



U.S. Transportation Secretary, Ray LaHood, listens to Islands traffic woes

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AP Photo

Staten Island's transit needs are now on the radar of Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- The cries of a transit-starved "forgotten borough" were heard at the top yesterday, as U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood listened to the transportation problems facing Staten Islanders and got local leaders' fix-it list.

"We could help you," LaHood said, after hearing about the push to restore rail service along the abandoned North Shore line, as well as establish a light rail line on the West Shore.

While there are no guarantees, the fact that there was a dialogue garnered kudos during the roundtable conference-call that was hosted yesterday by Rep. Michael McMahon (D-Staten Island/Brooklyn) and Staten Island Chamber of

Commerce President and CEO Linda Baran.

They were joined at the Chamber's St. George offices by representatives of the Federal Transit Administration and Federal Highway Administration, and community and business leaders.

LaHood was told about the years of work that have gone into getting the North and West Shore light rail projects off the ground; with the focus and the funding always going toward big-ticket tunneling projects in Manhattan, like the Second Avenue Subway, East Side Access, and Access to the Region's Core, "It's hard to get attention," McMahon said.

But, Ms. Baran said, "We're getting some national attention, which feels really good."

Describing the existing North Shore rail right-of-way, McMahon told LaHood, "The physical space is there. The desire to do it is there, and it would be an economic boon."

"We wanted to get on the secretary's radar screen the fact that Staten Island has very specific and dire transportation needs," McMahon said.

College of Staten Island Professor of Finance Jonathan Peters told LaHood he believes the borough is "underfunded to a very large degree in terms of federal dollars," and pointed to his research that shows Staten Islanders pay 5.8 percent of the nation's tolls. Were the borough its own state, it would rank seventh-highest in the country in terms of tolls collected.

McMahon also said he will try to streamline the bureaucratic approval process to encourage more dual-track studies to cut the wait from several years to as little as 18 months. "We should be able to move forward more quickly than we do," he said.

"Make good use of the office of your congressman," LaHood said. "He's in a position on transportation issues to make things happen."

Community Board 1 Chairwoman Leticia Remauro thanked McMahon "for bringing the money into this borough. "When you went to Washington, you made a huge impact, and you brought the plight of Staten Island to the door of the President."

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