News and Notes from The LIRR Today

March 11, 2015

"The MTA is not moving forward with" the Third Main Line Track

At a meeting of the Long Island Regional Planning Council at Hofstra University in February, LIRR President Patrick Nowakowski said that "the MTA is not moving forward with" the Third Main Line Track project, a critically important expansion of the LIRR's infrastructure that would add a third track to the currently two-tracked and capacity constrained Main Line between Queens Village and Hicksville. According to *Newsday*, Nowakowski suggested that long-standing community opposition to the plan may be insurmountable.

The LIRR's Main Line is currently the single busiest segment of double track on the system, with a total of 251 trains passing down the lines on the average weekday. Those trains carry nearly 110,000 passengers, more than one-third of the LIRR's total daily ridership, to or from 57 different stations on Long Island, and they all have to funnel down one of those two Main Line tracks.

The Main Line as it is now is already at capacity during the rush hours. The LIRR sneaks out slightly more capacity for peak-direction trains by stealing slots from reverse-peak trains and using both of the two tracks to run trains in the peak direction. As a result of this, reverse peak service suffers considerably. There's currently significant gaps in reverse peak service (those looking to go from the city out to Long Island in the morning, and back in the evening). There's a 95-minute gap in any sort of reverse peak service between 6:26a and 8:01a in the mornings, and local stations like Merillon Avenue currently have a three hour and nine minute gap in morning reverse peak service. The gap in any sort of reverse peak service is nearly an hour long in the evening. To and from Ronkonkoma, there is a gap in eastbound service of 2 hours and 22 minutes in the morning (3 hours and 3 minutes at Wyandanch) and 2 hours and 25 minutes in the evening (3 hours and 2 minutes at Brentwood and Wyandanch). These gaps in reverse peak service do an excellent job of stifling reverse-peak ridership, which is extremely low on the LIRR.

Mr. Nowakowski told the LIRPC that "if there's ever going to be a third-track project, we're not going to do that without working with those communities that will be affected. We're not going to take people to court. We're not going to try to force anything down people's throats. Either we all want to do it, or we all decide not to do it," and his comments highlight the general mentality the LIRR has adopted over the last couple of decades when it comes to dealing with local opposition: just give up. If it can't be done entirely on property that the LIRR already owns (Ronkonkoma Branch Double Track project, the Mid-Suffolk Electric Yard, etc.) or it can't be done in a place that is in complete agreement with everyone around them, then they aren't going to do anything.

This localistic way of thinking has some major flaws… you are essentially exclusively considering only the thoughts and desires of the three communities who are directly along the right of way and being the loudest opposes to the project. It completely ignores the people who live in the 316 other cities, villages, and hamlets on Long Island who would benefit from the construction of the Third Main Line Track (316 is, in case you didn't notice, all of them).

Not building the Third Main Line Track would mean that the number of trains the LIRR would be able to run along the Main Line during rush hours on the opening day of East Side Access will be exactly the same as they can operate today. And the trains that run along the Main Line today are among the most crowded and most delayed trains on the system, and that is a direct result of the LIRR's inability to operate more trains, or operate trains with more flexibility, down the Main Line. When even the slightest of service disruptions occurs on the Main Line, the LIRR has zero room to adjust, and the congestion and delays amplify throughout the entire rush hour, and tens of thousands of passengers either get to work late, or get home later than scheduled.

And considering that Main Line trains are already among the most crowded trains on the system, there is absurdly

little space for any sort of ridership growth that will likely come with East Side Access. The one and only way the LIRR would be able to operate more trains during rush hours would be to extend the amount of time the LIRR uses both tracks on the Main Line in the peak direction.

Extending the time that the LIRR uses both tracks in the peak direction will be able to allow them to add more trains for those traveling to Manhattan in the morning and from Manhattan in the evening, but that comes with serious tradeoffs. Most notably, when the LIRR uses both tracks to provide serve in the peak direction, they are unable to provide any reverse-peak service, as mentioned previously. Extending the amount of time they do use both tracks will extend those gaps in reverse peak service as a result. That means that some stations that currently see gaps in service that exceed *three hours* will become even longer. Extending these gaps even longer will do an excellent job of killing off whatever semblance of reverse-peak ridership still exists, deal a blow to non-commutation ridership for those who might want to take the train into the city from Long Island in the evening for concerts, sporting events, or other events in the city, and it would result in a substantial negative impact to mobility on Long Island as a whole.

