

TRACKS OF OUR TEARS

Penn upgrades will mean delays this summer

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

An Amtrak plan to cram up to three years' worth of infrastructure repairs at Penn Station into a few months could make it a harsh summer for LIRR riders, who will endure prolonged track shutdowns, including during rush hours, officials said yesterday.

Amtrak, Penn Station's owner and operator, laid out its plan to address problems at the century-old transit hub, where several system failures in recent weeks have outraged rail providers, elected officials and hundreds of thousands of commuters on both sides of the Hudson River.

"The events of the past month have shown that we just have to step up our game there. We have to get in and accelerate a renewal program that was scheduled to stretch out over another two or three years and get that work done more quickly," Amtrak President and Chief Executive Officer Charles "Wick" Moorman said in a morning conference call with reporters yesterday. "Obviously it's going to have some impact on folks over

the summer . . . We'll give people plenty of time before the work begins to digest what those impacts will be. But I think this is critical work and it's work that Amtrak needs to go ahead and get done."

Moorman declined to share details on the kind of disruptions that are expected until Amtrak meets with representatives from the LIRR — Penn's primary tenant — and NJ Transit to discuss their plan and ways to mitigate its impact on the 600,000 people who travel through the Manhattan hub every day.

However, a source briefed by Amtrak on the plan said it involves taking up to four of Penn's 21 tracks out of service for prolonged periods.

The project will cost "tens of millions of dollars" and be funded by Amtrak, which plans to defer some planned technology initiatives to pay for it, Moorman said.

The summer work will be concentrated in the "western throat" of Penn Station, the nation's busiest rail hub where separate track failures caused two derailments in just over a week recently. The work will include replacing tracks and switches that date to the 1970s. Other track upgrade work will last through June 2018, but will be performed primarily on weekends, as it has been for years.

The Metropolitan Transporta-

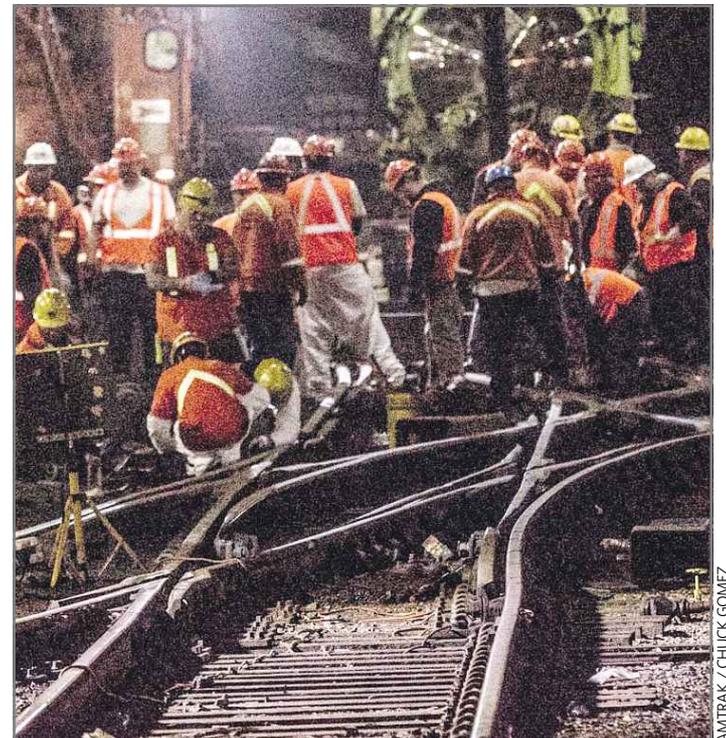
tion Authority did not comment yesterday on Amtrak's announcement. However, MTA Board member Mitchell Pally, of Stony Brook, suggested Amtrak was getting ahead of itself.

"Amtrak can say what it wants to say. It will only happen after the MTA agrees to it," said Pally, who is not convinced that Amtrak's prescribed fixes will address Penn Station's ills. "The last thing we want to do is to have stuff done that is not going to solve the problem."

Pally said weekday track shutdowns would cut away at the LIRR's redundancy, and could lead to far more severe disruptions if something else goes wrong at Penn while some tracks are out of service. Before any plan is set in motion, the MTA would need a better handle on what tracks would be out of service and during what times of day, and develop alternate plans to move passengers, including by, potentially, bulking up service at Atlantic Terminal and on its subway system, Pally said.

"All of those details will have to be worked out before the MTA agrees to anything," Pally said.

Kyle Strober, executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island, an advocacy group, agreed that the "devil is always in the details." He called on all the railroads involved to



Workers repair tracks after a NJ Transit train derailed April 3.

closely communicate with each other and with riders.

"While admitting there is a problem is a good first step by Amtrak, implementing a plan that crams multiple years' worth of work over the summer season is unprecedented and could have a devastating impact on Long Island's economy if not executed correctly," Strober said.

At a New Jersey State Legislature hearing yesterday, NJ Transit Executive Director Steve Santoro said he had not yet received a plan from Amtrak, but called it "good news that Amtrak is taking seriously the issues of the infrastructure in and around Penn Station."

Amtrak announced several other initiatives to improve Penn, including by tapping former MTA

Chairman and LIRR President Thomas Prendergast to lead a review of Penn Station's concourse level and make recommendations for improvements, creating a joint concourse-level operations center to be staffed by representatives from Amtrak, LIRR and NJ Transit, and creating a task force to review all station safety protocols.

Mark Epstein, chairman of the LIRR Commuter Council, the official watchdog group for the railroad and its 308,000 daily riders, commended Amtrak for "taking action, albeit long overdue, to attend to these deferred maintenance and operational problems."

"The conditions that riders have endured for years and that have been highlighted in past weeks are intolerable and cannot be allowed to continue," he said.