

## Light Rail Not Preferred for the Interborough Express

The vast majority of persons who expressed a preference for a transit mode in the public comments on the MTA's Interborough Express (IBX) project website preferred a rail mode over Bus Rapid Transit (BRT). But only a few commenters preferred the Light Rail mode. Most of those expressing a mode preference preferred trains like those on the LIRR or NYC Transit.

Let's dig into the details.

In its January 2023 report announcing the selection of the Light Rail mode for the proposed Interborough Express (IBX) line, one of the reasons given by the MTA was "the fact that public input suggested strong support for a rail option."<sup>1</sup> I found it curious that the MTA referred to "a rail option," not specifically to Light Rail, so I made a Freedom of Information Law request for copies of the comments submitted on the IBX project website. The MTA recently provided a spreadsheet with those comments, with most personal information of the commenters removed. A copy of those comments is attached to this article.

The spreadsheet provides 866 comments of all types. By my count, approximately 240 persons expressed a preference regarding transit mode. Only 20 preferred Light Rail! More than eight times as many (165) preferred Conventional Rail (CR) or Heavy Rail (HR). (These are the MTA's terms for subway-like cars, which either comply with Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) rules for sharing tracks with freight trains (CR) or do not comply (HR).) Approximately 55 simply preferred rail of any type over BRT.

To my eye, the reasons given for a Light Rail preference were not very substantive or compelling. Some persons simply like the idea of Light Rail. One person said, "The best mode of transit would be light rail because NYC doesn't have a light rail. This is NYC'S time to shine for light rail."<sup>2</sup> Another person preferred Light Rail because "Street level exit/entry will make the line instantly more accessible";<sup>3</sup> however, the present IBX proposal would not provide street level entry/exit. Some appear to have been misinformed or misled. For example, a commenter

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<sup>1</sup> MTA, THE INTER BOROUGH EXPRESS, Planning & Linkages Study (Jan. 2023), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Comment 220519-000829.

<sup>3</sup> Comment 220519-000105.

said, “I like the prospect of the light rail method because it has the best capacity, fastest time, and wouldn't have to share track with freight trains.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, as I have previously discussed, Light Rail would not offer the best capacity or fastest time, and none of the modes considered by the MTA would have shared tracks with freight trains.

Several commenters expressly said, “not light rail” or “NOT light rail.”<sup>5</sup> Some specifically expressed concern over street-running of Light Rail, as proposed by the MTA.<sup>6</sup>

A common concern was that projected ridership and planned capacity have been underestimated.<sup>7</sup> For example, “Light rail will not provide the necessary capacity to accommodate ... future growth.”<sup>8</sup>

One person, who correctly (in my opinion) doubted MTA contentions regarding advantages of Light Rail, said, “To me, the numbers in this study regarding ridership and travel times look to be skewed to make a cheaper light rail project look more favorable.”<sup>9</sup>

My own view is consistent with the following statement of a person favoring “subway rail,” “The current Subway system with its standard gauge rolling stock is efficient, timely, & comfortable. It has a whole city of workers & specialists ready to support it, and is standardized in a way that other options simply aren't.”

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<sup>4</sup> Comment 220602-001071.

<sup>5</sup> *See, e.g.*, Comments 220522-000414, 220522-000568, 220525-000031, 220525-001293.

<sup>6</sup> *See, e.g.*, Comments 220508-000056, 220518-001179, 230111-000010, 230214-000000, 230307-000006.

<sup>7</sup> *See, e.g.*, Comments 220518-000693; 220519-001122, 220523-000110, 220620-000647.

<sup>8</sup> Comment 220620-000647.

<sup>9</sup> Comment 220518-000693.