

Long Island Regional Planning Council

LIRPC Meeting – February 15, 2024 Zoom Virtual Meeting Summary Minutes

LIPRC Members Present

John D. Cameron, Jr., Chair
Michael White, Vice Chair
Jeff Kraut, Treasurer
Theresa Sanders, Secretary
Supervisor Don Clavin
Nancy Engelhardt
Jeff Guillot
Mayor Barbara Donno
Mayor Robert Kennedy
Supervisor Ed Wehrheim

Staff and Guests Present

Richard V. Guardino, Jr., Executive Director
Elizabeth Cole, Deputy Executive Director
Missy Leder, Executive Assistant
Rachel Titus, Program Coordinator

Alan Belniak
Katherine Heaviside
Mark Smith
Tammy Strauss

Robert Free
Hector Garcia

Jonas Wagner
Sarah Zepeda
M. Mulrenan
Michael Madigan
Irene Donohue
Jessica Zanca Worth
Greg Battaglia
Daniel Segal
Linda Henninger
Jenny Kate Schlagel
Elisa Picca
Bob Arnold
Liz Alexander
Kristen Walsh
Mike Cortez
Katheryn Laible
Derek Betts

Timothy Freeman
Alfonso Castillo
Donna Betty
Pete Palamaro
Jacob Balter
George Hoffman
Patti Bourne
Rita Egan
Joseph Martelli
Karen Blumer
Jay Korth
John Hagan
Monica Morales
James McComb
Patrick O'Hara
Stephani Bontempi
Sagar Mehta
Christopher D'Antonio
Richard Buhr
Sherry Southe
Richard Amanna
Debra Mulé
Sarah Lansdale
Doreen Marino
Joseph Martelli
Ann Welker

Meeting Commenced:

John D. Cameron, Jr., opened the meeting at approximately 10am.

John Cameron:

Good morning and welcome to our first LIRPC meeting in the new year.

Thank you for joining. Our Executive Director, Rich Guardino, will now conduct a roll call.

Rich Guardino:

Welcome, everyone. Thank you all for being with us this morning.

Roll Call

John D. Cameron, Jr., Chair
Michael White, Vice Chair
Jeff Kraut, Treasurer
Theresa Sanders, Secretary
Supervisor Don Clavin
Nancy Engelhardt
Jeff Guillot
Mayor Barbara Donno
Mayor Robert Kennedy

Supervisor Ed Wehrheim

John Cameron:

As we do with all our meetings, we will start off with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Supervisor Ed Wehrheim:

Pledge of Allegiance

Alan Belniak:

Thank you for joining us this morning. My name is Alan Belniak with VHB. I am here to help support this meeting today. After some opening remarks and some orders of business, we'll have a presentation. After that, the comment and question opportunity is given to members of the LIRPC. After the members of the LIRPC, we will turn to the public to ask questions and share comments in one of two ways. You can use the Q&A function below. If you move your mouse to the lower section of zoom, the Q&A button will pop up and you can type in your comment, and I will read it aloud. Alternatively, you can use the raise hand feature, which is also below. That sends a signal to us that you'd like to speak or comment. I'll call out your name, send a command for you to unmute your microphone and you'll then have a couple of seconds to share your comment or question. Please note, this meeting is being recorded. With that, I'll turn it back over to John and Rich.

Adoption of the Minutes from the December 7, 2023 Meeting.

All in favor.

All in Favor: So moved.

Election of Officers for the 2024 LIRPC

Motion to Accept John Cameron as Chair of the Long Island Regional Planning Council: Jeff Kraut

Seconded: Barbara Donno

John Cameron abstained

All in Favor: So moved.

Motion to Accept Michael White as Vice Chair of the Long Island Regional Planning Council: John Cameron

Seconded: Don Clavin

Michael White abstained

All in Favor: So moved.

Motion to Accept Jeff Kraut as Treasurer of the Long Island Regional Planning Council: John Cameron

Seconded: Don Clavin

Jeff Kraut abstained

All in Favor: So moved.

