

Regional Rail Working Group, Meeting of July 20, 2005

Attendees: George Haikalis, Bonnie Braine, Greg Bender, Joe Clift, Paul DiMaria, Herb Gormley, Richard Harrington, Phil Strong, Bill Guild

Topics discussed:

1. Rail Workshop at Municipal Arts Society. We briefly reviewed the results of the workshop, which was held on 6/28. MetroHub was the major topic of the day, although some emphasis was also given to LIRR access to Grand Central. Jack Dean of MTA planning and Jan Khan of NYMTC attended the workshop. Regarding Grand Central: Dean seemed to think that the group should concentrate on cost issues, and not use "fear-mongering" (i.e., emergency evacuation issues) to attack the deep-level station plan. The consensus of our group is that security/terrorism problems are valid objections to the MTA preferred design. The "Macy's/34th Street" station proposed by NJ Transit was also reviewed. Al Papp mentioned that NJ Transit is ignoring the original ARC goals, which included connectivity to other parts of Manhattan and to other rail systems. However, the MTA has shown no inclination of its own to further that goal. We hope to do a more comprehensive presentation of our positions again in the fall.

2. Lower Manhattan / JFK Airport

A. Scoping meeting of 7/18. The gist of the comments by transit advocates is that the \$6 billion cost the project is far out of proportion to any possible benefits. The PCAC position is that other projects should have higher priority, especially considering that not enough funding is available for other, long standing MTA proposals. (Comments for the scoping process can be submitted up to September 17.) IRUM's position is that Jamaica station is well-suited for "triple-meet" LIRR service; i.e., coordinated service from there to Grand Central, Penn Station, and Lower Manhattan, and transfers provided at Jamaica among the three routes. George mentioned that a lower fare structure than presently available on the LIRR within Queens might generate the ridership to justify a new tunnel; airport traffic alone is not sufficient.

B. Downtown Brooklyn: There seems to be an obvious need for any new line to provide more access to downtown Brooklyn than can be accomplished by only using the existing Atlantic Ave. terminal.

The document in the planning studies section of the MTA website, however, avoids mentioning Brooklyn in its list of goals and objectives, even though the route would obviously have to pass through the borough. The major emphasis is on airport traffic and "commuter travel" from Jamaica station, presumably meaning LIRR passengers from east of Jamaica.

C. Equipment issues. This has been a perennial problem ever since the Port Authority imposed its AirTrain concept nearly a decade ago. We can see two major options:

1. Using the Atlantic branch for a subway service, which would probably allow access to the AirTrain tracks without the purchase of special equipment.
2. Retaining the LIRR on the branch, which could allow service from various Nassau and Suffolk points directly to Lower Manhattan.

D. Need for LM subcommittee. We hope to have more frequent meetings of this subcommittee in order to work out our positions.

E. PATH as model for Lower Manhattan: Greg discussed the PATH system as a possible model for what could be done on the Brooklyn/Long Island side of Lower Manhattan. PATH already handles two comparable functions:

1. It provides a transfer at Newark for regional rail riders who want to reach LM; a similar transfer could be done at Jamaica for LIRR passengers;
2. It has multiple stations in the office and residential areas of Jersey City, the New Jersey equivalent of Brooklyn.

We know that PATH could have a third major market; it could be extended (relatively easily) to Newark Airport. (See comment at the end of this document for some suggestions about PATH.)

F. Routings: We want to explore the possibility of splitting the route (Jamaica and JFK services) at Woodhaven Junction. This would avoid the complexity of routing everything through Jamaica. A decision would have to be made about building a flyover at the junction.

G. We are aware that Governor Pataki is more interested in "doing something" (showing interest) for Lower Manhattan rather than solving any specific transportation problem.

3. Rockaway subcommittee / Carl's resignation. Carl Perrera has left the RRWG and has decided to work with a "Rockaway Transit Coalition" that would operate independently. From his letter of 7/20/05, I gather that he felt constrained by the Metro-Hub (i.e., regional-based) orientation of our group. He may have felt that subway options were not given enough attention because of an emphasis on "railroad-based" service in the Metro-Hub plan.

It should be noted that there has been some support in Queens to build a pedestrian/bicycle trail on the Rockaway cut-off, which might preclude (maybe deliberately) the restoration of rail service. We need to keep provisions for rail even if that is developed after the trail is completed.

4. LIRR East Side Access / Power Point show. Joe Clift presented the PowerPoint file that compares the two "Grand Central loop" options against the MTA's "deep cavern" option. We seem to have a persuasive case - I think it's always been a strong case - in arguing that Grand Central has the capacity to handle the LIRR without adding another level beneath the station. (The MTA's present cost estimate is \$7.7 billion.)

The new level would require the first set of escalators from platform level to handle a depth of ninety feet; that would be one of the longest escalator installations in North America.

The presentation also had some ideas about simplifying the Queens end of the 63rd Street tunnel - basically using two tunnel portals instead of six. We admitted that we haven't developed our Queens concepts as thoroughly as we have those on the Manhattan part of the project.

No tunnel boring work has started yet on the East Side Access project, although I guess that could change depending on the outcome of the bond issue proposal in the November election.

5. At note on New Jersey: The Star-Ledger has reported that NJ Transit has decided to drop a plan to extend the Hudson-Bergen LRT to Tenafly. Instead, the agency wants to use Diesel MU trains that would shuttle between there and North Bergen, adding another transfer for Bergen County riders. The "sweetener" is that someday the branch could be connected directly to the new ARC tunnel.

6. Additional suggestion about Lower Manhattan:

We might want to consider PATH itself for an extension to Jamaica and JFK. If a new East River tunnel were to be built, it might be worth having PATH use it. The system would run through the WTC, probably use the Court Street/Transit Museum and Hoyt-Schermerhorn tracks, have exclusive use of the Atlantic branch, and then split at Woodhaven. There could be, e.g., a Hoboken-JFK service and a Newark-Jamaica service. Or the opposite could be done. Or, there could be alternating trains among all four endpoints.

An advantage: it wouldn't be necessary to sweat the details of an entirely new system on the eastern side of LM. We already have the PATH equipment specs, fare structure (now MetroCard compatible), operating procedures, etc., in place.

The second advantage: it provides through-running via LM. Many origins and destinations (Newport City to Brooklyn, Newark Airport to JFK) can be one-seat rides or at least easier rides.]