



## **\$8.7B commuter tunnel construction to begin soon**

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**BY TOM DAVIS**  
**STATEHOUSE BUREAU**

Construction of an \$8.7 billion commuter tunnel to Manhattan will begin within weeks now that NJ Transit has awarded the project's first building contract.

The agency's Board of Directors approved a \$13.6 million contract Wednesday to build a bridge across Tonnelle Avenue in North Bergen that will allow the tunnel's tacks to pass underneath.

The project will take place close to where the tunnel will go underground, allowing the two new rail tracks to begin their descent under Palisades Mountain.

"It's truly a historic moment," said Rich Sarles, the agency's executive director.

Tonnelle Avenue will remain open throughout the project, and traffic will be able to pass through all four lanes of the highway during peak periods, Sarles said.

The contract also requires the demolition of a McDonald's and a portion of a warehouse to prepare for the track alignment. Sarles said NJ Transit currently is negotiating to purchase the fast-food restaurant's property.

"We're creating a bridge over the railroad, so it's going to be like a highway bridge," said Sarles.

The board's approval follows last week's announcement that the Obama administration is including \$200 million for the project in its 2010 federal budget, bringing the total federal commitment to date to \$378 million.

NJ Transit is seeking as much \$3 billion in federal funds to help pay for the tunnel.

The tunnel project will provide a one-seat ride to and from all of the agency's rail lines serving midtown Manhattan from New Jersey, and Orange and Rockland counties in New York, NJ Transit says.

It could also double the number of riders who commute to and from Manhattan. NJ Transit currently relies on a century-old Northeast Corridor tunnel to serve more than 100,000 passengers every weekday.

NJ Transit said federal stimulus money will help fund the contract with Ferreira Construction Co. of Branchburg. About \$130 million will go toward the final design of rail tunnel to Manhattan and an expanded Penn Station in New York.

Critics have called the project a costly "tunnel to nowhere" that doesn't reach the East Side of Manhattan, saying the stimulus funding should go toward projects that help more people.

"This tunnel is sucking from every funding source, especially when there are alternatives that could make it better," said George Haikalas, president of the Institute for Rational Urban Mobility advocacy group.

But Kate Slevin, executive director of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, also praised the contract as "historic" and said the project will provide mass transit options for thousands of commuters, particularly in Bergen and Passaic counties.

Riders on the Pascack Valley or Main-Bergen lines have to either switch trains at Secaucus Junction or change to a PATH train to get to Manhattan.

"This truly is a tunnel to somewhere," she said.