Motion to Accept Theresa Sanders as Secretary of the Long Island Regional Planning Council: John Cameron

Seconded: Don Clavin

Theresa Sanders abstained

All in Favor: So moved.

Rich Guardino:

Resolution 2024-101 authorizes an agreement with Anthony Basile CPA, P.C. to perform an audit of the LIRPC for the year 2023. The Basile accounting firm completed the 2022 audit in a timely and professional manner. The Executive Committee consisting of the Officers of the Council recommends retaining the Basile accounting firm for the 2023 audit and the Resolution authorizes an agreement at a cost not to exceed \$18,500.

Motion to Accept Resolution 2024-101: Jeff Kraut

Seconded: Jeff Guillot

All in Favor: So moved.

Rich Guardino:

Resolution 2024-102 authorizes an accounting consulting extension agreement with Straus CPA, PLLC. Straus has done an excellent job providing accounting services in 2022 and 2023. The Executive Committee recommends extending the contract with Straus CPA, PLLC through December 31, 2024, at \$180 per hour not to exceed \$10,250.

Motion to Accept Resolution 2024-102: Jeff Kraut

Seconded: Barbara Donno

All in Favor: So moved.

Rich Guardino:

Resolution 2024-103 authorizes a renewal of an agreement with Epoch 5 Marketing, Inc. for consulting services including public relations, social media, education, and marketing strategies for the LIRPC and the Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan. The LIRPC entered into an agreement with Epoch 5 Marketing, Inc. a NYS Certified Woman Owned Business Enterprise in 2018. The agreement has been renewed annually since then as all the services rendered have been performed in a professional manner. This resolution would authorize an agreement through December 31, 2024, for an annual sum of \$42,000.

Motion to Accept Resolution 2024-103: Jeff Guillot

Seconded: Don Clavin

All in Favor: So moved.

Rich Guardino:

Resolution 2023-104 approves the Financial Summary for 2022 and the Projected Budget for 2023. The Executive Committee and the Executive Director met and reviewed and recommended approval of the documents.

Motion to Accept Resolution 2023-104: Jeff Kraut

Seconded: Nancy Engelhardt

All in Favor: So moved.

Rich Guardino:

Resolution 2024-105 authorizes an increase in the hourly rate for LINAP consultant Rachel Titus from \$70 per hour to \$75 per hour beginning January 1, 2024. The \$70 per hour rate has been in place since January 1, 2020. Ms. Titus serves as Program Coordinator for Nitrogen Smart Communities, serves on

the management team for the Long Island Water Quality Challenge and assists with other LINAP related programs.

Motion to Accept Resolution 2024-105: Barbara Donno

Seconded: Jeff Kraut

All in Favor: So moved.

Rich Guardino:

Resolution 2024-106 authorizes an agreement with Nassau County Soil and Water Conservation District for the transfer of \$100,000 of LINAP Grant Funds to the Nassau County Soil and Water Conservation District for administration and management of the Septic Environmental Program to Improve Cleanliness (S.E.P.T.I.C.). The S.E.P.T.I.C. program provides grant funding to eligible recipients to replace a conventional or failing septic system with an innovative alternative wastewater treatment system. The LIRPC has previously authorized the transfer of \$200,000 of LINAP Grant Funds to Nassau County. The District has submitted a proposal for funds to continue the administration and management of the program. Nassau County and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation have agreed to the direct transfer to the Nassau County Soil and Water Conservation District.

Motion to Accept Resolution 2024-106: Ed Wehrheim

Seconded: Michael White

All in Favor: So moved.

Rich Guardino:

Resolution 2024-107 renews the contracts and extends the terms of the Personnel Services contracts for Richard Guardino, Executive Director, Elizabeth Cole, Deputy Executive Director, and Missy Leder, part-time Executive Assistant. The 2023 LIRPC Summary of Work was previously forwarded to members of the Council.

John Cameron:

The Executive Committee met and discussed the employment and compensation for Rich, Liz and Missy and I would like to ask Jeff Kraut to say a few words.

