

Testimony of Senate President Stephen Sweeney
to the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Surface Transportation,
Newark, N.J., May 4, 2015

I would like to thank Senator Booker for bringing the U.S. Senate Surface Transportation Subcommittee to New Jersey for a field hearing focused on the critical role that passenger rail service, and specifically the Northeast Corridor, plays in the region's economy today and how further investment is vital to future job and economic growth.

New Jersey is the crossroads of the Northeast Corridor -- Amtrak's Boston-to-Washington rail line that connects a market of 60 million people, including the nation's most important financial, political and academic centers.

But the Northeast Corridor isn't just Amtrak: Of the 750,000 rail riders in eight states who travel on Northeast Corridor tracks daily, 228,000 of them -- almost one third -- are New Jersey Transit passengers. In fact, five out of six NJ Transit passengers travel some part of the Northeast Corridor each day.

New Jersey is part of an interconnected regional economy that we share not only with New York, the nation's largest city, but also Philadelphia, the fifth-largest. We rely on the busiest and most advanced mass transit network in the country. Any long-term disruption or cutback of service on the Northeast Corridor would be catastrophic to the economy of New Jersey, the region and the nation's economy, and unfortunately, that threat is real, and it is here.

The two 105-year-old rail tunnels under the Hudson River that carry Amtrak and New Jersey Transit trains between New Jersey and New York City were badly damaged by Sandy. In fact, Amtrak's Northeast Corridor, which is four and five tracks wide elsewhere, has to squeeze through a single track bottleneck in each direction when it hits the Hudson River.

These single-track tunnels operate at full capacity during the morning and afternoon rush, with three Amtrak and 21 NJ Transit trains going in one tunnel and out the other every hour. If one of those tunnels has to be closed for 18 months for repairs, we go from 24 trains an hour to six trains an hour.

Seventy-five thousand displaced rail commuters would flood the already crowded PATH system, exacerbate overcrowding at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, and create monstrous daily traffic jams at the George Washington Bridge and the Lincoln and Holland tunnels,

It would be an economic disaster and a commuter nightmare. That is why I have been saying for months that no project is more critical to New Jersey's economy than the construction of a new rail tunnel.

Fortunately, encouraged by the late Senator Frank Lautenberg, whose seat Senator Booker now holds, Amtrak began work on plans for a new Gateway rail tunnel almost immediately after the Access to the Region's Core (ARC) tunnel project was cancelled by Governor Christie in 2010.

We are grateful that Amtrak is already well underway with construction of the \$185 million Hudson Yards concrete casement to preserve a right-of-way for the Gateway tunnel into Penn Station.

I am urging your committee to do everything possible to make sure that Congress provides funding for Amtrak to proceed immediately with the Gateway rail tunnel, and we will do everything we can on our end to make sure that the regional funding share is there.

Because the new Gateway rail tunnel would connect New Jersey and New York City, we have recommended that the Port Authority set aside the first \$3 billion from its planned sale of up to \$8 billion in non-transportation-related assets for the new tunnel, along with funding for a new Port Authority Bus Terminal.

The \$7.5 million Gateway tunnel is just the first half of a comprehensive plan that will expand rail passenger capacity for both New Jersey Transit and Amtrak, and jump-start further economic growth in our region

It includes reconstruction of the current two-track Portal Bridge, a swing bridge over the Hackensack River that carries 450 trains a day and sometimes gets stuck when it opens for barge traffic, with a taller replacement bridge, and the construction of an additional two-track Portal South Bridge to accommodate increased trains.

It includes expansion of the Northeast Corridor Main Line between Newark and Secaucus from two tracks to four tracks to handle more trains, enabling NJ Transit to provide “one-seat” rides during rush hour on the Bergen, Pascack Valley, Main, Raritan Valley, Montclair-Boonton and North Jersey Coast Lines.

And it includes construction of a new Penn Station South adjacent to the existing Penn Station to accommodate the projected doubling of rail ridership by 2040.

The economic benefits to these projects would be enormous. The new trans-Hudson investment is projected to generate \$10 billion in new Gross Regional Product annually, \$4 billion in new Real Personal Income annually, 44,000 new permanent jobs and 6,000 construction jobs during the course of the project. Proximity to rail lines with access to New York City service raises home values by up to \$34,000. And the millennials who will soon make up a majority of our workforce prefer to work in transit-friendly cities and towns. We need to capitalize on that by putting more money, not less, into our passenger rail network.

My colleagues and I stand ready to partner with you, our regional congressional delegation and Amtrak to do everything we can to advance the Gateway rail tunnel project and to expand the capacity and quality of passenger rail service in the region.