

Testimony of  
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Before the  
New York State Senate Transportation and Corporations, Authorities and Commissions  
Committees

Public Hearing on the LIRR East Side Access Project and the  
Amtrak / MTA East River Tunnel Rehabilitation Project

May 5, 2021

Good morning Chair Kennedy, Chair Comrie and members of the committees. My name is Steve Strauss, and I am the relatively new Executive Director of the Empire State Passengers Association. ESPA is a statewide intercity passenger rail and transit advocacy organization that has been active in the state for over 40 years.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today on what may be the longest-running public transportation construction project in the Western Hemisphere, East Side Access, and rehabilitation of the existing East River Tunnels.

Today the committees will hear testimony from various experts on the best way or preferred way to rehabilitate the existing East River tunnels. Should Amtrak and the MTA advance the design of a rehabilitation project using 55-hour full weekend closure construction prior to the December 2021 completion of the East Side Access project or should the agencies wait until East Side Access is completed and use a full closure of a tunnel to complete the work in a way that is likely to be faster, more efficient and at a lower cost?

The Committee members have also indicated an interest in hearing testimony as to the impact on existing LIRR and Amtrak service reliability if the major rehabilitation work is delayed until after East Side Access opens.

ESPA would like to point out to the Committees that the Northeast Corridor Commission's Five Year Capital Plan for FY2021 to 2025 identifies only two funded projects for the Tunnels. The first project is a Right of Way Improvements project, currently underway and budgeted at \$88 million with funding from the MTA. The second project is the River-to-River Resiliency project at a cost of \$108 million, funded by a combination of \$80 million in Superstorm Sandy relief funds and \$28 million in MTA and Amtrak funds. The Committee members should ask the MTA and Amtrak how completion of these projects will impact LIRR service reliability.

The NEC Capital Plan also includes the much larger East River Tunnels Rehabilitation project at an estimated cost of \$500 million. The projected start date is October 2023 with completion in December of 2027. Most importantly, this project is listed as unfunded. ESPA believes the committees need to learn more about the scope, schedule and funding of this project from Amtrak and the MTA.

ESPA would also like to take this opportunity to urge the committees to begin asking the Long Island Railroad for its preliminary service plan for East Side Access. It has been a very long time since the Railroad laid out its train service ideas in the Environmental Impact Statement for East Side Access

over 20 years ago. Commuting and mobility needs have greatly changed in Queens, Long Island and Manhattan in this time period.

The Long Island Railroad needs to begin an in-depth conversation with the riders and residents of its service area on what level of additional service it proposes to provide when East Side Access opens. Over the next 20 months we need to discuss weekday and weekend service plans, how underserved communities in Queens and Long Island can benefit from additional and affordable service frequencies, what the cost of operating a large new terminal will be and whether ridership can support 7-day service to both Manhattan terminals. We also need to know whether the 8 tracks at East Side Access can fully accommodate the trains that would shift from Penn Station in conjunction with any full closure of one of the East River tunnels. Would such a plan rule out any increase in LIRR weekday rush hour service while the tunnel is closed?

A decision on how to rehabilitate the East River Tunnels should not be finalized until the LIRR provides these service plan options and detailed ridership recovery projections to elected officials and LIRR riders. This data is critical to deciding on the advantages and disadvantages of commencing the East River Tunnel rehabilitation project after East Side Access opens.

The Empire State Passengers Association urges the New York State Senate to start asking these important service plan questions of the Long Island Railroad.

Thank you.