

INSTITUTE FOR RATIONAL URBAN MOBILITY, INC.

George Haikalis
President

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April 29, 2019

Mary Boyce, Dean of Engineering, Columbia University
500 W. 120th Street #510
New York, NY 10027

Lance Collins, Dean of Engineering, Cornell University
Carpenter Hall, Room 242313
Ithaca, New York 14853

Patrick Foye, Chairman and CEO, MTA
2 Broadway
New York, NY 10004-2207

copies to other interested parties

Dear Dean Boyce, Dean Collins and President Foye:

IRUM would like to offer its assistance as you deal with a provision contained in the "MTA Reform and Traffic Mobility Act" that was passed by the NY State Legislature as part of the State's Budget in early April.

That provision states:

“For purposes of an independent review of the project commonly referred to as "East Side Access", the Metropolitan Transportation Authority shall establish an outside expert advisory group to review such project and make recommendations to accelerate its completion. Such outside experts shall include members of the outside independent review team established to review the project commonly referred to as the "L-train project". Such review shall be completed as soon as practicable for consideration by the metropolitan transportation authority board.”

In the case of East Side Access, IRUM is calling for careful consideration of a far better alternative - the Upper Level Loop (ULLA) – which was first proposed by the Committee for Better Transit in 1996.

This reexamination is described in IRUM's February 8, 2019 to the MTA Board:

https://www.irum.org/20190208_Letter_To_MTA_Re_ESA.pdf

A copy is attached.

Changing course is not an easy effort because many decision makers have much invested in the current plan. In the case of East Side Access major construction activities have already taken place.

But in many ways this change in course is similar. Like the L train redo, this change has the potential to affect passengers in a very positive way, saving three to four minutes of travel time in each direction. It will save MTA millions of dollars in operating cost.

These are recurring benefits.

But most important, the change will avoid the risk associated with passengers using a deep cavern “terminal” station 151 feet below the street. Even a minor delay in outbound trains in the evening peak could produce an accumulation of 8,000 passengers. A willful act, like the recent episode that nearly occurred at St. Patrick’s Cathedral last week, could result in great harm to LIRR passengers.,

While this change has the potential to speed completion of East Side Access, this cannot be accurately determined without the detailed analysis described in the February 8, 2019 letter.

Safety should be the highest priority.

There are other impacts of East Side Access, not related to the terminal design, that are worth considering, including the costly proposal for a new Midday Rail Car Storage Yard at Sunnyside, Queens, the utility of an on-line station adjacent to the yard that would benefit the growing developments in the Queens Plaza area and the reconfiguration of the Jamaica Station, claimed to be needed because of East Side Access.

Missing, is a coherent long term service plan for the LIRR that would include the potential for dual-mode locomotives that would allow abandonment of the waterfront Long Island City terminal and the Richmond Hill repair shops. Reusing these valuable real estate assets for affordable housing or other developments certainly merits consideration.


Even more worrisome is the absence of a regionwide strategy for making more effective use of the NY-NJ-CT metropolitan area’s “sleeping giant” of regional mobility – its three commuter railroads. One example of how this could be done is described in a presentation which IRUM made to Mary Kay Murphy, Director of the Planning and Development Department of the PANYNJ and her staff on January 15, 2019:

https://www.irus.org/20190115_Why_PA_Should_Support_Regional_Rail.pdf

The January 15, 2019 presentation describes the MTA/NJ Transit/PANYNJ 2003 ARC plan for a regional rail connection between Penn Station and Grand Central Terminal. Speeding completion of LIRR East Side Access by using the Upper Level platforms, as described in the Delcan report, is fully consistent with the 2003 Access to the Region’s Core (ARC) connection plan, which would make much better use the Lower Level at Grand Central Terminal. It would make sense to coordinate construction of these elements. Their completion would produce a truly world class regional rail system in the very core of Manhattan.

IRUM would welcome an opportunity to discuss these issues with you and your associates at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



George Haikalis, President, IRUM

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Fernando Ferrer, Acting Chairman,
cc: Scott Rechler, Lawrence S. Schwartz, Peter Ward, Patrick Foye, Veronique Hakim, Janno Lieber
copies to other interested parties

Metropolitan Transportation Authority
2 Broadway, New York, NY 10004-2207

February 8, 2019

Dear Acting Chairman Ferrer:

The Institute for Rational Urban Mobility (IRUM) is a NYC-based nonprofit concerned with reducing motor vehicular congestion and improving the livability of dense urban places. IRUM is particularly interested in advancing useful, cost-effective investments that will make public transit more attractive for the 23 million persons living or visiting the NY-NJ-CT metropolitan area, the nation's largest.

