

INSTITUTE FOR RATIONAL URBAN MOBILITY, INC.

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August 23, 2016

Metropolitan Planning Organization Coordination and Planning Area Reform
Docket Number FHWA – 2016-0016
Docket Management Facility
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 NJ Avenue S.E.
Washington, DC 20590

Re: Reforming transportation planning for the NY-NJ-CT metropolitan area

The Institute for Rational Urban Mobility, Inc. (IRUM) is a NYC-based nonprofit concerned with reducing motor vehicular congestion and improving the livability of dense urban places.

IRUM commends USDOT Secretary Anthony Foxx for proposing regulations that would improve the effectiveness of the metropolitan transportation planning process. These regulations are especially important for metropolitan areas that extend across state lines, where the Federal government should exercise its authority to “regulate interstate commerce”.

USDOT’s proposed regulations would begin the process of reforming the seriously flawed planning process currently in place for the 22 million person NY-NJ-CT metro area, the nation’s largest. The requirement, specified in these proposed rules, that each of the MPOs in the region would produce a common long range regional transportation plan, and a short range program of investments and operating strategies, would lead to a more coherent and useful planning process and is very much welcome.

However, preparing and reaching agreement on a unified NY-NJ-CT long range plan and a short-range program will not be easy. This cannot be accomplished by simply “cutting and pasting” the documents of multiple existing MPOs into a single document. It will require thoughtful preparation and considerable public discussion and review. The existing entity positioned to undertake this effort is the **Metropolitan Area Planning Forum**. However, as currently constituted, it **is clearly unable to carry out this task**. It must be adequately funded and fully staffed, so that it can take the lead in advancing this cooperative effort. The MAP Forum must greatly increase the frequency of its meetings and establish a functioning public involvement process at the metropolitan level, now seriously lacking. Also, staffing must be independent of existing state agencies, where career paths largely influence planning outcomes.

While IRUM fully endorses these rules as proposed, it urges USDOT to extend them, by executive actions if needed, to apply to Federal agencies directly under its jurisdiction, including Amtrak, FRA and the FAA. Two key efforts overseen by these Federal agencies – planning for

much-needed expansion of Hudson River of passenger rail capacity, and preparation of a regional aviation system plan for the three-state metropolitan area – have been placed in the hands of the Port Authority of NY and NJ. This agency has very limited experience with public outreach, or careful engagement with local units of government. Governed by a Board of Commissioners appointed by the two Governors, the Port Authority can levy tolls and other fees that are then amassed into a consolidated fund, ultimately controlled by the Governors. This clearly is “taxation without representation”, a key grievance that led to the formation of the U.S. in the first place. USDOT planning regulations now under consideration should require that transportation plans, produced by this independent authority, be included in the consolidated regional transportation plan and program described in the proposed regulations.

Furthermore, IRUM urges USDOT to devise a mechanism to extend these rules to other independent authorities in the Tri-State region, like the NYS Thruway and NJ Turnpike, whose facilities are tightly interwoven into the region’s Federally-funded transportation infrastructure.

Finally, IRUM urges USDOT, through its certification process, to take seriously its responsibility to review the quality of metropolitan planning in this region, by withholding approval of expenditure of Federal transport funds until these planning agencies are able to meet the transportation planning challenges of a metropolitan region of 22 million persons, the nation’s largest.

Improving the transportation planning process in the Tri-State Region

In 1961, Governor Nelson Rockefeller proposed a three-state transportation planning and operating agency, to be established under a three-state compact. This *Tri-State Commission* would have absorbed the Port Authority of New York and the Tri-Borough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, with their substantial toll revenue surpluses, and the commuter rail, rapid transit and bus transit operations, with their growing deficit operations in the region. The state legislatures of New York and Connecticut agreed to advance this compact, but New Jersey declined. Governor Rockefeller then established the “single-state” MTA, and moved to assemble the transit agencies and the TBTA under its control. (The Hudson River widened into a Hudson Ocean.)

