



200 million reasons commuter rail tunnel is "closer to reality"

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BY TOM DAVIS
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The Obama administration will contribute \$200 million toward a new commuter rail tunnel to Manhattan, New Jersey's congressional leaders announced Thursday.

The award, included in the proposed 2010 federal budget, would be the Obama administration's largest contribution so far toward the \$8.7 billion project, which is expected to be completed by 2017.

State officials hailed the announcement as the federal government's strongest stamp of support for a tunnel that will double the train capacity between New York and New Jersey.

"The president's inclusion of this money for the mass transit tunnel is a clear indication of the administration's strong support for what is the largest transit project getting under way in the nation," Governor Corzine said.

Earlier this year, Corzine allocated \$130 million of stimulus funds toward the project, and the federal government provided another \$48 million in its fiscal year 2009 appropriations bill. NJ Transit says construction will move forward this spring, helped by the federal stimulus money. The agency wants the federal government to eventually commit as much as \$3 billion to the project.

"This is huge," said Rich Sarles, NJ Transit's executive director. "This is a big step forward."

So far, Port Authority and New Jersey officials have contributed nearly \$6 billion toward the tunnel. But the Obama administration has not indicated whether it will meet NJ Transit's \$3 billion funding request. Local congressmen have asked for \$345 million through earmark spending requests from next year's budget for the new tunnel. They include Bill Pascrell Jr., D-Paterson; Steve Rothman, D-Fair Lawn; Albio Sires, D-West New York; and Rush Holt, D-West Windsor.

The House will release its appropriations bill next month. Rothman said Thursday he was pleased with the Obama administration's support, but he hopes to secure more money for the project by the end of the year.

"I will be working with my New Jersey and New York colleagues to add to that \$200 million by the time Congress votes on its spending priorities," he said. Obama's budget also recommends the tunnel for an "Early Systems Work Agreement," which demonstrates the project has the full backing of the federal government.

"This is the green light we need to start putting people to work, building a new rail tunnel under the Hudson River and help build the foundation for a stronger economic future," said Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J.

The tunnel is expected to create 6,000 construction jobs a year over a 10-year period and, once completed, 44,000 permanent jobs throughout the New Jersey- New York region.

Critics complained that the Obama administration's funding should go toward redesigning the project so that it connects with the east side of Manhattan. Jeff Tittel, executive director of the Sierra Club in New Jersey, said the tunnel won't be useful to New Jersey commuters if it doesn't go past "Macy's basement."

"It [Obama's funding] would be great if the tunnel actually somewhere," he said. Sarles said the project will be worthwhile because it's "going into the heart of Manhattan. That is going somewhere."

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