

Regional Rail Working Group, Meeting of October 20, 2004

Attendees: George Haikalis, Bill Guild, John West, Phil Strong, Colin Wilson, David Peter Alan, Bill Hine, Jeff Chase, Richard Gualtieri, Gary Johnson, Paul DiMaria, Herb Gormley

Guest Speaker: John Kanarek, Senior Director, Project Development, NJ Transit

Topics discussed:

1. I'll review NJ Transit's new initiatives first, then go over some of the more general information that John presented at the meeting.

a. Bergen / Passaic Counties. John said that NJ Transit is moving away from earlier proposals for electric light rail in these counties (i.e., extensions of HBLRT) and towards FRA compliant diesel MU service. Although this has been suggested before by NJT, John confirmed that DMUs are now their preferred course for that area because of lower capital costs. In fact, he said that NJT has an add-on option with North Carolina's order with the Colorado Railcar Company. There has been dissent from NJ-ARP and others in Bergen County; they argue that electric LRT service should remain an option for the Northern Branch.

As now planned, DMU service would require an additional transfer for riders. The Northern Branch would operate as a Tenafly to 50th Street/Tonnelle Avenue (North Bergen) service, while the Susquehanna route would run from Hawthorne to Hackensack, or possibly also to Tonnelle Avenue. At some future date, both lines might gain direct access to New York via the ARC tunnel.

One question from the group was about the possibility of routing the Northern Branch into Hoboken. John thought this might be possible but difficult to do. (I believe this was done in the 1960s but there may be additional freight train interference now.)

b. HBLRT: John thought this would likely be extended west to Secaucus, not north as originally conceived. A further extension to Xanadu/The Sports Complex is possible, but that would require an expensive crossing of the Hackensack River.

c. Xanadu/Sports Complex: This seems to be the fastest moving plan, with a regional rail loop off the Pascack Valley line that could open as early as 2007.

d. Monmouth-Ocean-Middlesex (MOM) route: Opposition from towns in Middlesex County remains a problem, and NJ Transit is reevaluating all three possible routes (from Monmouth Junction, Matawan, and Red Bank). The Matawan line is being leased (to the

county?) for use as a rail trail. The town of Marlboro has opposed rail service there in the past. [Has any “rail-banked” trail ever been returned to its original use?]

e. Union County LRT: The county has shown unusual interest in the project and may contribute funds to the Elizabeth-Jersey Gardens Mall-Newark Airport segment. (The full line would extend to downtown Newark. [Additional information: about a mile of the Newark portion - to Broad Street station - is now under construction]).

f. West Trenton line: Passenger service was ended in the early days of NJ Transit. A revival would probably require some double tracking. Route owner CSX will not discuss this until NJT is able to secure funding for the project.

g. ARC, now also called Trans-Hudson Express tunnel. As the new name implies, NJT wants to increase capacity from its side of the river despite the lack of MTA help in the “region’s core” (i.e., extensions beyond Penn Station). The DEIS should be done by summer, 2005.

In response to questions, John said that ARC will have provisions for future extensions. However, he said NJT alone cannot fund the RPA “Zupan Loop” or a connection to Grand Central; these would have to wait for a future revival of MTA interest.

He also said that the ARC tunnel will allow most or all of the north Jersey lines to have some direct trains to New York. This brought up questions from the attendees about dual-mode locomotives. (Presumably NJT cannot afford to electrify every route.) John confirmed that NJT is interested in dual-mode units; this would require rebuilding and extending the third-rail system from PSNY that is now (I think) out of service.

A further question concerned the possibility of catenary-based dual-modes, which would be a good fit in New Jersey’s system. John said that this would be a “heavy-lift” for technical reasons, and said the agency hasn’t explored that possibility since the 1980s. [Why are catenary dual-modes more difficult to build?]

George asked about the Metro-Hub through-running concept. John said that the MTA - the “two to tango” partner - has not shown much interest.

[Assessment: I think Jim Dermody was lukewarm about Metro-Hub because the LIRR already has four tracks into PSNY and he was counting on even more capacity from the East Side Access project.]

