

EDITORIALS

## 'Fix it first' applies to Rt. 9

**T**raffic jams on Route 9 rank the busy highway as one of the two or three worst in New Jersey. That dubious distinction means the road deserves immediate attention, the state's transportation commissioner told the Editorial Board of the Asbury Park Press yesterday.

If that's not good news for harried commuters, at least it's better than no news. It means that Route 9 becomes a priority under the Department of Transportation's "fix it first" approach to highway projects.

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*Commuters  
can't wait for  
long-term  
solution.*

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Transportation Commissioner James P. Fox recognizes that redesigning intersections, changing the timing of traffic signals and similar tinkering won't solve Route's 9 problems.

The real solutions are more complex — and costly. The money isn't there now to add a buses-only lane to the highway as it passes through Western Monmouth County, so the DOT must try to come up with as many short-term fixes as it can. The trick will be to make changes that won't have to be undone when the extra lane eventually is added.

Another lane would be just part of the answer. The passenger rail line proposed from northern Ocean County would take commuters off Route 9. But both buses and trains headed into New York face a bottleneck at the Hudson River. A new rail tunnel — which would cost at least \$4 billion — is a must. Likewise, transportation planners have to find a way to get more buses into the Port Authority terminal.

Fox said widening Route 9 through both Monmouth and Ocean counties would cost "hundreds of millions of dollars." That the road is a U.S. highway should help the project qualify for federal dollars, but dozens of other worthy New Jersey projects also need help from Washington. With power in Congress shifting to the Sun Belt, New Jersey's share of federal transportation aid isn't likely to grow, no matter how valid the state's argument.

The "fix-it-first" policy makes easing traffic jams and eliminating hazards a priority. Earlier this summer, Fox approved improvements to Route 18 in Middlesex County. Work on Route 9 won't be far behind. It can't happen soon enough for commuters who endure daily stop-and-go delays.

# 'WORST ROAD' MAY GET HELP

## DOT draws up statewide master plan

By NAOMI MUELLER  
STAFF WRITER

NEPTUNE — Route 9 would get a \$200 million overhaul if state Transportation Commissioner Jamie Fox has his way.

Calling Route 9 one of the three worst roads in the state, Fox said he expects plans to address the many concerns along the heavily traveled stretch of Route 9 from Old Bridge through Monmouth and Ocean counties. The planned improvements will be in a

**E-ZPASS:** Ocean County may get high-speed plaza; few oppose ending discounts. PAGE A3

transportation master plan — the first in 20 years, and the first ever designed to coordinate both road and rail projects. The plan should be completed by the end of the year.

Doing the Route 9 project "the right way" probably would take at least 10 years and would entail widening the road,

adding a bus lane and improving many of the intersections, Fox estimated.

"We need to look at this road in a big-picture way," Fox said during a meeting with the Asbury Park Press editorial board yesterday. "It's not just an intersection here and an overpass there. The road needs major improvements, and we need to deal with those improvements by look-

Staff Photo  
Illustration



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*The road needs major improvements. . . . We can't keep taking a Band-Aid approach there.*

JAMIE FOX  
STATE TRANSPORTATION  
COMMISSIONER

ing 10 years down the road. We can't keep taking a Band-Aid approach there.”

The master plan now being drawn up would address transportation needs for the entire state through the next 10 to 20 years. In addition to Route 9, projects that might be included would be the construction of an-

other motor-vehicle tunnel under the Hudson River to Manhattan, a project that would cost at least \$2 billion, as well as infrastructure improvements to NJ Transit rail lines and up-grading trains, he said.

Listing a project on the master plan is no guarantee it will be carried out. Coming up with the money is the biggest hurdle to improving roads and rails, authorities say.

Monmouth County Freeholder Ted Narozanick, who is also chairman of the North Jer-

sey Transportation Planning Authority, agreed with Fox's classification of Route 9 as one of the three state highways most in need of work. Route 9's problems revolve around its rush-hour backups as thousands of commuters drive to and from New York and North Jersey, but backups occur at other times of day because of the many shopping centers and traffic lights.

Municipalities in western Monmouth are studying the corridor to determine how their

own zoning codes and master plans can be revised to help facilitate improvements on the highway. But because so many businesses have located along it, widening would be "very very difficult," Narozanick said.

