

Third track: New York-Long Island traffic relief

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The recent announcement by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority that it is seeking fare increases for next year has grabbed most of the headlines, but there's another worrisome transit development for Long Islanders. The Long Island Rail Road announced last month that it's considering deferring the construction of a third track on its main line between Queens Village and Hicksville. Both an underfunded MTA capital program and the opposition of adjacent property owners may derail the project.

But deferment of this project would be a setback for every Long Islander, as it would provide much-needed rail service within Long Island, give Island employers access to a vast new workforce from New York City, and give many additional Long Island residents and workers an alternative to \$4.50-a-gallon gas.

The LIRR has long been a sleeping giant, unable to fully serve the Island because of the constraints imposed by the limited two-track, 11 1/2 mile stretch of its main line. This bottleneck is necessarily programmed to serve its major market into Manhattan, so it can't serve other markets well.

For example, it is impossible to reach Mineola, the Nassau County seat, from points west during most commuting times. After the 6:39 a.m. train, the next one is 97 minutes later - missing the start of 8 a.m. working hours and making the railroad all but useless for many would-be riders.

These gaps in the schedule are prevalent throughout the system and render the LIRR a non-factor for much intra-Island travel. That's why the third-track project needs to be implemented as quickly as possible.

The third track is also linked to East Side access, to bring LIRR riders into Grand Central Terminal. Today, the East Side access project itself is progressing nicely - in fact the tunnel under Park Avenue has just broken through into Grand Central. But without the mainline capacity that the third track would provide, the LIRR will not be able to schedule as many trains to fully utilize this new tunnel. East Side access is too important to be held hostage to an uncertain timeline for the third track, but if the third track is delayed, it's essential to pursue interim measures to ensure that full value from the East Side access project.

That East Side access is critical for Long Island and the tri-state region cannot be disputed. The project will save up to 45 minutes a day for 160,000 riders, including 65,000 peak period commuters, and will allow them to avoid an extra transfer at Penn Station and the cost and time of an extra subway, taxi or bus ride back to the East Side. Moreover, the two-thirds increase in commuter rail capacity to Manhattan opens up new services and will give Queens residents the option of using the LIRR, closed to many of them today because peak trains are full. This will reduce subway crowding, as some riders switch to the LIRR.

The impact of the improved commuter rail and subway service will reduce road traffic as well. An estimated 6,000 cars will be taken off the road during the peak periods in the morning and evening, the equivalent of one packed lane of traffic for the three-hour commuter peak times. Overall on Long Island, more than 300,000 fewer miles would be driven each day, easing local congestion and reducing carbon emissions, pollution and lowering our dependence on foreign oil.

The added capacity into Manhattan would open up options for more Amtrak service and direct rail service to Manhattan from Kennedy Airport. And at Grand Central Terminal, for the first time, travelers could use the combination of the LIRR and Metro North to make trips by rail between the northern suburbs and Long Island.

Long Island, which is currently suffering from economic stagnation, would be given a boost by both East Side access and the third track. East Side access would make areas near rail stations on Long Island more valuable by giving direct access to Manhattan's East Side and its high-paying jobs. The third track would provide intra-Island travel and options for reverse commuting, and help Long Island's economy to boot. With high gas prices, Long Islanders need all the transit options they can get.

The potential delay of the third track is a painful reminder that the MTA is well short of the money to fund all the projects we need, and it underscores the importance of Albany's role in finding ways to finance our transit system. Without the support of the State Legislature we will continue to face painful choices. With its support, we can move forward with all these critical transit projects, whose importance is highlighted with each uptick of oil prices.

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