

Tunnel Wars

With ARC dead, officials debate alternate plans to ease tunnel congestion

By JON LENTZ

Thanks to New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, the Access to the Region's Core commuter train, or ARC tunnel, is dead. In its place, two proposals have arisen: One is Amtrak's "Gateway Tunnel," a proposed \$13.5 billion rail connection from New Jersey into Manhattan's Penn Station. The other proposal is an extension of New York's No. 7 subway line from midtown Manhattan to Secaucus, N.J.

Transportation insiders say it is difficult to predict whether either one will be built, given the years of planning still required and the need to secure high-level political backing as well as billions of dollars.

But as for which of the two is more viable, the Gateway Tunnel has an early edge.

"The Amtrak one is probably the better of the two," said Robert "Buzz" Paaswell, a civil engineering professor at City College. "It's more likely to be funded, and it'll serve more demand on the Northeast Corridor."

"It's probably got a little more legs right now, although they're both so expensive the real question is where's the money going to come from," Paaswell added.

The federal designation of the Northeast Corridor as a high-speed rail corridor in mid-March gave another boost to the Gateway, which already accounts for high-speed rail. It also allows the project's backers to seek federal dollars as part of any high-speed expansion.

"Given that the Northeast Corridor was just designated a high-speed rail corridor earlier this week, that does bode really well for Amtrak and the Gateway project," said Veronica Vanterpool, the associate director of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign.

The Gateway tunnel is estimated to be completed as early as 2020. Amtrak earmarked \$50 million for the ini-

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tial four-year design, engineering and environmental review phase, though the spending will hinge on whether or not Republicans in Congress succeed in scaling back Amtrak funding.

"We're still looking for revenue streams and funding partners for the project, but Amtrak is committed going forward to dedicating future appropriations of unknown quantity toward the project too," said Cliff Cole, an Amtrak spokesperson.

Meanwhile, the city is reaching out to many of the same key players that would likely be involved in the Gateway project, including New York, New Jersey and



Mayor Bloomberg is pushing to extend the No. 7 subway line from midtown to New Jersey

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the Port Authority, while pushing ahead with an analysis of its No. 7 subway extension.

One advantage the city cites is that it is already spending \$2.1 billion to extend the No. 7 to 34th Street and 11th Avenue, which is closer to the Hudson River. The subway extension, which would be the first outside of the city, would also provide a direct connection to Manhattan's east side, unlike the Gateway.

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Amtrak says that the Gateway plan could accomplish

some of the city's goals with a connection of the No. 7 line to Penn Station, where commuters could transfer from the trains to the subway.

Neysa Pranger, a spokesperson for the Regional Plan Association, said she is optimistic that the various players could find a compromise. Whatever the solution, it won't be built any time soon, she added.

"Normally you'd start this conversation a decade ago, and ARC was really two decades in the making," Pranger said. "The fact that we're at capacity now, and now we're just starting to talk about it, we're way, way, way, way behind."