

Tunnel is nation's top transit project

Tuesday, June 9, 2009

**BY LARRY RIGGS
TRANSPORTATION WRITER**

NORTH BERGEN — Federal Transit Administrator Peter Rogoff came to the groundbreaking ceremony for the nation's biggest mass transit project with big news and a bigger commitment: The federal government will fund the remaining \$3 billion needed to build the \$8.7 billion rail tunnel under the Hudson River.

Standing on the site of a warehouse to be demolished for the massive project, Rogoff announced Monday that the Obama administration is committed to provide the full \$3 billion federal share for the project over the eight-year construction period. It matches \$5.7 billion provided by the state, the New Jersey Turnpike Authority and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

"It is the biggest commitment of federal transit money to any one project," Rogoff said.

The tunnel project won funding because it serves one of the most transit-intensive areas in the country, the existing tunnels are at capacity, and it represents the best use of federal dollars, he said.

The project will transform the lives of commuters by shaving 40 minutes off the average trip, he said.

Federal funding is guaranteed through a legal agreement, even if the administration changes in Washington, he said.

"We don't enter into an agreement unless we intend to fund it," Rogoff said afterward.

Officials said there was already a combination of \$1.35 billion on hand in federal and state money for the project to proceed.

Gov. Jon S. Corzine announced he would sign an executive order within the next 10 days requiring the state comptroller to provide oversight over the 25 tunnel project contracts and to assess contractor performance.

"This is too big a project not to be attentive and make sure the taxpayers' money is spent wisely," Corzine said. "It is essential to make sure we get it in on time and on budget."

Hordes of hard hats

Corzine and the 10 other officials who spoke were flanked on and off the dais by some of the 6,000 construction workers expected to be employed by the project. The tunnel work includes rail yards and construction of a deep cavern station under 34th street in New York which will be connected to Penn Station and adjoining subway and PATH train lines by underground passageways.

Critics have said the tunnel should go to Penn Station, which NJ Transit officials said can't happen because of subway lines, a city water main and other infrastructure issues in Manhattan.

Close to 200 people attended Monday's groundbreaking and almost every NJ Transit and Amtrak train that passed sounded its horn.

The ceremony came just shy of the 100th anniversary of the first train from New York to Perth Amboy in November 1910 through the first tunnels built by the Pennsylvania Railroad. Veteran U.S. Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg, D-N.J., who many praised for keeping the tunnel project moving in Washington, joked about it at his own expense.

"I'll never forget what it was like in 1910 when they started the first tunnel," quipped Lautenberg, who is 85. Then he turned serious and invoked the memory of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks when NJ Transit and Amtrak trains provided the only way out of New York City.

He called the new tunnel an "invaluable piece of our security network," adding it will help take cars off the highways, ease traffic congestion and remove pollutants from the air.

"We will be less dependent on foreign sources of oil, it will eliminate missed appointments and delays getting home," Lautenberg said. "It is a historic moment."

N.Y. gets first digs

Actual tunnel digging is expected to start next year on the Manhattan side of the river, said Richard Sarles, NJ Transit director. He paid tribute to a predecessor, the late George Warrington, who advanced the tunnel project.

Missing from the ceremony were New York City and state officials, who Corzine said were invited but had other commitments. New York officials were thanked for their support as was the Port Authority. Its \$3 billion toward the project is considered a bi-state contribution.

Republicans also were missing from the rank of federal and state officials on the dais.

©2009 Asbury Park Press