Forget romantic fantasies—rebuild Penn Station without uprooting the Garden - Crain's New York Business

Moving Madison Square Garden from atop the decrepit transit hub would increase cost and disruption

By Mitchell L. Moss and Hugh O'Neill

Penn Station may be the busiest transit hub in the western hemisphere, but its congested corridors and poorly connected concourses create a challenging experience for commuters. A solution is now in sight, building upon Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s plan to upgrade Penn Station and the Postal Service's historic Farley Building across Eighth Avenue to create a new Empire Station Complex. Proposals for this critical project were due April 22.

The new Empire Station includes Moynihan Train Hall, a 210,000-square-foot grand hall similar to the one in Grand Central. That space will be the hub for Amtrak and commuter rail passengers, relieving congestion and concentrating new, state-of-the-art ticketing, baggage and waiting facilities—with raised ceilings and flooded with natural light.

The plan will reduce congestion on the rail platforms and at the station’s entrances and exits by creating direct access to Amtrak and Long Island Rail Road lines both from the Moynihan Hall and from a new passenger concourse on the west side of Eighth Avenue. The new facility will have vastly improved street access to both the new concourse and Moynihan Hall. The additional stairs and escalators connecting to both the new expanded West End Concourse and many platforms will help customers get to and from their trains more directly. By creating a new waiting area for them in Farley, the concourse crowds in the upper level of Penn will be reduced.

Penn Station commuters will be able to move smoothly in, through and between the upper and lower levels because the project will reconfigure those spaces—adding new entrances, natural light, stairways and escalators, and widening walkways. Of course, the very location of Penn Station, just a few blocks from the Hudson River tunnels that link New York and New Jersey, means that passengers will still need to use stairs or escalators to reach rail platforms and tracks 40 feet below street level.

There are well-meaning groups who believe we should tear down the current structure, move Madison Square Garden, and start over. Simply put, this is too expensive and disruptive an option for achieving most of the same goals by modernizing the existing facility at far lower cost and with far less disruption.

Furthermore, the Garden currently sits above major transit hubs; moving it to a new location not directly served by mass transit would aggravate pedestrian and road traffic congestion (increasing noise and exhaust-fume pollution) during the venue’s sports and entertainment events. And strong resistance from neighborhood groups would undoubtedly delay, if not stop, such a move. Preservationists have also raised questions about other potential arena sites.
Our recently released report estimates that the Empire Station plan could be completed for less than $2.5 billion, whereas moving the Garden and building a brand new Penn Station would cost closer to $6 billion. Raising an extra $4 billion of private and public capital for the relocation option will be exceedingly difficult in light of the projected return, and given the priority of funding new rail tunnels under the Hudson and the MTA's capital program.

Faced with New York’s financial priorities and competing mass-transit demands, it’s hard to justify relocating Madison Square Garden and vastly increasing the disruption involved in fixing Penn Station for only modest gains beyond what the Empire Station proposal delivers.

Penn Station requires a pragmatic and feasible plan for rapidly transforming the commuter experience at the city’s largest transportation hub. Commuters in New Jersey, Long Island, Amtrak and areas soon to be served by Metro-North should make sure the Empire Station Complex becomes a reality.

We cannot afford to indulge the romantic fantasies of architecture critics who want to build a new version of the original Penn Station. Now is the time to relieve the commuter pain point at Penn Station—and the governor’s plan is the only realistic option for getting that done.

Mitchell L. Moss is a professor of urban policy and planning at the Wagner School of Public Service at New York University and director of the Rudin Center for Transportation. Hugh O’Neill is the founder and president of Appleseed and former assistant executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.