

Regional Rail Working Group, Meeting of November 17, 2004

Attendees: George Haikalis, John West, Phil Strong, Jeff Chase, Jim O'Shea, Gary Johnson, Paul DiMaria, Herb Landow, Joe Clift, Herb Gormley

Topics discussed:

1. Bergen County/Northern Branch: We briefly mentioned the position laid out by Jack Kanerack last month, but we decided to hold off more extensive discussion until more New Jersey members are present. We did think that NJ Transit's new interest in DMUs there goes against its long-standing plans for extending light rail northwards, at least as far as Vince Lombardi Park and Ride. NJ-ARP Bergen County members had thought light rail to Tenafly and also a branch to Hackensack and Paterson were worth pursuing.

2. Mission statement. George presented a tentative group mission statement that was printed on the agenda. Some members of the group were concerned about using the term "converting" as our goal for what should be done with the regional rail system. The group was more comfortable referring to the "integration" or "transformation" of the system. It seemed that this could mean that the needs of customers should be put ahead of certain changes in train operation or equipment. We mentioned through-ticketing between systems, which can be done now through electronic vending machines, as one early step to be taken.

[We do face the fact that on the American scene the division between railroads and rapid transit has been rigidly maintained. Perhaps this is too conservative; if it is, we need to know more about how things are done in Paris and Berlin, or in the few exceptions that have existed in the U.S. (The now-gone North Shore-Chicago el partnership is an interesting case.)]

3. LIRR-East Side Access:

a. This project is in the new MTA capital budget, but we don't know if any expansion projects will actually be funded in the next five years. Peter Kalikow has signaled that he may drop everything not related to rebuilding the existing system, and there is no doubt that the capital program is in serious trouble. Nevertheless, East Side Access is very close to the first major tunneling contract (some preliminary work has already been done in Queens) so it is possible that the MTA will try to push it forward in pieces over a long time period.

b. Herb presented a draft of a letter - consisting of a series of bullet points - to be sent to Kalikow. George proposed circulating the letter at an ESPA meeting in Albany. We considered sending letters from both ESPA and the RRWG itself, possibly with slightly different content in each.

I think the group concurred with the basic message of the letter: that the ESA project should be halted immediately and the MTA should develop a more cost-effective plan. However, there was considerable back and forth at the meeting about what criteria should be used to judge this and other capital projects in the region. We are sure that that the present estimate of \$6 billion pretty much forecloses other expansion plans.

c. Time “savings” of ESA. We discussed how the present “bunker” plan may diminish any time savings offered by access to Grand Central. The new level would impose on passengers a 150 foot escalator ride, in two stages, to reach street level.

d. Other advocate groups, including Straphangers and the Regional Plan Association, support the present plan. [Transportation Alternatives hasn’t taken a position, although they generally haven’t concentrated on rail beyond fare issues. Perhaps the group should approach Paul White - TA will start working on its winter 2005 issue soon, and they accept guest columnists.]

4. MTA fiscal crisis. Revenue backed bonds from earlier years are becoming a serious burden on the agency. [Fare hike proposal and token booth closures were indeed approved in December, although bus service cutbacks are on hold for a few months, at least. There may be new service guidelines allowing for longer bus headways.]

NJ Transit may also be poised to for fare hikes in 2005. The RRWG will have to operate an uncertain future where fighting for new revenue becomes as important as proposing new projects.

5. Bombardier locomotive. Herb passed around information about Bombardier’s prototype gas turbine locomotive. We discussed this as a possible platform for a New York area dual-mode unit. The main benefit would be that it would be considerably lighter than a diesel. However, we were concerned about the fuel efficiency of such a unit in commuter service. [I believe Amtrak preferred to run its various kinds of Turbo trains with limited stops because of the fuel consumption issue.]

6. John West discussed the issues involved in Lower Manhattan access, which recently have been defined by the Governor and others as mainly linking Kennedy Airport to the Financial District. (Some benefits for commuters from Long Island may be in the mix.)

Two proposals have been on the table: 1. A new East River tunnel for the LIRR, which seems too expensive relative to the benefits provided; 2) use of the Manhattan Bridge or a subway tunnel (probably the IND Fulton Street tunnel), which would possibly take away capacity from city riders.

We have suggested a new Court Street-Whitehall Street tunnel as a third option, because the approaches are in place and it probably be cheaper than Pataki's somewhat vaguely defined proposal. However, we haven't yet defined the benefits of increased access from that direction. Does Lower Manhattan really need more transportation investment, or is Midtown the place where future efforts should be directed? (George pointed out that all Brooklyn-Manhattan lines are used below capacity except for the IRT 4/5 tunnel.)

Also, we have mentioned several times that New Jersey has been left out of present plans, even though that may be more crucial for LM's future. Previously New Jersey members of the group have suggested a PATH extension to Newark Airport as a simpler and more effective plan than Pataki's JFK line.

[An additional note about New Jersey: New York Waterways, which dominates trans-Hudson ferry service, is in financial trouble. There have been hints that the Port Authority, Hudson County, or New York Water Taxi may have a role in saving some services, but nothing has been decided yet.

7. Freight tunnel under New York harbor: This plan seems to be running into trouble. There have been proposals to pay for it with tonnage charges - a kind of train toll? Who would be responsible for collecting it? It would seem that the Port Authority would be the most logical agency to build and operate the tunnel, although they don't seem to be at the forefront of advocating it. Most of the support has come from New York - the reverse of the situation with ARC.

Also, the main transfer terminal between rail and trucks would probably be in Maspeth, Queens, and that community has not been favorable towards a new facility.