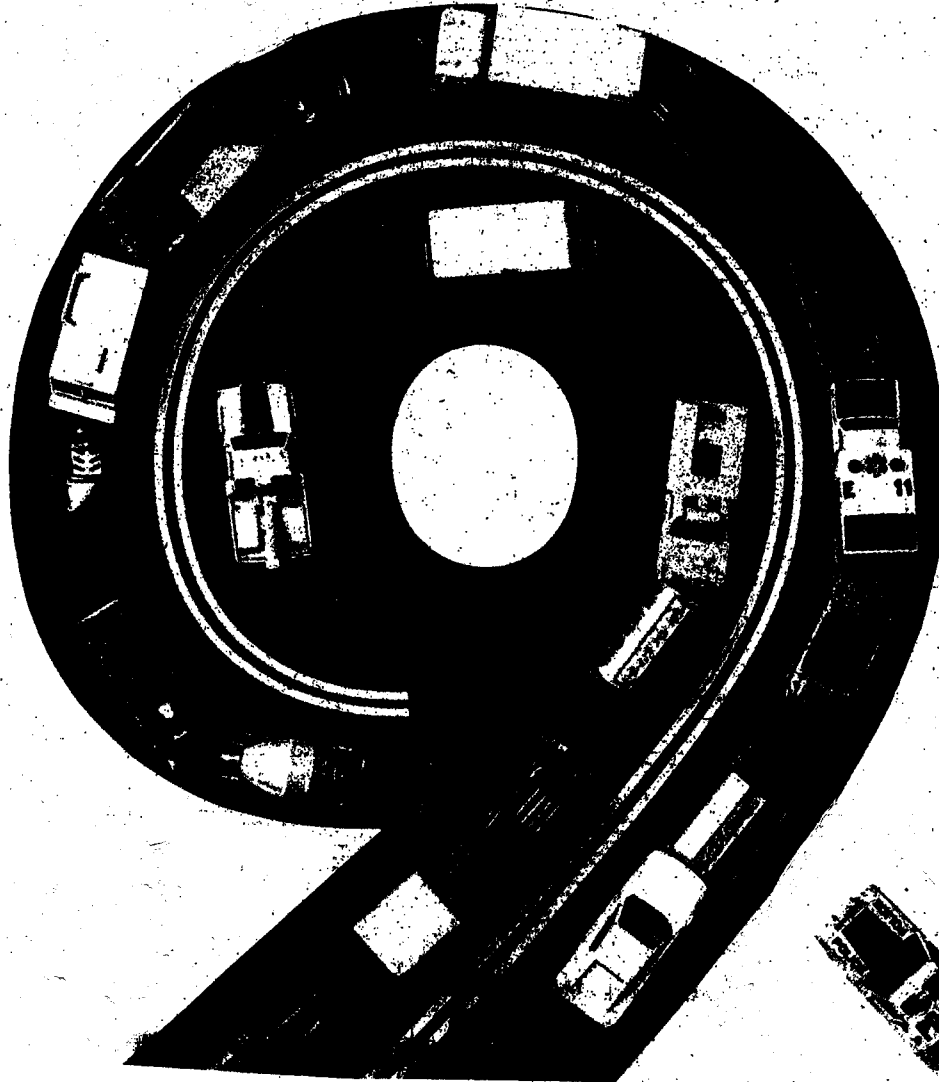
The idea that the state might add a bus-only lane on the busy commuter highway was greeted with enthusiasm by NJ Transit bus drivers yesterday. One of them, Gasford Clarke, a 17-year driver, said he would welcome such a lane.

"No one will let you in when

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\$200M WOULD WIDEN CONGESTED ROUTE 9



you're trying to get back in traffic," Clarke said while sitting at the Lakewood bus terminal. "You literally have to force yourself in."

But two Ocean County residents interviewed yesterday said they do not believe such a lane is needed. Claude Carr of Toms River, a bus commuter, said that drivers usually move out of the way for buses and that creating a bus-only lane is unnecessary.

