

INSTITUTE FOR RATIONAL URBAN MOBILITY, INC.

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Mysore L. Nagaraja
President, MTA Capital Construction
2 Broadway, 8th Floor
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Copies to: Hon. Nancy Shevell Blakeman, Chair, MTA Capital Construction, Planning and Real Estate Committee and members of committee, members of the Permanent Citizen's Advisory Committee to the MTA, Peter Cannito, James Dermody, and other interested parties

Dear Mr. Nagaraja:

Your March 24, 2006 letter to Susan Blakeman makes it quite clear that MTA's plan for a Deep Cavern station for the LIRR is fundamentally flawed. That letter states that the emergency egress plan for this station is to evacuate passengers from the platforms to the mezzanines, some 140 feet below Park Avenue, which would be considered "Points of Safety". Long before 9/11 transit advocates argued that a *terminal* station this far below the surface, unprecedented in railway practice, would result in a great inconvenience to LIRR passengers, adding three to four minutes per trip when compared with using existing platforms located in Grand Central Terminal's Upper Level. Now, according to your letter, it seems that MTA has made no provision for evacuating passengers from the Deep Cavern station in a timely manner in case of a terrorist attack, or even a routine fire. As many as 8,000 passengers might be trapped in the mezzanine, and forced to climb some 90 feet up stopped escalators to reach the concourse, and then climb another two levels to the street.

For MTA to argue that a station on the Upper Level, as originally proposed by the Committee for Better Transit, is less safe than the Deep Cavern defies common sense. Pedestrians walking on cross streets on Manhattan's East Side can look down through grates and see the top of rail cars, no further than five or six feet below them. Numerous opportunities exist to develop additional regular and emergency exits within the buildings that are located along Vanderbilt Avenue directly over the loop track platforms. For all but a short segment of the loop track, access to adjacent tracks is available. If needed, additional emergency access to this short segment can be provided. **On the basis of security and fire safety concerns alone, MTA should scrap its proposed Deep Cavern Station and pursue the Upper Level Loop Alternative.**

The detailed review of the Delcan Report contained in the March 24 letter, the first since this report was sent to MTA some 18 months ago, provides MTA an important first step to refine the Upper Level Loop Alternative so that it fully meets LIRR and Metro-North operating requirements at Grand Central Terminal. For example, current transportation engineering practice suggests that the appropriate maximum speed to comfortably traverse the Upper Level Loop track is a little over 15mph, assuming a three inch unbalanced superelevation. It would be important for MTA to fully explore Metro-North's contention that due to limited side clearances, speeds should be limited to four miles per hour in anticipation of excessive lateral motion due to track or equipment defects. The location any such close side clearances should be identified and mitigation measures devised.

Metro-North's practice of keeping three tracks out of service at any one time for "maintenance or capital work" is a luxury few busy railroads can embrace. It is particularly painful in this case, since it forces LIRR commuters into a Deep Cavern station, adding three to four minutes per trip and greatly increasing risks in this age of concern about security. Metro-North should develop its own operating plan, building on the Delcan plan, to facilitate the release of Upper Level Loop tracks for LIRR use. MTA can refine the construction plan, based on its successful experience in constructing the local-express connection in Queens, to avoid the weekday Metro-North track outages discussed in the Delcan plan. By minimizing or eliminating these operating concerns MTA can avoid any significant environmental concerns and quickly move ahead the Upper Level Loop Alternative.

A more regional approach to dealing with Metro-North capacity issues is also warranted. Particularly, it would be important for MTA to revisit Alternative G described in the Major Investment Study Final Report of the MTA-NJ Transit-PANYNJ Access to the Region's Core (ARC) project. That alternative would connect the eight center-most platform tracks of the Lower Level of Grand Central Terminal with five existing platform tracks at Penn Station as part of the ARC plan for new Trans-Hudson tunnels. Alternative G was dismissed because it failed to provide adequate peak hour train capacity. This failure was due to the inability of NJ Transit and Metro-North to agree on an integrated operating plan that made full use of the through-running capability possible using this connection. Instead, NJ Transit and MTA are now advancing another Deep Cavern station, under 34th Street and under Macy's. This station will have the inconvenience and risks associated with this type of facility, while increasing the cost of this project. Alternative G would have greatly improved the operating performance of Metro-North at Grand Central Terminal converting this "stub" terminal into a "through" station and making it much easier to bring LIRR trains to the Upper Level Loop platforms. Passengers on both sides of the Hudson River would enjoy many new travel options, by advancing both proposals concurrently.

Other proposals to increase Metro-North capacity should be advanced. In the near term, operation of Metro-North trains on Amtrak's West Side and Hell Gate Lines to Penn Station would quickly allow major increases in service. A more advanced signal system on the four-track Park Avenue mainline could increase capacity to thirty trains per hour, per track. A grade separation at Mott Haven Junction in the Bronx would eliminate conflicts at this critical location. Finally, with MTA now considering options for improving LIRR service to Lower Manhattan, a similar planning effort for direct train service from the Northern Suburbs, dropped a month before 9/11, could be revisited.

With the region's three commuter rail operators collaborating, rather than going their separate ways, the Manhattan business district -- the region's economic engine -- will be better served, commuters will save travel time, taxpayers will benefit and **the frightening risks of two Deep Cavern terminal stations can be avoided.**

Sincerely,

George Haikalis
President