



## State, P.A. weighing lifelines for N.Y. ferry

### Assemblyman proposes a takeover by NJ Transit

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**BY MARK MUELLER AND BRIAN DONOHUE**

**Star-Ledger Staff**

Port Authority and New Jersey officials are making contingency plans for the potential demise of NY Waterway, the sinking ferry service that could go out of business this week.

With the financially troubled service in danger of going under, a state assemblyman said he would introduce legislation empowering NJ Transit to take over the operation that serves 32,000 riders.

"A lot of people rely on that ferry service to get to and from work, and it provides a relief mechanism for overcrowding," said Assemblyman John S. Wisniewski (D-Middlesex). "So I think a prudent step is to at least explore the possibility of giving NJ Transit the power to take it over."

Other options include the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey picking up the service or having competitors divvy up the more profitable routes.

Acting Gov. Richard Codey has not publicly endorsed any option.

A spokesman for state Transportation Commissioner Jack Lettiere, who is also chairman of the NJ Transit board, said the department is closely monitoring the situation to prevent service interruption.

"It's obviously in the department's vested interest, as stewards of our roadway network, that we have as many different modes of transportation as possible in that region providing transportation to New York City back and forth," said the spokesman, Joe Fiordaliso.

Port Authority spokesman Steve Coleman said the bistate agency has been talking daily with NJ Transit and the state Department of Transportation, as well as with other ferry operators, to ensure service continues on NY Waterway routes.

"We think there needs to be a multi-agency look at the ferry situation in the region before anybody jumps to knee-jerk decisions," Coleman said.

NY Water Taxi and Circle Line, among others, have expressed interest in some routes, Coleman said.

Heavily traveled, profitable lines are likely to be picked up quickly. Among those believed most profitable and likely to survive are Hoboken to Battery Park City; Hoboken to Pier 11 near Wall Street; and Weehawken to 38th Street. Also believed profitable is the line that runs from the Belford section of Middletown in Monmouth County to stops between Pier 11 and 38th Street.

It's just as likely unprofitable lines will be scrapped.

Appearing before a subcommittee of the New York City Council last week, NY Waterway President Arthur Imperatore glumly announced, "NY Waterway is dying," and called for a public takeover.

Among the reasons Imperatore cited for NY Waterway's problems: a miscalculated expansion, rising fuel prices, a federal investigation into the company's billing practices and ice last winter that froze some ferries in their berths.

The 18-year-old ferry line links 10 New Jersey ports with Manhattan.

NY Waterway plans to stop running ferries Dec. 31 on a bustling route that brings about 5,300 riders each day from Hoboken Terminal and Pier 11, near Wall Street. Also scheduled to close that day is the route from Pier 11 to Port Libert é in Jersey City.

Those planned shutdowns come on the heels of a Dec. 3 elimination of sparsely used routes from Pier 11 to Newport in Jersey City.

Few could predict such dire news in the aftermath of 9/11, when riders left without PATH rail service -- the station at the World Trade Center was destroyed in the attacks -- flocked to NY Waterway ferries.

But when PATH service returned to lower Manhattan earlier than expected last November, commuters returned to the trains.

In what was seen as a last-ditch effort to save the ferry service, officials in Hudson County proposed borrowing \$38 million to buy NY Waterway. But the New Jersey Attorney General's Office said the county leaders omitted two important steps in seeking state approval for the bonds, delaying the proposal.

Meanwhile, bankers are getting antsy and NY Waterway employees are wondering whether they will have jobs at the end of this week.

Former NJ Transit official Martin Robins, now director of the Voorhees Transportation Policy Institute, the research unit at Rutgers University, called on the public sector to find a way to preserve some of the ferry services.

"This is getting urgent," he said, calling disruption of ferry service a public policy emergency. "All public transit services are operating in a world where everybody has an automobile as an option, so if you raise the price too high, they can go to rail, automobile, bus.

"There are so many choices people have, so companies don't have that pricing flexibility that might enable them to keep up with rising fuel prices or any other setbacks," he said.

He said an important history lesson can be gleaned from looking at shut-down passenger train routes on two lines in Bergen County in the late 1950s -- including service in Teaneck, Bergenfield, Bogota, Tenafly and Englewood.

"We've rued the day for the last 45 years that that happened, and they have never been restored," Robbins said. "So history serves a lesson here, and the question is: Who's going to make the move?"

*Staff writer Mike Frassinelli contributed to this report.*