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A New Hudson River Rail Tunnel

The Problem

The Hudson River has long been a physical and political barrier dividing the states of New Jersey and New York. This has not kept 600,000 people a day from crossing it, the majority who begin their days in New Jersey and cross the Hudson to reach the huge supply of high paying quality jobs in New York City, mostly in the Manhattan Central Business District. The transportation facilities they use to accomplish this daily task are old and filled to capacity. The last of these to expand is the George Washington Bridge, when in 1962 its lower deck was added to the 1931 structure. The Lincoln Tunnel opened in 1937 and a third tube was added in 1949 at the same time that the Port Authority's bus terminal at 41st Street was built. And the Holland Tunnel opened in 1927. The three rail tunnels to Manhattan will reach their centenary soon – the two tubes of PATH date from 1907 and the Pennsylvania Railroad tunnel carrying NJ TRANSIT trains and Amtrak will reach the age of 100 in 2010. These rail tunnels have never been expanded.

All of these facilities are at capacity, yet the demands on these facilities continue to grow. Without expansion of their capacity economic growth for both New Jersey and New York will suffer. New Jerseyans will not gain the access to the high-paying job market in New York and New York will not gain the access to the skilled labor pool in New Jersey.

The expansion possibilities for the trans-Hudson transportation facilities are limited. Highway expansion is neither practical nor desirable. The Port Authority bus terminal, expanded in the 1980s, cannot handle any more buses, constrained by the capacity of the bus lane to and through the Lincoln Tunnel. PATH's World Trade Center branch, to reopen by the end of 2003, will once again be full. The uptown branch of PATH, which winds its way through Greenwich Village and Chelsea has some capacity, but does not take commuters where they want to go. And while it is true that ferry expansion offers

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some possibilities for added trans-Hudson capacity growth, it is limited to niche markets where access to both shores can be easily provided.

Expansion of rail capacity into Penn Station is the only possible option, but requires a new tunnel. Currently, only 25 train “slots” in the peak hour are possible through the existing tunnel; five of these are reserved for Amtrak and the remaining 20 are for NJ TRANSIT. More trains on existing lines or new service on new lines is not possible without a new tunnel.

Access to the Region’s Core

In 1990, to their credit, the three major transit agencies in the Region – the Port Authority, NJ TRANSIT and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) – were prescient enough to recognize the impending problem. They formed a pact to work on the project, agreeing to move forward only if they achieved full agreement on each step along the way. Their work, known as Access to the Region’s Core (ARC), finally began in 1995 after much administrative delay. A key objective of their work was to devise a means to allow commuters from west of the Hudson to reach the east side of midtown Manhattan, where the vast majority of commuters worked. Currently, all the means of transit from west of the Hudson leave commuters on the west side of Manhattan, necessitating transfers to subways and buses, an expensive taxi ride, or an excessively long walk.

ARC examined many alternatives and eventually centered their attention on three alternatives. However, the only one of these three that would enable passengers to reach the east side directly would require the “invasion” of rail operations of the MTA within Grand Central Terminal (GCT). The MTA vetoed this option, arguing that it would adversely affect their Metro North and LIRR options. (The LIRR is to be connected into GCT with a project now under design and known as East Side Access (ESA)). Neither of the remaining two options would deliver people to the east side. One option, known as “P,” would build a new cavernous stub-end terminal deep under the existing Penn

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Station. The other, known as “S,” would expand the station platforms on the south side of the existing Penn Station and operate trains eastward to Queens where they would be stored in Sunnyside Yard in Long Island City.

ARC has just completed a Major Investment Study which concluded that these two remaining options should be advanced and refined in an Environment Impact Study (EIS). See <http://www.accesstotheregionscore.com/> for more details. This next stage has now gotten underway with the selection of a consultant in June 2003.

See http://www.njtransit.com/ne_pressrelease.jsp?PRESS_RELEASE_ID=641

Regional Plan Association strongly believes that neither option still on the table accomplishes what is needed – new rail capacity and direct access to the east side. And while we believe that the first step is to secure funding for a tunnel to the west side, we also believe that a commitment is needed by NJ TRANSIT to seriously study options to reach the east side. Our beliefs would hardly matter if we did not also believe that there is a solution that would meet the objective of a one-seat ride to east Midtown, one that would also have other major benefits for both states. We expect that NJ TRANSIT will include our proposal as one of the alternatives studied in the EIS.

RPA’s Proposal

RPA’s proposal meets both the capacity and direct east side imperatives. It offers better connections to the New York City subway system than the current ARC alternatives do. It offers redundancy with the existing Penn Station in case of emergency. It offers direct service to many midtown Manhattan destinations. It opens up access possibilities to the prospective developments on the far west side of midtown Manhattan. And because of these many virtues, it will motivate more trans-Hudson travelers to choose transit, lightening the load on the highways in New Jersey and the streets of New York.

RPA’s alternative would consist of a loop configuration that stops at 34th Street and Seventh Avenue, continues across 34th Street and turns up Madison Avenue, stopping in

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the 42nd to 46th Street area, where easy access to GCT would be possible, and then turns back westward at either 49th or 50th Street, stopping between 6th and 7th Avenues, and then would turn south on either 9th or 10th Avenues before turning back across the Hudson. Two draft versions of this loop are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

This loop would be able to handle 24 trains per hour, doubling the current capacity, providing room for growth and for added services from lines that are now not possible, including direct rail one-seat rides from the Raritan Valley Line in Union and Somerset counties, the West Shore line in Bergen and Rockland (NY) counties, and from a new line serving Monmouth, Middlesex and Ocean counties. The loop would also be able to operate as a circulator for trips solely within Manhattan. The RPA loop would attract more transit riders and lower auto use into Manhattan to a greater extent than either of the two alternatives now being considered by NJ TRANSIT.

RPA is advocating to appointed and elected officials in New Jersey and New York a new tunnel, with its eventual extension to the east side, in the loop concept described above. The first step is to make sure that the funds are available to construct the new rail tunnel, with commitments to extend it later in the loop configuration to be even more useful to both states. The advocacy is extended to both states because the project is in the interest of both states.