



# PCAC

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**Senate Standing Committee on Corporations, Authorities and Commissions  
And Senate Standing Committee on Transportation**

***Oversight Hearing on the Rehabilitation of the East River Tunnels and the East Side Access Project***

**Testimony by Lisa Daglian, Executive Director, PCAC  
May 7, 2021**

Greetings, my name is Lisa Daglian and I am the Executive Director of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA, PCAC. Thank you for holding this hearing with respect to the rehabilitation of the East River Tunnels and the East Side Access Project.

Both of these projects are critical to the future of our region's transportation network and its riders. There are knowns and unknowns about each; it is the unknowns that will determine whether – and when – commuters will benefit. This hearing today will help make at least some of those unknowns known.

**East Side Access: What We Know**

Long Island Rail Road commuters have been waiting for decades to be able to take their train into Grand Central, through fits and starts, false hopes and countless delays, and significant cost overruns. Now, despite the pandemic, they are cautiously optimistic that day will finally come in December 2022.

The additional eight tracks that will bring LIRR trains into Grand Central should mean a faster, more convenient ride for Long Island commuters, with more options for their trips including transfers to Metro-North. It has been anticipated that ESA will serve approximately 162,000 customers a day, reducing commutes into Manhattan for some by up to 40 minutes. And while the configuration – deep below Grand Central – is far from perfect, the new facilities will be modern and accessible.

Fortunately, construction on East Side Access was able to continue despite the pause on much of the MTA's capital work during the pandemic. Further delays would just drive up the costs – already projected to be more than \$11 billion. According to one of the three MTA ESA websites, "Tracks have been replaced, reconfigured, and modernized from Harold Interlocking in Queens to Grand Central. The complex network of switches and tracks at Harold Interlocking, one of the busiest train interlockings in the U.S., is being reconfigured to improve service and reduce delays. This work will benefit the entire northeast corridor."

That point is inarguable. However, the question that remains is, why did the MTA pay for the entire project and then get stuck with the cost of overruns caused by Amtrak – which, according to Newsday, were \$340 million between 2014-2018 alone? LIRR passengers will certainly benefit, but Amtrak – and the entire northeast corridor – are the clear winners here. Indeed, on numerous occasions, the MTA has blamed Amtrak for being responsible for additional delays since 2006.

### **East Side Access: What We Don't Know**

In addition to getting a better handle on how costs were assigned to the MTA and determining a better fiscal model for the future, another helpful project postmortem would be assessing Amtrak's contribution to delays and how different project components might be streamlined or reconfigured to allow for work arounds when unforeseen circumstances arise. Since the MTA and Amtrak have several significant undertakings ahead of them, including Penn Access, looking at lessons learned and applying them going forward will be critical to helping keep costs lower and reducing the impacts on riders.

Commuters should be the biggest beneficiaries of East Side Access and the new Grand Central facilities. However, we are curious who will, in fact, be in charge of the new terminal. Back in February, the MTA solicited information and proposals from service providers to "...operate and maintain infrastructure and related structures supporting The Long Island Rail Road Access into the new east midtown terminal located within Grand Central Terminal, and the rail facilities, passenger facilities, and retail development and management." The LIRR will remain responsible for its railroad operations, and Metro-North Railroad will remain responsible for the operations and management of the existing GCT terminals and passenger concourse. This seems confusing at best. Why is there the need to create a new oversight structure? Who is ultimately in charge of East Side Access? How will the three involved groups collaborate in planning and delivering service and managing seamless operations?

Even as we anticipate our region's reopening, we don't know when and how ridership will rebound. The MTA-commissioned McKinsey report forecasted that it would be 2024 before 80-90% of ridership would return as a best-case scenario, but we are already seeing an uptick in ridership. The challenge is planning service to meet the needs of the future – but that must be done now. It would be a tragic waste to have spent decades and more than ten billion dollars to build a beautiful new station as part of the Long Island Rail Road's vision for expansion – and not expand service. LIRR riders and taxpayers from across the MTA area deserve to know that East Side Access will benefit them and the region when it opens.

