

The Times

THE Tunnel: An investment in N.J.'s economic future

Thursday, September 30, 2010

BY DIANNE BRAKE

Thursday, September 30, 2010

SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

At Monday's Assembly Transportation Committee hearing, New Jersey Transit Executive Director James Weinstein confirmed that the multibillion-dollar project now under construction is necessary for just about any new transit service improvement to be added to New Jersey's transit system.

The project, variously known as the Access to the Region's Core (ARC) project, or the Trans Hudson Express (THE) Tunnel, has been halted this month by the Christie administration for a 30-day review of the project's finances. Assembly Committee Chairman John Wisniewski, D-Sayreville, asked Mr. Weinstein questions to determine whether the review is likely to result in a withdrawal of the administration's support for the project. The director replied that the 30-day review would have to be completed before such a question could be answered.

One committee member implied criticism of the project by asking why New Jersey should care about a project that seemed to support New York jobs. The answer lies in the fact that THE Tunnel will double transit capacity for up to 75 percent of New Jersey's population.

Although THE Tunnel will separate New Jersey trains from the Amtrak entrance to New York, thereby benefiting Amtrak riders on the Northeast Corridor, the benefit of THE Tunnel to New Jersey is so huge as to be almost impossible to estimate.

An investment in a system at one location can benefit the entire region, as has been demonstrated in Boston and Washington, D.C. Boston's central artery and Washington's new Metro line to Arlington have spurred new economic investments in station areas all along the lines. It was not just the city centers that benefited from the investment, but all the communities touched by the system.

In New Jersey, improvements made possible by THE Tunnel can make the system far more Jersey-centric than it is today. NJ Transit will be able to improve service between New Jersey stations and among New Jersey transit lines, and improve connectivity among different modes of travel.

It will allow NJ Transit to reconnect New Jersey's cities to suburban employment centers as well as bolster new economic investments in the existing transit hubs of Newark, Jersey City and other employment centers.

We applaud Gov. Christie's responsible action to make sure that the funding is in place to complete the project, which is one of the most strategic investments in New Jersey's future that is under way today. We know that the administration recognizes the

importance of this investment to the prosperity of New Jersey's near-term and long-term future.

After all, what could be of greater immediate benefit to New Jersey's struggling economy? Building the project adds about 6,000 construction jobs for New Jersey's workers and, when it is complete, the project will provide the capacity to spur more lasting economic growth in the future.

What could be more strategic? This project adds growth capacity that will achieve multiple goals: reduce traffic on highway arteries, improve environmental conditions and mobility, and encourage efficient land-use patterns.

The project also enhances New Jersey's competitive edge in the region. PlanSmart NJ has supported THE Tunnel since we expanded our focus from Central Jersey to statewide in 1999. We recognized that the post-recession economy and the next generation of the work force will have a new appetite for greater transit use and development near transit hubs.

We trust that Gov. Christie will use the power of his office to make sure that the review will be completed as soon as possible and will result in expediting the completion of the project rather than slowing it down.

We ask Gov. Christie today: As you lead our state to a recovery from the current recession, please reinforce the message that your administration will stand by this project. It is a gift from our generation to those yet to come.

Dianne R. Brake is president of PlanSmart NJ (plansmartnj.org), a Trenton-based statewide not-for-profit research and advocacy organization that advances the quality of community life through sound land-use planning and regional cooperation.