

December 11, 2015

TWO MILESTONES REACHED ON EAST SIDE ACCESS

The MTA announced earlier this week that it had reached substantial completion on two ‘significant’ contracts for [East Side Access](#). Work on the 55th Street Ventilation facility and a contract for structures improvements in HAROLD Interlocking in Queens are currently wrapping up, bringing us a few centimeters closer to the completion of East Side Access.

Work on the 55th Street Ventilation Facility, one of four facilities which will provide ventilation to the new tunnels that were bored deep under Manhattan, is finished after crews started working on it over three years ago. The facility is completely underground and its only opening to the outside world is a few emergency hatches and what the MTA is calling “[high-heel friendly](#)” [sidewalk grates](#).

In Queens, the work just completed began over six years ago, and consisted of installing 2,700 feet of new storm sewer, 3,600 feet of duct banks that house 12,000-volt AC traction power, an access road, five utility conduits, three electrical substations for snow melters, relocated and adjusted utility conduits, installed a remote terminal unit, and purchased three gantries.

The MTA [also uploaded several pictures to its Flickr stream](#) dated November 23rd that illustrate what’s going on elsewhere on the project.

These contracts aren’t all that much more than box ticking on a massive project plagued by issues (we were supposed to be in our third year of East Side Access revenue service this month), but it’s good to see things starting to get done, albeit it very slowly.

LIRR LOOKING TO CLOSE PEDESTRIAN CROSSING IN ISLIP

The LIRR says it wants to close a “dangerous” pedestrian crossing in Islip. [The crossing](#) is just a few feet west of the platforms at Islip station, and allows passengers to go between the two parking lots on either side of the station and access the other of two side platforms at the station. The crossing gets frequent use, with most passengers who drive and park at Islip station using it at least once a day (if they park in the south lot, to get to the westbound platform in the morning, or if they park in the north lot, to get from the eastbound platform back to their cars in the evening.) There is no pedestrian overpass at the station that would allow passengers to cross from one side to another without physically crossing the tracks at grade.

The LIRR presently wants to fence off the crossing and build a walkway forcing riders to walk 200 feet west to the Nassau Avenue crossing (another grade crossing), at the cost of \$345,000 (which seems high for a fence and 200 feet of sidewalk...).

The LIRR’s Deputy Chief Safety Officer Tim Doddo said that the railroad receives “almost daily reports from our engineers” of close calls at the crossing, though Mr.

Doddo said that the railroad is only aware of one pedestrian accident at the crossing in the last 35 years.

The railroad’s plan has drawn criticism from residents who use the station because it would inconvenience them, making it harder to access the parking lots or platforms on the opposite side of the tracks. In my opinion, other than letting the LIRR say it closed a grade crossing, closing the crossing won’t actually do anything, since all they’d be doing is moving the problem 200 feet to the west. While there’s gates at the Nassau Avenue crossing, they don’t pose much of an obstacle to pedestrians going under or around them. With gaps in service of as much as 50 minutes at Islip during the morning rush hour, nobody is going to wait patiently behind a crossing gate while the train they hoped to catch enters and leaves the station, making them wait almost an hour for the next one, so it’s not going to decrease the likelihood of people cutting across in front of trains.

I’m all for closing *dangerous* grade crossings, but closing crossings for the sake of closing crossings is silly when it comes at the expense of the railroad’s passengers (and it’s not going to even fix the problem, just move it

elsewhere). The most ideal solution would be to construct a pedestrian overpass or underpass at Islip, like many other stations have—that would allow most passengers to easily get between lots and platforms on either side of the tracks, it would let the LIRR close the crossing, and it would greatly reduce foot traffic across all of the crossings in the vicinity (not just move it

elsewhere). But since 30 feet of fence and 200 feet of sidewalk is expected to cost \$345,000 (enough to run weekend Greenport service year-round for the next three years), who knows how much that would cost.

The Department of Transportation is expected to rule on the proposal sometime soon.

MARGINALLY MORE SERVICE ADDED FOR ISLANDERS GAMES

The LIRR [has added a third eastbound extra train following Islanders games and a third westbound extra train on weekends and holidays](#) to better meet the existing demand for event service to Brooklyn-Atlantic Terminal, which is right across the street from the Barclays Center. While service is being expanded, it's only marginally good news if you happen to live on the South Shore, west of Babylon.

At the beginning of the season, the LIRR advertised two additional eastbound trains after Islanders games, and two additional westbound trains on weekends and holidays only, but they only went to Babylon and Farmingdale, leaving riders in a pretty hefty portion of the system without any sort of direct trains following events. As I mentioned last time, on all of the LIRR's advertised service in the hour following the conclusion of Islanders games, about 5,101 passengers per game ride the LIRR had to vfy for only around 3,126 seats on trains, which was a loading factor of 159%, way more than what should be considered acceptable.

The LIRR's "increase" of service consists of adding a second direct train from Brooklyn to Babylon on weekdays, and a second round-trip on weekends and holidays. While this is good news for those who live between Rockville Centre and Babylon, it leaves riders going to most other places on the system out in the cold, literally, with the only way for them to get back home is to take trains to Jamaica, and then try to make connections there (connections which are sometimes released on a whim or just plain long to start, given that the baseline service from Brooklyn is so little compared to what the LIRR runs to and from New York).