State Sen. Joseph M. Kyrillos Jr., R-Monmouth, met yesterday

morning with Fox as well as representatives from each of the municipalities in his 13th Legislative District, which includes Middletown, Hazlet, Keansburg, Keyport, Union Beach, Matawan, Aberdeen and Holmdel, as well as Old Bridge in Middlesex County. In addition to speaking about "local nitty-gritty projects," Kyrillos said, Old Bridge Mayor Barbara Cannon raised concerns about improvements needed on Route 9.

"I think anyone who travels on it knows how difficult and how congested it is," Kyrillos said. "It's as tough a road as any to travel on in New Jersey."

During the hourlong editorial board meeting, Fox also spoke about difficulties the state has had with E-ZPass and the Division of Motor Vehicles, which he called "an agency in crisis."

During the next month, the state will continue to study problems at the DMV to determine whether the agency should be privatized and, if it is not, how it can be fixed using state and federal money. He would not say whether a possible increase in fees for driver licenses and registrations is likely.

Fox also spoke about other projects, such as the proposed plan to offer passenger rail service to the Monmouth-Ocean-Middlesex line, which is currently in the study phase. Although confident that such a line would be used, Fox said that before it is built, the money needs to be available. The decision of whether to return the rail service will likely be decided by 2004, he said.

Additional park-and-ride lots also are needed at train stations across much of the state, he said.

Staff writer Chandra Hayslett contributed to this story.

# East Brunswick gets \$3M grant to upgrade Rt. 18 intersection

BY TOM HAYDON  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

In February, one month after Gov. James E. McGreevey took office, state Sen. Barbara Buono met with newly appointed state Transportation Commissioner Jamie Fox about improvements needed for Route 18 in East Brunswick.

Yesterday, Fox presented East Brunswick with a check for \$3 million, funds to cover half the cost for reconfiguring the intersection of Route 18 and Tices Lane.

"I would never have seen \$3 million under the (previous) administration," said Buono, a Democrat who served on the Assembly budget committee for six years until her election last year to the state Senate.

Fox said the funding demonstrates a policy change to stress fixing existing roads over building new ones.

Township leaders worked for four years on the improvement plan, but only late last year got all the components, including land contributions from developers in place, said East Brunswick Mayor William Neary.

East Brunswick spent about \$90,000 for a study to develop improvements for the intersection, where, according to the state Department of Transportation, 58,000 vehicles pass each day.

The township paid for the study with host community benefits it re-

ceives from the Middlesex County Utilities Authority for having the county landfill within its borders. Another \$200,000 in host benefits will go for design work, and still another \$1.5 million in host benefits will go towards construction. East Brunswick has also received \$1.5 million in contributions from developers.

Neary yesterday praised Buono's diligence during the last six months to get the state money, saying the senator "got down like a dog on a bone to work in getting those funds."

Fox said the state grant represents the administration's shift from building new roads to fixing existing highways. Capital spending for widening highways has been cut from 20 percent last year to 4 percent this year.

"It's a philosophical shift to address again infrastructure in suburban and urban areas where most of the people live," Fox said. He said Route 18, along with other highways such as Route 9 and Route 1, had been neglected in recent years.

"Throughout New Jersey, the congestion along Route 18 is legendary," Fox said.

Currently, drivers eastbound on Tices Lane can only turn right onto Route 18 south and, if they want to continue into South River or head north on Route 18, they must go 50 yards to the West Prospect Street jughandle.

Drivers familiar with the busy intersection often use the shopping center just south of Tices Lane as a cut-through to Route 18. Other drivers simply make illegal turns from Tices Lane onto Route 18, often leading to accidents, about 100 per year, police said.

The township plans to build a side street behind the shopping center to siphon off Tices Lane some drivers who are going to Route 18 south, or going to a jughandle to turn north. Motorists would get on Route 18 near Guarino's fur store.

Tices Lane turns into a one-way street westbound on the west side of the highway. Because of the change to a one-way street, drivers on Tices Lane must turn south and go to a jughandle at West Prospect Street to cross the highway to reach the northbound lanes.

However, when improvements are complete, Tices Lane will be a two-way street on the west side of the highway. The jughandle at West Prospect Street, where cars often back up on the highway, would be eliminated. Also, a new reverse jughandle would be built in the northbound side just north of Tices Lane.

