

## Who foots the bill for \$6-billion rail job?

### While Pataki and Bloomberg push for a Manhattan-JFK link, more pressing projects are at risk

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Gov. George Pataki and Mayor Michael Bloomberg are pushing a \$6-billion rail project that would link lower Manhattan to both Kennedy Airport and the Long Island Rail Road's Jamaica hub.

If we could afford it, bringing commuters into lower Manhattan and providing a rail connection to the airport would be a great idea. But in a mass transit capital plan stretched thin by lack of resources, does this proposal make sense?

The Straphangers Campaign has said the link is clearly not the top priority for spending very limited transit money. The Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority has opposed the project as not having benefits to justify the cost. The Long Island Association has said the rail link is not a priority for Long Island.

Yet the mayor and the governor are pushing hard. Pataki recently called for the Port Authority to chip in over \$1 billion to the project. Bloomberg has traveled to Washington to try to get \$2 billion of post-9/11 federal aid reprogrammed to support the tunnel.

The driving force behind the plan seems to be a handful of powerful lower Manhattan landlords. If you own property downtown, a \$6-billion tunnel delivering Long Islanders to your doorstep might look pretty good - even if it comes at the expense of more important regional transit priorities.



Make no mistake: Investing in public transportation is one of the best things we can do for the region. But because the governor and the mayor have not come up with sufficient funding, the MTA is delaying construction on its two top priorities for expansion of transit service: the Second Avenue Subway and East Side Access, which will connect the Long Island Rail Road to Grand Central Terminal.

The Second Avenue Subway and East Side Access are the right regional transportation priorities, arrived at appropriately through the MTA's comprehensive public planning process. The tunnel to lower Manhattan, by contrast, squeezed its way into the line for funding as a favor to downtown landlords. How can the mayor and governor talk about a new, lower-priority tunnel when we're delaying work on these higher-priority projects?

There are big questions about whether we will get the \$2 billion from Washington, or for that matter the \$1 billion from the Port Authority. But even if both materialize, they won't be enough to fund a \$6-billion tunnel. Where will the other \$3 billion come from? The MTA budget already is being asked to absorb some of the cost of this project; if the project goes forward, the MTA will inevitably be asked for more. By pushing for too much, there is a significant risk that all three projects will get bogged down and none will be built.

New York's public transportation system shouldn't look like a Rube Goldberg machine, with partially funded projects dangling here and there that overextend the system and jeopardize its basic service. It should build out from a solid core. The governor should cancel this over-reaching project, just as he canceled the West Street tunnel, and concentrate on getting the fundamentals right.

Every available federal dollar should be used to support established priorities. And substantial new contributions to the system need to be raised by the city and, especially, the state. Particularly appropriate are taxes on real estate owners and businesses, since they benefit most from an efficient transit system.

The MTA is already under a great deal of financial strain. Fares are up, and there are signs of serious maintenance problems. Breakdowns over the past few months have reminded riders of the bad old days. City residents learned in the 1970s that overstretching and underfunding the system have catastrophic effects that last for generations. And, as we saw beginning in the 1980s, major investments in subway service go hand in hand with city-centered economic growth.

The Kennedy Airport-Long Island Rail Road link may be a good idea one day, if it does not divert resources from the transit system's core operations. But this is a terrible moment to risk money that New York desperately needs - including \$2 billion in federal aid - by attempting an end run around the normal decision-making process. Instead of cramming this project into the capital plan without sufficient funding, we should put it on the shelf, and revisit it after we use the 9/11 money for more pressing priorities.