And extending the amount of time both tracks are used in the peak direction also won't be the magical cure that the LIRR might be looking to. Considering that the LIRR already uses both tracks in the peak direction during the height of each of the rush hours, they won't be able to add a single train down the Main Line during the busiest periods of the rush hour—they would only be able to add trains either before or after that existing period. That might ease crowding on the trains that run immediately before or after the time they use both tracks, but it won't do anything to help the trains that will be traveling at the height of the rush hour, which are already plenty crowded.

Additionally, increasing the amount of time that the trains are going to use both tracks in the peak direction could actually have a negative impact on train service out of Huntington. Huntington Station is the eastern limit of electric territory on the Port Jefferson Branch, and unlike most other eastern terminals, Huntington does not have a train storage yard, only a siding track that can hold three or four trains. Huntington mainly operates by having eastbound trains, whether revenue or equipment trains, arrive in Huntington, turn on the South Side Track, and then head back west towards New York. Extending the amount of time where reverse-peak trains will not be able to use the Main Line because the LIRR is using both tracks for peak-direction service will impact the LIRR's ability to run those trains to or from Huntington to turn for or from the peak trains. That means that the number of trains that the LIRR can currently operate to and from Huntington at the height of the rush hour will be the same number of trains that they will be able to operate during an extended throating period. That will result in longer gaps between rush-hour trains, unless the LIRR can find a way to bring more trains from places east of Huntington, either by extending electrification all the way to Port Jefferson, or extending electrification to someplace in-between and constructing a new yard there.

All of this casts doubt over the future successes of the LIRR's Main Line after East Side Access is opening. Not building the Third Main Line track will close off a lot of doors for the LIRR in terms of opportunities for service enhancements in conjunction with East Side Access. It will also mean that the LIRR won't be able to take full advantage of the benefits that projects like the Ronkonkoma Branch Double Track Project, the Mid-Suffolk Electric Yard, and the Hicksville North Side Track extension could bring.

And all of this has only considered the operational benefits that the LIRR could miss out on by not building the Third Main Line Track. *Long Island Index* conducted a study last year on the economic and fiscal impacts of a Third Main Line Track. Among some of the benefits that Long Island would be losing out on if there was no Third Main Line Track are 14,000 new jobs on Long Island, a $3 billion increase in total personal income, $5.6 billion more towards the Gross Regional Product, 35,000 new residents, $40 million in additional sales tax revenue, and $103 million in additional property tax revenue.

Long Island Index drew comparisons between Long Island and portions of the Hudson Valley, Connecticut, and Northern New Jersey, where economic activity has been increasing. It highlights the difference between Hicksville and White Plains. Both are about 30 miles from Midtown Manhattan, the former is on the LIRR's Main Line, at the eastern end of the double-tracked corridor, and one is along Metro-North's Harlem Line. The LIRR has zero trains that arrive at Hicksville between 6:48a and 8:26a. During that same period, eight outbound Metro-North Harlem Line trains arrive at White Plains, and the impact of that reverse-peak service on White Plains shows. Over the 10 year period from 2000 to 2010, there was 83,000 square feet of new development in White Plains, compared to only 32,000 square feet of development in Hicksville. That's a huge disconnect, and

it's not only in this one particular case. I was unable to confirm the exact number, but some have said that the Fordham Metro-North station in the Bronx now has more people getting on outbound trains in the morning going *towards* job centers in the Hudson Valley and Connecticut than commuters going into Manhattan.

Long Island is at the point where it's struggling to get businesses to set up shop or remain on Long Island. Increasing reverse peak service with East Side Access—not *decreasing* service is critical to helping Long Island grow economically. Not constructing the third track could have an innumerable impact on Long Island's economic development and an equally significant impact on the LIRR's ability to provide service to the tens of thousands of people who use the Main Line to get them to work. Showing no desire to actively pursue the construction of the Third Main Line track is putting the desires of a few over what is best for the rest of Long Island.

Plans for Renovated Hicksville Station Unveiled

In February, Governor Cuomo announced the final design for a renovated Hicksville station. The $68.7 million project will involve "almost completely" new platforms, new fully-heated, glass-enclosed platform waiting areas, new lighting, a new translucent canopy roof, new stairways, new elevators and escalators, a new CCTV system, upgraded audio and digital communications systems and new signage. The plans also include a new street-level plaza and entrance to the waiting room/ticket office.

