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Newsday (USPS# 388-760) (ISSN# 0278-5587) is published daily except Sunday and Christmas Day by Newsday LLC, 235 Pinelawn Rd., Melville, N.Y. 11747. Periodicals postage paid at Huntington Station, N.Y. Postmaster: Send address changes to 235 Pinelawn Rd., Melville, N.Y. 11747.

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LI Amtrak service part of plan

BY ALFONSO A. CASTILLO
alfonso.castillo@newsday.com

An agreement reached between Amtrak, the MTA and the state will explore the potential for a direct rail link between Long Island and cities throughout the Northeast, and also move ahead with a controversial plan to add another railroad to already-crowded Penn Station.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo announced the deal Tuesday and said in a statement the “Penn Station Access” plan to bring Metro-North Railroad to the busy Manhattan train terminal will “build upon our ongoing efforts to fully transform our state’s transportation infrastructure.”

The “memorandum of understanding” between the state, Amtrak and the MTA calls for a joint study on the “the feasibility of Amtrak running several trains daily from Long Island to Penn Station and continuing either north to Boston or south to Washington.”

Obstacles to overcome

The study would have to address several obstacles in the way of extending Amtrak onto Long Island, including limited capacity on the LIRR’s tracks and the fact that Amtrak uses overhead electrical wires to power its trains, as opposed to the LIRR’s electrified third rail.

In a statement, Amtrak senior executive vice president Stephen Gardner said the agency is “pleased to have reached a preliminary agreement” to move ahead with the Penn Station Access plan and to “begin working to advance direct Amtrak intercity passenger rail service to Long Island over the LIRR in the future.”

Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) raised concerns about the plan, noting that Amtrak and the MTA have yet to commence much-needed repairs of superstorm Sandy damage inside the East River Tunnels, which would be further stressed by Metro-North trains running to and from Penn Station, and Amtrak trains operating on Long Island. He said Tuesday the agreement “intensifies the urgency to fix the aging and Sandy-damaged” tunnels and called on the agencies “to get this job done for LIRR riders.”

The agreement puts into motion the MTA’s long-debated “Penn Station Access” plan that would use Amtrak tracks in the Bronx to route Metro-North into Penn Station, which has 650,000 Long Island Rail Road, Amtrak, NJ Transit and New York City Transit subway riders daily.

The project also includes plans for four new Metro-North stations in the Bronx.

Acting MTA chairman Fernando Ferrer called the project



Amtrak would offer direct routes from LI to Northeast cities.

a “game changer.”

“This is a long-held dream of mine and hundreds of thousands of Bronxites,” said Ferrer, a former Bronx borough president. “Needless to say, we salute Governor Cuomo’s leadership with Amtrak to let the MTA get this project moving.”

Reduced Penn service

The plan assumes the LIRR would reduce service at Penn once the MTA’s East Side Access megaproject is complete — giving the railroad a second Manhattan station at Grand Central Terminal and freeing up capacity at Penn. The railroad estimates about half its 300,000 daily riders into Penn would opt for Grand Central instead once the East Side Access is completed, now projected to be in 2022.

But critics of the project on Long Island have raised concerns about its potential impact on LIRR riders. Former LIRR president Helena Williams’ opposition to the project contributed to her losing her job in 2014. Williams questioned

whether the LIRR could afford to spare any capacity at Penn, even after linking to Grand Central, and raised concerns about contributing to customer crowding at the station.

Eight state lawmakers from Long Island expressed similar concerns when they wrote a letter to the MTA in 2012 urging the agency to drop the project, which the state estimated in 2008 would cost \$1.2 billion. The MTA has so far budgeted \$695 million for the project.

“The governor has invested enormous political capital into resurrecting the LIRR as the railroad that will carry Long Islanders far into the 21st century — from East Side Access to the Third Track,” Kyle Strober, executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island, an advocacy group, said Tuesday.

Still, Strober cautioned the MTA “to proceed carefully and thoughtfully as they seek to put Metro-North trains on Penn Station platforms while not causing additional pains to the already beleaguered LIRR commuters.”

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