

Regional Rail Working Group

Meeting of April 19, 2006

Attendees: George Haikalis, Herbert Gormley, Bonnie Braine, Joseph Clift, Jose Luis Pascual, Paul DiMaria, David Kupferberg, Carl Perrera, Phil Strong, Alan Lubliner. Bob Jelley; from Five Towns Rural Transit: Hank de Cillia, Patricia Shillingburg, James Ellwood, John Rooney

Topics discussed:

Presentation of East End Shuttle concept, by Hank de Cillia, Executive Director of Five Town Rural Transit Inc.

This nonprofit group has put forward a plan for improving rail and bus transit on the eastern end of Long Island. The proposal involves a coordinated rail and bus system that would have headways of no more than thirty minutes on its various segments.

Background

The five towns of eastern Long Island have 130,000 permanent residents, which is about 38% of the total in Suffolk County. There are a large number of second homes in the area, which comprise 40% of the total dwellings. On weekends during the summer months the population triples or quadruples.

However, the Long Island Rail Road and the MTA bus unit provide inadequate service. The LIRR see its main mission as bringing riders into New York City. Rail service in the Five Towns has long headways, and bus transfers are mostly not coordinated with train arrivals and departures.

In fact, two private bus companies running out of New York, Hampton Jitney and Sunrise Coach, each carry ten times the LIRR ridership into the area.

The Proposal

A new Peconic Bay Transit Authority would be created to operate service in the area; thus buses and trains would finally be under the same management.

New diesel multiple unit cars, possibly from Colorado Rail Car, would be purchased for the rail side of the operation. These would cover two new services: a Ronkonkoma to Greenport route and another from Speonk to Montauk. Transfers to LIRR trains would take place at the western most stations.

It is possible that an arrangement could be worked out where some LIRR trains would run through to the end points as they do now, providing one-seat rides from New York to the Hamptons. A number of stations that were abandoned over the years would be reopened.

The bus system would be reconfigured to handle service between the rail stations and to other points in the Five Towns.

Question and answer period

1. Overlapping Shuttle services with existing LIRR lines.

It might be possible to operate some Shuttle trains to places west of the Ronkonkoma and Speonk, depending on the potential for such service. Also, as mentioned before, some or all LIRR trains that run to Greenport and Montauk might continue to do that.

2. Joe Clift asked about the possibility of interim improvements.

The LIRR has not been using its dual-mode locomotives as intensively as their capabilities would allow (i.e., for through service to New York) and some of its other equipment is also not utilized enough.

Apparently LIRR president Jim Dermody has not been particularly concerned about political pressure to increase service to the East End.

3. George mentioned other areas in the region that have had problems similar to the situation on the East End. In Connecticut, the Shore Line East route was set up to serve towns east of New Haven, beyond what had been covered by Metro-North. On the Hudson Line, a shuttle service from Croton-Harmon to Poughkeepsie was replaced by through trains to New York.

4. Phil mentioned that an earlier proposal to use DMUs on the LIRR was rejected because the railroad did not want to provide new shop facilities for a small fleet of cars.

Metro-Hub

An earlier study by the MTA of services on the Hell Gate Line and Hudson Line to Penn Station, both of which are also part of Metro-Hub, seems to be dormant for the moment. The MTA may be waiting for Governor Pataki's successor to give some direction for its planning efforts.

Columbia University is planning a major expansion into the area north of 125th Street and west of Broadway. This new campus is adjacent to a Manhattanville station that could be established if Metro-North extends service along Amtrak's West Side Line.

A Metro-North service on that line would require a double-track connection up at Spuyten Duyvil, but the existing bridge there could accommodate two tracks.

In the Bronx, a corporate office complex is emerging on the site of the former psychiatric hospital. This is located near a possible Hell Gate Route station at Eastchester Road and Morris Park Avenue.

LIRR East Side Access

Alternative G (the Penn Station to Grand Central connection), which would help the efficiency of both New York terminals, is being ignored by most planners and officials. The interest of NJ Transit stops at Herald Square, while the two MTA railroads have no view beyond the south wall of Grand Central.

1. The deep cavern station planned for Grand Central (and also for Penn Station) may be dangerous if an emergency evacuation is required because of a fire or bombing. The plan for below grade galleries in the World Trade Center memorial has drawn some criticism for similar reasons. (Although it should be noted that the \$1 billion cost of the memorial as proposed will probably require the plan to be scaled back considerably.)

2. Mysore Nagaraja, President of MTA Capital Construction, has been critical of the Upper Level Loop Alternative (ULLA) and the Delcan Report supporting it; see the March 24 letter to Nancy Blakeman, Planning and Real Estate Committee, which is posted on the IRUM web site.

One part of the dispute involves train speed through the loop tracks. Nagaraja claims that the design speed on the loop is 10 mph, but the actual operating would be closer to 4 mph. Delcan's analysis is that a top speed of 12 mph and an average speed of 10 mph is feasible.

[It is worth remembering that in the ULLA plan, all LIRR trains pass through the loop to leave the terminal. In the MTA's deep cavern plan, they reverse direction after unloading at the platforms.]

ARC / Trans-Hudson Tunnel

As per David Peter Allen, the Lackawanna Coalition is concerned about a possible bottleneck that will develop on the Northeast Corridor between Newark and Secaucus. NJ Transit is now planning a four track lines between Secaucus and New York, including the Hudson tunnels, but is deferring any increase of capacity on the Corridor to the west.

The Asbury Park Press has reported that NJT is backing off from an earlier idea to move most Morris and Essex trains off the corridor and run them on a time-consuming zigzag route through the Meadowlands.

Other news

Farley/Moynihan station

According to a recent New York Times article, a fourth design has been accepted for this project. However, on May 27, another report stated that a long-discussed plan to build a new Madison Square Garden over the western end of the Farley building is being pushed forward by two developers. That would allow for a redesign of the present Penn Station but, not surprisingly, there is no plan yet "on how to pay for a makeover . . . that will certainly cost hundreds of millions of dollars."

The Farley project alone is projected to cost \$930 million, but that too may face yet another redesign to accommodate a new Garden.

Fulton Transit Center

Yet another boondoggle, this project will probably be redesigned as well, as per a May 23 article in the Times. The original \$799 million budget is already proving to be inadequate, according to the MTA's Mysore Nagaraja.

Gowanus Expressway

The state DOT is considering its own version of Boston's Big Dig, which would be a \$6 billion (at least) highway tunnel to replace the elevated portion of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway through Sunset Park and Park Slope.

About ten years ago the Committee for Better Transit proposed a plan to replace the expressway with a new light rail system (including a route on the Verrazano Bridge) and a new connection from the BMT subway that would take over one of the two tubes of the Brooklyn-Battery tunnel.