

News and Notes from The LIRR Today

February 16, 2015

BLIZZARD BURIES THE EAST AND SPARES THE WEST

A “potentially historic” blizzard that was projected to hit the northeast region last week ended up tracking a bit to the east, and while it still dumped nearly two feet of snow on the eastern edges of Suffolk County, it spared much of the metropolitan area bringing only a couple of inches of snow to some parts that were originally forecasted to get between two and three feet. While the storm did not dump as much snow as forecasted, it did leave a notable impact on rail and transit operations across the MTA service region.

As we drew closer and closer to the storm and the projected snow totals were only being revised upward, [a statement was issued by the Governor’s office on Sunday night](#) recommending that commuters who might potentially have to travel during the evening rush hour, when the storm was originally projected to arrive in New York, plan to work from home on Monday warning that service on the region’s public transportation systems may become suspended in advance of the storm’s arrival. The next day, either due to the necessity of going into work, or out of spite for the Governor, thousands of rode into work on the region’s subways, busses, and commuter railroads. The LIRR got almost everyone to work on-time, with an AM Peak on-time performance of 99.3% (there was only one AM peak delay, train 2825). Seeing the weather forecasts continuing to get bleaker, thousands of commuters left work early and stormed the commuter railroad stations, trying to cram onto early afternoon trains leaving New York. The midday off-peak service (no better than hourly or half-half hourly to most places) wasn’t able to handle the near-rush hour level crowds, and there was significant crowding on trains, with some trains leaving people behind at New York Penn, and delays resulting from heavy loading/slow unloading.

At a [lunchtime press conference](#), Governor Cuomo announced a tentative time of 11pm for the LIRR and Metro-North to conclude operations for the storm, giving them enough time to position equipment and people in safe places to ride out the storm. At that press conference, the Governor also announced the possibility of a travel ban—which would prohibit all varieties of travel, car and public transportation included—being put in place Monday night. At a press conference later in the afternoon, Cuomo confirmed an 11pm shutdown for the LIRR, as well as [announcing that there would be a travel ban for several counties in the Downstate region](#), including all of New York City and Long Island, going into effect at 11:00pm. Connecticut Governor Daniel Molloy announced a travel ban in Connecticut beginning at 9:00pm Monday night (Metro-North service to Connecticut began concluding earlier than it did for the H&H), and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie announced a similar ban shortly after Cuomo, going into effect at 11:00pm (NJT suspended service beginning around 8:00pm and warned passengers not to expect it restored until Thursday morning). The travel ban included all forms of transportation, including the entire New York City subway, making this the first time the entire system was shut due to snow.



Packed trains leaving New York Monday afternoon.
(Photo: [@MiaTweetvato](#))

As the evening continued and snow began to fall, the LIRR toiled through the evening rush hour with a full complement of trains. Despite most passengers fleeing the city earlier in the day, there were still a number of people who held out for the remainder of the business day and dealt with some pretty light loads on their way home (OTP was roughly 48.9%). The LIRR announced the list of last trains to operate around 7:30pm Monday night, and service wrapped up with the arrival of train 2073 (26) at New York Penn Station at 12:37am Tuesday.



The LIRR concourse at NY Penn during the service suspension.
(Photo: Metropolitan Transportation Authority/Patrick Cashin)

Despite there being no official confirmation that service was going to be restored from the railroad before noon, service was restored on the Main Line west of Ronkonkoma, the Montauk Branch west of Babylon, the Long Beach Branch, and the Oyster Bay Branch, with the railroad operating on a weekend schedule. Hourly service was also restored to Port Washington and local Main Line service was restored with Huntington trains turning at Hicksville. Around 3pm, the Far Rockaway and Hempstead Branches were restored, followed by Montauk Branch service to Patchogue later that evening. Service to Speonk/Montauk, Greenport, Huntington, Port Jefferson, and West Hempstead remained suspended for the remainder of the day.

