

# C o m p l e t e G e o r g e

Neile Weissman, completegeorge.org, neileweissman@gmail.com

## Remarks to Manhattan State Budget Forum on George Washington Bridge paths, 2/29/20

### Complete George

Complete George is 250 organizations, communities and public officials calling on the Port Authority of NY&NJ to widen the bikeways across the George Washington Bridge to comply with national standards (AASHTO) as part of the ongoing \$2 billion recabing and restoration.

In Manhattan, that includes Reps. Maloney, Velasquez; Borough President Brewer; Council Members Rodriguez, Levine, Powers, Rivera, Rosenthal, Kallos; Community Boards 4, 7, 9, 12; New York Road Runners, WEA, StreetsPAC.

### Ask

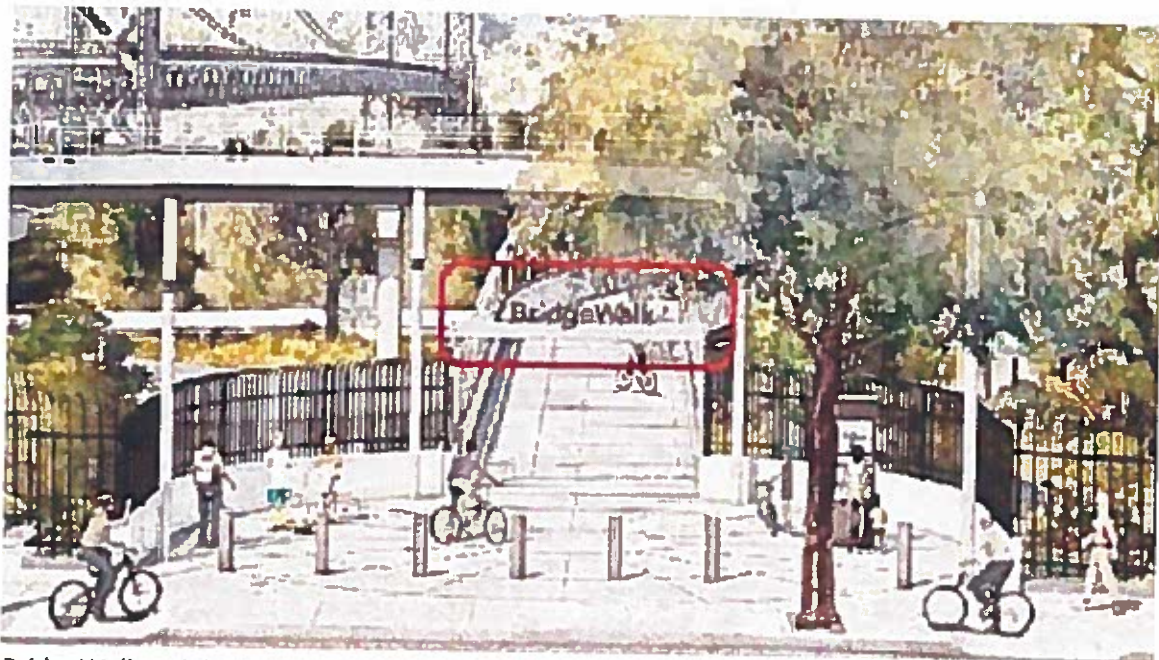
\$5 million per year for 10 years to widen the George Washington Bridge North Path.

### Need, Opportunity, Benefits

The George Washington Bridge is the sole bike-able connector out of New York City and linchpin to the proposed 1650 mile Tri-State Trail Network. Its 1931-era, 7 foot wide paths are already dangerously overcrowded at 3700 cyclists per day on weekends, and growing 10.4% per year.

The GWB is now undergoing a seven year, \$1.9 billion restoration. If its paths aren't widened as part of this project, the GWB will become a solely pedestrian facility.

This will hobble the growth of cycling across the region for generations, impacting durable enhancements to resilience, sustainability, public health and tourism annually worth hundreds of millions of dollars.



