

Third Rail for LIRR Has Towns Charged Up

Some mayors and residents contend a \$2 billion MTA expansion plan would cause problems



A rendering of the third track upgrade at the New Hyde Park station in Nassau County. PHOTO: METROPOLITAN TRANSIT AUTHORITY

By **JOSEPH DE AVILA** Feb. 13, 2017 7:16 p.m. ET

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority has a \$2 billion plan to solve a complaint of Long Island's commuters: bottlenecks on the Long Island Rail Road.

The proposal calls for a third track along one of the railroad's busiest corridors—a 10-mile stretch between the New York communities of Floral Park and Hicksville. About 40% of the railroad's traffic, or 107,000 passengers, travel over the segment each weekday, according to the MTA.

But mayors of several communities, including Garden City and Mineola, are opposing the expansion, arguing that service can be improved without adding a track. And some residents who live near the area have come out against the project, saying it isn't worth the headaches the construction would cause.

After hearing from the public, the MTA will submit a final plan. The MTA board also would have to approve funding. If signed off on, the project could get under way as soon as the end of the year.

Floral Park Mayor Thomas Tweedy called the estimated three-to-four-year construction time frame "tremendously optimistic." He said he worries that residents and business owners would have to put up with disruption for much longer. Local opposition torpedoed a similar plan a decade ago.

On the other side, businesses, construction companies and real-estate interests have formed groups to support the expansion, pointing out that it would attract more residents, develop the economy and shorten commute times.

Dave Kapell, executive director of the Right Track For Long Island Coalition, a group of businesses, labor unions and individuals that support the expansion, said he sympathizes with the residents who live near the existing tracks. "But life has to go on," he said.

Mr. Kapell said the two existing tracks were built more than a century ago and aren't adequate for current needs. "It just

defies the imagination that Long Island can succeed with 19th-century infrastructure."

When the MTA made a similar pitch in 2005, it would have required acquiring land from several homeowners for the third line. Now, the MTA said it could build the third track in its existing right of way without taking any residential property. The agency, however, would have to buy commercial property from up to four landowners.

"It is a completely new project from prior attempts to add a third track to the LIRR and reflects extensive public input, which is exactly why it's been received with such broad support," said Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat.

The MTA said the expansion would reduce slowdowns. Today, a single disabled train can cause delays systemwide because six tracks on three branches coming from eastern Long Island feed into the two-track segment before heading into New York City's Penn Station and other stops. With a third track, the railroad would have more flexibility to reroute trains.

Under the plan, the MTA also seeks to eliminate seven crossings along the corridor by building overpasses and closing two roads.

William Corbett, with a group called Citizens Against Rail Expansion, said residents with property abutting the existing tracks never counted on the railroad moving closer.

"During the construction phase, it will be devastating to the people who live along the track," said Mr. Corbett. The noise and inconvenience would be especially disruptive "in a place like Floral Park where the tracks go right through our little business community."

To address the concerns, MTA officials said the agency would require contractors who bid on the project to prove they could minimize the disruption to the community during construction.

Kyle Strober, executive director of Association For A Better Long Island, a group of real-estate executives, said a third line could enable reverse commuting, allowing businesses in Nassau and Suffolk counties to draw talent from the city.

LIRR uses both tracks to send trains into Manhattan during the morning rush and uses both tracks to transport riders out to Long Island in the evening. That setup limits service in the other direction during rush hour.

Many opponents also are concerned about contaminated soil along the right of way and the impact that may have when construction begins, he said.

MTA officials said the agency is testing soil samples to determine whether there are hazardous materials in the area.

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