Service on the Port Jefferson Branch was restored with train 602 on Wednesday morning, and a little after midnight on Wednesday, the LIRR announced that they expected to operate normal service on the entire system, with the exception of the Montauk Branch east of Speonk and the Main Line east of Ronkonkoma. Perhaps the LIRR shooting for a full morning rush hour was “biting off more than they could chew”, as Wednesday morning’s rush turned out to be a pretty sloppy one. Of 144 AM Peak trains, an even one hundred arrived late, there were five trains partially cancelled, ten trains cancelled and combined, and two trains cancelled outright. In all, only 27 trains arrived on-time, for an OTP of 18.8%. Wednesday’s overall OTP of 59.4% marked the lowest we’ve seen in over a year, and beat out the lowest OTP for any single day that we saw in 2014 (though, Wednesday 1/28 wouldn’t hold that distinction for more than a couple of days). MTA spokeswoman Meredith Daniels told [Newsday](#) after the rush hour that 49,815 passengers traveled on trains between 6am and 9am, or about 73.3% of the load on a regular day. Even with the reduced loads, there will still be several reports of trains short of cars as well as standee conditions onboard trains.

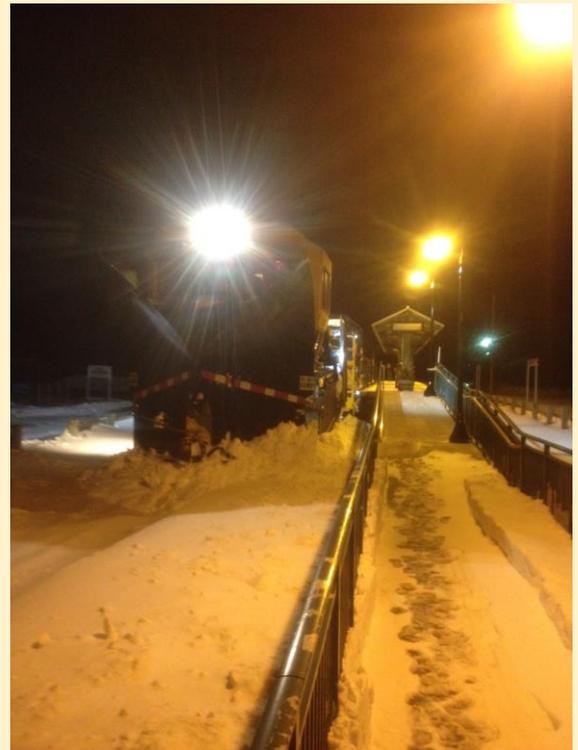
The storm ended up tracking towards the east, making it easier for the LIRR to clean up all of the snow afterwards. Patrol trains continued to operate across most parts of the system over the course of the night, and platforms began being shoveled and parking lots plowed shortly after the snow stopped falling. After service had been restored, there were sporadic cancellations and delays due to equipment shortages, but that could be expected in certain areas. The LIRR’s communication during the storm was also something to be happy with—from informal observations on Twitter and Facebook, lots of riders who had questions got answers to their questions. There was a period of ‘radio science’ from the LIRR right around the time when service was expected to resume, with little in terms of announcements, alerts, or notifications that service would actually be starting at 12:00 noon, but updates on the restoration of service did seem to come readily for the remainder of the day and into Wednesday (that eagerness to inform passengers seems to have evaporated since, with recurring signal problems in Queens to round out the week, drawing out rider’s angst and frustration again).

The one place where the LIRR’s response to last week’s blizzard could be considered substandard would be the operation of Wednesday morning’s rush hour. Instead of opting to run a scaled back rush hour using either one of [published lists of potential cancellations and combinations](#), or another series of cancelled or partially cancelled trains, the railroad valiantly announced that they would be operating with a full complement of trains on Wednesday

morning, which, between the some 1,857 delay minutes, 17 incomplete trips, and pretty widespread consist compliance issues, probably wasn't the best idea. MTA Spokesman Salvatore Arena did tell [Newsday](#) that "The delays were not horrible," [even though there were fifty five trains delayed by 20 minutes or more] "but they covered everyone," and "we did deliver on our promise to service the area that we said we would service."

This particular snowstorm also offered the LIRR its first opportunity to use its [new Harsco Spreader](#), the "crown jewel" of its [winter weather arsenal](#), that they took delivery of in March 2013. The spreader, which is officially numbered 4230 and unofficially called any one of a number of things (most commonly, "Darth Vader") was purchased for \$1.5 million to help clear large snow drifts that often accumulate on the east end of Long Island. This was the first storm that it was actually used, making trips to both Greenport and Montauk on Tuesday and Wednesday. There's several photos of the spreader "in action" ([and a video](#)) as well as some taken at Ronkonkoma Yard [after the storm](#).