(Renderings: AECOM/Metropolitan Transportation Authority)

The press release, which also includes quotes from a bunch of officials expressing their excitement for the project, mentions that the construction work will be conducted on weekends and will not impact weekday service. At some of the LIRR's current and past station platform rehabilitation projects, the work has been accomplished by closing half of the station platform, completely demolishing it and then rebuilding the one half to completion, and then switching to the other half of the platform and repeating the same process. It is unclear just how the LIRR will conduct the platform work at Hicksville—whether or not they will close portions of the platform completely (as that would not impact weekday service directly), or whether they will just work on one small segment each weekend until the project is done. Hicksville is the fifth busiest station on the LIRR system (behind New York, Atlantic Terminal, Jamaica, and Ronkonkoma), so the crews will have to work around some 91,000 passengers who use the station over the course of the week.

The Hicksville Station Rehabilitation Project will be going on in conjunction with the extension of the Hicksville North Track Siding that would involve the installation of over 3,000 feet of new track, power, and signal work to connect the North Siding with the existing station track 1. The LIRR says that this connection will allow them to add three trains in the AM and PM Peak periods west of Hicksville. The extended track will also give the LIRR three tracks

from the Hicksville Station to just west of the Wantagh Parkway underpass, which should be able to increase the LIRR's flexibility in the event of a disruption.

The press release from the Governor's office included some renderings of the new station platform, and you can see the full set here. As one who's waited for trains at Hicksville on a couple of occasions, it's not the most pleasant place to wait for a train (there's no benches on the platform!), so the improvements look like they will be welcomed by all who use the station. Though, I do see one potential problem with the design—the translucent glass canopies might look nice in the renderings, but unless somebody from the railroad is going to get up there every two weeks to powerwash all of the soot and bird poo off of them, it's not going to look nice and pretty for very long!

There was no mention in the press release as to when the projects would start, but they did mention that they anticipate the station rehabilitation to be done sometime in 2019.

The LIRR's Continued Broken Rail Problem

The LIRR has had a long winter this year when it comes to broken rails. They had at least 14 broken rails in the first 7 weeks of 2015 and the LIRR and its passengers have had to deal with at least four more since my last note about three weeks ago. The LIRR's broken rail count for 2015 currently stands at at least **18**:

#	Date	Location	First Alert	On/Close	Time Start-End	Track	Mean Temp.	Late	Cancel	Partial Cancel
1	Sa Jan 10	**Greenlawn**	8:30 pm	12:27 am	3:57	P1	21°F	(2)	(4)	
2	Tu Jan 13	**Central Islip**	1:35 pm	2:58 pm	1:23	G1	28°F	(1)	(1)	(3)
3	We Jan 28	**East New York**	6:55 am	10:44 am	3:49	A2	25°F	(25)	(6)	(4)
4	Th Jan 29	**Central Islip**	11:08 am	1:25 pm	2:17	G1	27°F	9	3	4
5	We Feb 4	**Merrick**	6:15 am	10:08 am	3:53	S1	31°F	(34)	(3)	
6	Fr Feb 6	**Islip**	3:41 am	10:49 am	7:08	S1	20°F	(8)	(3)	(1)
7	Fr Feb 13	**Westbury**	4:42 am	4:04 pm	11:22	G1	16°F	(75)	(21)	(2)
8	Fr Feb 13	**Babylon**	6:35 am	12:56 pm	6:21	S2	16°F	(32)	(6)	
9	Fr Feb 13	**Bay Shore**	7:32 am	11:44 am	4:12	S1	16°F	(10)	(3)	(1)
10	Fr Feb 13	**Great Neck**	8:09 am	12:56 pm	4:47	N1	16°F	(14)	(14)	
11	Fr Feb 13	**Westbury**	9:15 am	4:04 pm	6:49	G1	16°F	*Incl. in other WBY incident*		
12	Fr Feb 13	**Richmond Hill**	10:38 am	6:12 pm	7:34	Yard	16°F			
13	Tu Feb 17	**Jamaica**	4:34 pm	5:10 pm	0:36	G1	22°F		(4)	
14	Tu Feb 20	**St. Albans**	8:29 am	9:53 am	1:24	S2	12°F	(1)		(1)
15	Mo Feb 23	**Flushing**	11:29 pm	3:50 am	4:21	N1	24°F	(1)		
16	Tu Feb 24	**Woodside**	12:08 am	5:12 am	5:04	G4	18°F	(6)		(7)
17	Tu Mar 3	**Central Islip**	5:26 am	2:14 pm	8:48	G1	28°F	(25)	(3)	(3)
18	We Mar 4	**Forest Hills**	8:26 am	1:27 pm	5:01	G3	37°F	(1)		(3)