Jeff Kraut:

We did meet and based on a review of performance and activities and general market conditions, we recommended a very modest increase in compensation and given the increase in health care costs, we recommend a very modest increase in payment to contribute to health care costs.

Motion to Accept Resolution 2024-107: Barbara Donno

Seconded: Michael White

All in Favor: So moved.

Rich Guardino:

Thank you all. We appreciate your support.

At this time, it's a pleasure for me to introduce Robert Free who is the acting president of the Long Island Rail Road. Mr. Free is a 31-year veteran of the LIRR and has built his career from the ground up.

He began his time at the LIRR as a station cleaner and later advanced his way to a variety of mission critical roles, including progressively more responsible management positions. Rob led operations through the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring train service for essential workers, and helped advance the LIRR's epic capital program, which included mega projects such as Third Track and Grand Central Madison. Ridership continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the commutes of tens of thousands of Long Islanders have been transformed by the completion of Third Track, and the new Manhattan terminal Grand Central Madison. Rob, thank you so much for being with us today.

PRESENTATION

Robert Free:

Well, thank you, Richard. Thank you all for having me. It's my pleasure to be here to discuss some of the amazing things going on at the Long Island Rail Road. I just would like to elaborate a little bit on introducing myself. I've lived on Long Island most of my life. I currently reside in Port Jefferson Station with my wife and four children for about 26 years. I worked for the LIRR for 32 years. I started as a station cleaner working my way up through the organization as opportunities became available, most recently to Senior Vice President of Operations where I was responsible for day-to-day operations, as previously mentioned, as well overseeing the Long Island Rail Road and progressing a capital plan which includes Third Track and Grand Central Madison. It's an absolute tremendous honor for me to now lead this incredible organization, as we are an integral part of Long Island. For Long Island to be a viable place to live, we need a safe, reliable, and convenient transportation system, which is vital to the sustainability of Long Island and the region. The transportation system must provide a real benefit to Long Island. Economics, quality of life, accessibility, and affordability needs must be met. I believe the Long Island Rail Road meets all those needs.

As you know, over the last several years, the MTA and Long Island Rail Road have invested heavily in Long Island. We have seen generational projects delivered at speed unprecedented. An example of a mega project is the Ronkonkoma double track from Farmingdale to Ronkonkoma. This project entailed double tracking a section of the Ronkonkoma branch, which was previously single track with some segments of double track. Once completed it enabled us to provide thirty-minute service at the Ronkonkoma branch. Another project is the Elmont UBS station, which at the time was the first new station in 50 years on the LIRR. The mainline Third Track, for which we are grateful to John Cameron for supporting, has created a tremendous boost to our service providing a new track of about 10 miles from Queens Village to Hicksville. That provided tremendous capacity for us to improve and increase our service. We have been able to expand to new yards and existing yards. For those who haven't, I sure hope you can get to Penn Station to see the improvements in the area near 33rd Street Hall running from Seventh to Eighth Avenue. The corridor has been widened, the ceiling raised, and all new lighting was installed. It's truly remarkable and it's transforming Penn Station. We have also seen amazing improvements at Grand Central Madison. This is about a 550,000 square foot terminal on the East Side of Manhattan. Again, I hope you can get there if you haven't seen it already. It's an incredible facility. These projects are impressive in their own right, but even more impressive when delivered within a five-year span. It's truly breathtaking. As Walt Disney once said, "The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing," and that's exactly what we have done.