The remainder of the week seemed to go over as "normal" as one can expect with scattered switch problems, signal problems, and broken rails at inconvenient locations, but this storm wasn't the last of the nasty weather we would see on Long Island this winter.



The new Harsco Spreader at Greenport
(Photo: [MTA Long Island Rail Road](#))

LIRR ANNOUNCES NEW ON-TIME PERFORMANCE GOALS

At January's MTA Board LIRR Committee meeting ([the archived video is available online](#)), LIRR President Patrick Nowakowski [unveiled new, branch-specific On-Time Performance goals](#). For the the last several years, the LIRR's On-Time Performance goal for all branches on the railroad has been 95.1%, and the LIRR has had continued trouble meeting that goal, especially in recent months. Since January 2007, the LIRR has only met that OTP goal roughly 31.3% of the time, and It's been one year and nine months since the LIRR last met this goal. Some branches, like the Port Jefferson Branch, haven't met their OTP goals in years (it's been five years and five months since that branch last saw 95.1% of its trains arrive on-time).

The new systemwide On-Time Performance goal is lowered to 94.0%, and the remaining branches were either adjusted up or down to reflect the operating conditions and upcoming projects on those branches. The new figures represent an increase in the goal for the Far Rockaway, Hempstead, Long Beach, Port Washington, and West Hempstead Branches, and a decrease in the goal for the remainder of the bunch.

OTP will be measured against the new goals beginning with the January 2015 numbers, but applying the new goals to past performance from December-back, only one of the branches (Montauk) would have met its new goal in December of 2014 (which was, for the most part, a below average month in terms of reliability for the LIRR). While changing the goals does not actually change anything to do with the actual reliability of the railroad, the new goals will allow the LIRR to set some more reasonable expectations for themselves in terms of reliability. It also doesn't really fix the fact that OTP is a pretty useless statistic when it comes to measuring reliability, as discussed a number of ways [previously](#). At the January meeting the Mr. Nowakowski did mention that they were looking potentially revise some of the statistics they report in the monthly operating reports each month, so we will have to see what becomes of it.

The table on the next page summarizes the new goals for each of the branches, as well as some information showing around what percentage of the time the LIRR would meet the new goal, going back to January 2007:

Branch	Mean OTP (Jan 2007- Dec 2014)	Old Goal	% of time Old Goal Met	Time since Goal Last Met	New Goal	% Change vs. Old	% of time New Goal Met	Time since Goal Last Met
System	93.8%	95.1%	31.3%	1 Yr, 9 Mo	94.0%	-1.2%	51.0%	1 Yr 2 Mo
West of Babylon	93.4%	95.1%	25.0%	1 Yr, 9 Mo	93.9%	-1.3%	44.8%	1 Yr 8 Mo
Far Rockaway	96.8%	95.1%	86.5%	1 Mo	96.6%	1.6%	59.4%	5 Mo
West of Huntington	92.9%	95.1%	19.8%	2 Yr 8 Mo	92.5%	-2.7%	64.6%	5 Mo
Hempstead	96.4%	95.1%	86.5%	Met in Dec.	96.5%	1.5%	55.2%	1 Yr 2 Mo
Long Beach	95.6%	95.1%	65.6%	4 Mo	95.9%	0.8%	45.8%	1 Yr 0 Mo
Montauk	91.2%	95.1%	8.3%	3 Yr 0 Mo	90.8%	-4.5%	59.4%	Met in Dec.
Oyster Bay	93.6%	95.1%	29.2%	1 Yr 9 Mo	94.1%	-1.1%	43.8%	3 Mo
Port Jefferson	90.9%	95.1%	4.2%	5 Yr 5 Mo	90.9%	-4.4%	50.0%	3 Mo
Port Washington	94.7%	95.1%	46.9%	10 Mo	95.3%	0.2%	43.8%	9 Mo
Ronkonkoma	91.6%	95.1%	4.2%	3 Yr 0 Mo	91.6%	-3.7%	58.3%	3 Mo
West Hempstead	96.1%	95.1%	76.0%	5 Mo	95.8%	0.7%	68.8%	5 Mo
Mean	93.9%	95.1%	37.8%	1 Yr 9 Mo	94.0%	-1.2%	53.7%	8 Mo

