

A TUNNEL TO ECONOMIC HEALTH

By Jerrold Nadler

New York's growth has always been inextricably tied to its transportation infrastructure. In the 19th Century, the Erie Canal, first, and then the Erie Lackawanna and New York Central Railroads built the state. In the first half of the 20th Century, the New York City subway system enabled the city to expand radically into the outer boroughs. At the same time, the expanding thruways and the systems of bridges and tunnels spawned the growth of the suburbs, further augmenting the city and state's great economic engine.

But in the second half of the 20th Century, New York failed to keep its infrastructure up to date and the city suffered tremendous economic losses and disadvantages as a direct result. We have allowed our bridges, highways and mass transit systems to fall dramatically behind in necessary upkeep and expansion. Indeed, New York is the only major port city in the United States that never built a rail freight tunnel or bridge over or under its river or harbor. Consequently, we are today the only major American city that is totally dependent on trucks for our freight movement.

In the 1970s, when I was a member of the New York State Assembly representing the West Side of Manhattan, I first became acutely aware of the problem of freight movement in the New York region. As I grew to be more deeply involved in the issue, it increasingly dawned on me that freight movement—the transport of goods—was an issue of monumental consequence for all of us in our region. But it was also an issue that barely received consideration by elected officials or the media. Few understood how crucial the issue is to our everyday lives—or its importance to our economic future.

Before long, I came to understand that if we did not take freight movement more seriously, New York City and its environs would

become choked by truck traffic and pollution and that the inability of our highway system to handle greater volume of truck traffic would place a lid on economic development. There are some simple truths of the matter: Our roads simply cannot handle the current volume of traffic and certainly not a greatly increased level. Our health is at risk from truck-borne pollution. And with added density of population and congestion will surely come greater delays in bringing goods to markets, delays that will further drive up the cost of consumer products. Furthermore, New York's almost total reliance on trucks for delivering goods is extraordinarily destructive to our roads and bridges—not to mention the toll it takes on the water mains and other infrastructure.

I am convinced that the only solution to this economic and public health disaster-in-the-making is to reduce our dependence on trucks for freight movement by connecting the communities east of the Hudson River—Brooklyn, Queens and Long Island, Westchester, and eastern Connecticut—to the national rail grid. This is why, for more than 30 years, I have advocated for the construction of the Cross Harbor Rail Freight Tunnel connecting Brooklyn to New Jersey. While this critical project has gained momentum in recent years, its original inception long predates me.

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey was created in 1921 for the purpose of operating the port and improving the rail freight system serving the Port district. New York's distinct geographic separation (via the Hudson river) from the rest of the United States presented a set of challenges. Indeed, it was, and still is, the only major port city in the United States disconnected from the nation's freight rail network. The Port Authority was established specifically to solve that problem by constructing an under-the-harbor rail tunnel for the movement of goods. The first chairman of the Port Authority, Eugenius H. Outerbridge, a prominent manufacturing importer and exporter, called the rail freight tunnel from Bay Ridge to Bayonne the "keystone in the arch of the master plan" of the Port Authority. Nearly 90 years later, this project has finally begun to gain dramatic momentum. After an initial start in 1995, in the administration of Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, the "Cross Harbor Freight Movement

Project” was transferred in 2008 to the Port Authority, its rightful patron and an environmental impact statement is now underway.

It has taken a long time to get to this point, but it is now clear that cost, land use and environmental considerations will not allow the New York metropolitan region to merely “build its way” out of its congestion problems by expanding its highway capacity. Since freight does not ride buses or subways (or, incidentally, vote), we must find freight-specific solutions to the problem of moving goods and products efficiently and sustainably.

The inefficiency of our goods-movement system is particularly disturbing in a region that is the single largest consuming market in the country. Roughly 320 million tons of freight enters the New York metropolitan region annually. Trucks move more than 98 percent of this freight. That contrasts with most other American cities, which on average bring in only about 60 percent of their freight by truck. Trucking is the major source of congestion and the source of a host of ensuing problems. Fully 30,000 trucks clog key roads and bridges every day, with each large freight truck equaling the roadway capacity of four passenger vehicles. This problem will get much worse in the coming decades as the volume of freight moving through the region increases—a growth of 80 percent by 2025, according to official estimates.

In essence, congestion fundamentally harms our regional economy, environment, public health, and infrastructure. The lack of rail freight access also creates severe national security vulnerability for this region. Furthermore, because of the lack of a direct connection to America’s rail network and various constraints on our highways, bridges, and tunnels, a staggering 93 percent of the region’s goods enter through the George Washington Bridge.

Any meaningful resolution of the region’s congestion problems cannot be accomplished without serious attention being devoted to freight movement. The only conceivable solution is to revitalize the rail freight system in downstate New York. We must connect our region’s rail network to the nation’s rail freight system by building a Cross-Harbor Rail Freight Tunnel

The Cross-Harbor Rail Freight Tunnel is envisioned as a two-mile tunnel under New York Harbor, from the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn to Greenville Yards in Jersey City. This will link the existing Bay Ridge rail line (a below-grade, freight-only line through Brooklyn and Queens, owned by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Long Island Rail Road) with the nation's rail system in New Jersey.