There has been a lot of investment, but these projects have helped increase service by 41%. That's over 260 trains a day as compared to before the Grand Central Madison opening. We operated over 302,000 trains in 2023. That's over 77,000 trains more than in 2022. Reverse peak service increased by 56% equating to approximately 151 trains a day. There are more travel options with a major terminal on both the east side and west side of midtown Manhattan. Depending on where you're going, we have a major

terminal to accommodate you. Travel times have been reduced for thousands of customers. It's no longer necessary to take a Long Island Rail Road train to Penn Station and get on a subway train to get over to the east side for Grand Central. Instead, we have direct service. As many have seen, unfortunately, there are times when there is an Amtrak or LIRR service disruption or a complete shutdown at Penn. While before this would cause customers to be stuck in Manhattan, now customers can take a subway ride over to Grand Central to continue their travels. The options have increased. There's also economic stimulus as New York City and Long Island are dependent on each other. New York City provides good paying jobs and Long Island provides a vast labor pool. A recent Regional Planning Association study found that New York City provides 1/3 of all wages earned on Long Island. Those wages generate real economic activity on Long Island from the spending of those wages. The opening of Grand Central Madison and the service associated with it strengthens that bond.

I mentioned reverse commuting earlier. The study also found that there are more reverse commuters commuting to Long Island than to northern New Jersey, the mid-Hudson Valley, or southwestern Connecticut. In fact, there are slightly more reverse commuters to Long Island now than there were in 2019 and reverse peak service provides access to a wider labor pool for the businesses of Long Island. Accessibility and equity have increased not only to the communities of Long Island, but to the region as a whole. Customers now can travel between Long Island and Connecticut or upstate New York with ease due to Grand Central Madison. There is real connectivity within the region. Attending a Mets or Yankees game, going to the beach on Long Island, or seeing the leaves changing colors in upstate New York has never been easier. The increase in service also promotes intra-Island travel, which provides more access to public transportation for all the communities of Long Island.

Lastly, the investments make the service more affordable. Our combo ticket makes traveling between Long Island, Connecticut, or Upstate cost effective. As an example, if you're on Long Island, and you want to go to Upstate Connecticut, you would buy your base fare here on Long Island to go to Grand Central Madison and then the extension of ride on Metro North's territory would only cost \$8 no matter how far you travel on Metro North. It's economical. The city ticket has been expanded to peak periods. We also implemented the Far Rockaway ticket. Both are reduced fare tickets, and the cost of a monthly ticket is still cheaper than it was in 2019. We're also investing in our infrastructure and building a better Rail Road. We are improving ADA accessibility. This year alone, four stations will become ADA accessible. Once the stations and our current capital plan are complete, we'll only have seven stations to go before all 126 Long Island Rail Road stations are accessible. There is also a heavy focus on a State of Good Repair program, which includes maintenance work such as miles of new track and concrete ties, replacement of switches and third rail, upgrades to a signal system, grade crossing renewals, investments to power delivery systems, station renovation. We're also procuring a battery powered rescue engine for the Grand Central Madison tunnel. Now I hope we never have to use this engine. But because the Grand Central Madison tunnels are a little bit smaller than East River tunnels, we needed a more compact engine. This engine will have the ability to go in and rescue a disabled train that we can't get out of the tunnel without having to operate on third rail power nor on diesel power. It's great technology.

There are also climate resiliency efforts such as raising Long Beach branch infrastructure. I'm sure we all remember the flooding caused by Sandy to the Long Beach branch particularly Long Beach and Island Park, but even parts of Oceanside. With the federal Sandy relief funding, we have been able to raise critical infrastructure, such as signal cases and substations. Flood walls are being installed in Long Island City and west side yard. These walls encapsulate the yard and prevent water from intruding in the yard. We're working with Amtrak to install flood gates at the East portals of the East River tunnels. Also,

during Sandy, track one and track two were flooded and necessitated an extended outage for those tunnels for rehabilitation work. These gates will prevent water from getting into those tunnels.

All these improvements are making a difference. Ridership is significantly coming back as a result of all this investment. 2023 ridership increased by more than 24% versus 2022. We transported over 65 million customers in 2023 and non-commutation ridership, which are riders that travel outside of the rush hour and weekends is higher now than it was in 2019 for five months in a row. We're averaging about 230,000 customers each weekday and even on Mondays and Fridays, we're over 200,000. Customers are coming back. To put things into context, pre-COVID, we saw about 300,000 customers a day. We're making progress and customer satisfaction is increasing, currently at 70%. Now, it's not where we want to be, but we are seeing improvements, basically, in almost all categories, which is great news. This tells us that we're doing the right things, implementing the right changes, and providing a really comprehensive service.

