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Forget LaGuardia - Build a Train to JFK

George Marlin, the new executive director of the Port Authority, deserves praise for his decision to kill the proposed 22-mile high-speed transit system that would have connected Manhattan to JFK and LaGuardia Airports. This costly high-tech project, while serving airport employees and residents of Manhattan's East Side, would have aggravated traffic congestion on the 59th Street Bridge and the surrounding area, while doing little for travelers heading to or from the Bronx, Brooklyn, the rest of Manhattan and other parts of the region. Marlin did the right thing, not just because of the project's price tag, but because it was not organically linked to the city's subway system and to the region's commuter and interstate railway systems.

During the 1970s, the MTA launched a "train to the plane" that took passengers on a special subway to the Howard Beach station in Queens, where they then scurried to a city bus that delivered them to JFK. The MTA did little to attract passengers to the "train to the plane," and some in the MTA even considered it to be a diversion from their primary task of moving commuters. It was discontinued in 1990.

Until 1991, when the Federal Aviation Administration allowed the Port Authority to start collecting \$3 from every departing air passenger to pay for airport improvements, no public agency had seriously addressed the problem of airport access in New York. Though finally armed with a way to finance such a plan, the PA was forced to work within impossible constraints complying with federal guidelines for a system that would serve only airport users, avoiding drawn-out battles with local property owners and pleasing elected officials in Queens, where LaGuardia and JFK are located.

Naturally, this ruled out affordable and sensible alternatives, such as using abandoned subway lines or LIRR rights-of-way, or relying on the unused lower half of the new 63rd Street subway tunnel.

The result: a state-of-the-art rail system running from JFK down the Van Wyck Expressway to Jamaica, followed by a scenic tour of Queens with a stop at Willets Point next to Shea Stadium before proceeding to LaGuardia and terminating at Long Island City. Transportation officials in the Dinkins administration successfully pressed for a connection to Manhattan, and Gov. Cuomo then incorporated the project into his "New New York" scheme for improving public infrastructure in the region.

Insiders knew there were insufficient funds to pay for this expanded project, but public officials desperate to prove that New York could actually build something after killing the Second

Avenue Subway and Westway thought that additional funds could be found in Albany or Washington. The 1994 election, though, has made cost-cutting the new gospel at all levels of government, and so the Port Authority must now formulate a new strategy for improving access to the city's airports. This would be a fruitful topic for the American Institute of Architects' conference on "Coping with Capital Budget Cuts," to be held in Manhattan tomorrow.

By abandoning the current airport transit plan, the PA has created a new opportunity to build an affordable system linked directly to the city and regional transit systems. The PA should now focus on JFK, the region's principal international airport and the one with the worst highway connections. Ignore LaGuardia, a domestic airport that is accessible from several major highways.

The PA should build an at-grade three-mile rail line from the Howard Beach subway station that would directly connect JFK's terminals with the A line. Customized subway cars designed to accommodate air travelers and their luggage should be used for a new airport train service that would serve designated stations in Brooklyn and Manhattan, and cost more than a subway fare. The fragile lower Manhattan office market would benefit by having a direct connection to JFK that would attract tourists and international businesses.

In addition, the Port Authority should build a 3 1/2-mile rail line from JFK to the LIRR's Jamaica station with an across-the-track link to Penn Station and a special elevator connecting to the E line of the subway. Just as Walt Disney World has a transportation center where monorails and buses converge, a user-friendly JFK transportation hub at Jamaica could be the drop-off point for travelers from Long Island, Westchester, Connecticut and other parts of the city. And southeast Queens communities that have coped with the noise of jet take-offs and landings deserve to benefit from the public investments that would create jobs and stimulate economic activity.

The prevailing wisdom holds that we need a new Robert Moses to build transportation infrastructure. What we really need are public officials willing to build an affordable link to JFK that doesn't solve all the problems of airport access, just the worst ones. If George Marlin can improve access to JFK by building upon existing regional transit systems, the Port Authority will finally be on the right track.

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