

TUNNEL VISIONARIES

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The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, New Jersey Transit and the federal government are moving ahead with plans to build a new \$7 billion rail tunnel under the Hudson. That is good for the co-dependent economies of the Garden State and New York City, neither of which can prosper without the other.

It is also good news for automobile addicts. Instead of sitting in traffic while trying to cross the Hudson River during rush hour, they will have a new reason to kick their increasingly expensive habit.

The new tunnel, which will complement the existing tunnel that links Penn Station to the American mainland, has been on the wish list of regional planners for years. The wish recently came much closer to reality when the Port Authority pledged \$2 billion for the effort. New Jersey Transit and federal transportation agencies will pick up the rest of the tab.

Preliminary engineering work is about to begin, with 2016 the target date for completion.

The new tunnel will double rail capacity under the river, allowing New Jersey Transit to transport 86,000 daily rush-hour commuters by 2025, up from today's 43,000. It will also improve service along Amtrak's heavily used Northeast Corridor.

Commuters from the west, including some upstate New York counties, account for about 15 percent of the gross city product of New York City, according to the Regional Plan Association. And New Jersey owes a sizable portion of its prosperity to the availability of high-paying jobs in Manhattan.

It's alarming to consider, then, how much the region's 21st-century economy depends on early-20th-century planning and engineering. The current rail tunnel, which takes New Jersey commuters and Amtrak passengers into dreary Penn Station, is nearly a century old and holds just two tracks. It was built for a time when New Jersey really was a garden state, and when New York City's economy was far less reliant on guest workers from west of the Hudson.

Over the past decade, New Jersey Transit has vastly improved access to Penn Station. Its Midtown Direct service offers a direct link to Manhattan from Morris, Union, Somerset and Essex Counties. Its Frank R. Lautenberg Rail Station in Secaucus allows passengers from northern New Jersey and upstate New York to transfer to Penn Station-bound trains.

Partly as a result of this expansion, the existing rail tunnel cannot accommodate any more trains during rush hour. And, as regular commuters know well, a single mishap in the tunnel can lead to hours of delays and inconvenience.

The new tunnel would add two more tracks, one in each direction. Equally important, the plan calls for expansion of a century-old, two-track rail bridge over the Hackensack River near the tunnel. Without additional bridge capacity, the new tunnel may not be able to reach its potential.

The region's economy requires 21st-century improvements in its infrastructure. The new rail tunnel is an important step in that direction.