

The Commuter: Too late to connect subway to Secaucus?

By Bonnie Friedman, Jersey Journal, Apr 3, 2006

Could New York City subways be coming to Hudson County?

Steve Lanset, a business analyst, and Ralph Braskett, an actuary, are hoping to start a grassroots campaign to get NJ Transit to sign on to a plan to bring the No. 7 train under the Hudson River to the Lincoln Harbor Light Rail station in Weehawken.

They'd also like to see the subway line extended even deeper into Hudson County, using elevated tracks that would take it all the way to the Secaucus Junction Train Station.

The idea would require scrapping a long-awaited plan to build a second commuter rail tunnel from Secaucus to a new station deep below Midtown Manhattan which was approved by NJ Transit's Board of Directors last summer. It's known as THE Tunnel.

But Lanset and Braskett say it's not too late.

"NJ Transit is not the last word on this," said Lanset, 55, who lives and works in Downtown Jersey City.

The pair – who have no formal transportation planning background – are promoting the plan through the one-page Web site: www.subwaytosecaucus.com. They've also been talking it up online through NJ.com's Transit forum. (NJ.com and The Jersey Journal are both owned by Advance Publications.)

Lanset wrote on the forum that NJ Transit's plan for a commuter rail tunnel "looks more unwieldy and expensive every day."

Braskett said the subway solution would cost about half of NJ Transit's \$6 billion projected figure for the commuter rail tunnel because subway tunnels are smaller and constructed at steeper grades. Their plan also nixes the Midtown Manhattan train station.

Lanset and Braskett also say the prickly problem of state boundaries shouldn't present a hitch because NJ Transit is reimbursed by New York for operating commuter rail service to New York destinations.

Once their online campaign starts generating buzz about the plan, the pair says it will make a formal presentation to state and federal officials.

But do two Joes from Jersey really have any chance of derailing a multi-billion dollar project that has been on the radar for the last decade?

No way, says Dan Stessel, a spokesman for NJ Transit.

"At this stage in the games, it's like asking, 'Why not a skytram?'" Stessel said.

"It's not in a let's-dream-about-it phase. This is not a theoretical exercise. THE Tunnel is actually going to happen," he said.

Martin E. Robbins, director of the Transportation Policy Institute at Rutgers University, also squashed the subway scenario.

“This was looked at in the Access to the Region’s Core study and was not accepted because the No. 7 has numerous problems about capacity,” Robbins said. “The New Jersey commuter rail system is very effective and should be the core of future expansion. The idea that is being promoted is a distraction.”

Lanset and Braskett aren’t concerned about the naysayers.

“Professionals get too caught up on their turf,” Braskett said, noting that other transit ideas initially dismissed as unwieldy – such as the MetroCard – are now reality.