The LIRR also announced new goals for their Mean Distance Between Failures numbers. The LIRR meets their MDBF failures pretty regularly, about 76% of the time for the total fleet average, partly due to how the LIRR's fleet has improved in reliability over the past few years along with the previous MDBF goals being pretty generous. The new goals bring increases to all of the different fleets. The goals for the M3's will increase from 55,000 to 75,000 miles, the M7's from 366,000 to 400,000 miles, the DE and DM locomotives from 18,000 to 20,000 miles, the C3's from 76,000 to 80,000 miles, the diesel fleet total from 46,000 to 50,000. The entire fleet MDBF was also likely raised as well, however the new figure was not visible on the meeting webcast and was cut off on the press release.

For more detailed statistics regarding On-Time Performance, be sure to check out the spreadsheet included in a separate attachment to the e-mail.

LIRR KICKS OFF MID-SUFFOLK ELECTRIC YARD PROJECT

The LIRR is beginning the public outreach process for their new [Mid-Suffolk Electric Yard](#) last week with a press conference and public information sessions about the upcoming project. The project, which is one of the [East Side Access Readiness projects](#) which will help the LIRR build up its capacity on the East End of Long Island in preparation for [East Side Access](#) which will be coming sometime in the next decade. The project involves constructing a new train storage yard in Ronkonkoma, immediately south of the existing Ronkonkoma Yard, as well as the necessary support facilities to allow for the LIRR to operate more trains out of Ronkonkoma after East Side Access is ready for service.

The current Ronkonkoma Yard currently consists of enough space to hold twelve, twelve car trains overnight. The yard, in addition with the Certified North Siding to the west of the station, is used to near full capacity for weekday rush hour service. The project will construct a second, eleven track yard that will nearly double the amount of trains that the LIRR can store at Ronkonkoma overnight.

As part of their public outreach efforts, the LIRR held information sessions at Ronkonkoma last week, has a [video on its YouTube channel about the project](#), information on the project available on their website, and the railroad [held a press conference](#) at Ronkonkoma on Thursday.

While it is good to see the LIRR's East Side Access readiness projects finally inch towards breaking ground, I still have some concerns regarding the LIRR's buildup of infrastructure along the Main Line. Work on the [Ronkonkoma Branch Double Track Project](#) is already underway (and progressing steadily between Central Islip and Ronkonkoma), and now the LIRR is inching closer to starting the Mid-Suffolk Electric Yard, but there has been zero mention of the [Third Main Line Track Project](#). Presently, the LIRR's Main Line between Hicksville and Queens Village is only two tracks, and, as a result, is either at, or very close to capacity for large parts of the rush hour. Adding all of this capacity east of Farmingdale and at Ronkonkoma does nothing to help the very constrained Main Line between Hicksville and Queens Village. The Mid-Suffolk Electric Yard project will give the LIRR the space to store eleven additional sets of

equipment in Ronkonkoma, but at the height of the rush hour, the LIRR won't really be able to add anywhere close to that amount of trains down the Main Line west of Hicksville. During rush hours, the LIRR currently uses both of the two Main Line tracks in the peak direction for a period of time each rush hour, which allows them to operate more trains towards Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan in the morning and from the city in the evening, but it limits the LIRR's ability to run reverse-peak service and equipment moves to or from the eastern terminals during the rush hour.

Presently, there are some significant gaps in reverse peak Main Line service. In the morning, there's presently a 95 minute gap in any eastbound service between 6:26 and 8:01am, and the local stations along the Main Line currently see gaps even larger than that. In the evening, there's currently no westbound trains leaving Ronkonkoma from 4:48pm until 7:13pm—a gap in service of two and a half hours. The only way the LIRR would be

able to add a nontrivial amount of peak trains would be to use both tracks on the Main Line for an even longer period of time, which would only lengthen those gaps in reverse peak service and stifle that market even more than they currently are. Doing that would add more options for those who live on Long Island and work in Manhattan, but it makes commuting via the LIRR's Main Line and Port Jefferson Branches from the city to jobs on Long Island almost impossible. Ensuring that people can easily reverse-commute out to jobs on Long Island will be critical to the region's overall economic development as a whole, and without a Third Main Line track, the Ronkonkoma Branch Double Track Project and the Mid-Suffolk Electric Yard will either not be able to be utilized to their full potential, or, fully utilizing them to provide more Manhattan-bound service will suffocate any remaining reverse-peak service on the Main Line, which can spell big trouble for economic activity as a whole on Long Island.