But we can't let up. We need to continue to improve the service we provide. That is why we have focused on safety, reliability, and customer experience. From that focus, we have identified five key goals at the Long Island Rail Road: 1. operate safe service 2. improve the customer experience 3. build a better Rail Road 4. operate an efficient Rail Road and 5. energize and develop our most valuable asset which is our workforce. Achieving these goals will help us be successful going forward.

We have to continue to invest in our system and that is why our capital program is absolutely essential in order to deliver on those goals, not only for the service we provide, but for the sustainability of Long Island as well. This not only means the mega projects that we talked about, but also financing our basic state of good repair needs. You can't support the new project if the rest of the system is not maintained in a state of good repair. That is why congestion pricing is so important to the Long Island Rail Road, Long Island, and the region. I think we can all agree that congestion in midtown Manhattan is at a tipping point. This congestion has many negative impacts such as poor air quality, delayed response for first responders, and economic impacts. It's projected that traffic congestion will have \$100 billion drag on the New York Area Metro economy over five years. Those are staggering numbers. Congestion pricing also provides critical capital funding for our system. We have come so far and accomplished so much, but we cannot lose that momentum. Too much is at stake and Long Island cannot thrive without a fully functional, safe, and reliable Long Island Rail Road.

To meet the needs of the future, we recently completed our 20-year needs assessment, which was an unprecedented effort to evaluate our system. It's available online for all those who want to see all 134 pages of it. This assessment helps shape our next capital program. Some of the areas we will focus on next include continuing to make our system more accessible and purchasing new rolling stock, which is absolutely critical. These would be tier four dual mode passenger locomotives. These locomotives offer the most efficient diesel engines on the market today and the dual mode ability gives us the option to operate in diesel or electric mode. Our current system is comprised of about 65% electrified territory, and that's where the vast majority of our service needs are, so these engines give us the potential to operate mostly in electric mode while operating. New electric cars, tier four work locomotives, and passenger coaches for a diesel fleet are all included in the plan. We will also be performing more station upgrades and will be enhancing our capacity by improving Jamaica infrastructure. For those who've been on a train coming through Jamaica, we know how slowly they operate and we're looking to change that. These improvements will upgrade the signal system, remove older slower switches, install new higher speed switches, and increase platform links. All this will increase the speeds through Jamaica. We

will also continue our state of good repair efforts including replacing or rehabilitating bridges and viaducts and making upgrades to the Atlantic Avenue tunnel.

These investments are an investment in our future and our children's future. We've all seen the reports about people leaving New York. Recently in Newsday, it was projected, I think, from 2021 to 2022, about 101,000 residents left New York State and just within the last couple of weeks, a 7% reduction in student enrollment on Long Island was reported. We need to keep our residents here on Long Island and provide a place for our children to plant their roots and start their own families. I know I want my children to stay here on Long Island. The Long Island Rail Road must provide a convenient, reliable, transportation system. It is vital to the longevity of Long Island and the region.

I'll turn it back over to you for any questions you may have. Thank you for your time.

John Cameron:

Thank you, Rob. We will take questions and comments from Council members first.

Nancy Engelhart:

Just congratulations! I would just like to say that I had stopped taking the train for a very long time. This is very exciting, especially Grand Central Madison. It's beautiful. I have also recently been to Penn Station and the improvements are very impressive. I think good things take a long time, but it all was very much worth waiting for.

Michael White:

Thank you to the Long Island Rail Road for their continued support of freight rail. For Long Island, it's an extremely important economic and environmental benefit. We will continue to work with the Rail Road to even make that more efficient.

Robert Free:

We work with New York and Atlantic and we coordinate with them constantly. We understand they want to boost their service and we just want to make sure it doesn't impact Long Island Rail Road customers. But, we are always there with them working side by side. It's a great relationship we have with them.

