

ASSESSING THE TAPPAN ZEE BRIDGE PROPOSAL

Background – In 1998 then-Governor Pataki killed the High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lane project that was supposed to solve congestion on the 30 mile long I-287 corridor through Rockland and Westchester Counties. It was deemed unworkable on the Westchester portion of the corridor. Other proposals for the corridor have tried to connect MetroNorth Railroad to its territory on the west side of the Hudson River, currently leased to New Jersey Transit.

Stewart Airport, recently purchased by the Port Authority, is only about three miles from the Port Jervis rail line. A separate study, led by MetroNorth, is studying the feasibility of a rail spur to connect to the Airport. There are two north/south rail lines in Rockland and three in Westchester.

After seven years and \$57 million dollars the TZB study team, with the MTA, NY Thruway and NYS DOT as lead agencies, has presented its plan for the TZB/I-287 corridor. Its initial goal was to provide a plan to mitigate congestion on that corridor but almost immediately it was clear that getting commuters to Manhattan on a one-seat ride was more important, second only to MetroNorth's determination to connect to its territory in Rockland by rail. MTA's dream has driven this study from the get-go. Early on in the study it even added commuters from the George Washington Bridge in order to make the case for a commuter rail connection to the Hudson Line coming from Rockland County. The actual numbers, however, break down this way – 70% of commuters on the TZB go to destinations along the east/west corridor. Only 30% of commuters on the TZB head to NYC and most of those go to the Bronx, better served by the Harlem Line.

At no time were members of the stakeholders groups allowed to consider a full-length commuter rail, from Suffern to Stamford, connecting five existing north/south rail lines and four states, without the Hudson River rail connection. This connection jacks up the cost of this option by at least a billion dollars if it is even feasible.

From the start it was clear that the Bus Rapid Transit was the preferred option for the full-length mass transit choice, not because it was the best option but because it was the cheapest and it allowed MetroNorth to make that Hudson Line connection without being burdened with building a full-length commuter rail that served the fastest growing city in the region and the the county seat – White Plains.

Last May the work of seven years was to be officially revealed to the public. By the end of the month, however, all meetings had been cancelled and four months went by before we knew what the agencies had in mind. One of the reasons for the delay was the need to get Gov. Patterson up to speed. On September 26 the Tappan Zee Study Team revealed the progress of the study at its headquarters in Tarrytown. Here is a summary of its work:

>The replacement of the Tappan Zee Bridge – the original two level replacement bridge has now morphed into two or three parallel bridges and causeways, far more expensive and complicated and grown to a total of 16 lanes – 8 general travel lanes, 2 HOV, HOT and/or BRT lanes, 4

breakdown lanes. Basically, the whole thing is still in the “concept” stage, after seven years. The new bridge will be capable of carrying a commuter rail.

>The full-length mass transit choice is a Bus Rapid Transit system which requires an exclusive lane in order to be rapid. The BRT has all the same problems of the HOV and many more. After seven years the study team has only come up with a “concept” for the BRT, its preferred option. So the public has no details to look at, even now. It should be noted that the study team had a BRT plan worked out a year ago but it was so cumbersome and slow that it had to be thrown out. They have yet to come up with a workable plan.

>The commuter rail (comparable to MetroNorth trains) gets at least a mention in the plan, but not for Westchester County. It would run from Suffern, in Rockland County, across a new TZB, to Tarrytown where the rail will tunnel underground into a huge curve that will surface to meet the existing Hudson Rail Line, just missing the historic Lyndurst complex. There are serious issues about whether a tunnel connection is even workable.

>The origin/destination issue – in spite of the heavy dominance of the east/west travel pattern and the existence of five north/south rail lines, the team members continue to claim that the numbers didn’t work for the commuter rail option in Westchester County but that it does for the Hudson connection. But in order to make the Hudson connection work they had to steal 12,000 city-bound commuters from the New Jersey Transit service and add them to potential riders on the Hudson connection. Well before the TZB project gets off the drawing board, however, the Access to the Region’s Core (ARC) project will be built. This project involves connecting the Secaucus Transfer Station in NJ to a second tunnel into Penn Station. This connection will offer the Rockland commuters a one-seat into Manhattan, making the Hudson connection redundant.

>Summary – After seven years and \$57 million the study team, under the control of the lead agencies, have come up with a proposal that is stunningly backward-looking and excessively expensive. While the entire country and the world are rediscovering the environmental and economic advantages of rail mobility we are opting for an asphalt dependent solution for the future. The parallel bridges and causeways currently be considered will be particularly disruptive to the life of the river as well as extraordinarily expensive. The BRT, a more advanced HOV concept, is unworkable in this corridor or the team would have had something to show for its work. The schedule for completion of the bridge is far into the future – 2017. With the supply of global energy under real stress in the near term, to opt for a road solution while maintaining the leisurely pace of the study is stunningly irresponsible. Where are our elected officials when we need them?

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