

## **Regional Rail Working Group**

**Meeting Date: October 19, 2005**

**Attendees: George Haikalis, Bonnie Braine, Barry Adler, Jeff Chase, Paul DiMaria, Joe Hartigan, Bill Guild, James O'Shea, Jose Luis Pascual, Carolyn Schultz, David Miraglia, Richard Stowe, Herb Gormley**

Topics discussed:

### *1) Progress reports*

- i) *Metro-Hub*: NJ Transit has been focused on the Trans-Hudson Tunnel project recently, which they counting on as a solution for their Penn Station capacity problems. Previously, NJT had been more favorable towards through-running than the MTA operating units.

At the Federal level, there have been moves to remove the Northeast Corridor from Amtrak ownership; presumably Penn Station itself will be included in this deal. Reports are that Amtrak will continue to be the actual train operator on the route. It might be possible to reconsider through-running if changes occur on the corridor, although we don't yet know the implications of new ownership. Probably the state of New Jersey will have to contribute more to corridor maintenance if the line is separated from Amtrak.

[In addition, NJT has taken over the last Amtrak Clocker trains, which have now been cut back from Philadelphia to Trenton.]

- ii) *Rockaway cut-off*. We would like a resident of central Queens to be involved in our efforts on this route. At the moment, residents of the Rockaways are generally supportive of restoring the line, while there has been considerable opposition – for years, in fact – farther north in Forest Hills. Some Queens's residents have supported a proposed bike/pedestrian greenway on the route specifically to block a restoration of train service. (There is a national group, Rails and Trails, which advocates joint use of rail routes.)

Transportation Alternatives supports a bike path on the route. While I worked there, the general attitude was that a rail alternative is too remote to warrant serious consideration.

There have been proposals to redevelop the Aqueduct Race Track site as a center for gambling casinos. (Horse racing would be consolidated at Belmont Park.) Jim O'Shea wondered if the Jets Football team might be persuaded to move to the site if their deal for a new stadium (to be shared with the Giants) in the Meadowlands falls through.

We discussed the idea of renaming the route, when mentioned in the Metro-Hub plan, as the Central Queens Rail Corridor.

Ferry service: We discussed the possibility that a high-speed ferry service from the Rockaways to Manhattan would be a useful interim measure.

- 2) *Lower Manhattan-JFK*: At the next RRWG meeting, we will have two guest commentators, Phillip Plotch of the Lower Manhattan Development committee, and Chris Bastian of the MTA.

As per the PAC meeting materials, there still seems to many options on the table for this project, including some that use existing Brooklyn-Manhattan tunnels, including those under Cranberry, Rutgers, and Montague Streets. There has been opposition in Brooklyn to losing any subway capacity to handle new services from JFK and Jamaica/Long Island.

At the moment, only the Joralemon Street tunnel (East Side IRT) is beyond capacity in regards to passenger loads. Before 9/11, a new East River tunnel was not considered a high priority for New York transportation needs.

It should be noted that some of the airport options use about a half mile of the Rockaway Cut-off to reach Woodhaven Junction.

We've heard reports that Jack Dean of the MTA has said that Governor Pataki won't allow a no-build option to be considered in the planning process. Our group, however, is willing to consider "no-build" in our own deliberations. I might define this to include "system enhancement" options (e.g., a fifth track at the IRT Atlantic Avenue station) that would require capital expenditures.

- 3) *Holiday fare discounts*: The group seemed, on the whole, to be skeptical about the discounts, and there has been some skepticism in the press and among the public too. It has been suggested that if the MTA has a surplus, it should be used for other purposes than a one-time holiday discount. Personally, I wonder if the discounts are intended to bolster the city's retailers for what is likely to be a disappointing shopping season.

We think that any holiday fare plan should consider more benefits for regional rail riders. In fact, last year, the City Ticket was cancelled for the duration of the holiday season.

- 4) *Bond Issue, November 8*.

We took a poll during the meeting, and almost everyone present either opposed the bond issue or was undecided about it.

Some transportation advocates, such as ESPA, have opposed the measure, but it has gotten support from groups such as Transportation Alternatives, the Straphangers Campaign, and the Regional Plan Association. Much of the New York press has been supportive as well.

Objections to the bond issue from our group included the following:

- i) There is no financial plan to complete the three big-ticket projects mentioned in the bond issue. Only a small portion of each project would be funded if the issue passes. In fact, it is unclear if even that money would be committed to those specific projects over the long-term. Bond issues often allow funds to be eventually diverted among a variety of smaller projects.
  - ii) Attempts at cost control or sensible planning seem to be lacking for large MTA projects recently. We have seen East Side Access (LIRR) become a hugely elaborate and expensive project over the last decade. The Second Avenue subway has become almost unjustifiable with a \$2 billion per mile price tag.
  - iii) The MTA is already getting into serious debt problems by relying on fare backed “revenue” bonds for capital projects. We have seen little interest by the agency or the state in new revenue sources that would minimize this dependence on borrowing.
  - iv) The bond issue has too many highway-based projects listed, including many smaller projects that should be paid by gas taxes.
- 5) *Connecticut issues.*

Richard Stowe, a transportation advocate from that state, listed some proposals that have been of interest there:

- i) Extension of Harlem line (electrified portion) from Brewster to Danbury, via the Maybrook line. Danbury has a much larger population than the town at the present terminal. (M-N already has dual-mode locomotives, so perhaps these could be used for the extension.)
- ii) Springfield Amtrak line. All or most trains should run through to New York. At present most trips require a transfer in New Haven.
- iii) Transfer of ownership of the Hell Gate line from Amtrak to the MTA. I’m not sure the group has had a position on this, although we have generally thought that regional rail access to this line will not be hampered by Amtrak ownership. Of course, everything could change if the Federal Government forces Amtrak to divest itself its holdings on the Northeast Corridor.

We do agree that the Hell Gate Bridge is a very underutilized facility.

- iv) The new M-8s planned for the New Haven division should be compatible with operation on other parts of the corridor, including service to New Jersey and on Amtrak between New Haven and Boston.