John Cameron:

I reviewed the capital plan and have a couple of comments. First, I think as Michael White brought up, it's critical that we move a lot of our freight on and off the island by rail because our roadway infrastructure is overloaded. We support your efforts there to increase freight rail capability on the Rail Road.

Looking at the capital plan, to me it seems that you're taking the existing system and basically getting it to a state of good repair. I hope that having now completed Second Track, Third Track and Grand Central Madison, it isn't assumed that we are all set here on Long Island. The LIRPC just produced a report which was presented at our last meeting showing that Long Island's tax payments versus funding is very imbalanced. We send \$15 billion a year more to Albany than we get back and that's double what it was 10 years ago.

The mainline improvements are critical, and many will argue decades overdue, but we still have diesel operations on the Port Jeff line. This is an antiquated technology, especially for a major suburban area.

In Suffolk County, I believe that we have over 1.5 million people and over 4,000 in that service area. The Port Jeff line services Stony Brook University which is a major economic generator as well as an educator of our future workforce here on the island. It's critical that this line runs well.

And as you know, the Governor has announced her plans to try and expand the number of housing units that are on Long Island. The LIRPC did a 25-year sustainability plan back in 2010 identifying the lack of affordable housing as one of the two major impediments to our long-term sustainability. The second being an unsustainable tax burden. If we are going to create housing, the optimal location for this new housing is near transit nodes. I think we all recognize that. To get those transit nodes optimized, we need electrification. The Port Jeff line needs to be electrified.

A second major improvement, which frankly I saw lacking, was the relocation of the Yaphank station. Currently, Yaphank is not well utilized and is not really providing much value to the Rail Road. The proposal is to relocate it up by Brookhaven National Lab, which is the largest, single site employer and major economic generator on Long Island. We need that Yaphank station relocated. So, there is a need for continued capital investment in our system.

We have 3 million people on the island. We are the second largest economic generator of the state, for Washington, and for Albany. We need capital investment and infrastructure improvements to enable our economy to grow. Commutation cannot continue to become an issue. Long Island has major challenges.

I would like to speak on behalf of people on the island that may say, it's fine that we see improvement in Third Track and Grand Central Madison and even Second Track, but these are on the mainline and the south shore. But, what about the north shore. We also need to consider the population of the north shore. I didn't see any reference to relocating Yaphank or electrification in the capital plan. I appreciate if you can speak to that. Thank you.

Robert Free:

John, you said a lot. I'll try to remember everything and provide a response. Throughout my presentation, I talked about the need for investment. We need a good functioning transportation system for Long Island to thrive and survive. If I'm not mistaken, Long Island is probably the biggest suburban location in the country.

John Cameron:

To put it in perspective, Long Island has a bigger population than the city of Chicago. If we were a city, we would be the third largest in America. We have a gross domestic product greater than 17 states. We are an economic engine, and we have to make sure that we're going to continue to be.

Robert Free:

As I mentioned in the presentation, the state of good repair is needed just to keep our system running and operating and being a reliable system. Any capital program has to invest heavily in a state of good repair. It's absolutely essential. Shiny new projects and infrastructure can't be supported if the rest of the infrastructure is falling apart. We need to consistently invest in our existing system.

You mentioned the Port Jefferson branch which was part of the comparative evaluation, and we are still in the evaluation process. It will be compared to other projects on Long Island and in New York City. And as I mentioned, Long Island is not done. I live here. I want my kids to live here. I want Long Island to

thrive and be a fully functioning community. In looking at that evaluation, it'll be compared to other projects to see if it can be included in the next program.

Now to the comparative evaluation. It did well. But there were some things that held it back. First, the price tag is high at \$3.1 billion. A fully modernized Port Jefferson branch doesn't get you anything if the main line west of Hicksville and into Grand Central aren't completed. You need to build that capacity first. The overall plan needs to be considered, not just segments.