Construction of the improvements could start next summer, township officials said.

*Tom Haydon covers East Brunswick. He can be reached at thaydon@starledger.com or (732) 634-4706.*

## \$3M to East Brunswick for Route 18 upgrades

By JOHN YOCCA  
STAFF WRITER

**EAST BRUNSWICK:** As Mayor William Neary stood in the parking lot of Sam's Club off Route 18 eyeing an oversized cardboard check for \$3 million from the state Department of Transportation, a yellow Ryder truck slowed down on the highway, causing a few motorists to jam on their brakes and lean on their horns.

Congestion like this is exactly what Neary is hoping to ease with the state money, which will pay for half of a \$6 million project to reconfigure traffic patterns along Route 18 between Tices Lane and Highland Street.

DOT Commissioner Jamie Fox and state Sen. Barbara Buono, D-Middlesex, announced the funding at a 2

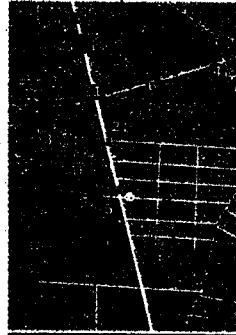
p.m. news conference along the dangerous stretch of highway where 58,000 vehicles pass each weekday.

The short distance between lights at Tices and West Prospect Street brings traffic to a crawl in this area where Mid State Mall lies to the east of the highway and another shopping center to the west. A Kohl's store is coming to that center, which had been anchored by Bradlees.

The traffic improvements include eliminating the light at West Prospect and adding a signal farther south at Highland.

"It's not just about efficiency," said Councilman Saul Fink. "It's about safety as well. These lights are just too close to each other."

Vornado Realty Trust, which owns the shopping



### 1 Tices Lane at Route 18

- Widen Tices lane eastbound to five lanes; modify traffic signal

- Construct a northbound jughandle north of Tices Lane; close jughandle south of Tices Lane

### 2 W. Prospect at Route 18

- Remove traffic signal and

- jughandle; construct shopping center access
- Convert W. Prospect to two-way traffic

### 3 Connector

- Construct a one-way roadway from Tices Lane to rear of shopping center and a two-way roadway from the center to Route 18

### 4 Tices Lane at Old Bridge Turnpike

- Widen the north side of Tices Lane to provide three lanes
- Install a traffic signal

### 5 Connector at Route 18

- Install a traffic signal
- Construct a jughandle
- Close Highland Street at Route 18 with a cul-de-sac

### 6 Tices Lane between Route 18 and Old Bridge Turnpike

- Convert to two-way traffic
- Relocate the Mid State Mall western driveway 250 feet from Route 18

Staff graphic

center west of the highway, and Denholtz Associates, owner of the Tices Lane Corporate Center behind the shopping center, have agreed to participate in the project,

undertaking improvements on their properties, township officials said. Denholtz has agreed to create a one-way

## ROAD: State grants \$3M for Rt. 18 project

connector road that will take traffic from Tices Lane to the rear of the shopping center,

while Vornado will build a two-way road that joins this connector to Route 18. Highland on the other side of the highway then will be closed to Route 18 traffic.

The township also plans to

use \$1.7 million in county funds it gets for hosting Edgeboro Landfill toward this project. The traffic changes include a light at Tices and Old Bridge Turnpike, which the county will install.

Design and engineering work is proceeding in anticipation of a spring construction start, Neary said.

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**State will help relieve 'legendary' congestion  
Plans to acquire  
fur store to build new jughandle  
By vincent todaro  
Staff Writer**



**DOT Commissioner  
Jamie Fox**

East Brunswick was formally presented with a \$3 million state Department of Transportation (DOT) grant for a major road reconfiguration project in the vicinity of Route 18, Tices Lane and Old Bridge Turnpike on Monday.

At an afternoon press conference in the parking lot of Sam's Club, Route 18, state officials, including DOT Commissioner Jamie Fox and state Sen. Barbara Buono (D-18), presented a ceremonial check and discussed the road conditions and the project with township officials.

