

NY POLITICS

Gov. Andrew Cuomo Proposes Air Train for La Guardia

Project Would Take 5 Years, Cost \$450 Million



New York City's existing air train moves along the tracks at John F. Kennedy International Airport, as photographed on Nov. 30, 2011 PHOTO: BRUCE BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES

By **ERICA ORDEN** and **MIKE VILENSKY**

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New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Tuesday proposed building an elevated train connecting the No. 7 subway line to La Guardia Airport, breathing new life into an idea long talked about but never realized.

The train would provide similar public-transportation access to what serves John F. Kennedy International Airport and Newark Liberty International Airport. It would run along Grand Central Parkway, and connect to the 7 train and to the Long Island Rail Road at a terminal in Queens at Willets Point.

“You can’t get to La Guardia by train today,” Mr. Cuomo said in an address to the Association for a Better New York, a civic and business-affairs group. “And that really is inexcusable. And that we’re going to change over the next several years.”

The air train is expected to cost \$450 million, the governor's office said, and would be finished within the next five years. It would fall under the domain of the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey, which operates the airport and will develop the train in consultation with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

Mr. Cuomo said he expects to pay for the air train with existing funds, including part of the \$5 billion windfall the state received from bank settlements.

The Democratic governor appears poised to tackle a number of mass-transportation issues in his second term, including the development of the Second Avenue subway line. He said on Tuesday—a day before his State of the State address on Wednesday in Albany—that he wants to invest in high-speed ferries, though he didn't provide specifics.

Mr. Cuomo on Tuesday also proposed adding four new Metro-North stations in the Bronx and giving Metro-North access to Penn Station. Metro-North currently runs out of Grand Central Terminal.

The Cuomo administration has also been focused on the development of a replacement for the Tappan Zee Bridge—one of the biggest and costliest projects of the governor's tenure.

Mr. Cuomo's pivot toward connecting La Guardia via train struck at a favorite idea of transportation advocates. La Guardia is currently accessible by bus, but proposals for trains to the airport have been derailed in the past.

In the 1990s, then-New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani called for extending the N line to La Guardia, and the MTA explored the idea, spending about \$17 million on planning. The proposal died after strenuous objections from local lawmakers and Queens residents over the disruption it would cause to residential neighborhoods. In 2003, that idea was shelved.

“There is a recognition that the airport's time has come,” said Mitchell Moss, director of New York University's Rudin Center for Transportation.

Nicole Gelinas, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, was skeptical of how Mr. Cuomo planned to fund the initiative, saying the money is needed elsewhere. She said the administration hadn't funded MTA's capital program, which is being stressed by expensive projects like the Second Avenue subway and Long Island Rail Road access to Grand Central Terminal.

“If you don't have any money, then don't do big initiatives,” she said. “It could be a very good project, but we need a way to pay for it.”



A spokeswoman for the governor pointed to Mr. Cuomo’s announcement on Tuesday that he will invest \$750 million in the MTA.

The proposal comes after the main bus to La Guardia, the Q70, reached its highest average weekday ridership, with 3,716 riders per weekday in August 2014, statistics through August show, according to an MTA spokesman said.

AirTrain JFK handles many more people. According to the Port Authority of New York

and New Jersey, more than six million passengers took the service in 2013 via the Jamaica and Howard Beach station routes. Through October 2014, the most recent month available, AirTrain ridership in 2014 had already hit more than 6.4 million passengers—a year-to-date jump over 2013 of more than 9%, a spokesman said.

Mr. Cuomo’s plan was met by cautious optimism in Queens. While Mr. Giuliani’s plan to extend the N train to La Guardia attracted criticism, Mr. Cuomo’s proposal would send the elevated train along a highway, rather than through residential areas.

“This has been kicking around for 20 or 30 years, and it seems that the governor’s proposal is the least disruptive” to Queens residents, said state Sen. Michael Gianaris, a Democrat who represents neighborhoods including Astoria and Long Island City.

Mr. Moss said the proposal “takes advantage of La Guardia’s geographic proximity to existing transportation systems, so you don’t have to build from scratch.”

The governor’s office said the Port Authority and MTA had determined that the proposal to run the elevated train along Grand Central Parkway “has limited impact on the established neighborhoods in Queens.”

Joe Sitt, founder of Global Gateway Alliance, an airport advocacy group, said the governor’s plan would “finally put us on par with leading airports around the country.”

But, Mr. Sitt said, “Let’s be clear: We do not need words or speeches. We need action—both on the state and federal level—to provide a budget and timeline quickly.”

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