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‘Penn Station Master Plan’ Won’t Fix Your Commute

Reconstruction alternatives fail to address the station’s core transportation issues: narrow platforms and inefficient train operations

New York, NY – This week, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) [unveiled two alternatives](#) for reconstructing Penn Station. The project aims to increase concourse space and passenger circulation, improve access between the street and the concourses, and give the station a facelift. Unfortunately, the plan fails to address Penn Station’s core transportation issues: narrow platforms and inefficient train operations.

There now is an incredible opportunity to do the first major upgrade and transformation of our region’s rail network since the original Penn Station opened in 1910. A confluence of events, including an unprecedented drop in ridership for the foreseeable future, a president who is committed to substantively addressing climate change, and at least a trillion dollars in federal infrastructure spending very likely on the horizon, bring us to a day that we at last have the opportunity to make meaningful changes both above ground *and* at the track level.

Penn Station’s track and platform configuration, which predates the commercial airline industry, is the relic of an era when people used trains for the type of long-distance commuting that airplanes are now used for. Although this layout has not changed, today the majority of the station’s service is provided by commuter rail (NJ TRANSIT and MTA Long Island Rail Road), which has different infrastructure needs than the intercity, long-distance rail service provided by Amtrak.

A plan that aims to fundamentally transform the commuting experience should prioritize optimizing rail service for [a modern through-running operation](#), the lynchpin of a truly unified regional rail network. We should be taking advantage of the post-COVID reduction in commuter demand to modify the existing station for through-running. Expanding Penn Station one block south for a new NJ TRANSIT terminal actually moves us farther away from unifying the rail network and creates a major limitation for expanding rail service between New York and New Jersey—the exact ridership that is projected to have the most future demand.



For infrastructure investment to really put the tri-state region's economy back on its feet, it must be part of a broader, comprehensive strategy for developing and connecting secondary business and residential cores outside of Manhattan, such as Newark, New Jersey and Long Island City, Queens. Through-running allows for more equitable prosperity and economic growth across the region, whereas doubling down on an inefficient terminal strategy limits future growth potential and reinforces the outdated concept of having only one primary central business district.

Since New York gets the least transit construction per dollar in the world, it needs to choose projects very carefully. Getting a maximum return on investment means taking a new approach that unifies our regions transit systems and maximizes flexibility for future growth and demographic changes. Now is not the time to be constrained by past mistakes. Now is the time to build back *better*, which means having a serious discussion on the [benefits and barriers to implementing through-running](#) and unifying the region's disparate commuter rail systems.

In a [letter sent to Secretary Pete Buttigieg](#) this week, TSTC requested the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) to seek a halt to the proposed Empire Station Complex until a cost-benefit analysis of alternatives is conducted and a comprehensive through-running implementation plan is developed for Penn Station.

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Tri-State Transportation Campaign is a 27-year old advocacy organization that fights for an equitable, safe, multi-modal transportation network that provides options and supports the economies of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. TSTC works to fix our commutes, meet our climate goals, stop traffic deaths, and make transportation fair. Learn more at tstc.org.