*BridgeWalk: While the Port Authority promises adequate capacity, the sign over the cyclists' path conveys a more limited function. The mile-long path quickly narrows to 7 foot. Image PANYNJ.*

**OP-ED: WITH TUNNEL REPAIRS IN OFFING, BIKES ARE KEY TO KEEPING PEOPLE ON THE MOVE**  
Neile Weissman, July 23, 2018,

**It's imperative to make contingency plans for a shutdown of Hudson rail tunnels. Step one: Widen bike paths on George Washington Bridge to accommodate far more riders**



Over the coming decade, there's a significant chance that the aging, salt-damaged Hudson rail tunnels will be shut down for restoration before new tunnels are complete.<sup>1 2</sup> If so, the region's transport providers would need to enact major contingency plans to move 200,000 travelers.

### **L-pocalypse**

Bicycling can move a significant portion cheaply, healthfully, and on their own schedules. But to make this happen, the paths on the George Washington Bridge — the only bikeable connector between northern New Jersey and Manhattan — must be widened to accommodate substantially more users. Consider how New York City is handling a similar scenario, fittingly known as the "L-pocalypse."

In 2019, L-subway service between Brooklyn and Manhattan will be suspended for 15 months to refurbish the century-old Canarsie Tubes, which, like the Hudson rail tunnels, were flooded after Superstorm Sandy. The closure, affecting 225,000 commuters daily, will not be preceded by new tunnels. Rather, riders will be rerouted onto new and beefed up subway, bus and ferry service.

They will also be encouraged to bike.<sup>3 4</sup>

To that end, the city will stripe new paths across the two boroughs. Fourteenth Street, which straddles the L, will be reserved exclusively for buses and bicycles. The number of cyclists accessing the Williamsburg Bridge is expected to double to 14,000 per day and thousands more will stream over other East River bridges.

### **Hudsogeddon!**

New York City's subway boasts considerable redundant capacity, crossing numerous bridges and tunnels. By contrast, the Hudson rail tunnels comprise a single point of failure for Amtrak and NJ Transit. This makes contingency planning for their loss far more difficult, expensive — and necessary. ("Hudsogeddon!")<sup>5 6</sup>



## Notes

- 1 The chances of the existing tunnels needing to be shut down for repair rise to 75% by 2026, Billions for Red Tape, May 2016, *Common Good*, <https://tinyurl.com/ydf8v3mr>
- 2 FAQ, *Hudson Tunnel Project*, <https://tinyurl.com/yc8wj42a>
- 3 City Plans for L-Train Closure, *MTA-NYC DOT*, <https://tinyurl.com/yc9dtbhc>
- 4 L-Train Shutdown Video, *MTA-NYC DOT*, <https://tinyurl.com/hkarh7r>
- 5 "Even partial tunnel closure would put 50,000 additional cars on the road, pushing Manhattan into gridlock and backing up New Jersey traffic 25 miles.", Billions for Red Tape, May 2016, *Common Good*, <https://tinyurl.com/ydf8v3mr>
- 6 "Martin Robins, of the Voorhees Transportation Center says he is 'terribly' worried about NJ real estate values, and Nicole Gelinas, transportation expert at the Manhattan Institute, says she may 'start advising friends to move to Long Island, not New Jersey' ", Gateway news reporting from 2014, 2016, 2018 by Dana Rubinstein, *Politico New York*, <https://tinyurl.com/ydff6fbc>, <https://tinyurl.com/y7cf5akz>, <https://tinyurl.com/ybvq4e2v>
- 7 "The (Newark-WTC) 10-Car Program would likely not be operational until 2028 if approved today. ... Another potential initiative, the Hoboken-WTC 8-Car Program with an estimated cost of \$550 million, is not currently under consideration." Trans-Hudson Commuting Capacity Study, Appendix B Multi-Modal Strategies, 2016, pp. 6-8, *PANYNJ*, <http://tinyurl.com/y7ejduqz>
- 8 Ibid, p.19
- 9 Five New Cities Choose Hudson Bike Share, Leaving Jersey City Alone With CitiBike, *Jersey Diggs*, <https://tinyurl.com/y9zre298>
- 10 "Bicycles may provide another means of accessing ferries for commutation between New Jersey and New York City.", THHCS, Appendix B Multi-Modal Strategies, p.20, *PANYNJ*, <http://tinyurl.com/y7ejduqz>
- 11 *Google Maps*, <https://tinyurl.com/y98uu2fi>
- 12 (2) 10' bike paths operating in peak direction; (1) 7' path operating cross peak to rebalance bike share; (1) 7' bi-directional path for pedestrians would yield an FHWA "E" level of service for 4000 peak cyclists per hour or 20,000 per day., National Standards, *Complete George*, <https://tinyurl.com/y7p25wlj>



