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Cuomo Wants Elevated Train Link Built to Ill-Served La Guardia Airport

By MICHAEL M. GRYNBAUM JAN. 20, 2015

It is a struggle known to generations of weary air travelers: the traffic-choked, anxiety-laden trip to La Guardia Airport, heartbeats and taxi meters rising in unison.

That bumper-to-bumper experience could soon be coming to an end. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York on Tuesday proposed the construction of an elevated AirTrain to La Guardia. It would be the first rail link to an airfield long lamented for its transit-starved location in Queens.

The proposed train would curve along the Grand Central Parkway for one and a half miles before connecting with the No. 7 subway line and the Long Island Rail Road at an expanded terminal in Queens, alongside Citi Field and the National Tennis Center.

Similar in design to the rail lines used to reach Kennedy International Airport and Newark Liberty International Airport, the elevated train would cost about \$450 million to build, the governor's office said, a relative pittance compared with a cost of \$1 billion per mile or more for new subway lines.

It is an ambitious, Robert Moses-style proposal from a governor determined to leave an imprint in his second term, although major elements remained to be

worked out. When the train would start operating, for one, is far from certain.

“I would not venture a guess to the timing,” Mr. Cuomo said, shortly after unveiling his plan at a breakfast speech in Midtown Manhattan. A spokeswoman later clarified that once construction began, the project would take about five years to finish.

Mr. Cuomo was also vague about how to pay for the train. He said the costs would be absorbed within “existing” state resources, including the budgets of the two agencies he was assigning to the project — the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey — as well as the billions of dollars the state is counting on from settlements with Wall Street banks.

But the transportation authority, which operates and maintains bridges, buses and the New York City subway system, already has a \$15.2 billion gap in its long-term capital plan, and Mr. Cuomo offered no hints of how the state might make up the difference.

“It is alarming that he would spring a new project on people without explaining how to pay for the old projects,” said Nicole Gelinas, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. “Are we going to keep up with the Second Avenue subway, never mind a new project?”

For La Guardia’s passengers, any doubts may be outweighed by the potential convenience. A survey by the Port Authority in 2008 showed that 75 percent of travelers from Manhattan used a taxi or car service to reach the airport; only 16 percent rode buses or shared a van.

The governor’s office gave no estimate for how long it would take passengers to ride from Manhattan to La Guardia via the proposed station, which is farther east of Manhattan than the airport.

Proposals for a train to La Guardia have circulated in transportation circles for decades. Other ideas have included a transit link from Woodside, Queens, or extending the N subway line from Astoria to the airport, a plan promoted by the

Giuliani administration but felled by Queens politicians concerned about its effect on local neighborhoods.

By comparison, Mr. Cuomo's proposal is cheaper and less intrusive to residents, according to Elliot G. Sander, chairman of the Regional Plan Association, a group that advises on infrastructure planning in the New York area.

"It is relatively simple, relatively inexpensive and has minimal impact on the surrounding community," said Mr. Sander, a lifelong resident of Queens. "You're not doing underground tunneling. It's a simple, short connection."

The governor, for his part, received a warm response on Tuesday when he previewed plans to improve the city's transportation network at a breakfast sponsored by the Association for a Better New York, a civic group.

"This is a breakthrough," said Mitchell L. Moss, director of the Rudin Center for Transportation at New York University. "They may need to rename La Guardia after Cuomo."

In the audience were representatives of the Wilpon family, which owns Citi Field and the Mets, and the Related Companies, one of Mr. Cuomo's largest donors; Related Companies is redeveloping land around the proposed AirTrain terminal.

The reception was slightly cooler at a transportation authority board meeting around the same time on Tuesday. Andrew Albert, a rider representative on the board, said he was concerned about an influx of airport-bound riders on the crowded 7 line. The 7 train is gaining a new stop on the Far West Side of Manhattan, but is also receiving a signal upgrade to increase the number of trains per hour.

Leaders of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the Port Authority later issued a joint statement praising Mr. Cuomo's idea.

Mr. Cuomo announced in October a contest for overall redesigns of both New York City airports. He affirmed on Tuesday that he wanted to redesign the terminals at La Guardia, which Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. recently compared to the facilities in a third-world country. The governor proposed, among other things, a high-speed ferry link from Manhattan and a new slate of departure-gate restaurants.

“I’m partial to Peter Luger,” Mr. Cuomo said during his speech, referring to the famed Brooklyn steakhouse, whose logo was projected on a screen behind him. “As governor,” he added, “you get a few prerogatives.”

Emma G. Fitzsimmons contributed reporting.

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