



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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Next Stop: Congestion and Fare Hikes

All aboard! A bad idea is about to leave the station.

I won't be getting on, but I'll tell you about it in case you missed the news this past week. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority is now considering a proposal that will allow Metro-North railroad to operate trains into Penn Station using the existing tracks. I can already hear the gnashing of teeth and the pulling of hair as I write this but some of you may wonder what the harm is. To answer that, neighbors may suggest making their commute on an average business day. Wake up before dawn,

wait on a freezing platform for a Long Island Railroad train on which you will likely stand elbow to elbow with fellow commuters the entire way, due to over-crowding. Once you arrive, you must launch yourself out of the train and be swept along with the wave of people rushing up woefully undersized staircases, being sure to avoid perpetually out-of-order escalators. Now, here's the best part – you get to come back about 5:45 in the afternoon and do it all again, navigating the absolute crush of weary commuters who just want to get home. That's the best-case scenario on a day with no major delays due to snow, rain, ice storms, electrical problems or signal delays. If any of those conditions exist, expect cancelled and re-routed trains and excruciating wait times with little or no information.

The facts are simple. It's already an overcrowded and difficult commute precisely because the 21 existing tracks at Penn Station must somehow be shared by all the traffic of the LIRR, Amtrak, and New Jersey Transit. Constructed in the 1960's, after we made the tragic mistake of razing the old Penn Station, the current hub is simply not large enough to efficiently handle that sort of usage and volume. It makes absolutely no sense to add new trains and thousands more commuters to the mix, which in the end, will only add to the chaos. In fact, given the physical constraints, it seems likely that to make room for Metro-North, other lines will have to cut the number of trains running into and out of Penn.

That's bad for the railroad and bad for its customers. The LIRR accounts for nearly 75% of the station's weekday train traffic. It actually moves more people than Kennedy, LaGuardia and Newark airports combined. Yet even with those staggering numbers, the railroad is only allotted seven of the 21 tracks! What would the commute look like for Long Islanders if access was further diminished? What would it look like if delays were even more common?

To make matters worse, the LIRR is predicting a significant increase in ridership the next several years. In 2007, it set a record with more than 86 million riders. While the East Side Access project to Grand Central is lumbering forward, it was approved to ease congestion at Penn Station and is being built to provide additional tracks at Grand Central for LIRR commuters, while not taking tracks away from Metro North riders. Realistically, the project is years from becoming a reality, and even upon completion, the LIRR would need to operate at existing Penn Station levels just to keep up with projected increases in ridership.

To give Metro North this access and to build the six new stations it wants, the MTA pegs the bill at about \$1.2 billion. Did we miss something? We are constantly assailed by their ominous warnings of gigantic budgetary shortfalls. How then, can it struggle to find billions more for current mega projects while it simultaneously plans for billions in expenditures elsewhere? Something's got to give. I know I am not alone in thinking that this will mean more outrageous fare hikes for commuters.

I have great respect and hope for new MTA Chairman Joseph Lhota. As former Deputy Mayor to Rudy Giuliani, he proved himself a pragmatic and skilled administrator. That's why seven other Long Island senators and I have appealed to his practicality via a public letter, asking him to abandon this poorly conceived plan. It seems it would be far more sensible for the MTA to hunker down, reform its finances, and work on completing the monumental projects it has already started. Whatever your opinion, I urge you to please make your voices heard.