



## Staten Island residents, politicians, sound off against MTA fare and toll hike

By Maura Yates

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Yesterday's MTA fare and toll hike hearing brought out around 80 angry Staten Islanders who spoke passionately about the need to save their transit service and keep their commuting costs low. Along with them, a host of local elected officials also joined the fray last night at the College of Staten Island.

The MTA's proposal, meant to plug a \$1.2 billion budget deficit, calls for possibly raising the cost of a single local bus or subway ride from \$2 to \$3, and express bus fares from \$5 to \$6.25. In addition, Verrazano-Narrows Bridge tolls could rise from \$10 to \$13.

Drivers who rely on the Verrazano to travel to work, doctors' appointments and to visit with family and friends balked at the toll hike on a bridge that forces Island drivers to pay just to return home.

Assemblyman Lou Tobacco and City Councilman James Oddo pointed to a new study conducted by Jonathan Peters, a College of Staten Island finance professor and transportation expert, which found more than 30 percent of the entire nation's tolls are collected in New York. About five to six percent of the nation's tolls are collected on Staten Island.

"This inequity is painful during good times. It's absolutely devastating during these fiscal times," Oddo said.

"Staten Islanders should not have to pay another nickel in tolls until a more equitable toll system is created," Tobacco said.

The issue of equity was hammered home, with calls from Borough President James Molinaro for Albany to approve tolling of the city's currently free bridges, so other boroughs can help foot the bill with their toll revenue.

"The resident discount on the Verrazano Bridge cannot and must not be increased," Molinaro said. "Let's put tolls on the bridges into Manhattan," Molinaro said. "Let them pay. Let them share in the pain and share in the burden."

As Councilman Vincent Ignizio put it, "Staten Islanders have no choice but to utilize the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, or learn to swim real well."

In addition Molinaro blasted a proposal to raise Access-A-Ride paratransit fares from \$2 to \$6.

"For many seniors who are barely getting by on Social Security, this increase will mean choosing between medications or food," he said.

Gene Russianoff of the Straphangers Campaign held up signs expressing the disbelief of riders facing such drastic hikes. Audience members held up signs that read: "Governor Paterson: Rescue The Riders!"

"These services are vitally important to our elderly, our poor and middle class," said Allen Cappelli, the board's Staten Island representative. "The cuts are just atrocious. The Verrazano Bridge toll is an abomination."

"The legislature has to hear what we've been hearing out here on Staten Island," Cappelli said, urging residents to write to their lawmakers to persuade Albany to pass a package of recommendations suggested by the Ravitch Commission, a panel charged with finding new revenue streams for the MTA to compensate



Advance file photo

Transit fares could be going up if a proposed hike goes into effect later this year.

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for the hard hit to dedicated real estate transfer taxes. Among the recommendations are the implementation of a payroll tax and tolling Manhattan's East and Harlem River bridges.

"The legislature needs to pass the Ravitch plan to put public transit on a solid economic track so the burden isn't shifted to the already beleaguered riders and toll payers."

Several candidates in the North Shore City Council race also spoke.

For more information on the MTA's proposal, visit [www.mta.info](http://www.mta.info).

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