When you look at the Port Jefferson branch modernization, if we were to electrify tomorrow, it wouldn't provide any benefit to the branch itself because it is still a single tracking. It's about 23 miles from Huntington to Port Jefferson and you have about four passing sidings on the way. It's not one of our most reliable branches in terms of on-time performance. So, you have to look at the whole picture. It's not just a matter of electrifying. There is also the single tracking and rolling stock. There's a major investment involved in this. As another part of the evaluation, it did pretty well in reducing travel times. I think it was about 3.6 minutes. The number of new riders comparison is where it hurt the project a little bit. We also have to consider if riders are going from the main line over to its Port Jefferson branch. We need to provide access to Long Island as a whole. We need to consider what the growth is looking like as communities are along the main line. If we open up capacity by moving people over to the Port Jefferson branch, that's a good thing.

My long-winded point is that the Port Jeff project is not dead. It has been looked at as part of the whole program to see where it fits in and what can be done. It is a mega, mega project, even bigger than Third Track by a lot. I will reiterate that there's still heavy investment in Long Island and I think that will continue.

You mentioned the Yaphank Station relocation. In December, an RFP went out to bid and we hope to award that design build project and begin construction by the end of this year. So that project is progressing. We met with the County Executive Romaine, and he expressed his desires to get that moving as well.

John Cameron:

Great. That's an important one for both Suffolk County and the island too. Brookhaven National Lab is a critical facility for the metropolitan area and the nation and so to the extent that the Rail Road can provide good transportation access should be a priority, I think. Thank you.

I want to mention that Supervisor Wehrheim is on our Council. Smithtown has received an award for their downtown revitalization and they're advocating for more housing creation in Smithtown and Kings Park. They've been leaders here and I am sure electrification is interesting to them being on that Port Jeff line.

Supervisor Wehrheim:

Thank you. Robert, just as John stated, we just received a \$10 million grant and we are in the process of sewerage all three business districts in Smithtown, which consists of St. James, Smithtown, and Kings Park. All three of those business districts have a Long Island Rail Road Station. It will be so important to pay attention to those lines once this housing is built. The project is part of the governor's plan to build transit-oriented development around Long Island Rail Road stations and it is crucial to what we're doing here in Smithtown.

Robert Free:

Thank you. As I mentioned again in the presentation, we're seeing people leave New York. We have to do everything we can to increase the housing stock, making housing more affordable and transit-oriented development is a great opportunity to do that. Look at Mineola. I think that's a great example of what transit-oriented development can do for a community. Hicksville is in the process of construction now. We've been working closely with them because it will provide some enhancements to our property as well. We have the capacity to get cars off the road and it's a great opportunity.

John Cameron:

You see the investment NYU Langone is putting into Mineola and with your Third Track, Mineola has become a hub along with Hicksville in Nassau County. We believe that in conjunction with Ronkonkoma it is going to spur economic development. Out in Ronkonkoma, there are two major proposals for economic development as well as transit-oriented housing. I think, if you build it, they will come. The Rail Road leads the way. I think it was Governor Cuomo who made it happen, but it was facilitated by you and the leadership of the MTA and the Rail Road. So, we appreciate it. This is critical for growing the economy and also for the creation of affordable housing.

Any other questions or comments from the Council before we open it up?

Jeff Guillot:

I had really intriguing questions about both North Shore access and transit-oriented development that John Cameron covered. So, I will simply say I am coming to you live from Babylon Village and I can walk to the train station from my house here. I commute to Penn once or twice a week and I applaud Long Island Rail Road for the tremendous job they've done revitalizing Penn. The difference since COVID is night and day. Thank you for bringing Rosa's Pizza back also. For me, it's an incredible infrastructure accomplishment.

Robert Free:

Thanks, Jeff. I think a lot of credit must go to our Chairman Janno Lieber. He's really made it a priority to improve Penn Station. The Governor is also focused on Penn Station which is good news for Long Island.

Alan Belniak:

Just a reminder, for those who may have joined late, you can submit a question or comment by using the raised hand button down below. That will send a command to me that you want to come off mute and ask your question. Alternatively, you can enter a question or comment using the Q&A.

