



Staten Island Port Authority toll hike meeting raises tensions, tempers flare

Staten Island Advance By **Staten Island Advance**

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- It's been a tense morning for those in attendance at the Port Authority's first public hearing on the agency's proposed toll hikes on its bridges and tunnels -- ahead of tonight's second meeting, agency officials may have to bring in additional security to calm frayed nerves.

A large contingent of union workers, there to defend the price increases, showed up first and got seated front and center as the meeting started shortly after 8 a.m.

While several spoke out in favor of bringing in more toll money to help fund projects that would create jobs, many others had a different feeling.



Advance file photo

The proposal would raise peak-hour E-ZPass tolls on those the three Staten Island-New Jersey crossings -- including the Outerbridge Crossing, above -- to \$12 a ride.

"What the hell do you think we are, growing money on trees," asked community activist Joe Valentin, who engaged in a shouting match with union members.

A mixed crowd are voicing their opinions for and against the **Port Authority's proposed toll hikes**, which would raise the toll by 50 percent during peak driving hours.

A second hearing will be held at 6 p.m. at the Michael J. Petrides Educational Complex in Sunnyside.

When union members were accused of trying to intimidate Islanders, a man wearing an orange union shirt -- one of many in the audience -- told him to be quiet.

Additional shouting matches ensued before one union member sought to calm the tension, saying he feels for Staten Islanders but added "I just want to work."

The 3-hour meeting drew dozens of comments with many going over the allotted three minutes.



Staten Island Advance/Jillian Jorgensen

Union members are dominating the meeting at Howland Hook.

College of Staten Island professor Jonathan Peters said many cannot afford the toll hikes and that Staten Islanders have few public transit options to get to New Jersey.

"It is making life impossible on Staten Island, and I just hope that you will reconsider the hikes and leave Staten Island alone," said Assemblyman Matthew Titone (D-North Shore), pointing out the hikes and other economic hits are making it impossible to seek happiness here.

Drivers who use E-ZPass and who cross onto the borough during peak hours would see the toll rise from \$8 to \$12. The tariff at other times would be \$10, but the daily off-peak windows would narrow.

The cash toll would be \$15 and tolls would go up again in 2014 under the Port Authority proposal, to \$14 for E-ZPass users and \$17 cash.

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The cash-strapped PA has said the steep hikes are needed to pay for various capital projects, like the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site and new suspension cables for the George Washington Bridge.

Union members are speaking out in favor of the massive toll hikes, saying they will ensure that jobs will be created. A number of members of the Laborers International Union of North America are in attendance, sporting bright orange shirts proclaiming 'Port Authority = Jobs'.

"If the project is going to create jobs, we support it," said Ruben Colon, a union carpenter from Brooklyn.

But others said it wasn't a matter of jobs versus tolls.

City Councilwoman Debi Rose called pitting labor against residents a "travesty."

"We're pitting people who need jobs against people who need to get to their jobs, and that's not fair," she said.

The Port Authority is holding a series of public meetings across the city and in New Jersey today. A second hearing will be held in the auditorium of the Petrides Educational Complex in Sunnyside at 6 p.m.

*-Reported by Jillian Jorgensen. Follow her on Twitter **@jill_jorgensen** for live updates.*

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