



Staten Islanders vs. unions at Port Authority toll hike hearings

Staten Island Advance By Staten Island Advance

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- A public hearing that started with a bang in the morning ended with whimper at night, after more than 200 union workers heard enough from Staten Island residents, and in a show of solidarity, walked out of the Port Authority's evening session for its proposed toll hike.

The Port Authority will vote later this week on a proposal to hike the typical E-ZPass toll from \$8 to \$12 in September and up to \$14 in 2014 -- for cash payers, it would be \$15 in September and \$17 in 2014. Off-peak hours will be raised to \$10 in September and \$12 in 2014. The commuter package will also jump from \$80 to \$120 for 20 bridge crossings in 35 days.

The union members, mostly from Labor International Union North America (LiUNA) were in favor of the hike, saying the capital work it will fund will mean safer bridges and good middle-class jobs for the people in their unions.

Both Governor Andrew Cuomo and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who have expressed doubts about the steep hike, must sign off on the plan. The Port Authority may vote on the proposal Friday.

Opening up both hearings, Port Authority COO Ernesto Butcher said the hikes were necessary to overcome a struggling economy, the cost of security post-Sept 11, and the price of rebuilding at the World Trade Center site. The proposed capital work to be funded by the hikes -- the raising of the Bayonne Bridge, a new Lincoln Tunnel helix, 592 new cables on the George Washington Bridge -- will create 167,000 jobs, he said.

The morning meeting was held in a tricky-to-find building at the New York Container Terminal, a spot on a lonely, industrial road marked by a few signs that said "public hearing" and a police car's flashing lights. The room had about 80 seats, more than half of them taken by union members who had arrived early decked out in bright orange shirts that said "Port Authority = Jobs."



Staten Island Advance/Hilton Flores

Joe Valentin said if the union workers packed the house to intimidate Staten Islanders, they were going to have to face a lot of angry residents. "You people aren't even from Staten Island," he said. "You talk about Staten Island, you don't even know where Staten Island is."

The hearing was an often tense and angry back and forth between the union members and Island politicians and residents.

The evening meeting, held at the Michael J. Petrides School, Sunnyside, could accommodate more than 900 people in the building's auditorium, and it was held after Borough President James Molinaro and other elected officials protested to the time and

Staten Island hearing on proposed Port Authority toll hikes

Dozens of speakers, including Staten Island resident Joe Valentin, spoke at a hearing about proposed Port Authority toll hikes. People at the 8 a.m. meeting were both both in favor of and in opposition to the increases.

location of the morning meeting.

Joe Valentin, of Great Kills, attended both meetings. He had a heated exchange with union members during his morning comments. When the union workers saw the man wearing the cowboy hat step up to comment again, some shouting ensued; and all the union workers walked out.

AN 'INSULT'

Molinaro used his comments to address the people in the audience since he felt it was an "insult" that no voting PA board members attended the meeting.

"We are losing business on Staten Island for one simple reason because of continuous toll increases," Molinaro said. "The third largest employer on Staten Island -- the New York Container Terminal -- is losing the APL Line, which is 37 percent of the production of that terminal, and it's moving to Jersey because of the tolls."

He cited businesses that have left Staten Island or are considering leaving for New Jersey because of the tolls to counter the argument that the toll hikes will create jobs.

"This affects Staten Island and its population," Molinaro continued. "It's a win for Jersey, not for Staten Island."

Jonathan Peters, a professor at the College of Staten Island, offered some startling statistics about tolls on the Island: more than 6 percent of the nation's toll dollars are collected here. Less than one percent of the country's population lives here.

"More tolls are collected on Staten Island already than in 43 states," he said.

The poor cannot afford to cross the bridges, Peters said, and they have just one mass transit option on the three PA bridges, a bus route to Bayonne.

LABOR SUPPORT

A slew of members from Labor International Union North America (LIUNA) and other unions testified in support of the hike, some offering just short affirmations of their support for any project that might result in jobs.

Union representative Michael McGuire said they "fully support" the PA plan. "There's no such thing as a free lunch," he said of the toll hike.

Other workers said the toll hikes were a safety issue, saying bridges could collapse if they weren't rebuilt.

