



What Every Long Islander Should Know About the Third Track

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

People have been fighting about trains ever since they were invented. So it is not surprising that Long Islanders are battling over an MTA plan to build an additional Long Island Rail Road track between Jamaica and Hicksville.

The controversy is curious, though, because the two sides don't really disagree with each other. They're just coming from two different places.

On one side is a coalition of business and public interest groups, including the Long Island Association, Tri-State Transportation Campaign, Regional Plan Association and Environmental Defense. They say the proposal is good for *Long Island*.

On the other side is a group of political leaders and residents who have collected some 10,000 names on petitions to kill the project. They say the project is harmful *to their homes and businesses*.

Proponents say Long Island needs to move more people by transit. Our clogged roads are hard on our environment, as well as our nerves. And it's hard on our economy that people don't have better ways to get to Long Island jobs.

Today, 80% of us work here on the Island, not in the city. About 120,000 commute *to* the Island from other places. Our transit system, designed to get suburbanites to the city, doesn't serve such people well at all.

The worst choke point lies between Hicksville and Jamaica. Five of LIRR's nine major branch lines pass along here. Demand is so heavy that during rush hours trains move only in the peak direction. Anyone wishing to travel the opposite way is basically out of luck.

A third track, combined with new connecting bus, van and light rail service, would make commuters' life easier and help relieve highway congestion. Plus it would boost the economy, as Long Island jobs become more attractive.

Opponents counter that more trains will bring more noise and pollution to their neighborhoods, could reduce their property values and could result in their homes or businesses being taken away. The construction process itself will cause major inconvenience.

Notice that opponents do not deny the Island-wide benefits. Nor do proponents deny that people living near the tracks may be adversely affected. The controversy is less a question of who is right than who gets their way.

The conflict plays out in the messy arena of public politics. In this arena we say, "the majority rules." But we also say that "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." Committed minorities often do get their way.



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This type of conflict is very common. So much so that NIMBY (“Not In My Back Yard”) has become a household word. Yet there are no set rules about who wins. Each case plays out in its own way.

One crucial element is the level of public awareness and participation. When the majority remains uninvolved, the narrow interest is apt to prevail. Turned the other way, the key to regional success is regional awareness. The more informed Long Islanders are, the better the prospects that they will get what they want and need.

This is one in a series of articles examining aspects of life on Long Island, presented by the Long Island Index. The Index provides data about the Long Island region, in order to promote informed public debate and sound policymaking. For more information visit www.longislandindex.org.

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