

STATEMENT ON THIRD TRACK PROJECT

In its Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) at page S-20, the LIRR admits that after spending billions of taxpayer dollars and damaging Long Island communities and their residents' quality of life, the end result of the Third Track project will be to add just one more morning westbound train and one more afternoon eastbound train each day. Is this really worth it? Even the LIRR's own statistics show that commutation into NYC has declined over the past 30 years.

The DEIS tries to justify this huge expenditure of public money and burden on communities like Floral Park Village by claiming that it will allow more reverse commute trains. But do we really need them? As a rider, I have personally seen reverse commute trains over the past 20 years. They have always been half empty, at best. Must we spend billions of dollars and damage Long Island communities to add more, even emptier reverse commute trains?

The LIRR projects there will be a need for trains going against the rush hour traffic years, and decades, from now. But based on what? Who will be paying high, ever increasing fares to get to LIRR stations, then to go from NYC to Long Island, then take a taxi or bus (or bicycle), just to arrive at a low paying job? And do the DEIS's projections even consider that in the future more and more high paying jobs will be relying on e-commuting, not trains?

The DEIS also claims there is a need to bypass trains that are disabled or have other problems. But the LIRR's own reports show that these incidents are happening all over the system, and mostly not on the ten mile stretch of track involved in this project. The plain and obvious question not answered by the DEIS is: Why not try maintaining the equipment better, actually solve the problems of a deteriorating and neglected system, rather than spend money going around them? This makes about as much sense widening the NYC streets so that people can drive around the potholes.

The most remarkable thing about this project is that the DEIS relies so heavily on other things besides the Third Track to justify it – such as eliminating grade crossings, upgrading stations and modernizing the switches and signals. The LIRR obviously does not have to build another track in order to make these improvements. And their benefits are undeniable, not just based on nebulous predictions. Eliminating key grade crossings will definitely reduce traffic congestion and pollution, eliminate blaring train horns and prevent deadly collisions between trains and vehicles. Upgrading and modernizing stations, switches and signals will plainly avoid many of the service breakdowns that continually plague the LIRR.

But the DEIS refused to seriously consider the alternative of first making these improvements before disrupting communities and spending billions of dollars on the Third Track. Out of thousands of pages, the DEIS rejected this sound alternative in only a sentence or two. It clearly was a predetermined result, not a genuine analysis of how to solve the LIRR's problems.

The LIRR should do right thing and use the public's money for purposes that clearly make sense and do not rely on baseless projections that may, or may not, happen over the next 10, 20 or 30 years: (1) Eliminate key grade crossings which tie up traffic each day and where people occasionally get killed, (2) replace the system's existing rails on a regular basis before they break, (3) fix and modernize the switches and signals that constantly seem to be failing, (4) maintain the trains so that riders can use the bathrooms without being disgusted, see out the windows and do not have sit on advertising posters used for seat coverings, and (5) spare the commuters some fare increases. Then, after this is done, re-evaluate the situation and determine if the reverse commute is finally starting to happen, and, if it actually is, whether other solutions have become more viable with advancements in technology.

The underlying question is, where are the MTA/LIRR's priorities? Shouldn't they be in adequately maintaining their existing facilities before requesting billions of dollars to expand, based on projections that may never come to pass? If they continue to misallocate their resources, then one day there may well be a real catastrophe. And if people are killed as a result, a third track is not going to make any difference for them or their families.

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