

The Star-Ledger

D.C. should dig the ARC tunnel

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The name of our senior senator adorns the exterior of the station in Secaucus where commuter rail lines merge before trains head under the Hudson to Manhattan. The **Frank R. Lautenberg** Station was named in his honor because of all the good work he has done for mass transit over his long career.

Let's hope he's got one more trick up his sleeve. The two tunnels that connect the Lautenberg station to Manhattan are even older than the senator, who turns 85 on Jan. 23. A wonderful birthday present for him -- and for commuters -- would be a commitment from the incoming Obama administration to include a second tunnel in the President-elect's proposed stimulus package.

The Democrats in Congress are working on that package with the goal of having it ready for the new president's signature when he takes the oath of office three days before the senator's birthday.

Lautenberg and the rest of New Jersey 's Congressional delegation should spend the next couple of weeks doing everything they can to point out to their colleagues in Congress why the ARC (**Access to the Region's Core**) tunnel should be at the top of the list for immediate action.

That case should not be hard to make. The scope of the proposed stimulus package will be huge, \$675 billion to \$775 billion over two years. Many of the projects around the country will no doubt be make-work exercises reminiscent of the infamous "bridge to nowhere," pork-barrel schemes in which the main jolt to the economy will be the spending on the project itself.

The **ARC Tunnel** is different. When completed, it will double the capacity for commuter trains to New York. At present, 23 trains an hour can travel through the tunnels that were opened by the old Pennsylvania Railroad in 1910. The new tunnel will raise total capacity to 48 trains per hour -- all of which are likely to be packed from the day the first train runs under the river.

And this project is ready to go. All of the preliminary planning has been completed and the local funding secured, a total of \$5.7 billion from the state and from the Port Authority. If the feds pitch in their \$3 billion share, construction can begin within months.

That will mean 6,000 new jobs for the region for the next nine years. Once the tunnel opens, tens of thousands of private-sector jobs are expected to be generated thanks to expanded capacity and reduced commuting times. Many commuters now have to switch trains to get into the city. When the tunnel opens, they'll go all the way to Manhattan without changing seats.

The incoming administration is no doubt hearing pitches for pie-in-the-sky transit projects all over the nation, proposals based on theoretical benefits for theoretical commuters. Here is a project that offers the most concrete of benefits for real people who have real needs. The commuters who will use this tunnel are already on trains -- or in cars wishing they were on trains.

A failure to get the ARC Tunnel into this stimulus package could delay the start of construction for several years. Frankly, it's time for Lautenberg and his colleagues to get to work. This train is leaving the station, and we'd better not miss it.