However, directly affecting how many trains the LIRR will be able to run is the state of the East River Tunnels and critical repair work that must be done to ensure their viability. Ultimately, this work will affect riders on both Metro-North and the Long Island Rail Road.

### **East River Tunnels: What We Know**

Superstorm Sandy wreaked havoc on our region, sending a river of corrosive salt water through the East River Tunnels and causing significant damage. Almost ten years later, we're still recovering, repairing, rebuilding and becoming more resilient. Yet we're also still feeling the lingering effects of the devastation. As the notice for this hearing stated: *A 2017 report by Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli said the number of trains delayed or canceled because of problems with the tubes and their switches increased 72 percent since Sandy, and accounted for a significant number of the Long Island Rail Road overall on-time problems.*

The East River Tunnels, which are owned by Amtrak but which the LIRR uses to access Penn Station – and which one day will bring Metro-North there as well – are in urgent need of repair and every day of delay leads to worsening conditions and extra expense.

Amtrak has long contended that it must wait for East Side Access to be open and operational so that it can begin its work, which it maintains will require shutting down one tube at a time completely for repair. That would in essence negate the additional capacity that was just gained by the new East Side Access project and won't allow for new Metro-North service along the East Bronx as part of the Penn Station Access project. It's one thing to wait for East Side Access to be completed to wait to start construction and another entirely to wait to develop a plan to begin construction, leaving many – including us – beyond frustrated.

The lack of a work plan for the East River Tunnels, and the potential delay that could create for Penn Access, caused Congressman Ritchie Torres of the Bronx to introduce H.R.3002 – legislation that would require Amtrak to adopt “the repair-in-place method for any track maintenance or rehabilitation” that is similar to the method used during the L- and then F- line construction undertaken to address Sandy-related damage.

Senator Kaminsky is, and has been, a vocal supporter of moving East River Tunnel construction forward expeditiously and we have agreed, stating in a letter to Newsday: “The longer the repairs wait – and take – the longer the delays and higher the costs. As we struggle as a region to recover from COVID-19, we can't afford that on any level. Cautious consideration and safety are key to determining the best next steps, but Amtrak has had years to come up with a plan and none is in the offing. It's time to take a serious look at how the proposed alternative can save precious time and money – and reduce commuter agita – and take significant steps to finally fix these critical conduits.”

#### **East River Tunnels: What We Don't Know**

We have seen the London Bridge Associates study supporting the “repair-in-place” method of fixing the Hudson River Tunnels, which has then been applied by some as directly correlating to the East River Tunnels. We've also read Amtrak's comments that the East River Tunnels “can only be fully and properly fixed by closing these tubes, one-at-a-time, to permit complete rehabilitation” to minimize disruption to commuters. We've read Amtrak's concerns about different voltage needs – 12,000 volts for Amtrak versus 600 for the subway, and the attendant fire safety concerns – and plan to affix tracks in concrete rather than wood ties and ballast – but these are in response to calls for repair-in-place for the Hudson River tubes and not for those under the East River. As far as we know, a comprehensive study has not been undertaken for these tunnels, and it seems a wasted opportunity.

It would appear that several golden opportunities were lost during this past year. A comprehensive study on the pros and cons of using the “repair-in-place” method could have been done by now. A phased construction plan could have been completed, with public hearings already held. Some preparatory work could have already begun, when ridership was low and service changes could be integrated with minimal disruption. But as far as we know, none of this was undertaken by Amtrak and we should know why.

There is still some time to get it right but there is no time to wait. Circumstance should dictate construction practice but then Amtrak must work with the MTA and outside parties starting now to ascertain if repair-in-place will work at all, partially, in its entirety, or what would need to be done to make it so.

At the same time, plans for Penn Access must continue to finally bring transit access and equity to parts of the Bronx – Co-Op City – that have never had a train station.

Our nation’s leaders are focused on infrastructure and jobs and we should be too: these projects will be key to getting our region back on its feet and to bringing riders back on board.

Thank you for your efforts in these matters.