

Reality check for Staten Island's rail plans

By [Ken Paulsen](#)

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\$1.4 billion price tag for North and West Shore lines proves daunting

The prospect of new North and West Shore rail lines that would form a transit triangle around Staten Island is either the only hope for the borough's car-choked roads, or a pie-in-the-sky proposal that will end up gathering dust on a bookshelf in some planner's office.

The faster travel speeds offered by rail, along with a proposed link to New Jersey, have been embraced by elected officials and business leaders who say they're the key to ensuring a smooth commute through a borough that is fast running out of growing room. It's also seen as a means to lure more businesses to the Island, and as a way to connect more residents to New Jersey's job market.



Michael McWeenyTHE PROBLEM: The North Shore rail right-of-way is available, but the tracks have fallen into disrepair. Cost to rebuild: \$400 million.

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for a graphic.

But like most things that sound so appealing, an enormous price tag is attached: About \$1.4 billion stands between the hopes for an efficient Staten Island rail network and the reality (\$1 billion would be needed for the West Shore and \$400 million for the North Shore).

The desire is there, say Staten Island commuters, desperate for increased and better transportation options. And the political interest is there, represented across the spectrum of the borough's elected officials. But interest and desire alone won't raise a nickel for the project.

Who'll take charge in raising the caboose-loads of money needed for these projects?

Republican Rep. Vito Fossella, the borough's pipeline to Congress, says it starts with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the state agency that, along with the Port Authority, would likely play a major role in the establishment of any new Island rail routes. More than any other entity, he says, the MTA can make the North Shore and West Shore rail projects happen if it makes them a priority. It's a big "if." Although the MTA has had some recent successes on Staten Island, such as significant improvements to local bus service, and a major role in the startup of a popular new bus line to Jersey City, the agency appears to have limited interest in delivering rail results to Staten Island. When repeatedly pressed by the Advance for an interview with chief executive Elliot G. Sander on the subject, a spokesperson declined, saying the agency is "not looking to make news on this just now." Last spring, Sander told the Advance that he supports both rail projects, but warned they would be next to impossible to pull off without the revenue generated from the proposed congestion-pricing plan -- which ultimately failed.

Fossella says MTA leadership is critical. "Unless you have a ready, willing and able participant in the MTA that's going to truly be a champion, the federal government, Congress and others are just not going to release money for projects" such as these.

Though the MTA is poised to scale back its next five-year capital plan due to increasing budget deficits, the agency is still planning to spend billions on Manhattan's Second Avenue Subway project. The question remains whether the agency can spare a billion or so for Staten Island rail projects.

"That's what we need from the MTA," Fossella said. "We need them to be true champions at the federal level for this project that's important for Staten Island, not just the multi-billion-dollar Second Avenue Subway."

Pointing to the lawsuit brought against the MTA to minimize the traffic impacts caused by Verrazano-Narrows Bridge construction, Fossella called for a team effort encompassing all Staten Island legislators to push the agency to widen its focus to this borough's rail needs.

"It's got to be a united front, Democrats and Republicans, sitting down at the table at every level of government, with these agencies, saying that this is a priority for the people of Staten Island, and it cannot relent until and unless it's done," Fossella said.

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey would play a big role in any plans to establish a Staten Island-to-Bayonne rail link. Despite repeated requests, its executive director, Chris Ward, was unavailable for an interview with the Advance for this story.

A spokesman for the bistate agency issued general commitments to helping the borough on future transportation challenges -- but offered nothing concrete. In response to a question about a 2004 Port Authority study of the North Shore line, the spokesman, Steven Coleman, did say: "The Port Authority still believes this is a project worthy of further consideration in planning for Staten Island commuting and North Shore development."

With both Fossella (end of 2008) and Conservative Borough President James P. Molinaro (end of 2009) nearing the end of their terms in office, their focus is largely limited to securing funding for the studies that will lay the groundwork for the rail future. Along with civic leadership from the Chamber of Commerce and all other Island elected officials, the task of leading the charge to get the train lines built will largely fall on the successors to Fossella and Molinaro.

For his part, City Councilman Michael McMahon, (D-North Shore), a congressional candidate, has pledged to make solving Staten Island's transportation woes his first priority if elected. "It's not only a question of transportation, it's an incredible economic shot in the arm for both the North Shore and West Shore," McMahon said. The borough's Republican party has yet to nominate a candidate. Republican Councilman James Oddo, a candidate for Molinaro's seat, sees the funding issue as a huge challenge for the borough's leaders, but one that can be accomplished. "We've got to try," he said. "It comes down to that. No matter how daunting, we've got to try."

"New York City is one of very few places across the country that has mass transit demands like this, and the federal government hasn't made a lot of money available for transit," he added. "Within that, with those limited dollars, you're competing against the big boys. You're competing against Manhattan, and the Second Avenue Subway, and all of their projects, and little old Staten Island unfortunately gets what's left. To date, that hasn't been much, and that's why it's a daunting task."