ICY CONDITIONS CAUSE A SLIPPERY AND SLOPPY COMMUTE HOME

I was hoping that the recount of the “potentially historic” blizzard that didn't turn out to be all that much was going to be the extent of my writing about severe winter weather on Long Island, but it wasn't much longer until Long Island got hit with another one of Mother Nature's punches, only this time, the trouble came from something a big different—ice.

“Winter weather conditions” delayed a whole host of trains in the morning rush hour on Monday, February 2nd, and things only deteriorated over the course of the day. When the air is exceptionally cold outside, ice can buildup on the third rail and hinder a train's ability to draw power from the third rail. If icing gets bad enough, the train might not even be able to draw any power at all, and electric trains can become stranded in their place without power. While icing usually does not adversely affect the LIRR (the area around Syosset and Cold Spring Harbor frequently have issues with icing following snowstorms), it affected the LIRR in a major way on Monday.

The LIRR was not the only one that had lots of third rail icing issues—New York City Transit had an unlucky string of events that resulted in 7-train service being suspended for most of the day on Monday. When an umbrella accidentally found its way onto the tracks and shorted the third rail, NYCT was forced to temporarily suspend service on the 7-line in order to get down and retrieve it. In the time they were doing that, a quarter-inch layer of ice developed on the third rail, stranding five trains. It took NYCT almost all afternoon and evening to get rid of all of that ice and restore service. The LIRR was cross-honoring passengers on the Port Washington Branch. In an excellent example of how inter-agency information can be conflicting and confusing, NYCT's original announcement of the cross-honoring stated that the LIRR was accepting 7-train passengers at



Ice buildup on a third rail along the NYCT Flushing Line
(Photo: [MTA New York City Transit](#))



LIRR Passengers stuck on a platform at Bayside in the cold after icing conditions forced the temporary suspension of Midday Port Washington Branch Service (Photo: [Katie Honan](#))



Third Rail Icing can also cause arcing, which gives off bright sparks of light when the third rail shoes move along the rail, like this train leaving Syosset on 2/2. (click to open video on YouTube) (Video: [njburkett](#))

Hunterspoint Avenue, Woodside, Mets-Willets Point and Flushing-Main Street. The only problem with that is, at the time of that announcement, two of those stations (HPA and Mets-Willets Point) aren't served by LIRR trains, and their announcement omitted New York Penn Station, where everyone would have to get on or off. There was lots of frustration and confusion with this, with NYCT's Twitter account telling passengers that the LIRR was not cross-honoring at New York Penn, while the LIRR was saying they were. One 7-train rider who was exceptionally frustrated documented the conflicting back-and-forth in more detailed [here](#).

At any rate, the LIRR wasn't all that much better. Conditions were steadily deteriorating over the course of the day and the LIRR approached the evening rush hour with the intention of operating a full complement of trains (ridership was likely close to normal, considering that many had stayed home the week before for a snowstorm that didn't really amount to anything notable). But icing conditions continued to cause trouble for the LIRR, and delays during the PM rush hour on 2/2 were significant and widespread. On top of all of that, unspecified "FDNY activity" in or near New York Penn Station resulted in the complete suspension of service for a short time towards the end of the rush hour, only adding to the chaos and confusion.

