



Penn Station Working Advisory Group

Meeting Summary

November 19, 2024

Overview

This document provides a summary of the proceedings from the fourth Penn Station Working Advisory Group (SWAG) meeting on Tuesday, November 19th at the Amtrak Executive Conference Center at Moynihan Train Hall. The presentation consisted of a progress update for the Penn Station Reconstruction project.

Meeting Agenda

- Meeting Goals
- Initial Group Activity
- Penn Reconstruction Design Update
 - Path to Preliminary Engineering
 - Preliminary Engineering Update
- Penn Projects Preliminary Timelines
- Discussion & Feedback
- Penn Station Tour (Optional)

Presentation Summary

Meeting Goals

An Amtrak representative opened the meeting by welcoming attendees and presenting the agenda. The goals of the meeting included:

- Providing an update on Penn Station preliminary engineering work
- Describing learnings and design evolution since the earlier Penn Station Master Plan study
- Gathering initial feedback on proposed station improvements
- Sharing a preliminary timeline for both Penn Reconstruction and Penn Capacity Expansion projects
- Providing an optional tour of Penn Station to aid SWAG members' understanding of station challenges and proposed improvements

Initial Activity – Group Poll

Prior to the presentation, meeting attendees were asked to participate in a group polling activity where they were asked to respond to the following prompts:

- What do you appreciate about Penn Station today?
- What do you think is the most critical improvement needed?

Approximately 30 responses were collected and presented in real time by way of a word cloud visualization. The most common responses to the first prompt (What do you appreciate?) centered around words such as *central, connections, LIRR Concourse, and intercity travel.*

Responses to the second prompt (What critical improvements are needed?) centered around words such as *concourse, circulation, crowding, wayfinding, trains, and cohesive layout.* The Railroad Partners underscored that the SWAG identified the same challenges related to connectivity, wayfinding and signage, and crowding, that compelled the Railroad Partners to develop the Penn Station Master Plan.

Penn Reconstruction: Path to Preliminary Engineering

Current Station Challenges: Project Need

After reflecting on the group activity, the Railroad Partners expounded on the need for the Penn Reconstruction project by citing specific challenges related to inadequate platform egress, limited station presence at street-level, severe crowding at both platform and concourse levels, confusing and byzantine layouts with low ceilings, inadequate station access and accessibility, and underperforming equipment and systems. Many of these challenges stem from the fact that Penn Station operates according to a dated design and layout not well-suited for either modern or future needs, including accommodating the nearly three times as many station users as existed when the station was last reconfigured.

Penn Station Existing Layout

Attendees were presented with plan view diagrams of the existing Lower Level (Level A) and Upper Level (Level B) of Penn Station. The Amtrak representative highlighted the inconsistent public concourse layouts across the two levels that contribute to wayfinding and navigation complexity and confusion. Despite recent targeted investments by the Railroad Partners in waiting areas, new entrances, and other amenities, a more comprehensive approach is needed to fully modernize the station to meet the needs of today and the future.

Penn Station Master Plan

The Amtrak representative provided details on the path taken by the Railroad Partners to advance preliminary engineering work for the Penn Reconstruction project. This process began with an interagency study (Penn Station Master Plan) initiated by the Railroad Partners in 2019 that focused on developing a single vision and conceptual framework for improving the existing station experience and operations. The Railroad Partners identified through that planning process a set of reconstruction principles, including:

- Transitioning to a single-level customer experience from a bi-level, concentrating customer-facing uses together to improve navigation and segregating non-public spaces out of the way
- Prioritizing vertical circulation, accessibility, and egress improvements
- Unifying customer experience and rationalizing station operations by centralizing and collocating customer services to create a more intuitive experience
- Modernizing facility equipment and systems

Penn Reconstruction: Preliminary Engineering Update

From Master Plan to Preliminary Engineering

An MTA representative then led attendees through new developments following the completion of the conceptual design work of the Penn Station Master Plan. The Railroad Partners awarded a preliminary engineering contract, enabling the Penn Reconstruction project, wherein the primary goals and priorities have remained largely consistent with those of the Master Plan: improving safety, functionality, and overall customer experience.

Preliminary engineering work has uncovered a set of unanticipated challenges for the station. This includes needing a larger footprint for Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC) and other mechanical, electrical, and plumbing (MEP) equipment and critical building systems than the Penn Station Master Plan had estimated. Through preliminary engineering work, the Railroad Partners have also identified additional structural complexities that have necessitated changes to the conceptual plans, such as the precise placement of station entrance vertical circulation elements on 8th Avenue.

