

The Times

Pushing to build \$8.7B tunnel – NJ Transit seeks federal stimulus aid

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BY MEIR RINDE

For two-and-a-half years, software consultant Ravi Palwai has been commuting by train from Hamilton Township to Manhattan. "Compared to driving, the train is better," Palwai said Thursday night as he waited at the Hamilton station for his ride home. "They get delayed, but I definitely like the trains." The delays, he said, are caused by congestion in the train tunnel under the Hudson River. With just a single tunnel in each direction that NJ Transit shares with Amtrak, any little problem can back up the whole system. "Most of the time, in the tunnel the train will stop for five or 10 minutes," he said. "Once we had to wait 45 minutes."

NJ Transit says it has a solution to backups, standing-room only cars, demand for more express trains and limits on its ability to expand statewide rail capacity.

And it will cost only \$8.7 billion.

After years of studies, the state's public transportation provider is pushing for federal funding that will allow it to begin an eight-year project to bore a new double-tube tunnel under the Hudson River to Pennsylvania Station in New York City. A new section of Penn Station under 34th Street in Manhattan will provide direct access to several subway lines and reach as far east as Sixth Avenue.

New Jersey will contribute \$2.7 billion from state transportation, Turnpike and congestion improvement funds, the agency says. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has committed \$3 billion. The remainder, the agency hopes, will come from the incoming Obama administration, which is considering spending hundreds of billions of dollars on infrastructure improvements nationwide to boost the flagging economy. "We have to get \$3 billion from the federal government," NJ Transit executive director Richard Sarles said at a meeting this month with the Trenton Times editorial board. "It's an interesting time to be seeking that money. It's a time when, because of the economy, everyone is talking about stimulus."

Part of Sarles' pitch is that the project, called the Access to the Region's Core or ARC, will create an estimated 6,000 construction-related jobs. But he also argued it is essential to the state's future growth. By doubling NJ Transit's rail capacity into Manhattan to a maximum of 48 trains per hour, more trains will flow both toward and away from New York, he said. By widening the bottleneck at the Hudson River crossing and giving NJ Transit its own tunnel, the project will allow the whole rail system to support more trains, he said. "There's no place else to achieve more capacity," he said.

In Mercer County, the main train stations in Trenton, Hamilton and Princeton Junction already provide speedy access to New York. But the county administration strongly endorses the tunnel project because of the economic growth that will follow, principal planner Matthew Lawson said.

NJ Transit projects the ARC project will boost personal income in the state by \$4 billion and the gross regional product by \$10 billion. "We're looking at this as basically opening the floodgate to a long period of boom for New Jersey," Lawson said. "We're going to benefit from that." More trains means more people who work elsewhere will want to live here, Lawson said. Businesses in Mercer also will be more accessible to workers and customers living in Pennsylvania and North Jersey. Even without considering future growth, more trains are definitely needed, he said.

"Express trains are standing room only leaving Princeton Junction," Lawson said. "There are people from Gloucester County who drive to Trenton and take the train to New York, and from Bucks County, from Montgomery County. "The limit to capacity now is the trans-Hudson tunnel. That tunnel is at capacity. They can't get any more trains in. The ARC project will double that capacity, essentially, to allow NJ Transit's statewide train system to expand," he said. By creating more peak-hour train capacity, the ARC project eventually will allow more riders to sleep or read instead of standing on the train and let commuters who now have to leave home at 5 a.m. to leave at 6 a.m. instead, Lawson predicted.

To help commuters on other lines who currently have to switch trains in Newark, NJ Transit is purchasing dual-power locomotives that can use both diesel and electric and will thus allow one-seat rides to New York. Such improvements are crucial because convenience is key to persuading commuters to stay off congested, polluting highways and use rail instead, Lawson and Sarles said.

In addition to long-term system expansion, more small improvements would make rail more attractive to riders, said Andy Lupo, who has been commuting from West Windsor to New York for 22 years. He said the recent addition of double-decker trains with better seating options has greatly improved the riding experience, but the clogged platforms at Penn Station are a "nightmare," and the Princeton Junction station needs an additional pedestrian passageway to improve access to parking. The tunnel project "is excellent. It's going to be wonderful down the road. But I think people would like to see some quick fixes."

In the long term, the building of the tunnel will make it possible to build proposed new rail line extensions to Monmouth, Ocean and Middlesex Counties, as well as a western extension that could connect Scranton, Pa., to New York, Sarles said.

He said a restoration of passenger service on the West Trenton line, which runs from Ewing and Hopewell to Somerset County, and from there to New York, would also become more feasible, though he noted it has not been funded and likely remains years away.

Planners say they support the ARC project in part because it supports "smart growth," in which housing and business development is concentrated around transit. That allows economic growth while minimizing use of open space and need for more highways. But plans for dense new development around the Hamilton and Princeton Junction train stations have so far foundered on opposition from residents and some elected officials who oppose urban-style development and its accompanying costs.

Dianne Brake, a West Windsor resident who is president of the nonprofit PlanSmart NJ, is a proponent of smart growth and said she believes the ARC project is of "extreme importance" to the state. But the state and local governments must start planning for the transit-oriented future it will create, she said. "You really have to figure out what you want to use that capacity for," she said, "in terms of how it serves the economic clusters that are important to transit riders, how it serves to redevelop the transit centers along the train line and the urban centers that have lost jobs, and encourages suburban residents to take urban jobs."