When the rush hour was over and the dust had settled, you could count the total number of trains that arrived on-time on one hand, and still have one finger leftover. That's right—out of 131

PM peak trains, a total of **four** arrived on-time. And of those four that arrived on-time, two trains (2878 and 2744) were only on-time because they left without their connections in Jamaica and Babylon, respectively (so really everyone who wanted to take those trains home actually arrived at their cars late), and another one of those trains was one that was six or seven minutes late right before arriving in Hempstead and then "magically" was no longer late, contributing more to that anomaly. Additionally, if you're looking for more reasons to doubt the veracity of the OTP numbers the LIRR reports each month, there were **10 late and 2 cancelled** reverse-peak trains that did not make it into the LIRR's [online delay database](#) (which pulls its information from the same database used to calculate the numbers presented each month). Some of these trains, like train 467 from Port Washington, were nearly an hour late. So unless that train made up 53 minutes of time between Port Washington and New York (which is impossible, since the running time for that train is only 37 minutes long), the LIRR has either accidentally or intentionally inflated their on-time performance for this day by twelve trains.

All told, the LIRR's overall on-time performance for the PM rush on 2/2 was **3.1%**, (and effectively **0.8%** if you exclude the trains that left without their connection and the train that was likely fudged) making it the LIRR's worst single rush hour in quite some time. And with an average delay of 19.3 minutes for the PM peak, passengers were pretty adversely affected as well. The total OTP for the PM Rush (including reverse-peak trains and the 12 late or cancelled trains that were left off the LIRR's Delay Database) was 7.7%. Five more weeks to spring... but who's counting!?

A NEW AIRTRAIN TO LAGUARDIA AIRPORT

Out of the blue last Tuesday, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced a plan to construct a new AirTrain to LaGuardia Airport. Travelling to the region's domestic airport in northern Queens has long been a hassle (though it has gotten better in recent years), and the Governor's plans will involve constructing a new, automated people mover system (similar to the system currently in place at JFK Airport) from the main airport terminals along the Grand Central Parkway to a new station in Willets Point, located between the existing Mets-Willets Point NYCT Flushing Line stop, which is presently served by 7 local trains 24-hours a day and express trains during rush hours to Manhattan in the Morning, and to Flushing in the afternoon and evening, as well as the [Mets-Willets Point LIRR station](#), which is currently served by Port Washington Branch trains on event days.

The new plan is not more than a few days old, but there is no shortage of criticism on the Governor's plan. Among the many issues cited with the proposed plan, one of the first things people point out with the plan is the fact that Willets Point is east of LaGuardia Airport, and Manhattan is west of the airport. As a result, those wanting to go from the airport to someplace in Manhattan will first have to travel east to Willets Point before doubling back west to get to Manhattan.

And this doubling back is not the most efficient way to get from point A to B. Based on preliminary, unofficial travel time estimates, using the proposed AirTrain to go from Manhattan to the airport will take roughly the same amount of time, if not take longer, than the existing surface transit options. In recent years, improvements in bus service to LaGuardia airport has seen tremendous improvements. In September 2013, the Q70 Limited began service. This route receives passengers at the Woodside LIRR station (where passengers can connect to LIRR services to New York Penn, or to 122 other LIRR stations, in addition to the 7 local and express), then the Jackson Heights/Roosevelt Avenue station on the Queens Boulevard Line (where passengers can connect to or from the E, F, M, R, and 7 local trains). After those two stops, the bus heads directly to the airport terminals on the BQE, arriving there roughly 10 to 12 minutes later, where it loops around the airport and comes back to those two stops.

Additionally, a few months ago, service was inaugurated on the M60 SBS, a new and improved version of the slow

M60 across 125th Street in Manhattan. Dedicated bus lanes, off-board payment, and traffic light preemption, as common with most SBS routes, has sped up the trips (or at least made the trip slightly more reliable) for those coming to the airport from upper Manhattan or the Hudson Valley and Connecticut via Metro-North. The M60 also connects to the 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, A, B, C, and D trains across 125th Street (and, eventually, the Second Avenue Subway), which can get you to a decent chunk of the system without requiring any additional transfers.

Many others (like [here](#), [here](#), or [here](#)) have listed off, in depth, some of the potential issues with the Governor's AirTrain plan. Some of the leading complaints include how NYCT's Flushing Line is often fairly crowded, both during rush hours and during off-peak times. Additionally, the narrower IRT subway cars, in conjunction with more people being crammed in those cars, is not the most conducive to those travelling with luggage. However, the Flushing Line is currently undergoing extensive work to install CBTC which will allow NYCT to operate more trains per hour, hopefully relieving some of the crowding on that line.

