

TIME TO MOVE FORWARD ON A HUDSON TUNNEL

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It sounds absurd, but the only passenger rail tunnel that crosses under the Hudson River to New York was built a century ago. It has two tracks, one coming and one going, shared by two very busy railroads, Amtrak and New Jersey Transit. Capacity is limited, delays are frequent. Something clearly must be done to supplement what is, after all, an essential lifeline to the nation's largest city.

Redundancy is key: a major breakdown in that tunnel could deal a blow not only to many thousands of commuters and other passengers but the regional economy as a whole. Fortunately, this oversight is on its way to being corrected. Even as it takes on a host of other projects, the Port Authority has been pushing a second two-track tunnel, called the "Access to the Region's Core," or ARC. The project was championed by Gov. Jon Corzine when he was in the United States Senate, and has the support of Gov. Eliot Spitzer and Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

The project will require about \$8 billion, roughly half of which has been secured, with \$2 billion coming from the Port Authority. Creative financing, including borrowing from New Jersey federal highway aid that had been targeted for congestion relief, has yielded another \$1 billion..

This is all money well spent. Now Congress needs to do its part by finding and committing the remaining funds. The tunnel is an extremely sound investment. And the need could not be more urgent.

If the plan goes forward, rail passenger capacity would double. New Jersey travelers would get a one-seat ride to Midtown Manhattan, instead of having to transfer, as many now do. Commuting times would be reduced.

New York is among the nation's most vibrant areas, a veritable cash cow for regional governments, but its economy will not continue to grow as long as its transportation infrastructure stays where it is. The limits on passenger rail hit hardest where growth has been fastest, west of the Hudson, where population is expected to increase 72 percent in the next quarter century.

Getting across the Hudson frustrates nearly everyone. Ask the poor soul who has tried to come across from the Garden State through the Lincoln or Holland Tunnels, or over the George Washington Bridge, especially at rush hours. But the ARC could help there, too. Transit officials estimate that as many as 35,000 cars may come off the road as motorists choose the train. If true, that could reduce congestion and vehicle emissions.

Critics complain that the tunnel will be at capacity from the minute it opens. That is probably true, which is all the more reason to push for a timely completion, now projected at 2016. The tunnel alone cannot fix the problems of moving in and out of the city, but it can help.