The improvements — which include a series of road widenings, jughandle construction and traffic signal changes, not just on Route 18 but in the entire vicinity around Tices Lane and Old Bridge Turnpike — are the result of studies prompted by congestion and accidents in the area.

Local officials expressed gratitude that the estimated \$6 million cost of the project would be abated with the state grant, as well as with \$1.5 million from Middlesex County.

"This Route 18 area traffic improvement is the first in over a decade," Mayor William Neary said. "The project, which will improve the daily commute for thousands, will, more importantly from a local perspective, ease traffic which at times, under current conditions, is gridlocked."

Officials are hopeful the work will begin in 2003.

"This is a heavily traveled stretch of Route 18 on which the livelihood of many businesses depend," Fox said. "Around the state we are trying to bring these types of projects to construction so that motorists can get where they are going easily and safely."

The project will also incorporate changes to several businesses' points of access as well as driveway improvements.

Plans include the acquisition of Furs by Guarino, which is located on Route 18 southbound where a jughandle will be built north of Route 18 and the connector road. The business has been located there for about five years.

The owners had restored a run-down building that was previously an auto parts store and turned it into a steel-lined vault. The store has been the site of numerous animal rights protests. The fur shop had previously operated for 10 years in a building near Movie City 5.

The owner of Guarino Furs, John Guarino — whose family went into the fur business in Plainfield in 1946 — presently has operations in East Brunswick and Green Brook, Somerset County.

Guarino said Tuesday that he had been told in recent years by Neary that one of the road construction options included the use of his property, but he said he has not heard from any government agency about whether his business will truly be affected.

"I'm concerned, but I have no facts yet," he said. Upon being told about the state's plan to acquire his business, he said, "That is a problem because we really like that spot."

In addition to having "put a ton of money into the building," Guarino said the site's visibility and the fact that it is a freestanding structure are benefits to the business.

"You're not going to find too many buildings like that on Route 18," he said. "The visibility is wonderful right there."

"It's not that easy to just pick up and move," he added.

The state's road project includes widening Tices Lane to three westbound and two eastbound lanes; the construction of a reverse jughandle north of Route 18 northbound and Tices Lane; the closing of the present northbound jughandle; modification of the traffic signal at Tices Lane and Route 18; conversion of Tices Lane between Route 18 and Old Bridge Turnpike into a two-way road; and the widening of the roadways and installation of a semiactuated traffic signal at Tices Lane and Old Bridge Turnpike.

Also the removal of both the traffic signal and jughandle at West Prospect Street is planned as well as improvements at West Prospect Street and Old Bridge Turnpike.

Additionally, a one-way connector road will be built from Tices Lane to the East Brunswick warehouse access, and a two-way road will be built extending from the warehouse access to Route 18, across from Highland Street, which will be closed at Route 18 northbound. A traffic signal and jughandle will be built where the connector road meets Route 18, allowing truck drivers to turn left or right onto the state highway.

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In addition to relieving some of the traffic congestion in the area — in part by removing the traffic light at West Prospect Street, which officials said is located too close to the signal at Tices Lane — officials are hoping to see a decline in the number of accidents.

A 1998 traffic study commissioned by the township found that about 100 accidents take place in that area.

"We have an awful lot of fender benders," Neary said of the accidents recorded.

Fox said the congestion on Route 18 "is legendary," and noted that "drivers wait up to 10 minutes at the intersection [with Tices Lane]."

According to the DOT, about 58,000 vehicles use Route 18 to travel through East Brunswick every day.

"This is a perfect example of an intersection and a road that has been neglected by the DOT," Fox said.

Despite the more than \$6 billion deficit the state is presently facing, the capital budget for the DOT has not been reduced by Gov. James McGreevey, Fox said. The DOT's \$2.5 billion capital budget is used for mass transit, road and bridge repairs.

Despite the deficit, New Jersey "couldn't cut back on infrastructure work," Fox said.

"It's not so easy finding money these days, but if you know where to look, you can find it," Buono said, adding that she learned long ago to try and avoid Route 18 when possible because of its traffic.

Buono said local businesses will greatly benefit from the improved conditions once the project is completed. Environmental problems also will be improved, she added.

"Air quality is severely affected by cars idling for a significant amount of time," she said.

