

# Interborough Express – Year End Report

**John B. Pegram<sup>1</sup>**

It has been an exciting year for the Interborough Express (IBX) Project. Most importantly, it is receiving high level attention from New York Governor Kathy Hochul and MTA Chairman Janno Lieber. For example, Governor Hochul made several IBX announcements in 2023, and Mr. Lieber attended and spoke at an IBX open house in Brooklyn on November 30th.<sup>2</sup>



**Governor Kathy Hochul**

In this article, I will briefly summarize the status of the IBX project, and the topics my articles have discussed and topics I am working on now. Included are links to material posted on this site that do not appear to be available elsewhere.

## **IBX Status**

In January 2023, the MTA published a 42-page Interborough Express Planning & Environmental Linkages Study report (PEL Report), primarily prepared for the MTA by a consultant team, led by AECOM USA.<sup>3</sup> It announced the selection of the light rail mode for the IBX line, and

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/interborough-express-inches-closer-to-becoming-reality-now-awaiting-environmental-review/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://new.mta.info/document/103686>

attempted to justify that choice. The 1,108 pages of appendices to that report were not made public at that time. Later in the year, apparently as a result of requests made under the New York Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) and a lawsuit I filed, the MTA has posted most of the appendices on its IBX project webpage.<sup>4</sup>

Governor Hochul announced on August 2<sup>nd</sup> that the consultant firm WSP USA was chosen to perform the environmental review for Interborough Express.<sup>5</sup> Then, on October 4th, the MTA published its 20-Year Needs Assessment.<sup>6</sup> It evaluated 25 potential projects, giving excellent marks to the Interborough Express Light Rail Transit proposal.<sup>7</sup>

In November, the MTA held three Open House events in Brooklyn and Queens. The major focus appeared to be promoting the light rail mode and seeking input on station locations. At each one, the MTA representatives made a short presentation and then they individually discussed the IBX project with attendees. A number of posters were located around the room. Most of the presentation materials and posters are linked on the MTA's IBX project webpage.<sup>8</sup>

In a November 30th interview, before the last IBX Open House, MTA Chairman Lieber told WCBS reporter Elijah Westbrook, "We are trying to add some new money to get some design actually going even before the new MTA capital program is under way. There are efforts under way to accelerate this project...."<sup>9</sup> That suggests there is a chance for some practical work to be accomplished before completion of the environmental review, which is expected by January 31, 2026.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://new.mta.info/project/interborough-express>

<sup>5</sup> See <https://bqrrail.substack.com/p/interborough-express-news>

<sup>6</sup> <https://new.mta.info/press-release/mta-releases-assessment-outlining-needs-continue-investing-15-trillion-regional>

<sup>7</sup> IBX excerpts are attached to article at <https://bqrrail.substack.com/p/interborough-express-news>

<sup>8</sup> <https://new.mta.info/document/126041>; <https://new.mta.info/document/126046>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/interborough-express-inches-closer-to-becoming-reality-now-awaiting-environmental-review/>

<sup>10</sup> WPS Work Assignment, pp. 1-2, attached to article at <https://bqrrail.substack.com/p/interborough-express-news>

Most of this is positive, but my optimism is limited by the unnecessary and inappropriate choice of light rail and other problems that I have identified in my articles.

### **Topics Discussed in 2023**

I posted 21 articles at [www.bqrail.substack.com](http://www.bqrail.substack.com) in 2023. The first four postings simply introduced attached documents that I had previously sent to the MTA. Then, I adopted my present practice of posting each article without notes for quick reading, with an annotated copy attached for downloading by persons interested in sources and details.

The major focus has been on the MTA's selection of light rail, which I consider inappropriate and unnecessary, and on how existing subway-type railcars—such as PA-5 cars used on the PATH system—could be used. Although the MTA report appendices admit that the PA-5 cars could be used, the MTA's most recent open house presentation persists in suggesting that specialized railcars would be required for conventional rail.<sup>11</sup>

The articles also have pointed out how street-running of light rail in Middle Village, Queens would cripple the light rail mode and why it probably would be unacceptable to that community.

The principal declared reason, or excuse, for the MTA's selection of light rail is to avoid a long new tunnel under All Faiths Cemetery. My articles have suggested that such a new tunnel is not necessary. The existing tunnel could be time-shared with freight trains or widened on its east side without significant disruption to freight trains or the cemetery.

My articles also have noted the opposition to light rail by a majority of the comments about IBX mode of operation, which were posted on the MTA's IBX webpage and with a YouTube video.

Another major topic of my articles has been the excessive projected costs, especially in the conventional rail mode projections, which have been referenced by the MTA in an effort to justify selection of the light rail mode. The MTA's latest presentation does acknowledge that its assertion that the conventional rail mode would not be cost effective is due the perceived need for a new tunnel under All Faiths Cemetery,<sup>12</sup> but the MTA and its former consultants do not

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<sup>11</sup> <https://new.mta.info/document/126041>, slide 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

appear to have considered basic, potential tunnel alternatives or to have made a highway traffic study regarding the proposed street-running light rail trains in Middle Village to avoid a new or expanded tunnel.