CitiBike 12-unit transporter. Photo by Susan Brennan.

## **GWB Reconstruction Misses Mark on Sustainability, July 25, 2017**

by Trent Lethco, Principal, ARUP; Member of the Board of Regional Plan Association



*Current GWB. (1) 7' path for pedestrians, runners, cyclists. Photo Hassan Diop.*

A question has been on my mind lately: why does the proposed design of one of NY's most significant public works projects fail to live up to current sustainability standards and why is it so out of sync with what is happening in our region? As designed the George Washington Bridge (GWB) deck replacement project bucks the trend of enhancing bridge infrastructure for all system users – the Tappan Zee Bridge and SF Bay Bridge being the two most notable examples.

After you read this post below, please [contact the Port Authority](#) and let them know that you too would like to see the [Complete George](#) project implemented. Please also let the RPA know you've joined us in asking Port Authority to complete the George in the comments below.

This year, the Port Authority of NY&NJ will embark on the \$1.9 billion reconstruction of the George Washington Bridge, the 85-year-old double-decker suspension bridge connecting Manhattan to northern New Jersey. In many respects, the project plan embraces modern standards: it calls for widening the eastern and western approaches, installing ramps in place of stairs on the North Path, and making the bridge ADA-compliant.

When it comes to sustainability, however, the PA seems mired in old guard thinking. Despite the fact that the GWB is the only bike route over the Hudson leaving NYC, the proposed 7-foot paths, tacked to the edges of a high-use roadway, seem more like an afterthought than a true civic amenity and they are intended to be shared between cyclists and pedestrians making them 5 feet short of an acceptable dimension.

Not all that long ago, a first-class bikeway was seen as a luxury, not a key piece of civic infrastructure. But times are changing. For the generations of Americans who grew up under the shadow of climate change, sustainability is way of life.



and spur economic growth—an opportunity that the PA risks squandering if it proceeds as planned.

The U.S. Department of Transportation recommends that transport agencies spend up to 20% of their renovation budgets on biking and walking improvements. In this case, that's \$380 million, yet the PA has allocated less than \$20 million for the paths. That is simply not enough to bring the facilities up to modern standards.



***Complete George:** (2) 10' paths for cyclists plus (2) 7' paths for peds-runners. 9' high anti-suicide barrier. Rendering Joseph Lertola.*

While enhancing the bridge's active transit options would require a significant upfront investment, it would also deliver a range of long term economic, social and public health benefits that should not be overlooked, including:

- Promoting a modal shift away from cars that directly contributes to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions
- Advancing social justice by improving transit accessibility for low-income and minority communities stuck in so-called "transit deserts"
- Growing tourism and the economy by drawing cyclists from across the region past food and tourist stops in upper Manhattan and the Bronx
- Delivering significant cost savings in the form of improved public health. (Using the World Health Organization HEAT model to quantify the health benefits of cycling infrastructure, a widened GWB would prevent 21 deaths per year and save \$195 million in health care spending.)
- Enhancing resilience by offering an alternative outlet for tens of thousands of commuters in the event of an emergency, much like the East River bridges did after Superstorm Sandy
- Enticing the millennial workforce, a demographic that favors bicycling over driving and mass transit
- Improving safety and air quality

