

Byford pushes 'golden opportunity' to link regional commuter rail through Penn Station

CAROLINE SPIVACK
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Andy Byford at a Grain's Breakfast Forum when he served as New York City Transit president.

Former New York City Transit President Andy Byford, who won commuter confidence in the late 2010s by improving the city's subway and buses, said rail officials should seize a "golden opportunity" for a bold redevelopment of Penn Station that goes beyond aesthetics.

Byford called for an expansion of commuter rail service at Penn Station that would run trains through the station rather than terminating them there. A new link could connect New Jersey Transit trains to Grand Central, or even Queens and Long Island.

Byford, who is now Amtrak's senior vice president for high-speed rail development, weighed in on the politically-fraught Penn redevelopment in a surprise appearance during a July 20 virtual panel discussion hosted by infrastructure nonprofit ReThinkNYC, members of which have been lobbying for an independent review of plans for the station.

"It's not just about building something that's more aesthetically pleasing-important as though that is, Penn Station is kind of an embarrassment-but you can't fix it by just putting in a few light boxes, by just heightening the ceilings, by just widening a few corridors," said Byford, whose description resembles a redevelopment vision proposed by Gov. Kathy Hochul.

"If we're going to do all of that, why not take the opportunity to fix the damn thing once and for all," Byford added. "Which is, I'm going to say, get rid of the pillars, which means move [Madison Square Garden], but at the very least, do something with the track configuration to enable through-running." MSG's current permit expired July 23, but city planning officials have indicated that they support a at least a 10-year renewal with conditions. The City Council will ultimately vote up or down on MSG's permit. Meanwhile, Amtrak, in coordination with NJ Transit and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, is embarking on an expansion that would bring new tracks, platforms and concourses to Penn. One much-discussed vision would raze the block just south of Penn, often described by its

property tax number Block 780, to create a terminal for NJ Transit trains.

Byford said it would "break my heart to see beautiful buildings torn down on Eighth and Seventh Avenues when they don't need to be." He stressed multiple times that he was expressing his personal opinion and was not speaking on behalf of Amtrak.

"If it was the case that someone asked me to have a look at this, I'll be honored to do that, but I'm just speaking as a private person who cares about New York City," said Byford.

In an email to Grain's, Amtrak spokesman Jason Abrams said the agency and its partners are "studying a range of options to add capacity" at Penn. He emphasized that creating new commuter rail connections would be a complex undertaking and cause "a significant amount of disruption" to existing Amtrak, NJ Transit and Long Island Rail Road service, as well as throughout the broader Northeast Corridor.

"Converting the existing Penn Station to a through-running operation would require significantly wider platforms, new vertical circulation elements (i.e. stairs and escalators) at the track level, and other major infrastructure improvements throughout the regional rail network to accommodate NJ Transit trains on LIRR infrastructure and vice versa," said Abrams.

It's unlikely New Yorkers will see any official involvement on Penn Station's revamp from Byford. Abrams noted that the expansion project is "not part of or affiliated with any of Andy's responsibilities."