I have debunked the initial claims by the MTA that light rail cars would accelerate and decelerate more quickly than subway-type conventional railcars, and that light rail cars would not need to stop as long as subway cars at each station. The MTA has dropped those claims. Unfortunately, the MTA is still over-optimistic about the light rail end-to-end times, and is not allowing for street-running delays in projecting the running time for the light rail mode.

As a result of FOIL requests and litigation, I have been able to post the following documents, which do not appear to be available elsewhere:

- Feasibility Study (Interim Report) Appendices, Volume 1,<sup>13</sup>
- PEL Report Appendix 1.11 “Capital Cost Estimate,”<sup>14</sup>
- Public comments submitted on MTA’s IBX project webpage,<sup>15</sup>
- Latest IBX ridership projections,<sup>16</sup> and
- The Work Assignment for the IBX Environmental Study by WPS.<sup>17</sup>

Since I posted Volume 1 of the Feasibility Study Appendices, the MTA produced to me the unpublished Volume 2, “Engineering Drawings” of the Feasibility Study appendices. That is attached to this article.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/i19338ojklzhjwap9cubd/IBX-Interim-Report-with-Appx-vol-1..pdf?rlkey=yxggrw7kplw40xtri1q7l9n7h&dl=0>

<sup>14</sup> Attached to article at <https://bqrail.substack.com/p/ibx-cost-estimate-excesses-and-errors>

<sup>15</sup> Attached to article at <https://bqrail.substack.com/p/light-rail-not-preferred-for-the>

<sup>16</sup> Attached to article at <https://bqrail.substack.com/p/interborough-express-news>

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> The Feasibility Study Appendices are identified in many places as pertaining to the “Bay Ridge Connector” and “BRC,” which are an earlier name and acronym for the Interborough Express and IBX.

## Future Topics

Recently, I became aware that no station is planned on the IBX line at Broadway Junction, because of the perceived need for another, expensive, long, new tunnel to provide an IBX station there. IBX riders transferring to or from an A, C, J or Z train at Broadway Junction are expected to walk about ¼ mile from or to Atlantic Avenue. There will be an article on that subject.

The East New York Tunnel, under the existing Broadway Junction stations, has long been considered a limiting factor on the width of trains on the IBX line. A future article will consider how the existing tubes of that tunnel may be useable by wider trains than had been imagined, such as the B Division railcars used on NYC Transit's lettered lines.

The use of the proposed IBX right-of-way is now used by one to three freight trains each day. Freight traffic could expand greatly if the long-proposed Cross Harbor Freight Tunnel is built by the Port Authority between New Jersey and Bay Ridge in Brooklyn. I have long planned to address the many reasons why that tunnel is unlikely to be built and why freight traffic is unlikely to significantly increase. Very little is known about the current status of that project. The project website is inactive and the Email link there is dead.<sup>19</sup> I have made Freedom of Information requests to the Port Authority for various documents about the project and have been promised responses in January 2024. Let's hope that those requests are fulfilled soon and that litigation will not be necessary to pry the information from them.

Use of driverless trains on the IBX line is another good idea, which I plan to address. The MTA could get some good ideas from modern driverless metros like the Canada Line in Vancouver.

A final possible topic is elevators and escalators. On first examination of the PEL Report Appendix 1.11, only one elevator to ground level appears to be planned for each station platform. No elevators to adjoining station platforms (of other lines) appear to be included. For example, at Atlantic Avenue—a proposed IBX transfer point—the LIRR is at approximately ground level,

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.panynj.gov/port/en/our-port/port-development/cross-harbor-freight-program.html>

the L train platform is elevated above ground level and the IBX is below ground level; however, there does not appear to be any elevator to the L platform in the IBX plans.



**Existing Atlantic Avenue Station<sup>20</sup>**

No escalators appear to be included in any of the cost estimates. Apparently, those riders who cannot fit into or wait for a small, slow elevator are expected to climb the stairs. Unlike riders at Second Avenue subway stations in Manhattan.<sup>21</sup>

It looks like 2024 will be an interesting year for the IBX proposal.

**Best wishes for the upcoming holidays and the New Year!**

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<sup>20</sup> The portal to the East New York Tunnel on the LIRR Bay Ridge Branch (to be used by the IBX line) and proposed location of an IBX station are to the right of the photo, where the fence is located. The LIRR East New York station is located under the arches of the Atlantic Avenue upper level, at the left of the photo.

<sup>21</sup> See MTA, “Second Avenue Subway Phase 2,” slide 4, <https://new.mta.info/document/24156> (“All new stations will have ADA elevator and escalator access”).

*This article expresses the personal views of the author and does not express the views of his employer, or any client or organization. The author has degrees in law and physics, and has taken several engineering courses. After five years of work as an engineer, he has practiced law primarily in the field of patents for over 50 years, dealing with a wide variety of technologies. He is a life-long railfan and user of public transportation in the United States, Europe and Japan.*