The Railroad Partners have conducted updated pedestrian movement studies and modeling to better understand station user desire paths to inform the design of concourse and entrance improvements. The Railroad Partners have also continued to assess the optimal balance of front of house and back of house uses and continued to investigate how construction can be carried out cost effectively while minimizing outages and disruptions to service.

Inspirational Precedents

Several precedents, both local and international, were cited as examples of what can be accomplished by way of the Penn Reconstruction project.

- **Grand Central Terminal (NYC):** Notable for representing a more integrated Midtown East experience compared to a Penn Station that currently feels isolated from the larger district
- **Kings Cross (London, England):** An example of an historic and storied station that was successfully rejuvenated
- **Florence Santa Maria Novella (Florence, Italy):** A station with an exemplary concourse exhibiting vibrancy, spaciousness, and comfort

Refined Proposed Project Elements

The MTA Representative went on to describe the primary project elements and proposed improvements:

- **Station platform accessibility:** The project is considering how to maximize and rationalize the platform vertical circulation layout in the station to reduce congestion on the platforms and increase accessibility.
- **Concourses:** Widened, double-height concourses with improved legibility, egress, and a maximized and rationalized platform vertical circulation layout.
- **Entrances:** New mid-block entrances and improvements to existing entrances on 8th Avenue and 31st Street & 7th Avenue to improve accessibility, egress, and support new mechanical equipment.

Proposed Platform Improvements

The presentation provided a plan view of proposed improvements to platform accessibility and egress, which focuses on improving the number and placement of vertical circulation elements, such as stairs and elevators. Stairs represent the most effective element for maximizing egress, while locating elevators in predictable places—and

targeting at least 2 per platform—will help signal to station users where they can be easily found from the concourse level.

Proposed Concourse Improvements

The presentation provided a plan view of the proposed single-level public concourse that would serve all tracks with a layout closely mirroring the above street grid. Improvements would alleviate crowding by increasing circulation space by 60 percent and providing 30 percent more vertical circulation elements to platforms. Proposed concourse improvements also include increased ceiling heights, co-located railroad customer services, modern retail amenities, and spacious consolidated waiting areas and restrooms to improve the overall customer experience.

Proposed Entrance Improvements

One of the main goals of the project is to improve accessibility and egress in the station. To address this, the current plan proposes upgrades at the northwest and southwest corners of the station on 8th Avenue, and new entrances at the midblock areas of 31st Street and 33rd Street.

Penn Projects Preliminary Timelines

Penn Projects Preliminary Timelines

In response to a previous request by the SWAG, a representative from NJ TRANSIT shared the proposed preliminary illustrative project timelines for both the Penn Reconstruction and Penn Capacity Expansion projects. Both projects are in the pre-NEPA outreach phase with Penn Reconstruction engaged in preliminary engineering work and Penn Capacity Expansion still undergoing conceptual design. The timing of future phases is subject to change, based on a number of factors.

Federal Discretionary Grant Awards

The NJ TRANSIT representative highlighted how recent grant awards from the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) will allow project work to keep moving forward. He noted that both grants were not awarded in the previous cycle and investments in hard infrastructure on railroads often get prioritized over station improvements, so it is a positive sign that both projects received these awards in this year's cycle. The awarded funds will be used to advance environmental review and preliminary engineering work on both projects.

Penn Station Tour (Optional)

Railroad Partner representatives led SWAG members on a tour of the existing Penn Station. SWAG representatives viewed the following areas of the station:

- Moynihan Train Hall, including the North Balcony, the ticketed waiting area, and the West End Concourse
- The new LIRR Concourse and 33rd Street & 7th Avenue entrance
- The Amtrak/NJ TRANSIT Terminal Operations Center (TOC)
- The Central Concourse
- The New Jersey Transit Concourse and the 32nd/7th Avenue Entrance
- The Upper Level Departure Concourse

Questions Summary

Questions and answers have been slightly edited for clarity and length and organized based on discrete topics.*

Process

- Q. How will the team be collecting public input moving forward?
- A. Everything you have seen is a sneak preview of what will be presented in the first set of public meetings targeted for January 2025, followed by a formal public comment period.

