

A TUNNEL FOR FUTURE

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If the Rockland-Bergen-Orange region is truly to flower in this new century, it will have to secure a one-seat rail ride to Manhattan. That will be super costly, but it's an investment that, frankly, big bucks Washington must make for the economic well-being of the neglected Northeast.

Not to mention reducing the impact of vehicular traffic on air quality, which the government has strongly encouraged in its many decades of support for interstate highways.

While our Westchester County neighbors have as many as 47 trains on a Saturday alone, all one-seat rides direct to Grand Central Station, Rockland-Bergen-Orange have long been neglected. The three county area once had a number of lines to and in New Jersey and then to ferries or other trains to Gotham. Now the Erie Northern (later Southern) is gone and the West Shore Line is freight only at a time when the river communities and North Rockland could use the passenger service. And the Pascack Valley and Port Jervis/Main Line have limited service compared to Westchester, with no one-seat rides but requiring delaying changes at Secaucus or Hoboken. The promise that was the new Secaucus Transfer Station has not been realized since it requires commuters to dash for a second train to Penn Station.

Now, there is hope for new rail tunnels from New Jersey to Manhattan that could bring the Rockland-Bergen-Orange area into the 21st century.

As reported recently by staff writer Khurram Saeed, Rockland rail riders would stay in their seats and have a quicker ride to midtown Manhattan if NJ Transit can secure funding for proposed tunnels under the Hudson River. Sen. Charles Schumer, D-New York, is among those pushing for that, as we have for years now. Schumer recently made an appearance in Rockland at the Pearl River train station to announce his "full-fledged support" for the Trans-Hudson Express Tunnel project. He is a member of the Senate Banking Committee, which funds the nation's mass-transit projects, so this is promising.

"Right now, as we know, Rockland residents have too few convenient options for mass transit," Schumer says. He has that right. The Trans-Hudson Express would have two new single-track rail tunnels to supplement two existing ones, owned by Amtrak, which carry NJ Transit riders to midtown. The project would include a new multilevel station under 34th Street that would connect to Penn Station.

Construction could begin next year and be completed by 2015. With a direct rail connection, Rockland commuters and New York City visitors would be able make the trip in 47 minutes rather than today's average of about an hour, and not have to switch trains.

The tunnel would reduce commuter use of the Tappan Zee Bridge, a big plus for air quality and Rockland's traffic and could alter expensive plans for a new crossing at Nyack.

The federal government could pay for up to 50 percent of the tunnel project. The rest would come from New Jersey, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and private, sources. The Rockland-Bergen-Orange region would get a significant transit boost and help assure its economic future.