Unable to achieve its legislative goal, the Governors ultimately created the Tri-State Regional Planning Commission, which included a broader array of metropolitan planning activities, but did not have operating authority. In its early years, under the capable leadership of J. Douglas Carroll, Jr., the Commission set the planning industry standard for capable management of data collection, monitoring and forecasting. Later, as USDOT was established, the Federal government made available substantial funding for transportation investment and operating support, and imposed requirements for preparing long range plans and shorter term capital improvement programs and operating strategies. To meet these requirements, with the participation of the three states, Tri-State established a comprehensive network of state and sub-regional units and coordinating committees that would allow units of local government to help define plans and programs, as required by Federal law.

The Commission was dissolved in 1982, replaced by ten metropolitan planning organizations with little ability to establish a regionwide plan. However, to its credit, the NY Metropolitan Transportation Council (NYMTC), the largest of these entities, did help to coordinate monitoring and forecasting activities at a regional scale. With shrinking resources, and staffing limited to the NYSDOT career paths, NYMTC's limited effort in recent years, has been further diminished.

There is a clear need for the Federally-mandated MPO process throughout the U.S. Too often in the past, the Governors and their state highway agencies would advance highway projects that were not welcomed in cities and other localities. The MPO process was a way for the Federal government to "devolve" transportation decision-making to include local units of government thus assuring more widely--accepted investment and operating plans.

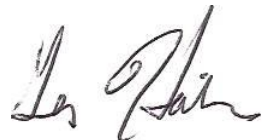
This approach to metropolitan decision-making is critical, should be retained and enhanced in the current effort of reforming regulations for multi-state transportation planning, in the NY-NJ-CT region – the nation's largest – as well as other large metro areas throughout the nation.

An intractable problem that remains is the governance of the three commuter rail systems that are critical to the economy of Tri-State region. At present the Governors, who "nominally" control these agencies, have been unable to awaken these "sleeping giants of regional mobility" to create a **regional rail system** - with frequent service, integrated fares and through running. By operating in separate "silos", these rail institutions have failed to adequately enhance regional mobility, needed for the Tri-State Region to compete with its global rivals.

Furthermore, the separate highway and transit agencies have failed to work together to define, and put into place, near-term congestion management strategies that would use transit and highway pricing to reduce the substantial cost of pollution, and unfettered vehicle use that greatly reduces the quality of life in dense locations, placing the region at a disadvantage with other more progressive regions.

IRUM has identified these issues and several others, and articulated them in numerous statements made at meetings of the NY Metropolitan Transportation Council and the MAP Forum. A recent example, shown below, is offered to USDOT to serve as guidance in preparing an agenda for a truly reformed metropolitan transportation planning process for the Tri-State Region.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "George Haikalis". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "G" and "H".

George Haikalis
President, IRUM

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Statement at June 11, 2015 Spring Meeting of the Metropolitan Area Planning Forum

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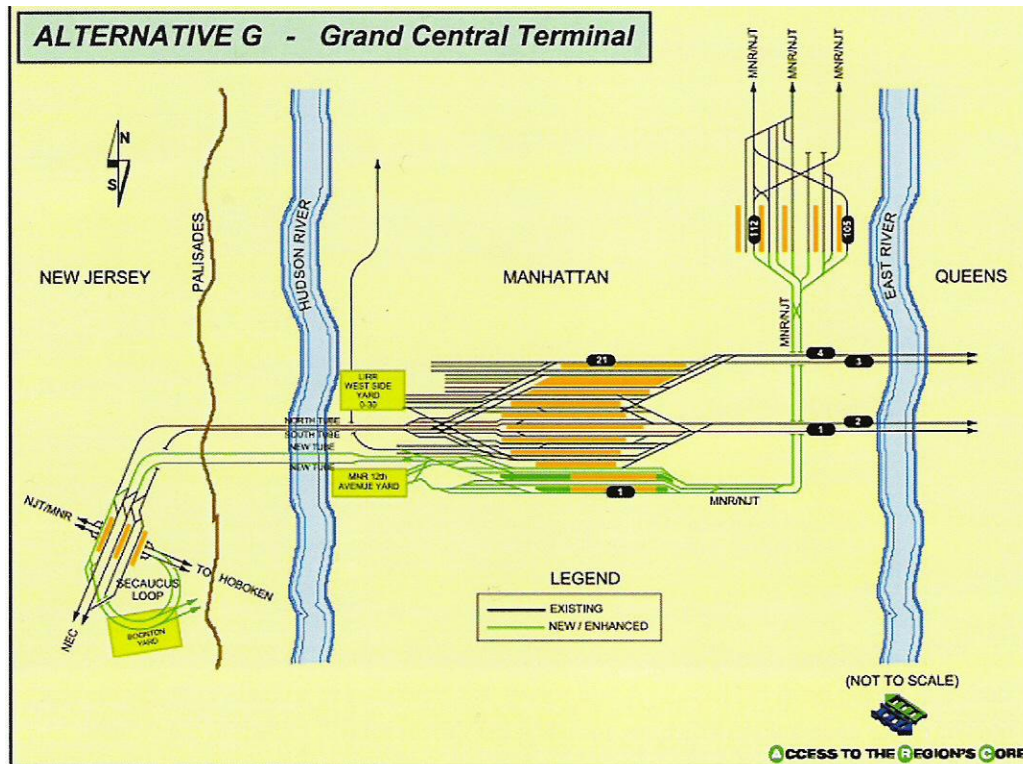
IRUM urges the MAP Forum to seriously consider the statement (copy attached) that was presented at last year's NYMTC Annual Meeting, which had as its theme "Expanding Horizons: Planning Partnerships in the NY-NJ-CT Region". While today's meeting of the MAP Forum is certainly an important step in creating such a regional planning partnership it is far too modest an effort to meet the urgent needs of the 22 million people living in the NY-NJ-CT metropolitan area.