Proposed Improvements

- Q. Have there been any considerations or accommodations to create a more direct connection between Moynihan Train Hall and Penn Station? The current below grade connection is a very narrow passage challenged by the presence of the A/C/E subway trains. Recognizing that double-height ceilings are not possible here, could the passage be widened?
- A. It is correct that there is an unfortunate bottleneck here created by the subway infrastructure that prevents double-height ceilings like we are proposing throughout other public spaces in the station. Widening is a great piece of feedback for our team to consider in addition to other interventions to make that connection a more pleasant experience, as well as improve the street level connections, which will involve working with city agencies.
- Q. Connecting to the east and Herald Square should not be forgotten. Does the Gimbels Passageway have a future in all of this? The amount of people traversing the street level between the subways at 34th Street and 6th Avenue and Penn Station is staggering.
- A. Creating a connection to Herald Square via a pedestrian passage continues to be a long-term goal of the Railroad Partners but is not part of the Penn Reconstruction or Penn Capacity Expansion projects.
- Q. We have been talking a lot about allocation of space, including tradeoffs between having more/less front of house (FOH) versus back of house (BOH) uses within the station. Could retail be sacrificed if it were to help the station achieve better targets for lighting, openness, and visibility?
- A. There are certain constraints we have to incorporate into our plans. As an example, BOH crew quarters need to be located proximate to the tracks and we know certain vertical circulation elements (VCEs) conflict with user desire paths. We are still working through the details of what elements will be placed exactly in which part of the station, but we are sensitive to over-retailing spaces and want to avoid renovating Penn Station in a manner that feels more like a shopping mall than a train station.
- Q. Can you say more about how these renovation plans account for a potential expansion of the existing station, especially when we do not know for certain where such an expansion would occur?

- A. We are closely coordinating the two projects' planning efforts to ensure that we are preserving opportunities to make concourse connections from the existing station in any direction of a potential future expansion. The current proposed Penn Reconstruction concourse design would allow for connections in all directions we anticipate will come under consideration during the Penn Capacity Expansion process.
- Q. Can you please say more about what unifying and rationalizing existing station operations will look like? How will this account for a future fourth operator in the form of Metro-North, especially as they use a catenary (overhead) line?
- A. Our goal is for Penn Station to feel like one single station for all customers. To that end, we are working to centralize and co-locate features like customer service desks, so there is a single area with staff from all operators. Similarly, we are planning for consolidated waiting areas for use by customers of all operators.
- Q. Are you planning to make the platforms wider as part of the proposed improvements?
- A. The primary focus of the Penn Reconstruction project with regard to platforms is to reconfigure the vertical circulation elements to improve safety and egress. As discussed in previous meetings, widening station platforms would require major construction in the station trainshed that would be very disruptive to service and operations. We are trying to minimize those types of disruptive impacts to the extent we can.

Public Realm

- Q. What is being done about the MSG trucks that are likely to conflict with the proposed midblock entrances?
- A. We understand MSG loading operations were a big part of the conversation surrounding MSG's permit renewal. We will continue to engage and see where our agencies and this project can be part of a solution, but it is ultimately incumbent upon MSG to tackle these challenges and incumbent upon the City agencies with jurisdiction, as the regulatory entities, to impose and enforce restrictions on MSG loading activities.
- Q. It still feels like despite these improvements, the station still will not have much street presence. The issue with MSG trucks speaks directly to this. Is there any chance of creating better connections to both 7th Avenue and 8th Avenue? The proposed changes address the dysfunctional entrances, but it does not feel like we are shooting for the moon. My organization is expecting not just a great station, but a great district. We recognize MSG has a responsibility, but it feels like there are better solutions that can address both problems.
- A. We are confident that the new entrances will be significant improvements from the current state and we will also be proposing ways to improve the public realm surrounding the station. We do recognize that there has been significant stakeholder interest in the idea of a train hall along 8th Avenue, however. At present, an 8th Avenue train hall is not part of the proposed Penn Reconstruction project, as that project is focused on making high-priority, critical safety and functionality improvements to the station as it exists today, but the idea is not off the table – addition of an 8th Avenue train hall could be evaluated as part of the EIS process for the Penn Capacity Expansion project, which would provide the public with many structured opportunities to provide input on the idea of creating a new train hall. Reconfiguring the MSG Theater to create an 8th Avenue train hall would also be dependent on the outcome of more conversations with Madison Square Garden, which owns that property.

