

Regional Rail Working Group Meeting of June 16, 2004

Attendees: Herb Landow, Bill Guild, Al Papp, John West, Paul DiMaria, Bill Hine, Jeanette Wolfberg, Robert Toth, Jeff Chase, Michael Leighton, James O'Shea, Barry Adler

[My opinions and digressions are in brackets. “John” within these notes refers to John Kennard, except where there are specific references to John West, who is identified as such. — PD]

Topics discussed:

A. Presentation by John Kennard, Director of Planning, Metro-North

1. To sum up Metro-North's plans: the main focus is on rolling stock, and the facilities to support that equipment. As we know, last winter was particularly difficult for the railroad's present equipment and reliability reached a low point. The Harlem Division is getting 180 new M-7s cars, but no new cars have been funded for the New Haven line yet. John said that the oldest New Haven cars would have been replaced if the money had been available, but instead they will be overhauled during the next five years.

During the question and answer session, the following issues came up:

2. Some group members wondered if the winter reliability crisis could have been avoided and if it had occurred mainly because of decisions to defer maintenance. John stuck to the explanation the cause had been the age of the cars and design problems that let snow into the electrical systems.

3. Bi-level cars: John said that this had been studied, and the most of the clearance problems were in the Park Avenue tunnel and in Grand Central itself. He believed that bi-levels would probably not be ordered in the near future.

4. Hell Gate Route and Hudson Line access to Penn Station: There will be a DEIS on this concept within a few months. John thought that this could be a cost-effective project, but other, bigger ticket MTA plans have priority right now, so he couldn't guess when it would move forward.

Greg asked if a joint NJ Transit-MTA operation over Hell Gate — in other words, extension of existing NJT electric service now ending at Penn Station (or Sunnyside yards) — could be implemented sooner. John thought the usual institutional problems (politics, unions) were a barrier, but he at least thought it was worth considering.

At this point Al gave John a copy of the Metro-Hub report, and asked for more co-operation between MN and other transit agencies in the region. Group members mentioned some benefits of Metro-Hub, including access to Newark Airport for counties in New York State and Connecticut, and a connection between east and west of Hudson services via Secaucus Transfer.

5. St. Mary's Tunnel, South Bronx: John confirmed — for the first time that I know of — that MN may buy this unused freight line from CSX. (It provides a connection from the Harlem line to the Hell Gate Route.)

6. Beacon Line: No passenger service is contemplated on this route for the foreseeable future. It would have provided a lateral service connecting MN lines radiating out of New York; e.g., a Poughkeepsie to White Plains trip by rail would have been possible.

7. Spring Valley to Suffern service (southern Rockland County): Metro-North considered this route a few years ago, but community opposition seems strong. [As I may have mentioned before, local politics tends to be in favor of the status quo, not pro- or anti-rail per se.] The active line south of Spring Valley (the Pascack Valley service) will see reverse peak (“two way”) service in one to two years when more passing sidings are completed.

8. Streamlining LIRR East Side Access: We asked John why the MTA has continued to support the more expensive deep-level plan. He declined to comment about the MTA itself, but he thought that the LIRR operating unit had wanted separate rather than shared facilities at Grand Central. [I think Metro-North must have had a large role in the decision-making process as well.] He confirmed that Metro-North would lose some tracks in the Madison Avenue yard to make way for an LIRR mezzanine and other facilities.

9. PATH/Lex and JFK/Brooklyn IND/Lower Manhattan issues: John West went through our presentations about these issues.

a. John Kennard’s view of PATH/Lex seemed to be that provisions for future connections could be preserved; he didn’t comment about the possibility of immediate progress towards a connection.

b. One new issue about PATH that Al brought up was that the “uptown” tunnels, to 33rd Street, will eventually need the kind of rebuilding that the downtown tunnels just received. Maybe PATH/Lex would allow some flexibility for this, or maybe it would have to wait until one ARC tunnel is completed.

c. JFK to Manhattan service could use either the LIRR Atlantic Branch or the A/C train subway. [This is something that is still in its earliest stages, so we have a chance to gain some momentum if we can decide which course is best. My suggestion is that the needs of Brooklyn and Queens residents, who far out number airport customers, get serious consideration.] John K. did mention that MN is not presently looking at any kind of direct airport access for its riders — presumably this would be via Hell Gate.

B. Access to the Regions Core: This merits its own set of notes. The important news here is that NJ Transit plans are tending towards a mostly separate (from Penn Station) new facility under 34th Street reaching to Herald Square.

The group was concerned about the operating problems that could result from, in effect, splitting the service into New York. As Greg put it, “uncertainly and unpredictability would be built into it” because trains might be entering and leaving different tracks on different days. At present all NJ Transit service is on the south side of the station; with the expansion, some of the service would be at least one and perhaps as many as three blocks away from the concourse where New Jersey riders assemble.

Some of the group wondered if the station is being split up, it might make sense to move the new facility all the way up the mid-50s as was proposed in early ARC alternatives.

[When the Penn RR operated a line into Exchange Place in Jersey City, was that consistently served by the same trains every day, or was there variations at times?]

We have noted that ARC has been losing its “all-Manhattan” focus and is becoming strictly a way to increase capacity under the river — thus NJ Transit has starting calling it the “Trans Hudson Express” tunnel to reflect its more limited purpose. Al stated that something like the Zupan plan for a Midtown rail loop should be a joint project among the three regional railroads. [In fact it might be difficult to get New Jersey to pay for something that big entirely outside of the state’s borders.]

Future meetings: A couple of group members asked if a map or two could be used during the meetings to help us figure out the intricate geography of the region. Not all of us have equal knowledge of every line and junction we talk about. My suggestion is that a couple of copies of “The Map” (MTA’s rail publication, subway on one side, regional rail on the other) and one copy of NJ Transit’s rail map would be helpful.