There's precedent with these far-reaching dreams, however. "New Jersey Transit never believed they would get funding for the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail," said Jonathan Peters, a finance professor and transportation expert at the College of Staten Island. Yet perseverance and political will got it done. "It might be a bit of a slog, but I think a defeatist attitude is one of the biggest problems we have."

THE PLANS



Jan SommaTHE FUTURE? A light rail train similar to New Jersey's Hudson-Bergen line is proposed for the Island's West Shore. The cost: \$1 billion.

The two new corridors, one that would run along the North Shore from St. George to Mariners Harbor/Arlington, and the other which would travel along a still-to-be-determined route along the West Shore, have the promise of carrying tens of thousands of passengers a day, and would shave travel time dramatically. Both proposals include a connection across the Bayonne Bridge to the 20.6-mile Hudson-Bergen Light Rail to Jersey City and Hoboken, and the PATH train to Manhattan.

A revitalized North Shore rail system could carry as many as 15,000 riders a day by 2015, and could complete the 5.1-mile trip in about 15 minutes -- far less than the average 30-40 minute trip by bus. Passenger service on the old North Shore rail ceased in 1953 (a victim of increasingly efficient local bus service) and freight service stopped in 1991, leaving the right-of-way largely intact. However, most of the tracks have rotted or washed away, and the old stations have been lost to the passage of time. In some spots, the shoreline would need to be rebuilt where it has slipped into the sea.



Irving Silverstein/THE PRESENT: Ridership is up 9 percent each of the past two years on the Staten Island Railway. About 16,000 commuters use the line each weekday.

The West Shore project would begin with a clean slate, which is why its price tag more than doubles that of the North Shore project. The original proposal called for a light-rail line running partially along the West Shore Expressway median, reaching the Pleasant Plains park-and-ride (near the Pleasant Plains Staten Island Railway station) on the southern end, and the Bayonne Bridge on the northern end.

A study completed in 2004 estimated that as many as 31,000 riders a day could use that line by 2020.

Increasingly unbearable traffic has already drawn commuters back to rail service, with a 9 percent growth in ridership on the Staten Island Railway in both 2006 and 2007.

THE STUDIES

Talked about for nearly two decades now, the North Shore project is further along, with a detailed feasibility study funded by the Port Authority completed in 2004. That study showed that there were enough people living along the North Shore corridor to support rail service, although residential densities were at the low end of the spectrum used to determine such a project's viability. The study found that rail service would help alleviate future traffic in the area, and would provide opportunities to improve the North Shore's economic conditions.

The West Shore project is already halfway through its own year-long \$350,000 study of three possible route alternatives. The highly detailed city-funded study is being conducted by New Jersey-based consulting firm Systra USA. The West Shore line would include a transfer point to the North Shore rail and the Staten Island Railway. A possible spur to the Staten Island Mall and future Fresh Kills Park are also being considered, as well as stops at the Corporate Park in Bloomfield.

Each plan has pros and cons, explained Tamila Spinner, senior vice president of the Staten Island Economic Development Corp. (SIEDC) and project coordinator for the West Shore project. The SIEDC will host a public open house on July 24 from 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. in the Hilton Garden Inn, Bloomfield, to collect feedback on the possible choices.

When the current West Shore study is completed sometime around March 2009, both projects will be on equal footing, and ready to advance to the Alternative Analysis phase, which includes a look at potential environmental impacts that would be caused by the projects moving forward.

Since both studies share a common goal of linking to New Jersey's rail network, it would be best for them to proceed together to determine the best way for the different lines to intersect with each other, the Staten Island Railway and New Jersey Transit trains, several transportation experts said.

"These things should be looked at in a coordinated fashion," said Jeff Zupan, senior fellow for transportation at the Regional Plan Association, a non-profit organization that works to promote better transportation, community design and economic competitiveness throughout the Tri-State area. "They're kind of being done as though they're on other sides of the moon."

FUNDING THE NEXT STEPS

Before federal funding can be awarded to the projects, both must undergo the exhaustive Alternative Analysis process as required by the National Environmental Policy Act. The analysis looks at all the possible options involved, from which route the tracks will follow, to which type of trains to use and how best to cross over roadways. The choices are compared against the "no build" option of doing nothing.

But securing funding for such necessary studies -- although they amount to less than 1 percent of the cost of construction -- has been a challenge for elected leaders.

"We must develop more mass transit options to relieve the traffic-plagued streets of Staten Island," Schumer said in a prepared statement. "The light rails will move tens of thousands of commuters daily to and from work, taking thousands of cars off the road."

Before either the North Shore proposal or West Shore proposal sees its first railroad spike, both face a path that seems as long as the Trans-Siberian Railway. About \$3 million to \$5 million is needed for the follow-up studies of each line before funding and construction can begin.

