INSTITUTE FOR RATIONAL URBAN MOBILITY, INC.

George Haikalis
President

One Washington Square Village, Suite 5D
New York, NY 10012 212-475-3394
geo@irum.org **www.irum.org**

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MTA's plan to bring LIRR trains to Manhattan's East Side calls for constructing a deep cavern station some 150 feet below Park Avenue directly beneath Grand Central Terminal. A controversial element of this $7.7 billion plan was the construction of a massive ventilation building on Manhattan's East 50th Street. Opponents of the vent building engaged a respected Canadian engineering firm – The Delcan Corporation – to consider an alternative plan. After a careful analysis, Delcan concluded that a better plan would be to bring LIRR trains directly onto existing tracks in the Upper Level of Grand Central Terminal. Metro-North Tracks 38-42 leading to the Upper Level Loop would be transferred to LIRR use.

To its credit, MTA has scaled down the size of its Vent Plant to meet community objections. Yet the Upper Level Loop Alternative (ULLA) has many advantages for the transit user and for the general public. Delcan estimated that ULLA would save some 60% of the cost of constructing MTA's Deep Cavern Plan for LIRR access or $1.2 billion of the $2.0 billion cost, and would shorten construction time by three years. LIRR passengers arriving at existing platforms on the Upper Level would save three to four minutes of travel time, compared with the Deep Cavern Plan, which would be constructed some 150 feet below Park Avenue. In this age of heightened concern about security, ULLA poses fewer risks for LIRR passengers.

MTA has expressed doubts about ULLA's constructability, its impact on Metro-North operations and feasibility of relying on the relatively tight radius loop for LIRR peak hour operations. Delcan has addressed each of these concerns in its detailed report. The Delcan report is posted on www.irum.org along with MTA's concerns. Delcan has had considerable experience in constructing large scale transportation projects. It used MTA's earlier STV study of connecting the LIRR to the Lower Level as an information source for its Upper Level proposal. The ULLA plan would be constructed entirely within the Park Avenue right of way, avoiding the need to underpin large buildings, as MTA originally proposed.

Delcan examined Metro-North's operations plan and found that, even with the loss one of its approach tracks and five of its 46 platform tracks at Grand Central Terminal – the world's largest railway station – remaining capacity would be ample to meet MNR requirements. Delcan found that capacity and reliability of train operations around the loop would be adequate to meet LIRR's future needs.

While MTA's staff review of the ULLA plan is most welcome, the plan's substantial advantages over the deep cavern plan merit a careful independent assessment by disinterested third party experts. This would not delay the project, and in fact could lead to its more rapid completion. Even if there were a firm commitment of Federal and state funding, which there is not, it would make sense to select an alternative that costs less to build, can be completed sooner, better serves LIRR riders and avoids the security risks inherent in a deep cavern station.