

The Times

Tunnel vision

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Just about everyone agrees that mass transit will be the key to addressing the twin congestions of traffic and emissions that are particularly troublesome in our crowded part of the country.

But the key to mass transit is convenience. We've seen some wonderful and workable examples of applied convenience in the past few years -- the River Line trains, for instance, are consistently full. Improved parking and facilities at the Trenton and Hamilton train stations have convinced more commuters to quit their cars. And if the incipient West Windsor transit village ever becomes a reality, it's certain to funnel more passengers into trains bound for New York.

And that's where the Access to the Region's Core mass transit tunnel project will come in. With a daily ridership of almost 1 million, the NJTransit system struggles to deliver passengers to Penn Station. Delays are often, transfers are required, and trains are jam-packed.

The tunnel project is designed to double passenger rail capacity between New Jersey and Manhattan with construction of a dual-tube tunnel under the Hudson River leading to a new station beneath 34th Street. New double-decker trains capable of running on both diesel and electricity will arrive at the rate of 48 trains per hour during peak ridership hours, project planners anticipate. The goal is a one-seat ride from the Garden State into Manhattan.

NJTransit is working on the \$8.7 billion ARC project with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. The plan, which was scrutinized during a series of public hearings and modified to accommodate residents' concerns, has secured funding commitments of \$3 billion from the Port Authority and \$2.7 billion from New Jersey. What's needed is \$3 billion from the federal government.

Considering President-elect Barack Obama's intention to stimulate the economy with aggressive improvements to the country's infrastructure, this seems like an ideal time for such a transit project. Planners expect there to be 6,000 construction and related jobs generated when the project begins next year, and forecast a \$4 billion increase in personal income in the region.

This is just the sort of large-scale project that demonstrates a far-reaching perspective on how important mass transit will be to maintaining and enhancing the region's economic vitality. Not only does it address the immediate need to break through the bottleneck now constricting the number and swiftness of passenger trains from the Garden State to New York, it also lays crucial groundwork for further expansion of commuter lines throughout New Jersey and beyond.

Some may question the wisdom of spending so much on projects of this scale in a faltering economy, but we believe such an initiative is at least as critical as the bailouts given so freely of late in Washington, D.C. And we believe there will be a much better return on this investment.