Attempts to secure study funding for the North Shore project have been successful in past years, with \$3.25 million allocated two years ago by Sens. Charles Schumer and Hillary Rodham Clinton. That money was lost, though, when the spending bill in which it was contained was never finalized by the congressional conference committee and sent to the president for a signature. The project again failed to score funding this week when a Senate appropriations committee finalized its list of projects that would receive money.

The only funds currently set aside for either \$3 million to \$5 million study is \$220,500 secured in December by Schumer and Clinton.

Molinaro remains committed to getting the environmental study under way before he leaves office in 2009, and said he expects funding to be secured for the North Shore portion of the analysis by the end of the year.

Schumer last week reaffirmed his commitment to transportation issues on Staten Island, whose workforce faces one of the longest commutes in the country.

"We must develop more mass transit options to relieve the traffic-plagued streets of Staten Island," Schumer said in a prepared statement. "The light rails will move tens of thousands of commuters daily to and from work, taking thousands of cars off the road."

But if federal help doesn't pan out, don't expect any financial help from the state, some of the Island's Albany legislators say.

In fact, the state Department of Transportation released its [New York State Rail Plan](#) this week, addressing freight and passenger rail issues. Its five references to Staten Island focused on freight rail on the West Shore. The 174-page report did not contain a single mention of the North Shore or West Shore rail projects.

"I don't think many of my upstate colleagues even know what the North Shore of Staten Island is," said Assemblywoman Janelle Hyer-Spencer (D-Mid-Island/Brooklyn). "I have not felt either at the city or the state level that there is much of a push to see either one of these things happen."

The last real discussion about funding the North Shore rail study was months ago, during the height of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's congestion-pricing debate. Before the state Assembly ultimately decided to block the proposal, members of the borough's Assembly delegation sought assurances that the money raised would fund the multi-million dollar North Shore rail study.

The MTA capital plan, which was contingent on the passage of congestion pricing, did include funding for the North Shore study, as well as other perks, such as 33 new express buses for the Island. The defeat of the mayor's pricing plan took those promises off the table.

A mayoral spokesman pointed to the city's funding of the current preliminary West Shore rail study, as well as the North Shore and West Shore Land Use studies, and an analysis of a South Shore fast ferry, as examples of Bloomberg's commitment to the Island's transit needs.

"These are all studies that we are funding through city money, or would have through congestion pricing, which speaks to the importance with which we view them," said spokesman Stu Loeser. Importance aside, a cautious optimism remains.

"I think eventually we will see it," said Assemblyman Matthew Titone (D-North Shore). "Will I see it in my lifetime? No. But I think we will reach that pressure point where there is no choice but to create these alternatives."

ENGINEERING ISSUES

Peters, the CSI transportation expert, said that although the borough faces horrific traffic due to unfortunate choices made during the building of some key roads like the Staten Island Expressway, many other decisions made in past generations, such as not developing the North Shore rail right-of-way, building Richmond Avenue to its full eight-lane width, and incorporating room for rail on the Bayonne Bridge, add up to give the borough an advantage when it comes to competing with other projects.

"Staten Island has a very, very good hand. These things are hard to replace," he said. "These are really good cards. We just have to play them well."

The Bayonne Bridge was built with rail in mind, with space set aside for tracks running across the span. But though it's the common denominator for both rail projects, the bridge is also a source of uncertainty.

Even if funding becomes available to finance the project, there are still engineering challenges to overcome, including how to run a train over the steep span. Even more problematic is the future for the existing bridge, which is now the subject of a year-long study to consider its replacement with a taller structure, or a tunnel, to accommodate the next generation of colossal cargo ships destined for local ports.

SHOT IN THE ARM

If built, the two rail lines would also allow Staten Islanders to tap into another growing job market in Jersey City's financial center, previously out of reach to many because of an inconvenient commute. The only current transit service that links to New Jersey is the S89 bus that travels along Richmond Avenue, across the bridge, and to the Hudson-Bergen line's 34th Street station in Bayonne. The route carries about 830 riders a day.

"We can move people onto the Island and we may be able to attract businesses," said Ms. Spinner of the Staten Island Economic Development Corp. "There is a tremendous potential for economic gain and quality of life for our residents."

Peters' research, presented this spring as part of a conference hosted by CSI's Center for the Study of Staten Island, pointed to residential growth in cities like Houston and Los Angeles after light rail systems were installed there.

Closer to home, since the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail opened in 2000, that system has helped spur the building of more than 10,000 housing units with an estimated sales value of more than \$5.3 billion, according to one study.

"All the doubting Thomases should just look over the bridge to Bayonne and see there that the partnership between the county government, and federal and state government and New Jersey Transit met their dream for a light rail into reality," McMahon said. "It is possible, and it was done less than 10 miles away from where we want to do it."

Send us your rail-related ideas & questions

We want to know what you think about the future of rail transportation on Staten Island. Send your thoughts to transportation@sladvance.com. Got a question? We'll pass the best questions onto those who can provide the answers. Got a suggestion? We'll make sure it's heard.

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