

# Regional Rail Working Group

**Meeting Date: December 14, 2005**

**Attendees: George Haikalis, David Peter Alan, Greg Bender, Joseph Clift, Herb Landow, Bill Guild, Steve Lanset, Al Papp, Paul DiMaria, Robert Toth, Jeff Chase, Herb Gormley**

**Topics discussed:**

## **Presentation by Herb Landow for “Alternative C”, a concept for New Jersey Transit rail access to Midtown Manhattan.**

I know that some members of the working group were present for this meeting, and others may have copies of the materials Herb prepared, but I will recap the major parts of the plan without trying to repeat every detail in this report.

**Background.** As we now know, New Jersey Transit has moved away from the original goals of Access to the Region’s Core, which had been to build an efficient distribution system within Manhattan for regional rail riders. Now NJT has retreated to the single aim of increasing capacity under the Hudson and has lost interest in where its riders go east of, say, Herald Square. Part of the problem is that Metro-North (and its parent, the MTA) has also pulled back to its own bailiwick, namely Grand Central. In the absence of any cooperation, nothing is now planned that will really change how these systems have worked for nearly a century.

**Main concept for Alternative C.** NJT is now planning two new tracks under the river, which would connect with Penn Station and a new “annex” station under 34<sup>th</sup> Street near Macys.

Alternative C would move the new tubes a little less than a mile to the north and provide a more comprehensive distribution system for Midtown. The two tracks would split into a four-track crosstown rail system that would reach as far east as First Avenue. There would be double deck tunnels under both 49<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> Street. Inbound (eastbound) trains would use the lower level tracks; outbound trains would be on the upper levels.

**Station locations / other construction details.** The plan provides for four new stations in Midtown, which would be located between the following avenues: 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>; 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>; Park and 3<sup>rd</sup>; and 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup>. (I might name them Midtown West, Rockefeller Center, Grand Central North, and United Nations/Turtle Bay.) There would be concourses at each station to provide passenger access between the 49<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> Street routes; these concourses would be in the sub-basement level of existing buildings.

The new system would, with one exception, pass below all north-south Manhattan rail lines, including the Metro-North approach to Grand Central. Transfers could be made to all of these lines; the transfer at Grand Central between MN and NJT would be a

particularly important feature of the project. (This replaces the Alternative G concept, which would have regional trains running through Manhattan from one system to the other. With Alternative C, the passengers make the transfers; the trains stay within their own systems.)

The one structural anomaly would involve the Lexington Avenue subway, where Alternate C would pass under the local tracks but above the express tracks. We are not sure how much clearance is available there. It may be necessary at this location to have the new trackways side-by-side rather than in double-deck layout.

**Operations.** Alternative C has some similarities to a rapid transit line as opposed to a conventional regional rail operation. There is no multi-track terminal station as provided at PSNY, Grand Central, or Hoboken. Trains run through to First Avenue; then crews change ends (or to be more accurate, relay crews take over) and the trains quickly leave again. Herb estimated the system could handle about 30 trains per hour in the peak direction.

A question came up during the meeting about how passengers would make transfers within New Jersey. At present NJT operates a single terminal in Manhattan, and future plans would funnel trains from all North Jersey lines into this one place. With Alternative C, NJT operations split in two, with some trains going to PSNY, and others using the 49<sup>th</sup>-50<sup>th</sup> Street line. There has to be some place in New Jersey where passengers can transfer and get a train for their preferred destination. (We guessed that the Midtown line might actually become more popular than the traditional service to PSNY.)

At the moment Secaucus seems like the only place where this could be done, but that station has an awkward multi-level design that makes it less than ideal for such a purpose. However, the group wasn't able to immediately think of another way to handle these transfers.

**Fate of Alternative G.** There is nothing here from an engineering standpoint that seems to preclude an eventual track connection between GCT and PSNY. However, it would seem likely that the need for such a project would be diminished and neither agency would have much interest in ever pursuing it. To be honest, the agencies already seem quite indifferent to it and are presently doing little or nothing to push it forward.