Methodology

- Q. Are the planned improvements being driven and informed by revenue/ridership goals or more so by the constraints of the station that have been identified? Is what is being proposed going to allow the station to reach level of service (LOS) goals during peak periods? How is this being measured?
- A. Both are factors. We have just started with modeling LOS but are confident that the approach we are taking will position the station to respond well during peak conditions and be an improvement over the current state. Penn Station is a very unique facility, which makes it challenging to meet the exact letter of every single building code, but the most important measure we will be relying on is a performance-based code for egress so we can be confident that in emergencies people can safely evacuate the station.
- Q. Since the new LIRR concourse has opened, have you conducted new pedestrian counts to understand user habits and desire lines? It would also be helpful to better understand what is happening underground vs. what is happening above ground when customers exit the station and enter the public realm.
- A. Yes, we conduct these on a regular basis, especially with workers increasingly returning to offices. We have conducted new pedestrian counts recently and will discuss the best way to share more information on those findings with you all.

Attendance

Station Working Advisory Group

- Eugene Sinigalliano, 251 West 30th Street Residential Tenants Association
- Dan Biederman, 34th Street Partnership
- Jesse Lazar, American Institute of Architecture New York | Center for Architecture
- Chad Purkey, Association for a Better New York
- Angel Santana, Empire State Development
- Gary Prophet, Empire State Passenger Association
- Christopher Boylan, General Contractors Association of New York
- Paul Macchia, Madison Square Garden
- David Sigman, Manhattan Community Board 5
- Christine Berthet, Manhattan Community Board 4
- Howard Levine, MTA Accessibility Representative
- Gerard Bringman, LIRR Commuter Council
- Lisa Daglian, Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council
- Randy Glucksman, Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council
- Tom Devaney, The Municipal Art Society of New York
- Elizabeth Goldstein, The Municipal Art Society of New York
- Andrew Albert, NYC Transit Riders Council
- Ed Hoff, NJ TRANSIT Accessibility Representative
- Rich O'Malley, New York Building Congress
- Joshua Simoneau, New York City Department of City Planning

- David Breen, New York City Department of Transportation
- Joshua Kraus, New York City Economic Development Corporation
- Ferlanda Fox Nixon, Newark Regional Business Partnership
- Madeleine McGrory, Office of Manhattan Borough President Mark Levine
- Jessica O'Connor, Office of New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy
- Laurie Hardjowirogo, Office of New York City Council Member Erik Bottcher
- Julia Kerson, Office of New York Governor Kathy Hochul
- Dave Ullman, Office of New York Governor Kathy Hochul
- Jacob Golden, Office of New York State Assemblymember Tony Simone
- Jonah Rose, Office of New York State Senator Brad Hoylman-Sigal
- Alex Marinides, Office of New York State Senator Liz Krueger
- Joe Raguzin, Office of the Rockland County Executive
- Craig Lader, Office of the Westchester County Executive
- Richard Sun, Office of U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer
- Steve Barton, Office of U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer
- Brook Jackson, Partnership for New York City
- Todd Goldman, Port Authority of New York & New Jersey
- Jim Mathews, Rail Passengers Association
- Maddie DeCerbo, Real Estate Board of New York
- Tom Wright, Regional Plan Association
- Sarah Kaufman, Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management, NYU
- Judy Kessler, Vornado Realty Trust
- Joe Sgroi, Office of U.S. Senator Cory A. Booker

Project Team

- Sara Appleton - Amtrak
- Petra Messick - Amtrak
- Margaret Clark - Amtrak
- Kate Cunningham - Amtrak
- Anabel Frias Rosario - Amtrak
- Craig Schulz - Amtrak
- Laura Colacurcio - Amtrak
- Ryan Morson - Amtrak
- Wei Yu - Amtrak
- Sharon Tepper - Amtrak
- Temoor Ahmad - MTA
- Joe O'Donnell - MTA
- Sean Fitzpatrick - MTA
- Jessica Mathew - MTA
- Matthew Zettwoch - MTA
- Jeremy Colangelo-Bryan - NJ TRANSIT
- Grant King - NJ TRANSIT
- Joe Quinty - NJ TRANSIT
- Ilan Acklesberg - Public Works Partners
- Daniel McCombie - Public Works Partners

- Caroline Decker - WSP
- Carol Wynperle - WSP