

Regional Rail Working Group Meeting of July 21, 2004

Attendees: George Haikalis, Phil Strong, Joe Clift, Paul DiMaria, Bill Hine, Jeff Chase, Richard Harrington

[George may want bring us up-to-date about developments regarding the William Kaufman lawsuit over the East Midtown ventilation building.]

Topics discussed:

1. Bergen County / New Jersey Transit:

a. Pascack Valley line: This route was supposed to get sidings allowing reverse peak service, but implementation has continued to slip, perhaps to 2007. There has been community opposition at some of the siding locations - originally five, now down to three. The Pascack project has been tied into the rail access plan for the proposed Xanadu retail/entertainment complex in the Meadowlands.

b. Northern Branch: NJ Transit has proposed but not yet funded light rail service to Tenafly (probably electric but diesel has been suggested too.) We briefly discussed the possibility of further extensions to Nyack or the Palisades Center Mall. The right of way north of the state line is now a hiking trail, and NJ Transit, in scoping meetings, considered service there but dropped that option fairly early.

c. Light rail in the Lincoln Tunnel: We briefly discussed this plan, originally put forth by CBT in the late 1990s. George wondered if eventually all or most bus service from New Jersey could be replaced by rail. [My own assessment: that is probably not possible anytime soon. Why not also consider a way to replace the overcrowded contra-flow bus lane into the tunnel?]

2. East Side Access/LIRR: The MTA wants to build a ventilation plant on East 50th Street, replacing four small buildings; it is possible that this facility will require a supplemental EIS. A neighboring property owner, the William Kaufman Organization, has filed a suit requesting the SEIS. Consultants for Kaufman are interested in the Apple Corridor alternative developed by the Committee for Better Transit. I believe George was to meet one of the consultants on July 23.

Other property owners in the area (Tishman Speyer, Palace Hotel) are concerned, although they have not taken action yet.

3. Future of CBT: The interest of the Kaufman Organization may facilitate a renewal of CBT - is it possible they may pay a fee for advice about the Apple Corridor alternative? George may be interim president, probably for six months or so. We still need to deal with Steve Dobrow's papers stored at his home.

4. Nassau County: Money has been earmarked for a transit study in the county "Hub"; light rail is one of the options available.

George has met with Nassau County planner Bob Brickman to pitch increased LIRR service (via the Metro-Hub plan) as a natural complement to the county hub plan. We will try to get Brickman to attend our meeting in October.

An EIS for the LIRR Main Line third track will start soon. We may have a subcommittee to work on this issue.

5. Ridership and cost estimates: We will attempt to get whatever information is available from the operating agencies about past studies they have done. (Right now we have little hard data available.) NYMTC has a computer model that we may be able to use. Ideally we would like to hire a consultant to integrate this material, but I would think that certain members of our group have the expertise to do this work.

6. Rockaway cut-off subcommittee:

a. Carl and George discussed the need to produce a leaflet describing the benefits of our cut-off plan.

b. Carl mentioned that the Logan bus company, which has a lease on part of the right-of-way, seems to have some clout in the neighborhood, partially because it is a major community employer. George thought that the overall benefits of the project could overcome any specific opposition.

c. The MTA apparently did do some design work three years ago on a one-seat ride vehicle using AirTrain and LIRR tracks - and then buried the information. It would have been used in four car trains to fit the station platforms at the airport. (It would be helpful if we could get Bombardier specs for the present AirTrain cars.)

7. Access to the Region's Core:

a. Al and Herb are working on a plan to run about 50 trains per hour (one way) through the Hudson Tunnels, possibly deferring (forever?) the need for new tunnels. They weren't present to discuss the idea; the group members present were concerned that even if the scheme were theoretically possible, it wouldn't work for day-to-day operations because there is no margin for error.

b. Alternate G: The benefits of this were restated, because it would allow trains to flow through Manhattan without the need for new tracks and platforms at Penn. (NJT now plans up to eight new tracks in or near PSNY.) Also Amtrak could gain access to Grand Central, although so far they have not made any comments about that.

c. Farley/Moynihan station: Amtrak has commented on this - it is reluctant to pay rent to use the new station while also paying to maintain the old one. Also, as we know, the new station would not have the best access to the platforms and would be further from where most users want to go. [Has the Moynihan station always been an architectural solution in search of a problem?]

8. PATH/Lex: Lou Venech called George and offered a two-week extension for further comments. [Is this a meaningful deadline? The Port Authority has never given serious consideration to the idea.]

9. Lower Manhattan/JFK Connection: There should be scoping meetings later this year. John West may form a subcommittee for Lower Manhattan issues.

The political push behind this project seems to be based on enhancing the Lower Manhattan real estate market, which hasn't had a full recovery in the last three years. We have doubts that traffic from the airport alone will be sufficient to justify something this expensive.

[Assessment: It's interesting to note that when Pataki, Bloomberg, et al. are behind something, all technical problems melt away and the operating agencies say, "How high do we have to jump?" Nevertheless, we have the opportunity to get in at the beginning of the process if we know what we want.]

10. Amtrak has updated its five-year plan, which is posted on its website. Some new issues in the plan:

- a. Conflicts with the freight railroads, including congestion on certain routes and the downgrading or abandonment of other lines.
- b. Potential corridors for development, although it seems that the states would have to pick up all or most of the costs.

We may want to investigate "interoperability" issues between freight and passenger service. Part of this involves FRA requirements for equipment, which may be too restrictive - the River Line is an example. But there are more general conflicts, as mentioned in the Amtrak report. [Could these be resolved if the parties involved were motivated to do so?]