

Regional Rail Working Group

Meeting Date: November 16, 2005

Attendees: George Haikalis, David Peter Alan, Jeff Gerlach, Richard Harrington, Paul DiMaria, Joe Hartigan, Phil Strong, Robert Toth, Jeff Chase, Christopher Wasiutynski, James O'Shea, Jose Luis Pascual, Richard Stowe, Herb Gormley, Bob Olmstead, Robert Francis, Jeffrey Otto

Topics discussed:

Presentation by Chris Bastian, MTA Planning, Project Manager Lower Manhattan/JFK/Jamaica Rail Link, supported by Philip Plotch, Director of Transportation Policy, Lower Manhattan Development Corp.

The scoping phase of the project has been completed, and the analysis of various alternatives has begun; preliminary results may be ready by late winter of 2006. As I reported last month, there are many options on the table right now; about ninety-four variations are on the list. The Draft EIS may be done by early 2007.

The LIRR Atlantic Branch is a front-runner for the new service, but the Fulton Street IND and the Broadway/J line are also being considered. A new East River tunnel and the existing Montague Street tunnel are serious contenders for entry into Manhattan, but other crossings (including the Manhattan Bridge) are still on the list. Some non-rail options (bus and ferry) are also included.

Also, the provision of through service from LIRR stations east of Jamaica is still undecided.

According to Mr. Bastian, respondents voiced several major concerns during the scoping process:

1. The route should connect to the proposed Second Avenue subway or an existing subway to allow through service to Midtown. (Apparently PATH is also being considered for a connection [through service?] to New Jersey.)
2. There should be more than one station provided for Lower Manhattan, not a single terminal as PATH provides for its LM line.
3. Brooklyn needs a station in the Metro Tech/Borough Hall area.
4. Travel needs from the Rockaways should be addressed.
5. Capacity on existing Brooklyn subways should not be reduced to make way for the new service.

Question and answer period. Mr. Bastian did most of the talking here.

1. *Rockaway cut-off to Rego Park and beyond.* This may not be included in the study; the project is not orientated towards service to Midtown Manhattan.
2. The exact travel time to JFK via rail has not been established yet.
3. *Ferry service.* We pointed out that ferry service might be quite fast (perhaps thirty-six minutes to Lower Manhattan) and would be good for passengers with luggage. There are several options in the list for ferries to different points in Manhattan.
4. Decisions about what kind of rail equipment (subway, LIRR, AirTrain, or hybrid) to use have not been set.
5. *FRA standards.* Several group members asked whether it was time to override or modify the strict separation the FRA requires for different rail modes (“standard” railroads versus transit systems.)

Mr. Bastian said the planners were reluctant to push now on this issue. He said that requests for waivers or permits would have to come at the direction of higher management levels of the MTA. He also noted that the FRA could impose its standards on an entire system if just one part of it connected to a regular railroad. (I believe this was the situation at PATH for many years.)

6. *Funding.* Full funding for the project has not been identified. Credits from post 9/11 Liberty Bonds might supply up to \$2 billion. There would also be contributions from the MTA and the Port Authority, and about \$100 million from the bond issue passed in November. Mr. Bastian noted that eventually politicians and the public would have to decide if more money should be committed for construction.

Overall evaluation. Our group seems skeptical of the need to give this project priority, or of even doing it at all – at least in the sense of building a new river crossing. We might consider JFK rail service to Midtown and ferries to LM as the best combination. For their part, MTA Planning seems to be aiming for a kind of strict neutrality. I think their message is that they have been directed to come up with a plan, and they are reluctant to question the larger issues or assumptions behind it.

We may doubt this project will generate enough economic development in Lower Manhattan to justify its construction. Mr. Bastian claimed that the benefits from the project would be determined at some point, although the methodology has not been selected yet. I assume the MTA hasn’t chosen a “cut-off” point at which the project would be judged viable or not.

Mr. Bastian admitted that the project is competing for the limited amount of funding available for New York area projects under the new Federal transportation bill. I would

also say that the amount of state and local monies available are constrained too, as we have noted before.

We have heard that sources in the MTA (including Bill Wheeler) believe that a no-build option will not be recommended, probably because Governor Pataki has put his support behind this project. However, it is likely a new governor will be in office long before this is ready for construction.

Progress reports

Metro-Hub.

1. We don't know the revenue effects of integrating subway and regional rail fares because we haven't acquired enough data for that. One problem is that the LIRR has not provided all of the fare data that we asked have for.
2. An issue about fares is that with the coming of MetroCard, the MTA has flexibility to raise different kinds of fares without tampering with the "base" fare on subways and buses that has always been such an politically-charged issue. It is possible that the MTA may give with one hand (integrating fares) while taking away with other (raising various prices to cover the costs).
3. We also speculated about separating operational issues (through-running) from financial ones by looking into a phasing plan for MetroHub features.
4. We also want to go beyond presentations to the management of the various operators (Jim Dermody et al.) and get more support from political leaders and the public.

Rockaway Cut-off

1. There seems to be some support in central Queens for a bike path on the right-of-way. That could be a problem because it would then be part of the Parks Department, which might block restoration of rail service later. We would like to get provisions for rail included in any bike/hiking path.
2. The Rockaways have had a housing boom recently, as have many other parts of the city. That strengthens the case for the cut-off, which needs riders from Queens as well as the airport to reach its full potential.
3. The airlines themselves may support better access to Midtown if they knew such a goal was in reach. Some of them (possibly JetBlue) might like a convenient rail service between JFK and Newark Airport. We noted that service to the latter is not truly a one-seat ride now, as a monorail actually connects the terminals to rail service outside the airport boundary.

LIRR East Side Access

Some members thought that the MTA's plan will fail only if not enough money is forthcoming to complete it. That would be an unfortunate outcome, with the project either left in a half-built limbo or moving forward at a very slow pace. Unlike something like the Second Avenue subway, the project cannot open incrementally.

Property owners in Midtown may drop their opposition to the vent structure if they can get provisions to their liking.

New Jersey Issues

1. David Peter Alan reported that the Lackawanna Coalition is skeptical of NJ Transit's underground 34th Street station plan, and also has doubts about the Secaucus Loop plan (which will bring Bergen County trains onto the Northeast Corridor).
2. The RRWG has a proposal to replace the Loop concept with a direct connection to the corridor (i.e., a single, 600 foot radius curve into Secaucus Junction.) This would require a new set of platforms just to the northeast of the existing station. However, we think this would offer a faster service into Manhattan.
3. As part of the Hudson tunnel plan, NJ Transit is considering an option to take the Morris and Essex off the "Kearny Junction" connection that opened in 1996. Instead, a roundabout route would be used to western Jersey City and then up the West Shore line (I assume) to a new connection. The point of this would be to avoid four-tracking the Northeast Corridor west of Secaucus, even if it increased travel time on the M&E.

Long Island Rail Road West Side shuttle.

We discussed this concept again, which would offer an alternative to an extension of the #7 train to the far West Side. LIRR trains would carry passengers between Penn Station and the West Side yards. We should discuss if extending existing runs instead of creating a separate shuttle would be the best way to provide service between those two points.