**TESTIMONY FROM THE  
EMPIRE STATION PASSENGERS ASSOCIATION  
ON THE NEW YORK STATE DEPT. OF TRANSPORTATION'S BUDGET**

February 29, 2020

**TO:** Manhattan's NYS State Senate Delegation:

The Empire State Passengers Association would like to thank you for the opportunity to share ideas to improve intercity rail transportation in the Empire State. Our testimony focuses on the proposed \$44 million in State funds budgeted to pay for Amtrak service within New York State and changes to the state's intercity rail program that you should consider supporting.

Since the 2008 passage of the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act (PRIIA) and its subsequent reauthorization, under federal law states are required to pay the full subsidy cost of Amtrak routes shorter than 750 miles (Section 209). In New York State, that means that all Amtrak service north of New York City is funded by New York State, except for the *'Lake Shore Limited'*, a New York-Chicago long-distance train funded by Amtrak with federal operating subsidies. Additionally, New York State is paying Amtrak more for the LIRR and Metro-North's use of Amtrak assets in New York City and Amtrak is paying Metro-North more for its use of the New Haven line.

**Operating Budget and Issues**

Under PRIIA Section 209, Amtrak serves as a service vendor to New York State. Subject to negotiations with Amtrak, New York controls Amtrak service within the Empire State. This includes the amount of service offered, the frequency of service, the price of tickets and the quantity and quality of on-board services and amenities. ESPA's believes that the general public and the State Legislature are not generally informed of this fact and available data is hidden in a sole-source contract with Amtrak.

Governor Cuomo has requested \$44 million in his FY2021 budget for the Amtrak contract. This is the same figure that the NYS Legislature has appropriated for our state-supported Amtrak service since 2013. ESPA recommends that the Senate support these items recommended by the Governor. In addition, the Senate should seek more information on the actual costs of the Amtrak service and examine if the vendor is providing the service which New York taxpayers are funding. ESPA believes additional disclosure is the first step in providing transparency and greater accountability on the quality and quantity of Amtrak service.

**Creating a Robust State Rail Program within NYS DOT**

NYS DOT has only four full time rail division employees managing the State's passenger rail program. ESPA believes it is time for NYS DOT to begin building a robust state rail program similar to active state

other sporting equipment in the baggage car, thus opening the opportunity for downstate residents for example to bring bicycles to tour the Erie Canal Trail or bring hockey equipment to tournaments.

Other states have successfully worked with Amtrak to increase bicycle capacity on trains to promote tourism travel. The State of Pennsylvania recently added a baggage car to the NYC-Philadelphia-Pittsburgh '*Pennsylvanian*' at an estimated cost of \$300,000 annually. However, Amtrak provides a discount to Pennsylvania because their baggage car provides a through service connection with an Amtrak long-distant train, the '*Capitol Limited*'. Thus, the cost would be higher for New York State. In addition to the '*Maple Leaf*' the '*Adirondack*' would benefit from a baggage car, however this is more difficult because there are no staffed stations north of Saratoga Springs and there is the complication of customs and border inspection.

The last short-term improvement to onboard service we advocate for is that Amtrak base a team of cleaners at Albany-Rensselaer who would board Empire Corridor trains at the station and clean them enroute. These cleaners could detrain at Utica, catching a return train east that they would also clean. Due to the length of train trips in both time and distance from Penn Station to Niagara Falls, restrooms can become... unpleasant; while garbage bins can overrun. Having them refreshed midway through journeys would be a small but meaningful way to improve onboard service, making rail a more attractive alternative to driving or flying.