While any addition of service would be helpful given the inadequacy of the railroad's initial service plan, adding a train to a place that not only already has a direct train going there, but already has three regularly scheduled trains an hour from New York (two local, one express) seems silly. In the hour following Islanders games the LIRR is now sending five trains to Babylon, while sending

just one to practically everywhere else in electric territory—Ronkonkoma, Huntington, Far Rockaway, Long Beach, Hempstead. The first two of which have enough ridership to warrant additional service on an ordinary night, nevermind an additional influx of Islanders fans. While the Babylon extra I saw when I visited Brooklyn after an Islanders game was probably the most crowded train there, the loading on it was nowhere near 200%, and didn't seem to warrant a whole extra train—the overflow Babylon riders could be served just as well by better coordinating connections out of Brooklyn to existing trains at Jamaica, and not having LIRR employees in the station just blindly tell riders to get on whatever train is posted there and go to Jamaica.

As far as I can tell, the additional eastbound train on weekdays, at least, is unlikely to result in any additional operating expenses from game to game—the LIRR was previously wasting money on having crews run two extra trains to Jamaica after most Islanders games (one of which was likely run by an existing crew, the other likely run by an extra crew called in and paid for 8 hours), so they're just making better use of the resources they're already using (a pleasant surprise!).

But still—running five trains an hour to one place after an Islanders game doesn't seem like the best idea. Not only is it not really necessary based on the observed passenger loads, but running five trains one behind each other, and mixing slow locals and fast expresses on one stretch of track is clumsy, and the extra trains from Brooklyn typically unnecessarily delay the regularly scheduled trains from New York (which adds to travel time—and very few of the post-event trains are leaving 20 minutes after the game as advertised anyways).

With three crews, the LIRR could run extra post-event trains to Babylon, Ronkonkoma, and Huntington, [as well as run a whole host of extra service](#), all for the same amount operating cost. So the extra service is better, but only marginally so. The additional service is a step in the right direction, but ~~more~~ smarter service is still needed.

MASTIC RESIDENTS WANT NEW GRADE CROSSING

In other grade crossing news, the Town of Brookhaven is looking to get at least one new grade crossing constructed in Mastic, near the LIRR's Mastic-Shirley station. The Town of Brookhaven Board voted unanimously on November 19th to request a hearing before a state DoT administrative law judge, who will make recommendation to the DoT Commissioner on whether or not one or more new grade crossings should be added in Mastic.

The Town of Brookhaven says they want the new grade crossings to help alleviate the severe congestion in Mastic and Shirley that presently builds up when the gates at the William Floyd Crossing—the single busiest highway grade crossing on Long Island by car volume, with an average annual daily traffic count of over 48,100 cars and trucks going over the crossing each day—are lowered for any longer than a short amount of time. 27 trains cross six highway lanes on an average weekday, 14 of which are westbound trains, that make a station stop at Mastic-Shirley. A DoT Spokeswoman told *Newsday* that 52,637 vehicles traverse William Floyd Parkway between Surrey Circle just south of the crossing and Montauk Highway a few blocks to the north on the opposite side of the tracks.

Beth Wahl, president of the Mastic-Shirley Chamber of Commerce [told Newsday](#) that “It's a nightmare. That's

the only way you can describe it.” Brookhaven Town Councilman Dan Panico told *Newsday* that the town requested the hearing because LIRR officials have been “inflexible throughout the years” when asked to consider new crossings. LIRR spokesman Salvatore Arena told *Newsday* that the LIRR “has long opposed the creation of new grade crossings for safety reasons.”

While it's fine for the LIRR to oppose new grade crossings on the grounds of safety, the railroad should not forget the importance of being a good neighbor and being reasonable and giving suitable consideration to the concerns of municipalities. The LIRR could oppose the construction of a crossing in Mastic to alleviate traffic now and nobody would probably pay all that attention to it, but nobody should be surprised if, come several years from now, the LIRR has enough money to double track as far as Mastic-Shirley or Speonk and increase service, that residents don't do anything possible to block the LIRR's efforts at that time. Shoving off concerns from local municipalities lands the railroad on a very slippery slope—it almost always stunts progress and growth, and it serves as good example of why the LIRR often times has great difficulty getting expansion projects done on Long Island. Good relations with local municipalities is important for many reasons, the LIRR shouldn't be balking at a chance to extend an olive branch to local communities.

MTA COMES OUT WITH NEW MAP OF NY-PENN STATION

The MTA, New Jersey Transit, and Amtrak have launched a “[public safety awareness campaign](#)” at NY-Penn Station for the holiday shopping season. The campaign consists of various safety advertisements with the red and green stick figures used elsewhere illustrating some of the common things people do to injure themselves at the continent's busiest rail station. In addition, the MTA is making available “[Z-card](#)” things that fold out and have the [various safety messages](#) with the stick figures on them, but also have a map of NY-Penn Station showing where all of the concourses extend to, where staircases, elevators, entrances, exits, and other passageways in the labyrinth of a train station under Madison Square Garden. The map, [available online here](#), is probably the best map of NY-Penn Station I've seen so far. [NJTransit has its own map of NY-Penn Station](#), a very close second, but it's a bit

cluttered by the different retail locations in the station, and as of this writing, is a little out of date. My normal commute hasn't taken me through NY-Penn Station regularly in many years, but as far as I can tell, there doesn't seem to be anything missing or incorrect on the MTA's version of the map (NJTransit's is missing one staircase down to tracks 18/19 in the LIRR concourse). The reverse of the map also has the [regional transit diagram](#), first debuted during the Super Bowl (though they did little more than just copy and paste the map and extend the 7 to 34th Street—it still has the R washed out through the Montague Tube, the Raritan Valley Line hasn't been extended to NY, the Meadowlands Line to Hoboken, and Amtrak hasn't stopped at Secaucus since the Super Bowl.) Anyways, I believe printed copies are available in NY-Penn Station now if you'd like a paper copy to keep.