(note: number of delayed trains indicated in ( ) are approximations given in absence of official figures from the LIRR)

As the winter goes on, broken rails still seem to be a problem in the morning hours (the average time of the first alert is 8:13 am), and the average time it takes to fully recover from broken rails is inching closer to five hours. Broken rails are still the most common on *westbound* tracks (of the four recent broken rails, all but one were on tracks typically used for westbound trains). There has also been three broken rails in the Central Islip alone so far in 2015 (two east of the station on January 13 and March 3, and one west of the station on January 29).

The number of broken rails that have disrupted train service so far in 2015 still appears to be very high when compared to rail systems that operate in similar climates (Metro-North, NJTransit, MBTA in Boston, and Metra in Chicago). The consideration that this many broken rails seems to be a thing that is unique to the LIRR has been a something that has been perplexed many so far this winter, especially the day at least six broke, and there *still*—even after there have been 18 disruptions and an excess of 340 late or canceled trains due to broken rails—has not been any sort of explanation from the railroad to the passengers on why this phenomenon might be occurring.

The easy explanation would be to just say it's due to the weather, but things like this will only continue as long as broken rails are just chalked up to the weather or unforeseen circumstances. And while the railroad has been lucky and caught and repaired all of the broken rails that have occurred so far before something serious happened (the NTSB found that a broken rail was likely one of the primary causes of the May 2013 collision of two New Haven Line trains outside of Bridgeport that injured 72), it's only a matter of time before their luck runs out.

Two Grade Crossing Accidents in As Many Days

Grade crossing collisions between cars and trains have been in the news a lot lately, and not only because of the major accident on Metro-North in February. In the first week of March, there were two collisions between cars and trains at grade crossings in as many days: the first at the Rocklyn Avenue crossing in East Rockaway, and the other at Rider Avenue in Patchogue.

The first accident happened on Monday, March 2, in East Rockaway. According to witnesses, the driver was an elderly woman who went around the lowered gates, and onto the crossing. The train, which was headed for New York and just pulling out of the Centre Avenue station at that time, struck the back corner of the car on the driver's side, and nudged it off the crossing. The crossing is located just a few hundred feet to the east of the station, and the last two or three cars were likely still on the platform when the train struck the car. There had been no previous accidents at this crossing in the last five years, and about 5,500 cars cross the Long Beach Branch here on the average day. The FRA's Accident Prediction Value (APV, the likelihood that a collision between a train and a highway vehicle will occour at that crossing in a year) was 3.881%, ranking 83rd on the list of most dangerous crossings on Long Island.

The smashed up car that collided with a Long Beach train in East Rockaway. (Photo: Bill Bennett/*Newsday*)

The second accident happened in Patchogue less than 24 hours later. This accident was a little more forceful with the locomotive striking the car and sending it flying about 30 feet down the tracks. Like the accident the day before, the crossing was also activated and an elderly driver also went around the lowered crossing gates. Similarly, the diesel train that struck this car wasn't going all that fast, as it it had just left the platform at Patchogue about 1,700 feet to the west. The Rider Avenue crossing has had a bit of history—there has been one train-car collision here in the past five years (back in 2012). The number of cars that cross the Montauk Branch here on the average day is pretty similar to the number that crossed at the Rocklyn Avenue crossing the day before—around 5,300. The FRA's APV for this crossing was 7.649%, the 29th most dangerous on Long Island.

What's left of the car that collided with a Speonk train in Patchogue (Photo: Victor Alcorn/*NY Post*)

In both of these incidents, witnesses indicate that the car went around lowered crossing gates before being struck by a train. In both cases, the drivers were elderly. Whether the drivers were fully aware that the crossing gates were lowered and still went around the gates in spite of that, or whether they were unaware that there was a train approaching is hopefully something that is being investigated. Both of these crossings were among the 129 different crossings on Long Island that had an APV that was higher than the site of the fatal accident in Valhalla in February. If anything, these two accidents enforce the need for a heightened awareness of grade crossings and the significant dangers they pose.