In light of Governor Andrew Cuomo's recent call for reexamination of the L train tunnel reconstruction, **IRUM urges the MTA to convene a similar panel of independent experts to consider the merits of changing course on the LIRR Deep Cavern project, and advancing a much safer, less costly, and more passenger-friendly alternative.** While Federal and local agencies have expended more than eight billion dollars since the project was initiated in 1996, as much as three billion dollars more must be spent before revenue service can be begun, now projected in December 2022.

Two main drivers for considering a change of direction are (1) the existence of a fully operational "Upper Level Loop Alternative" (ULLA) within the 46 platform track Grand Central Terminal complex – the world's largest railway station, and (2) the long-standing worry that as many as 8,000 LIRR commuters could be trapped in the deep cavern terminal with limited egress capacity in the event of a fire or an act of terrorism.

In an objective evaluation of future investment strategies it is important to note that money already spent is "sunk cost", and should not enter into decisions about future courses of action. Fortunately, this evaluation can be completed very quickly. Much information about the cost of connecting the existing tracks and platforms in the Upper Level at Grand Central Terminal to the existing 63rd Street LIRR tunnels, begun in 1968, was developed by the Delcan Corporation, Canada's largest transportation engineering firm in 2004. Delcan found that because of Manhattan's stable rock conditions, two 3,000-foot long tunnels, and another two 1,000 foot long ramps under Park Avenue, could be constructed in two years for about eight hundred million dollars, compared to the \$2.0 billion estimated by Delcan for the comparable segment in Manhattan. The overall price tag for completing the LIRR East Side Access Project has now ballooned from \$6.3 billion to eleven billion dollars. IRUM was a participant in the Delcan study and the full report can be found on IRUM's website: (https://www.irum.org/delcan_r.pdf)

A few years later Dr. John J. Fruin who literally "wrote the book" on passenger egress from rail stations, together with three other passenger safety experts called attention to the worrisome safety issues inherent with the MTA deep cavern plan: <https://www.irum.org/pr091222.pdf> Privately, many retired MTA executives have conveyed to IRUM their continuing concern about the of the Deep Cavern.

The original proposal to use the Upper Level Loop tracks for the LIRR East Side Access was submitted to the MTA in 1996 during the scoping process, by the Committee for Better Transit (CBT):
https://www.irum.org/19960604_apple_cr.pdf

A panel of independent experts engaged by MTA should review the Delcan study and estimate the likely cost of moving forward on the ULLA compared with completing MTA's Deep Cavern plan. The review will assume that other elements of the two plans would be identical.

The Delcan study found that LIRR passengers would save three to four minutes of travel time in each direction using the Upper Level Loop platforms, which are just below the sidewalk, and connected by ramps to the main Concourse, and are an attractive feature of the landmarked Grand Central Terminal. The study also estimated the increased operating cost for ventilation requirements and the 17 long escalators needed for the deep cavern.

In comparing the two plans, the independent panel should compare the present worth of the recurring travel time lost by the deep cavern option, based on current accepted values of travel time, real and perceived, used in evaluating other transit projects. The higher operating cost avoided should likewise be factored to reflect current experience.

Given the substantial amount of information already available, an independent, well-qualified panel assembled by of the MTA Board could complete a preliminary review in as few as 30 days, without delaying the existing program.

Governor Andrew Cuomo recently criticized the current tight-knit web of revolving door consulting firms and retired MTA executives, the equivalent of Eisenhower's worries about a "military-industrial complex", that are thought to drive the excessive cost of MTA capital projects.

IRUM urges the MTA Board to immediately convene a panel of independent experts to review the Delcan study and chart the financial consequences of changing course.

The MTA could then seek to engage a public/ private partnership similar to the one that successfully advanced the "design/build" replacement of the Tappan Bridge.

The Delcan Report provides the key parameters for such an initiative.

Sincerely,



George Haikalis, President, IRUM