Fox said the improvements are part of the state's "fix it first" philosophy in applying budgetary funds. He said state officials do not want to invest in projects that will make sprawl even worse, but instead want to address existing infrastructure issues.

"We need to address our troubled hot spots," he said.

# Tunnel offers safe passage

Students can cross street underground

By TRACY ROBINSON  
COASTAL MONMOUTH BUREAU

WEST LONG BRANCH — Students and staff of Monmouth University have a new route to get across campus this semester — the recently completed pedestrian tunnel.

"This just makes it so much more safe and convenient for everyone involved," said Patricia Swannack, vice president for administrative services at the university.

Because it allows people to avoid crossing Cedar Avenue, the walkway is expected to lessen traffic congestion on the state road and eliminate the need for crossing guards, Swannack said. Officials said the area was the site of a fatal accident a few years ago.

Begun in August 2001, the \$4 million federally funded project overseen by the state Department of Transportation was completed Aug. 22. It links the north end of the school's grounds to the south.

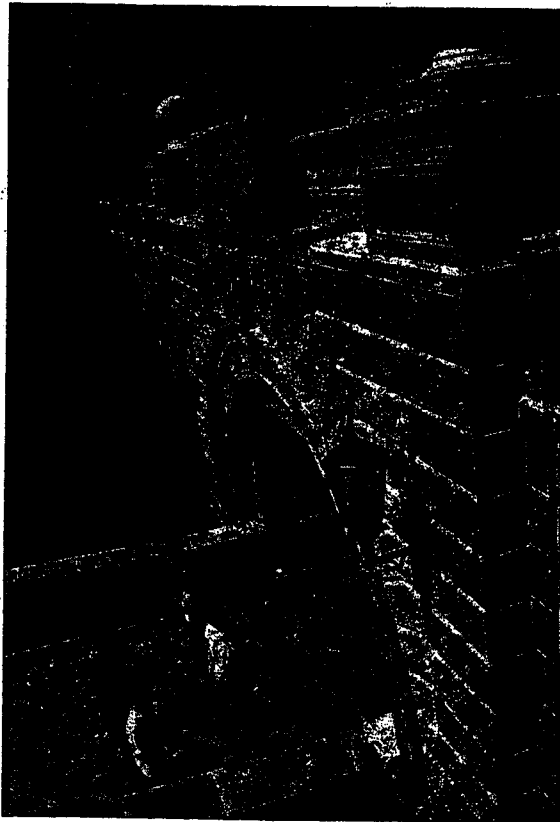
Students and staff have been using the tunnel, but it was officially opened at yesterday's ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by school and state officials as well as legislators.

"This isn't a tunnel; this is a beautiful walkway," said state Sen. Joseph Palaia, R-Monmouth. The structure contains architectural details similar to those on school buildings, such as Woodrow Wilson Hall.

The tunnel also has safety features such as security cameras and emergency telephones.

College students using the new tunnel agreed that it would make the campus a lot safer.

"I think it is a good idea so we don't have to wait for all the traffic," said Christine Arsego, 18, a freshman from Connecticut.



JOSEPH J. DELCONZO/Staff Photographer

The pedestrian tunnel at Monmouth University allows students to cross Cedar Avenue without contending with traffic.

"It's a lot safer," said freshman Lindsey Woodfield, 18, of Lakewood.

The underpass has "transformed the campus," said university President Rebecca Stafford, adding that the school has wanted the tunnel for 30 years.

State Sen. John O. Bennett, R-Monmouth, who has taught political science at the school, said the walkway "also makes it easier for the faculty."

State Sen. Andrew Ciesla, R-Ocean, said the project was made possible because of the cooperation of many, and he thanked Gov. McGreevey.

"A lot of people had their oar in the water to push this project

along," agreed Monmouth County Freeholder Director Harry Larrison.

In a news release, state Transportation Commissioner Jamie Fox credited U.S. Rep. Frank J. Pallone Jr., Palaia and university and county officials for their help in completing the project.

The school is also in the midst of an approximately \$300,000 pedestrian mall project, which includes a fountain and sidewalks on the south side of Cedar Avenue that lead to the tunnel and link Plangere Center with Robert E. McAllan Hall, Swannack said.