

Feds kick in \$3 billion for new rail tunnel under Hudson River

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BY JUDY RIFE

NORTH BERGEN, N.J. — The federal government upstaged NJ Transit and the Port Authority Monday at a historic groundbreaking for a new rail tunnel with a little historic moment of its own — the announcement that it would contribute \$3 billion to the tunnel, the largest award to any transit project in U.S. history.

"These are the projects that transform people's lives" and demonstrate our ability as a nation to move from 'Yes, we can' to 'Yes, we will,'" said Peter Rogoff, the new Federal Transit Administration director.

Rogoff pointed out this project in the nation's most transit-intensive state will shave 40 minutes off the average commute and give thousands of New Jerseyans and New Yorkers "more time to have a life" for generations to come.

The Obama administration's decision to write the big check means NJ Transit and the Port Authority have the entire \$8.7 billion to build the project, known as Access to the Region's Core, in hand before construction starts — and start it will, within days.

Until Monday, the amount of the FTA's contribution was still in question and the two agencies were proceeding with their own \$5.7 billion commitment.

"To say I'm excited is an understatement," Gov. Jon Corzine said as passing NJ Transit trains blew their whistles in obvious acknowledgement of the ceremony. "This is about jobs now and mobility for 100 years, and it's appropriate to use the word 'historic.'"

Corzine added he will sign an executive order this week that will hold the state accountable for getting the project built on time and on budget and direct the comptroller to audit and assess the effort.

"This is too big a project not to make sure taxpayers' dollars are spent wisely," the governor said.

Christopher Ward, the Port Authority's executive director and New York Gov. David Paterson's representative, predicted that ARC will make the two states one in much the same way that the George Washington Bridge and Lincoln and Holland tunnels have.

"The Port Authority's mission is to make the Hudson River disappear as a barrier," said Ward. "Toward that end, we have built the great crossings, and this is another great crossing."

The state's two U.S. senators, Frank Lautenberg and Robert Menendez, tied for best line. Lautenberg, who is 85, joked about how he remembered when the Pennsylvania Railroad broke ground for the first Hudson River tunnel in 1910, and Menendez talked about how construction jobs would be "the green light at the start of the tunnel" for the recession-ravaged region.

The event was held in the parking lot of an empty warehouse that will be demolished in the coming months to build an underpass beneath Tonelle Avenue to the Palisades, where the new tracks and trains will begin their descent into the tunnel and under the river.

The route is roughly parallel to Amtrak's Northeast Corridor line, which carries its trains and NJ Transit's through the tunnel the Pennsylvania Railroad built to Pennsylvania Station.

The new tunnel will double the capacity of the old one, allowing 48 trains an hour to travel to Midtown rather than 23 and giving commuters from Orange and Rockland counties in New York and Bergen and Passaic counties in New Jersey a one-seat ride to Penn Station — eliminating transfers at Secaucus Junction.