FACE-TO-FACE

At the morning session, union members and residents faced-off in several confrontations -- some of which seemed just one minute away or one more snide comment from coming to blows

"I walked in here, I thought I was getting bushwhacked with all these orange shirts in here," said Valentin, a Staten Island resident, who was one of the first non-union or elected officials to speak.

Only one union member said during his testimony he currently lived on Staten Island, and many said they lived in Brooklyn or New Jersey. Valentin said if the union workers packed the house to intimidate Staten Islanders, they were going to have to face a lot of angry residents.

"You people aren't even from Staten Island," he said. "You talk about Staten Island, you don't even know where Staten Island is."

After a man in an orange shirt complained aloud about Valentin's speech, Valentin shot back at him, pointing out that plenty of union workers had already spoken. "You got more time than I did," Valentin said.

Valentin believes the Port Authority will raise tolls regardless of what people said. "What the hell you think we are, growing money on trees?" he asked.

Andy Scudera of Dongan Hills also slammed the union members when it was his turn to speak. "You guys want jobs? Fine. Go get them somewhere else. Not off my back," he shouted.

A union member shouted back at him shortly after, "If you don't pay for the bridges, they're going to collapse. Do you want a bridge to collapse?"

That led to more yelling, with residents saying

Staten Islanders attend second toll hike hearing

The evening meeting, held at the Michael J. Petrides School, Sunnyside, could accommodate more than 900 people in the building's auditorium, and it was held after Borough President James Molinaro and other elected officials protested to the time and location of the morning meeting.

they had given union members their chance to speak without interruption and union members complaining that residents were addressing them directly, instead of speaking to the Port Authority board members.

Scudera also took issue with a sign held by union members that said rebuilding the World Trade Center should be the number one priority and said he lost five friends in the September 11 attacks.

"Make sure there's no signs that make us feel guilty that we don't want the World Trade Center put up," he said. "It's an insult."

And while nearly every union member who spoke mentioned the size of their unions, Marie Wausnock of West Brighton said she had plenty of people behind her.

"We have 450,000 members who are called residents of Staten Island behind us," she said. "450,000 members strong."

She said the Port Authority failed at being accountable.

"This is going to create jobs - for the Realtors," she said. "Every house is going up for sale. People are not going to live here."

HAVING THEIR SAY

Here's what Staten Island's elected officials had to say during yesterday's two public hearings on the Port Authority's proposed toll hikes:

Assemblyman Matthew Titone: "Life on Staten Island is becoming unsustainable. It is virtually impossible to pursue happiness here on Staten Island."

Sen. Diane Savino: "What are we offering to the people of Staten Island? Are we going to get better service? Light rail, for instance?...If not now, when?"

Councilwoman Debi Rose: "Once again, Staten Islanders are being held hostage to the demands of the Port Authority, with no choice but to pay the ransom. "I don't know if it's become obvious to people yet, but we live on an island. We have no other way to get on or off."

Assemblywoman Nicole Malliotakis: She called the hike "nothing short of outrageous."

Councilman Vincent Ignizio: He said raising the Bayonne Bridge would be done with or without toll hikes -- because it was in the Port Authority's best interest to get larger ships to the New York Container Terminal.

Assemblyman Michael Cusick: "These men and women (unions) want to work on the projects that the Port Authority has. Most of the other folks (residents) want to get to work without mortgaging their house."

Councilman James Oddo, after alluding to the massive traffic jam that many Staten Islanders had to sit through on Easter Sunday: "What we didn't realize until the toll increase was proposed was that was the Port Authority's version of foreplay. The real screwing was yet to come."

Assemblyman Lou Tobacco: "This is not about us against them, and shame on you Port Authority for manipulating..This is a waste of time. No one up here can vote. It's a spit in our face."

State Sen. Andrew Lanza said he would ask Governor Andrew Cuomo to veto any proposed toll hike passed by the PA, and he would not vote to confirm any PA board member who approved an increase. "New York state, in fact, has lost more of its citizens than any other state in the union... And do you know why? Because every time we turn around someone tells us we got to pay more for less."

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