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Advisory Panel Warns of Ailing New York Transportation System  
By SEWELL CHAN

On the eve of a vote by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to raise fares for the second time in less than two years, a state panel warned today that New York State's transportation infrastructure had begun to deteriorate and would need billions of dollars in public investment over the next five years.

In a report titled "Transportation - Trouble Ahead," the panel warned that New York would lose jobs and its economy would falter if it did not put "substantial, sustainable and predictable funding" into its highways, bridges, rail network, ports, airports and mass transit systems, of which New York City's is by far the largest.

The report and its timing could be sensitive for Gov. George E. Pataki, who holds the most sway over the authority and has been criticized for not offering new money to close a substantial deficit in its capital budget. Under Mr. Pataki and his predecessor, Mario M. Cuomo, the state eliminated its subsidies for the authority's construction programs.

In an interview today, Governor Pataki appeared receptive but noncommittal toward the report's findings.

"We are looking not just at the M.T.A.'s proposals as to how they not just operate but continue to expand and enhance the system," he said. "And we're also going to be looking at proposals from our Department of Transportation, from our other transportation entities, as to how we can do that. We will just have to look to see what we have the capacity to do, and what we're able to commit to."

Mr. Pataki's transportation commissioner named the 12 members of the panel, the New York State Advisory Panel on Transportation Policy for 2025, to update a statewide transportation master plan and develop transportation policy for the future.

While the report avoids direct criticism of the governor, it pointedly cites the vision of two predecessors: DeWitt Clinton, who championed the construction of the Erie Canal in the 1820's, and Thomas E. Dewey, who supported the creation of the New York State Thruway in the 1950's.

"It is essential that the state take bold and decisive action to ensure that the infrastructure of the Empire State does not slip back to the deplorable conditions of the 1980's," the panel wrote. "During that time in the state's history, years of poor planning and underinvestment led to a crumbling infrastructure, unsafe travel and unreliable service."

In interviews, panel members said they were struck over the course of nine public hearings by the depth of the state's transportation needs, particularly in the areas of highways, roads and transit. Along with New York City, four upstate cities - Albany, Buffalo, Syracuse and Rochester - have metropolitan transit agencies.

"We tried to avoid placing blame, but clearly the Legislature and the governor are part and parcel of the problem," said one member, James J. McGowan, the president of AAA New York State, a federation of seven automobile clubs. "If adequate appropriations had been made, the problem that the report addresses wouldn't even exist, in both rail and road infrastructure."

In a draft statement provided by panel members, the state transportation commissioner, Joseph H. Boardman, said he welcomed the panel's findings and would incorporate them in the state's multiyear master transportation plan.

Mr. Boardman noted that a federal transportation bill that provides a significant share of the state's highway spending is more than a year overdue. He also suggested that additional state funds will not be easy to come by.

"The state's dedicated transportation fund needs replenishment now, or we will not be able to maintain our existing transportation system and provide the improvements needed to support our economy and quality of life now and into the future," Mr. Boardman. "Crafting new transportation investment programs under these conditions presents an enormous challenge to the state's decision makers."

The report chronicles demographic and economic changes that have increased the stress on the state's transportation systems. Free-trade agreements and the expansion of same-day delivery services have prompted an explosion in truck traffic. Subway ridership in New York City has increased each year since 1992, sparked by the replacement of subway cars and reconstruction work on tracks and stations.

Pavement cracking is becoming more frequent on state roads, and the size of the cracks is becoming larger, according to the report. It also noted a 2003 study by the American Society of Civil Engineers, which found that 37 percent of the state's bridges were structurally deficient or functionally obsolete and that New York motorists spent \$2.3 billion a year on extra vehicle repairs and operating expenses as a result of driving on unsound roads.

Meanwhile, spending on debt service to pay off bonds for capital projects has exploded, totaling \$715 million in 2002 for the highway system and \$916 million this year for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

The report also faults the fractured structure of the state's transportation system, which includes 12 public authorities, the state's Department of Transportation, local highway departments, four major private railroads and 32 short-line railroads, among other entities. "No one is truly in charge of the system as a whole," the report states. It recommends the use of technology to inform motorists about traffic conditions and the integration of government services, so that a trucker, for example, would only need to apply once for a hauling permit.

Among other recommendations, the report calls for improving downstate rail freight service east of the Hudson River and increasing highway tolls to manage congestion and generate revenue.

Michael Cooper contributed reporting from Albany for this article.