The tunnel will allow much of our freight to move by rail into New York City, Long Island, Westchester, and southern Connecticut.

Three studies to advance the project have been completed to date: A 1995 New York City Preliminary Study, a 2000 Major Investment Study (conducted by the City of New York and the Federal Highway Administration), and the April 2004 Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). These studies examined the costs and benefits of 60 alternative ways of moving goods into the region from west of the Hudson. The studies concluded that the "preferred alternatives" are either a one- or two-track rail freight tunnel under the Harbor.

The environmental impact study concluded that the Cross Harbor Tunnel has the highest benefit-to-cost ratio (2.2-to-1) of any major transportation project currently under consideration in New York. The estimated hard cost of constructing a two-track tunnel is \$2.3 billion. Including soft costs—such as insurance and other administrative fees—and the costs of the required rail terminals, bridge clearance improvements and other necessary facilities, the total cost of a two-track tunnel project is estimated at \$7.3 billion. The net present cost is \$4 billion. A conservative estimate (even assuming zero induced economic development, which is difficult to quantify) of the net present value of the benefits is approximately \$10.5 billion. This is a phenomenal return on investment, unheard of in other, similar endeavors.

Even a one-track tunnel, which may ultimately be advisable initially to save money, has an extremely high benefit-to-cost ratio of 1.9-to-1. A one-track tunnel and its associated infrastructure would cost about \$1.8 billion. The second track could be added later, as the market and traffic volume dictate.

There are a number of other benefits that were confirmed by the environmental impact statement.

For one thing, the presence of the tunnel would mitigate congestion by generating a large shift of freight traffic from truck to rail in the region. A direct and efficient cross harbor link would also increase the competitiveness of freight rail in New York City and the region, competitiveness that is presently hindered because of outdated freight rail infrastructure and the lack of an efficient, high-capacity option for moving freight rail across the Hudson River. The environmental impact study also predicts that the Cross Harbor Tunnel would eliminate 2,800 daily truck trips, many going through some of the most congested choke points of the region. This is equivalent to a reduction of more than 10,000 daily car trips. Overall, the tunnel is projected to remove 1 million tractor trailers and 6 million vehicle miles traveled from New York City streets per year.

There are economic and employment considerations, too. The tunnel would act as a key engine for economic growth by creating as many as 30,000 new regional long-term jobs, with about 23,000 of them in the five boroughs of New York. In addition, it would create an additional 1,000 construction jobs.

Perhaps the most critical result of the tunnel would be that it would serve to improve New York's air quality and public health. The adverse effects of congestion from motor vehicle pollution take a huge and dramatic toll on the health of New Yorkers. There is a well-researched body of epidemiological studies from around the world that documents the serious threats associated with exposure to PM2.5, which are the sooty chemical particles produced by a number of sources, from car exhausts to power plants. They contribute to a number of health problems, including lower birth weight, asthma, cardiovascular and respiratory problems, strokes and heart attacks. Those conditions lead to increased use of asthma medication, doctor visits, emergency room trips, hospital admissions, school absenteeism and premature death. In 2000, New York City children were almost twice as likely to be hospitalized for asthma as children in the United States as a whole. Additionally, 94 percent of the added cancer risk from air pollutants in New York City comes from hazardous air

pollutants released by vehicles. Our asthma rates in New York City and the region have risen as our freight rail network has deteriorated. The tunnel would remove 120,000 tons of carbon dioxide each year from our air.

Not insignificantly, the tunnel will provide important national security benefits by creating a key system redundancy that will ensure that essential goods can move into New York City and Long Island, even if a terrorist attack closed the George Washington or Verrazano-Narrows Bridges to trucks.

In 2008, when the Port Authority took over the project and resumed work on the environmental impact statement, it received \$100 million in funds I obtained for the project in the 2005 federal transportation bill (called “SAFETEA-LU”). The Port Authority is working in earnest on the supplemental environmental impact statement, which will include updated land use and traffic data, new shipper surveys, analysis of mitigation and impacts, financial analysis, and selection of a preferred alternative.

Other recent events have been encouraging. Earlier this year, Governor David A. Paterson, a 20-year supporter of the tunnel concept, released the “New York State Rail Plan 2009: Strategies for a New Age,” the first updated state rail plan in more than two decades. The plan specifically calls for implementation of the “identified recommendations of the Cross Harbor Freight Movement Project Environmental Impact Statement.” This report obviously greatly enhances the ability of the Port Authority to move forward aggressively in its advocacy of the project.

Certainly there are those in the public debate who are inclined to argue that a crippling recession is hardly the ideal time to make such a huge investment. However, this is the time to firmly place our resources in a project that would relieve congestion, improve the quality of health and allow for more efficient freight transport in the area. With a president and a Congress that are more focused on sustainability issues than ever before, with city and state governments that have already begun work on decreasing automobile use and its impacts, and with thousands of advocates and citizens who

have become educated on freight, transportation and public health problems, I think the tide is finally turning.

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