The proposed AirTrain would also land nearby to the Mets-Willets Point LIRR station. As those who have taken the LIRR to or from Mets games or other events at Shea Stadium or Citi Field in the past, the staircases down to the LIRR platforms are a bit of a distance from the 7 train station and the stadium exit. That length of boardwalk separating the LIRR tracks from the subway and the stadium [works to everyone's advantage following events at the stadium](#), but the over 800 foot walk from the NYCT station (and where the AirTrain station is shown to be close to in the initial renderings), can be a bit of a walk for those travelling with luggage or small children, and may be a deterrent for those looking to connect to the LIRR onward from Willets Point.

And if passengers decide to hike it down that boardwalk, which I've traversed many times myself (often disappointed) following Mets games, they may not be too excited about how long they may have to wait for a train once they get there. Presently, the LIRR only operates half-hourly service during off-peak times, and there can be some larger gaps in service during the reverse-peak period. Considering that it's not always easy to precisely time connections when you're coming from an airport, chances lots of passengers will be spending a decent amount of time at Mets-Willets Point

waiting for trains. During rush hours, trains on the Port Washington Branch are often crowded, and service isn't always terribly frequent on the inner portions of the branch (since ridership at the four stations in Nassau County, Great Neck, Manhasset, Plandome, and Port Washington, tends to easily dwarf the ridership at the stations in Queens).

Many supporters of the project have quickly arrived at the assumption over the past several weeks that the LIRR will be eager to add lots of more trains from Mets-Willets Point to support the AirTrain to Willets Point. While there is no clear presumption that they intend on doing just that at this point in the game, we can assume that there will (hopefully) be a nontrivial increase in the number of trains on the Port Washington Branch once East Side Access is open and in service, especially since the branch lacks a convenient transfer station, like Jamaica, for riders to switch to a train going to a different station (Woodside comes close, but the up-and-over transfers at Woodside are not the most pleasant, especially if travelling with luggage). However, there is still a notable chance that off-peak Port Washington Branch service is kept at two trains per hour, and there will only be one train to New York Penn and one train to Grand Central Terminal each hour during off-peak times. And this also assumes that East Side Access will be up and ready with all of its kinks worked out by time this project is completed, which may not be the case. In [a joint statement that sounded very painful to write](#) from the leaders of the MTA and the Port Authority released after the announcement, the agencies said that they could get the project done within five years of obtaining all necessary approvals. East Side Access is still at least seven years off, and with no firm end date in sight, the chance of that date getting pushed back further is more likely to happen than not. There's a decent chance that if all goes somewhat closely to plan, the AirTrain to LGA could be up and running for some time before East Side Access is up and running, and before all of its kinks are worked out.

The MTA is one step ahead of the governor in a way with regard to the Mets-Willets Point station itself. As part of the MTA's 2005-2009 Capital Program (two capital programs ago now), the Mets-Willets Point station [will get some improvements](#) that include track and signal improvements to facilitate operations at the center platform, new elevators to make the station accessible, platform and canopy extensions, new pre-fabricated platform shelters, and some drainage improvements at track level. Some of this work has already begun, with Shea Yard being used on weekdays [to accommodate](#)

[some trains that were displaced due to work on the Hudson Yards overbuild at West Side Yard](#), but there's still some work to be done (and hopefully it'll get done before this current capital program is finished!). Rehabilitating the center platform would afford the LIRR the opportunity to run trains to Mets-Willets Point and turn them there, but such short trips can be fairly inefficient and expensive once you have to try and find a way to make them fit in with the existing trains (since the LIRR seems very stubborn when it comes to adjusting their schedules to make things run together better).

