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## The Port Authority: More Than an ATM

A new executive director for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey will be on the agenda at tomorrow's meeting of the Board of Commissioners. Although attention has focused on Governor Pataki's choice to run the authority George Marlin the critical issue is not who runs the agency, but what policies the authority should pursue. Contrary to the prevailing political winds that call for dismantling and privatizing much of the authority, there is a genuine need for a regional agency with the power and know-how to develop transportation infrastructure that connects the two states and links us to the rest of the world.

In recent decades, the Port Authority has been diverted from this fundamental mission. The governors of New York and New Jersey have diminished its autonomy by appointing political operatives rather than independent and informed experts to the board. At the same time they have rejected increases in bridge and tunnel tolls that would allow large-scale investments in transportation infrastructure.

Moreover, the governors increasingly treat the Port Authority's Regional Development Fund as an automatic cash machine that can dispense millions of dollars for pet projects, regardless of their merit. In New York State, \$48 million in Port Authority funds have been placed in an interest-bearing escrow account for the questionable Harlem International Trade Center, preventing these assets from being used for a worthwhile project that might actually get built in this century. And \$50 million was allocated to purchase a parking lot at Aqueduct Race Track, which was then leased back to the New York Racing Association for \$1 a year; the surplus income went toward balancing the state budget. In New Jersey, Port Authority funds have been used to pay for a new building for Rutgers University in downtown New Brunswick and to attract back-offices from New York City.

Political pressure from elected officials has also led the authority to subsidize the development of the Newark Legal and Communications Center and to maintain Howland Hook port facilities in Staten Island and the decaying piers in Brooklyn Heights.

Under outgoing Executive Director Stanley Brezenoff, the agency pruned administrative spending while maintaining its operational muscle demonstrated by the speed with which it rebuilt and reopened the World Trade Center after the 1993 bombing. But last week's announcement that the Port Authority will scale back the proposed high-speed rail line linking JFK and LaGuardia airports to Manhattan suggests that the agency has lost its soul and sense of purpose.

Is there any greater transportation need in the region than improved access to our airports? How can we attract tourists if they must cope with JFK's International Arrivals Building or the lack of an affordable, reliable way to get to hotels in midtown Manhattan? Unless the governors stop siphoning off funds for questionable projects and allow reasonable bridge and tunnel toll hikes, access to the airports will never improve.

The authority should not abandon airport access, but do something feasible and affordable: Build a new Amtrak station at Newark Airport next to its new people-mover and offer a shuttle-train connection to Manhattan's Penn Station. At the same time, the Port Authority should build a no-frills monorail from JFK to Long Island Rail Road's Jamaica station, which would serve New York City and Long Island.

With Penn Station the hub of an airport access system, travelers from Maine to Miami would have convenient transportation to our international airports. But to do this, the Port Authority must concentrate on its core business regional transportation and get out of the real estate business by selling the World Trade Center's Vista Hotel, Newark Legal Center and the obsolete piers. Most important, whoever is the next executive director must tell the governors their cash machine is closed.

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