
March 17, 2006

Regional Transit Council Puts Hudson Tunnel on List

By PATRICK McGEEHAN

A group of New York political leaders and transportation officials threw their support yesterday behind a project that would start in New Jersey — a \$6 billion rail tunnel under the Hudson River.

The group, known as the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council, voted to add the proposed tunnel to its list of major projects that need to be built during the next 25 years. Projects must be on the list, known as the regional transportation plan, to qualify for federal funds.

The council, whose members represent city and state agencies and five suburban New York counties, published a regional plan last year that did not include the trans-Hudson tunnel. But at its annual meeting yesterday, the council amended the plan to add the tunnel, a top priority of officials in New Jersey, over the objections of some who prefer different configurations for the project.

The vote occurred just minutes after the council's co-chairmen announced that its members had settled on some shared goals and would work in concert to identify transportation projects that would meet them. This newfound spirit of cooperation will help in obtaining more federal financing for improvements in the region, said [Thomas R. Suozzi](#), the Nassau County executive, who completed a one-year term yesterday as a council co-chairman.

"It's important that we, as a region, try to establish a vision that will target growth" and contain suburban sprawl, said Mr. Suozzi, a Democrat who is running for governor of New York. He added that the council had recognized in the past year that "working together, we'll be much more effective than we have been working separately."

The council is responsible for tracking long-term transportation projects that will require financing from the federal government. In the past, it had no mechanism for measuring the relative benefits of big projects and prioritizing them. As a result, local officials lobbied against one another for money in Washington, pitting bridges against tunnels against subway lines.

Now, the council is developing a process for gauging a project's importance by certain criteria, including its potential benefits to the regional economy, environment and quality of life, said Thomas J. Madison Jr., commissioner of the New York State Department of Transportation. Mr. Madison is a co-chairman of the council, along with Iris Weinshall, the transportation commissioner of New York City, who succeeded Mr. Suozzi yesterday.

Other members represent Putnam, Rockland, Suffolk and Westchester Counties.

Mr. Madison said that the council's direction had been uncertain beyond lining up financing for two big projects: a subway under Second Avenue in Manhattan and a connection for the Long Island Rail Road to Grand Central Terminal under the East River.

All told, the council has identified \$70 billion in needed but unfinanced projects, including the possible replacement of the Tappan Zee Bridge, Mr. Madison said. With the prospect of declining amounts of money from Washington, Gov. [George E. Pataki](#) is pushing for legislation in Albany that would allow the state to enter partnerships with private companies to build or operate highways, bridges or other public assets.

Mr. Madison said: "This is something we need to look at. Financing is going to be an incredibly important part of our discussions in the future."

On that score, adding the trans-Hudson rail tunnel — two single-track tubes — to the regional plan was painless. The plan was amended to include the tunnel, which would stretch from northern New Jersey to a terminal deep under West 34th Street in Manhattan, on the premise that its financing would come from New Jersey or Washington.

New Jersey Transit, the project's sponsor, and the [Port Authority of New York and New Jersey](#) have pledged to find the money from state and federal sources. George D. Warrington, New Jersey Transit's executive director and a council member, said yesterday that he was "deeply grateful" for the council's action.

The approval came despite objections from some transportation advocates who argued that burying New Jersey Transit and Long Island Rail Road platforms in "deep caverns" more than 100 feet below street level, as has been proposed, would be too expensive and dangerous.

George Haikalis, who said he was the president of the Institute for Rational Urban Mobility, called for connecting the tracks through the proposed new tunnel to Pennsylvania Station and on to Grand Central Terminal. That plan would cost less, attract more commuters and save travel time, he said, but it has been rejected because it would require unprecedented cooperation among regional transportation officials.

Mr. Suozzi asked the council's staff to prepare a rebuttal to the criticism.