But work on the station itself or any amount of additional trains on the Port Washington Branch still won't change the fact that Mets-Willets Point is out on the Port Washington Branch and not directly connected to the rest of the system. Most passengers coming from Long Island do not live along the Port Washington Branch, and as a result, they will have to [first travel to Woodside, then transfer to a Port Washington Branch train going east to Mets-Willets Point](#), before getting on the AirTrain heading back west when they'll finally arrive at the airport (after making a huge zig-zag across Queens). It's a problem that frequently causes headaches and longer travel times for passengers going to events at Mets-Willets Point, especially since the transfer at Woodside from Main Line to Port Washington Branch trains is not always the most convenient. Furthermore, since there are lots of trains from Long Island that do not stop at Woodside (including trains from all stations in diesel territory, Brooklyn trains, and the majority of trains during rush hours), a large number of travelers from Long Island will have to deal with one or more additional transfers at some point along their trip. Most passengers coming from stations on eastern Long Island will have to transfer at Jamaica, transfer again at Woodside, and then finally connect to the AirTrain at Mets-Willets Point. Passengers from the transfer-loving LIRR's diesel branches or the West Hempstead Branch will likely have at least one additional transfer stuck in their trip as well. With all of the transfers and connections, taking the new AirTrain to LGA might actually take longer than the existing surface transit options (in particular, the Q70 Ltd.). One might wonder if the \$450 million this project is expected to cost might be better spent on another project in the region that would be more beneficial to the region. There have been some other alternatives proposed over the years, and without going into the details of each, I've surmised the major pros and cons of three different AirTrain alignments ([mapped here](#)) in the following table. Personally, I like the Jackson Heights alignment the

most, since it would offer the most transfer opportunities and has a decent chance of actually being faster than existing surface transit options for the majority of people coming from Long Island and the remainder of the region. The proposed Willets Point alignment is better than nothing—but only marginally so. If we are only going to have the money to build an

AirTrain once, we ought to be really sure that we have it right before breaking ground. A \$450 million AirTrain that is not really better than existing transit options and is subsequently at the risk of not being all that popular likely isn't the wisest use of our limited transportation funds.

(Abbreviations: LGA = LaGuardia Airport, WDD = Woodside, SSM = Mets-Willets Point, NYK = New York Penn Station)

Alignment	Pros	Cons
Governor's/ Willets Point Alignment	Involves passing by very few residential properties, won't face much political opposition, "path of least resistance", shortest track-miles to construct, SSM station and yard currently undergoing improvements to support additional trains, would likely be able to utilize Passenger Facility Charges (PFC's) to fund construction, CBTC work on NYCT Flushing Line will allow for more frequent service, ample parking facilities available at SSM, space available around SSM for yard facilities, conversion of SSM to a full time station may allow for additional travel opportunities for those commuting from Long Island	Takes passengers away from the CBD, fewer connecting transit options available at SSM, forces passengers onto the crowded NYCT Flushing Line, Port Washington Branch infrequent during the off-peak period or crowded during the peak period, forces an additional transfer if travelling uptown/downtown Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn, requires a three-transfer trip for most passengers coming from Long Island (transferring at Jamaica, WDD, then again at SSM), presently no timed transfers at WDD for those traveling between SSM and stations on Long Island, peak Port Washington Branch trains are frequently crowded, narrow IRT cars not conducive to those travelling with luggage, no presumption of substantial additional service on Port Washington Branch following completion of East Side Access, not faster or more convenient for travelers coming from Long Island, the Hudson Valley, or Connecticut than existing surface transit options
Jackson Heights Alignment	Would offer passengers significantly more connecting transit options (LIRR Main Line trains at WDD, Queens Boulevard lines (E/F/M/R), would offer a two-seat ride to many locations in Midtown and Downtown Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Long Island, more direct route from the CBD, would likely be able to utilize PFC's to fund construction, connects to a number of additional local bus routes from Jackson Heights, does not require passengers to backtrack to SSM, CBTC work on Flushing Line will allow for more frequent service, East Side Access work may allow for increased travel options to NYK, GCT, and points on Eastern LI	Longest in terms of construction miles, routing in vicinity of Jackson Heights may pose difficulties, little land space to place an AirTrain in Jackson Heights, crowding concerns on QBL lines during rush hours
Astoria Alignment	Direct ride to Manhattan, would allow one-seat ride to many locations in Manhattan and Brooklyn, would allow for integration with the New York City Transit system, more direct route from Manhattan to the LGA, convenient transfers to most trunk lines in Manhattan for those travelling downtown	Routing would face significant local opposition, N train has few convenient transfers in Queens, requiring almost all passengers to go into Manhattan before coming back out, may be difficult to secure the ability to utilize PFC's, service to Astoria may be infrequent and crowded at certain times during the rush hour, would require passengers coming from Long Island to either backtrack from NYK or transfer at Queensboro Plaza