#### **A Capital Program for the State's Intercity Passenger Rail Program**

With an enhanced state rail staff within NYS DOT, a continuing rail capital improvement could be developed just as the State does for highways, mass transit, aviation and waterways. Past documents – including the 2005 Hudson Line Railroad Corridor Transportation Plan and 2009 State Rail Plan – identified several valuable projects that could eliminate rail bottlenecks, increase service reliability, reduce travel times and therefore encourage more use of trains in New York State. With work completed over the past decade several of those ideas have been largely realized. However, ESPA would like to call your attention to four major capital projects that the state needs to begin planning for and developing funding plans this year.

First is that the current fleet of Amtrak owned dual-mode diesel-electric locomotives that serve the Empire Corridor, enabling trains from Upstate to enter the non-diesel electric territory of Penn Station and the East River tunnels, need to be replaced. Acquired by Amtrak from GE in the 1990s, the current fleet of 18 of locomotives have exceeded their 20-year service life, after very intense utilization. The average failure rate in service for the dual-mode locomotive fleet is increasing leading to more frustrating delays to passengers. ESPA believes that a dual-mode locomotive replacement order should be combined with an order from Metro-North which needs to replace its own fleet of dual modes and has taken the first steps to acquire new dual-mode locomotives from rail manufacturers. They will need to draw up a new locomotive design to specification already agreed upon by Amtrak, Metro-North, and the Long Island Railroad. A joint Amtrak—Metro-North order could save New York taxpayers money and speed delivery to Amtrak of the much need new motive power.

reliability, allow an increase in Amtrak daily round-trip frequency from today's 13 to as many as 24 daily trains, and reduce travel time NYC-Albany from today's 2hrs 20mins to 2hrs 05mins.

These improvements were identified and agreed upon in 2005 by NYSDOT, Amtrak, Metro-North, CSX, and Canadian Pacific in the Hudson Line Railroad Corridor Transportation Plan. All that is needed is the approval and funding for program of final engineering and construction to be started that would in a few short years bring Amtrak service NYC-Albany to a level currently seen on the Northeast Corridor. With Albany-Rensselaer the 9<sup>th</sup> busiest station in the Amtrak system, NYC-Albany, the busiest city-pair outside the Northeast Corridor and too many sold-out trains today south of Albany, we at ESPA believe that there is plenty of latent demand waiting to be unleashed by a higher-intensity modern passenger rail service.

Other potential capital projects for the Empire Corridor include proposed station projects at Amsterdam (currently under study by the city government) and at Dunkirk. Dunkirk southwest of Buffalo on the shores of Lake Erie currently has no Amtrak service, but could since the '*Lake Shore Limited*' passes through every day. The State University of Fredonia is located only two miles from Dunkirk and the former pre-Amtrak Dunkirk station site. There is also work that needs to be done at the Syracuse station to the existing platform, whose weak foundation is causing several safety issues.

Longer-term there is the issue of addressing the state's Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act mandating net zero-emission of CO2 by transportation by 2050. It would make sense for the panel of experts called upon by Governor Cuomo to study high speed rail, to study this idea as well. Perhaps as part of a "phase two" of a Hudson Line improvement program, electrification of Metro-North commuter and Amtrak intercity passenger service on the Hudson Line could be extended north from Croton-Harmon to Rensselaer, after the necessary planning, approvals, and funding. Electric traction utilizing power from renewable energy offers a clean alternative to the fossil fuel diesel traction of current locomotives. Railroad electrification can play a meaningful part in meeting the ambitious but necessary goals of the Climate act. The state should also explore the use of hydrogen fuel-cells for railroad traction, given that Alstom, a major in-state rail manufacturer, is developing such rail vehicles in Europe.

We hope ESPA's testimony stirs interest from Senators and staff as to the opportunities to improve the intercity passenger rail program, create more oversight of Amtrak, produce good jobs for New Yorkers and begin to improve passenger rail service in the state. ESPA intends to pursue a dialog on these issues with the Transportation Committees in both houses and with individual State Senators and Assembly members. We will make our members or registered representatives available to answer any questions that members of the Legislature may have in the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the NYS Department of Transportation's state rail program.

**Steve Strauss**

Forest Hills, NY

*Empire State Passenger Association*