

A 22nd Century Approach to Penn Station

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The chaos that has recently wracked U.S. airlines underscores how unbalanced our national transportation system is. The U.S. has invested billions of dollars to sustain our major airlines while starving our passenger railroads. Consider that the passenger railroads – operating at full capacity – can handle a great deal of the demand for trips of less than 500 miles. If we had electrified High Speed Rail (HSR), trains would be able to travel 500 miles – New York to Charlotte, Detroit or Toronto – in less than 3 hours, or New York to Chicago in six hours. Imagine traveling without long lines for checking-in, security clearance and passport control, and all the anxieties that go with flying and airports. How beneficial would that be? Also, consider the recent experience of some overseas visitors who were bound for a transit convention in Newark; they were incredulous that they had to change trains three times to get from Kennedy Airport, where they landed, to their destination. Imagine a commuter rail network serving Greater New York in which one-seat/one-fare rides with convenient connections are the rule rather than the exception.

Is High Speed Rail or One Seat/Fare rides a pipedream? In the US, with few exceptions, yes, whereas in Europe and Asia, it's the norm. Can we do the same thing here? By all means.

In the debate over what to do about Penn Station and the upcoming Gateway Tunnels, there is much discussion over what a re-designed station would look like, how it would operate and be funded, the draconian urban renewal techniques some are pressing. New “planning teams” are being put in place to deal with all this. But few are asking the essential question:

'What kind of city do we want New York to be now and into the next century?' Will we be competitive with our peer cities, i., e., London, Paris and Hong Kong? Only by posing such fundamental questions will we be able to decide what to do now to secure a bright future for the city and the metropolitan area.

Do we want merely to spruce up our current transit system, the main features of which date back to the 19th century, or be a global leader in technologically advanced, equitable and humane

urban planning. We can learn much from our European and Asian counterparts about swift and accessible intercity and intraregional transit. We need High Speed Rail; the redesign of Penn Station must enhance the likelihood of this becoming a reality. This will also require the implementation of through-running at Penn Station New York metropolitan area, whereby commuter trains would run through Manhattan to hubs and centers of business activity across the region, rather than continuing to use Penn Station as an (inefficient) terminal facility. Through-running would add greatly needed capacity at Penn Station and encourage balanced and equitable economic growth throughout the region.

In a recent speech on the Infrastructure Bill, Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttegeig might have been discussing High Speed Rail and through-running when he said:

“This is what Reconnecting Communities is all about. Good transportation policy connects everyone to where they need to go efficiently, affordably, and safely. And I believe that together we won't just be repairing legacies of the past. We will be creating a new one for the future that all of us can be proud of.”

Reconnecting and making new and strong connections must be the primary goal of transportation infrastructure. Chicago, our second city but not when it comes to rail, is making bold plans for the renewal of Union Station. Union Station is an Amtrak hub for coast-to-coast travel. It is being prepared for High Speed Rail. They know that High Speed Rail will come to the US in full force – just as it has to the European Union. Through-running is a key feature of the proposed new Union Station. Why is such an access multiplying feature of a key central station even debated in New York? Los Angeles, not known as a mass transit leader, is implementing through-running to meet its needs in hosting another Olympics. Philadelphia and Toronto already have very successful through-running operations.

New York's global competitors -- London, Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and others -- are all integrating High Speed Rail into new or existing through-running modern region-integrating systems. Let's get away from pay-as you go by developers' schemes of planning like the current Penn Station proposal. Instead, let's expeditiously have a real global design competition – one overseen by an international jury of independent experts– to expeditiously explore the implementation of High Speed Rail and through-running at Penn Station. This should be done in conjunction with the construction of the new Gateway Tunnels under the Hudson River.

Let's look ahead to the 22nd century, not back to the 19th.

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