



## Port Authority should come clean on toll money, Staten Island lawmakers, AAA say

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- It's time for the Port Authority to come clean on precisely where the money is going from last year's bridge toll hike.

So said the AAAs of New York and New Jersey Monday with the approach of the one-year anniversary of the increase. The toll hike triggered the auto clubs' **2011 court action to roll back the increase**, contending the money goes for "cost overruns" for World Trade Center redevelopment with no benefit to commuters.

Assemblywoman Nicole Malliotakis and Rep. Michael Grimm, who filed an amicus brief to the suit, which is pending in U.S. Southern District Court, also weighed in Monday, saying the P.A. should make a financial accounting public.

This as Ms. Malliotakis (R-East Shore/Brooklyn) awaits the P.A.'s **court-ordered delivery Tuesday** of a study assessing the economic impact the tolls have on the New York Container Terminal.

And this as the AAA also called Monday for passage of the Consumer Protection Act, co-sponsored by Grimm (R-Staten Island/Brooklyn), designed to restore federal oversight of toll rates by interstate agencies to the U.S. Department of Transportation.

AAA officials said they will tell the P.A. to stop "stonewalling" the public and elected officials with a "Where's the Money?" press conference Wednesday to mark the date of the increase a year ago.

The next increase is slated to take affect Dec. 2, with the peak hour cash rate increasing to \$13 and the E-ZPass rate to \$10.25.

"Although the toll revenues from Port Authority bridges and tunnels far exceed their operating costs, every one of



Staten Island Advance/Anthony DePrimo

The New York Container Terminal has said it will go out of business in a few years time if its truckers don't get a toll break, threatening some 550 jobs here.

the Port Authority's four bridges is classified as 'functionally obsolete' by the Federal Highway Administration," AAA officials said in a statement. "Clearly, drivers are already paying more than their fair share, and they are doing so at a time when federal, state and local authorities are hard pressed to meet routine road and bridge maintenance needs ... Tolls on the Northeast corridor's busiest interstate transportation facilities should not be diverted to unrelated and speculative projects."

The Consumer Protection Act, which Grimm co-sponsored with Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.), would also mandate that toll money could not be used for non-transportation related projects like real estate acquisition and development.

Said Grimm: "Staten Islanders are sick and tired of being used as the bailout for the P.A.'s sky-rocketing debt and gross mismanagement. Recent reports show that bridge toll revenue far exceeds operating costs, and that the P.A.'s real estate endeavor in Lower Manhattan is driving the agency deeper into debt. Where is the accountability? If left unchecked, who knows what else we will be asked to pay for with little return. It's time to restore much-needed oversight before these tolls do any further damage to our local economy, and that is exactly what the Commuter Protection Act will do."

Agreed Ms. Malliotakis: "AAA has a very strong argument that these toll increases should be overturned, especially when the Port Authority's 2011 financial statement shows they made over \$157 million on Staten Island bridges alone. It's clear that profit from their interstate transportation network isn't going only toward maintenance, and proves that the toll hikes were unjust and unreasonable. I'm hopeful that the amicus brief I filed with Congressman Grimm, along with the data I've been able to obtain from the Port Authority, will help AAA make this clear to the court as well."

On that score, Ms. Malliotakis told the Advance Monday that she had not heard from the P.A. regarding the ruling by Supreme Court Judge Joseph Maltese last Friday that the agency turn over its study of the financial impact tolls have on NYCT truckers.

The P.A. could appeal the Maltese ruling.

The agency has not said whether it will turn over the document -- which it had resisted sharing with the public, saying it was only a draft report -- and P.A. spokespeople did not respond to requests for comment.

Meanwhile, Ms. Malliotakis said it is in the "best interest" of the agency to comply, because "the public desires to see it," calling it "an opportunity for them to show good will."

Along those lines, Ms. Malliotakis originally said she would make public Monday an initial assessment of raw study data the P.A. gave to her. But she said she and Dr. Jonathan Peters, a College of Staten Island finance professor with an expertise in transportation who is helping her, decided it made more sense to wait another 24 hours to see if the P.A. comes through with its 103-page report, which includes analysis, rather than release their preliminary conclusions.

However, the two did note last week that after culling through the raw data of a comparative study of more than 6,700 truckers, it **appeared that 95 percent headed to the NYCT paid tolls on the Goethals and Bayonne bridges and Outerbridge Crossing** compared to just 20 percent headed for a container terminal in Jersey City.

The NYCT has said **it will go out of business in a few years time** if its truckers don't get a toll break, threatening some 550 jobs here.

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