For example, a more ambitious agenda would include:

- 1. The development and analysis of near term operational strategies for managing demand and dealing with roadway congestion which are at legendary levels. This would include a coherent plan for road pricing that would reduce excess demand and use of some of these revenues to greatly increase the frequency and reduce the price of regional rail service.**
- 2. Reducing excess demand for auto travel also results in improved regional freight movement that occurs by truck in the near term, before major new rail freight investments can be placed in service.**
- 3. Planning for longer term investments in regional rail service for passengers should complement planning for with new investments in rail freight facilities. One example would be the 2003 Access to the Region's Core (ARC) plan for connecting Penn Station with Grand Central (shown on the attached page). By routing the bulk of regional passenger rail service through this new connection, the existing route through Penn Station becomes available for specialized "low- profile" rail freight service.**
- 4. Sustainable communities would benefit greatly from enhanced, affordable regional rail service - particularly for reverse-peak, off-peak and weekend service.**
- 5. It is critical that this Forum participate in planning for the updated Regional Aviation System Plan that is now beginning.**
- 6. These forums should also include a more formal citizen involvement process – beginning with the establishment of a Regional Citizens Advisory Committee.**

The NY-NJ-CT region must plan more comprehensively for transportation and economic development if it is to meet the challenge of its growing competitors abroad.

**George Haikalis
President, IRUM**



Expanding Horizons: Planning Partnerships in the NY-NJ-CT Region

Partnering for Regional Rail

Remaking the three commuter rail lines that serve the NY-NJ-CT Region so that they function as though they were a single *regional rail system* -- with frequent service, integrated fares and through-running -- would increase rail capacity, enhance the region's economic competitiveness and provide motorists with an attractive alternative to congested highways and river crossings. MTA and NJ Transit can move quickly to form a partnership to operate *through trains* at Penn Station using existing rail equipment. This partnership can then restart planning for much needed increases in Hudson River passenger rail capacity, first by releasing critical information contained in the 1,600-page 2003 Major Investment Study (MIS) developed in the "Access to the Region's Core (ARC)" -- a collaboration of NJ Transit, MTA and the Port Authority of NY & NJ. Only a 31-page Summary Report was made public. One of the three final alternatives described in this report (shown above) called for connecting the new Hudson River rail tunnels with existing tracks and platforms in Penn Station and then linking them to existing tracks and platforms in the Lower Level of Grand Central Terminal. This alternative would produce a truly world-class railway system for the NY-NJ-CT region and the Northeast Corridor.

Detailed information contained in the full MIS report, prepared by Parsons Brinckerhoff -- at the time the region's largest engineering firm -- would provide useful insights about this alternative, such as the recommended plan-and-profile of the connection and its engineering challenges and ridership potential. A true regional partnership would share information by meeting regularly with the public. NYMTC can play an important role by encouraging this public dialogue.