2. General state of NJ Transit, other issues on the system.

a. John Kanarek was upbeat about ridership, which has been increasing in all primary markets served. Midtown Direct has been the most successful of the new services.

Secaucus Transfer has been disappointing. It has mostly shifted existing riders who used to go to Hoboken. Little new ridership has been generated, possibly because of limitations on the Main/Bergen lines, like inadequate parking. (Route 17 park and ride station has just opened). Also, the “Allied Junction” development around the station has not taken place and doesn’t seem likely any time soon.

b. Capital funding: Firm dates for expansion projects have not been set, except perhaps for Xanadu access. The future is cloudy because the transportation trust fund will expire in June, 2006. [New Jersey members may want to update us on what is happening with this issue.]

c. The agency is committed to buying 100 bi-level cars, with an option available for 100 more.

d. There may be a few places where new development or parking facilities can feed ridership to new stations. John and Johnson may leave its extensive facilities in North Brunswick, which would provide a chance to develop a new station. An earlier proposal for a South Brunswick station failed when a planned office park nearby was dropped.

3. MTA fiscal situation:

a. We discussed growing debt service as a major factor in the MTA’s financial crisis. The agency has become dependent on borrowing for capital needs because of inadequate funding from all levels of government.

George suggested that additional motorist-based funding (taxes, fees, and/or tolls) should be part of the solution to paying for transit. At the moment we lack information to evaluate the impact of different fare levels on ridership and the overall revenue stream.

b. MTA chairman Peter Kalikow has been reported as saying that he may drop system expansion - including the Second Avenue subway and LIRR Grand Central Access - from the next capital program in order to save “core” rehabilitation projects on existing routes. [I’m not sure the agency will be any more capable of expansion in 2009.] Anyway, such a move would give us much more time - presumably years - to push for one of the cheaper GCT options we have discussed. Probably Metro-Hub would look a lot more desirable, especially to the LIRR.

c. City Ticket (weekend flat \$2.50 fares) will continue on MN and LIRR, although still on a trial basis.

4. Progress reports:

a. Metro-Hub: NJ-Transit's interest in dual-modes is an encouraging sign. New Hudson River tunnels will probably not be ready for at least another nine or ten years; we think Metro-Hub could be implemented within four years.

Some members of NJ-ARP are skeptical about the value of LIRR dual-mode units, particularly because of poor reliability. However, the Raritan Valley Coalition has been a strong supporter of the dual-mode concept (if not necessarily existing designs) because it would be the easiest way to get a one-seat ride to New York.

b. JFK Access/ Rockaway cutoff. Funding for an airport link to Lower Manhattan has run into resistance in Congress. Governor Pataki had thought that LM was assured of special consideration because of the 9/11 attacks. [Maybe the passage of time is lessening Federal enthusiasm for this kind of thing.] The Rockaway cutoff (airport to Midtown) could be built more cheaply and will give improved access to central Queens and the Rockaways. [The next meeting of the Rockaway cutoff subcommittee is on November 8.

c. We hope to have a Brooklyn-Lower Manhattan subcommittee meeting on Monday, November 15. Part of the focus is on the Brooklyn IND line, which has unused capacity, but we will also look at airport access and the LIRR Atlantic Avenue branch.

5. Amtrak/Intercity:

a. There will be attempts (NARP-based?) to save the Three Rivers/Pennsylvanian services. Amtrak is planning to drop the Three Rivers route between Pittsburgh and Chicago and reduce New York-Pittsburgh daily round trips from two to one. One option would be to "flip" the Three Rivers schedule so that it operates overnight through Pennsylvania and then by daylight through Ohio. [Assessment: would it be possible to reroute the train through Cleveland and Toledo? There is very little population on the present CSX line west of Akron.]

b. Amtrak and New York State remain far apart on the issue of the state's rail improvement program. The rebuilt Turboliners have been moved to Amtrak's shop in Delaware. The state may consider replacing Amtrak for operations, although ESPA cautions that this might be more expensive - Federal operating funds could be lost - and the freight lines may not want to deal with a new operator.