[Additional detail about Alternative G: Metro-North has lost any chance of getting West Side yard space for itself. Any MN trains going to Penn Station would probably have to continue to New Jersey.]

**Yards.** NJT is now planning a huge storage yard in the Meadowlands. Alternative C could provide considerable storage capacity within Manhattan. A connection could be built to the Amtrak West Side line, and a linear yard could be built in the Riverside Park tunnel. The yard would have two tracks for Amtrak, two more for storage, and an access track for train crews and maintenance equipment.

**Financial issues.** We can't at this early stage make an estimate of the costs of building this project. Herb guessed that it would likely be more expensive than the officially endorsed Trans-Hudson Express tunnel/Macy's station plan.

This brings up some tricky political issues. Would New Jersey politicians balk at spending for so much infrastructure in another state? Would they demand that the MTA kick in some money too? Would the MTA feel this is not their problem?

Of course, Alternative C would benefit residents of both states, and it would make sense to promote that aspect of it. It would be better to present it that way rather than as something that "only helps NJT's customers."

### **Other topics discussed**

**Metro-Hub.** Some members of the group (I believe Joe Clift, Al Papp, and David Peter Alan among them) have met with George Warrington to discuss the possibilities of through-running into the MTA systems. Warrington seemed to be a least receptive of the concept (NJ Transit has always seemed more open to the idea than the MTA.)

There were suggestions at the meeting that it might be time to look at the Metro-Hub report again and see if any revisions are in order.

**Rockaway cut-off.** There seems to be some interest in Queens for a subway service along the cutoff. This could be done by diverting one of the Queens Boulevard local services (the R or the V train) to the new line; presumably the route would extend to Far Rockaway or Rockaway Park. A bellmouth at Rego Park was included in the Queens Boulevard IND seventy years ago for just such a service

One drawback to this plan is that a lot of passengers from the new line might want to change to the overcrowded express trains at Jackson Heights.

**LIRR/East Side Access.** The MTA seems to have reached a compromise plan for the Midtown venting/cooling plant that satisfies most of the nearby property owners. Only one owner is still resisting.

The Grand Central "upper level loop" concept seems to be finally getting some attention from people beyond our group. For example, Gene Russianoff of the Straphangers Campaign reportedly sent a letter to MTA Chairman Peter Kalilow asking that the upper level option be examined again.

The Tri-State Campaign newsletter (*Mobilizing the Region*) had an article in December discussing alternatives to the deep cavern plan, including the Delcan Corporation plan commissioned by Midtown groups, and IRUM's plan during the EIS process. The alternatives, of course, involve use of the existing tracks of Grand Central. According to the article, MTA officials have agreed to meet with Delcan (a Canadian consulting firm) to discuss alternatives.

**Lower Manhattan/JFK.** According to one of his aides, Congressman Jerrold Nadler is now having doubts about the worth of a large investment in this project.

**Freight issues.** Bill Galligan of the East of Hudson Task Force has suggested that Yard A in Long Island City be returned to freight use; at the moment it is slated for use by the LIRR as part of the East Side Access project. There has been community opposition in Maspeth, Queens, to a new or expanded freight yard there. This train to truck transfer facility is needed somewhere if a trans-Harbor freight tunnel is ever built.

**Amtrak.** Al Papp discussed how Amtrak is now operating with an interim president after the sudden firing of Peter Gunn in November. One reason for his dismissal may have been his opposition to Bush Administration proposals to sell or lease the Northeast Corridor to a non-Amtrak entity.

Amtrak will rollout a new kind of food service, which is supposed to be cheaper to operate, for four long distance routes; probably this will be extended to the other routes later. This plan uses “pre-plated” food that will be heated rather than prepared on board. It will also replace traditional dining car service with a more informal type of diner-buffet setup.

At the moment there is no food service provided on the Empire Corridor between New York and Albany. For a brief period the Subway sandwich chain provided meals on the route, but Amtrak employees objected to having a non-union operation on the trains.