Karen Blumer, you should now have the ability to take yourself off mute and ask your question or show your comment.

Karen Blumer:

Hi. I'm Karen Blumer. I'm with a group called TALZ, Taking A Lead on Zero Waste. One of the things we're trying to do besides reducing all our waste for Long Island, is to look at the transportation systems. We live in Aquebogue. Through a forest, I can see the train go by from Riverhead to Greenport every day. It's a commuter line and very often it's empty. Looking forward, we're trying to think outside the box to optimize some of our transportation systems. Might there be a possibility that we can look at this with you? Part of our goal is instead of shipping garbage out using rails, starting to treat garbage as a resource and turning it into products. If we had more products and clean things to ship, we might be able to organize or piggyback the use of trains.

Robert Free:

Freight operations are run by the New York and Atlantic Railway so they would be responsible. They wouldn't combine freight or waste or anything else like that on a passenger train, but I'm sure the New York and Atlantic Railway is always interested in expanding their business. We would coordinate to make sure that they could have access and the ability to get to those locations. So, I would encourage you to reach out to New York and Atlantic Railway and coordinate something, and then between the three of us we can see the feasibility of it and progress from there.

Karen Blumer:

Okay, who would be a good person to talk to there?

Robert Free:

I don't have any contacts offhand. Let me try and figure out how I can get you a contact. If you would bear with me, maybe I can.

Karen Blumer:

Okay. John is on our executive committee. So, if you get that info to him, it would be great. Thank you very much.

Alan Belniak:

We do have one question entered into the Q&A from Bob. Bob writes, "Anything being done at the Long Island Rail Road to minimize overtime abuses, especially given the impact on inflated pensions that are paid out over decades?"

Robert Free:

I can say it's a focus of ours to reduce the amount of overtime. Over the last several years, we've instituted new processes and oversight to try and make sure the overtime that's worked is correct and our employees are where they're supposed to be, and it's truly needed overtime. As we progressed through COVID, we had a high vacancy rate, and it was difficult to bring onboard new employees. We've since been very aggressive in our hiring, and we're getting to a comfortable place, filling those vacancies and being at a good headcount. There's always some form of overtime that's unnecessary, but our responsibility as managers is to work with the labor organizations to try and root out those instances where people aren't doing what they're supposed to be doing. I have to say, I'm extremely proud of our workforce. As we've talked about all these mega projects, they had a big hand in accomplishing all that and delivering those things on time. I'm proud of them. We'll continue to look at this and be as efficient as possible. The governor and the legislature, led by our chairman worked to get us proper operating funding. If you look at transit agencies across the country, they're hitting what's called the fiscal cliff. We've managed to identify efficiencies. We were provided funding, but the operating agencies were tagged with becoming more efficient reducing cost. At the Long Island Rail Road, we have to reduce operating costs by \$60 million recurring savings. We're constantly looking at this and we're trying to find ways to be more efficient. This is one of our top priorities as they stated earlier. The goal is to run an efficient Rail Road.

Alan Belniak

We do have another new hand raised from Joseph Martelli. Joseph, you should now have an option to take yourself off mute and when you do the floor is yours.

Josephy Martelli:

Thank you, Mr. Free and Mr. Garcia for spending your time with us. My question is regarding Elmont, UBS. It's a tremendous station. Do you have any information on ridership? Where are the numbers of trending and do you see them continually rising? I take it myself. Your staff has been nothing but outstanding and courteous. It's a great, great ride and a great way to get to the game, but just curious about the numbers, if you have any available.

Robert Free:

I'm sorry, Joseph, I don't have any available today. Depending on the game or event, you'll get a pretty good ridership there. Since the opening of UBS, we've definitely seen an increase in ridership, as we're providing a tremendous amount of service and even operating extra trains to and from the location. We've instituted a gating program to help ease customers entering and exiting and to ensure that we're collecting the fares. Depending on the event, you'll see spikes in ridership as well.

John Cameron:

I have one last question. Rob, could you maybe give us an update or understanding on the overall Penn Station plan. We had submitted a letter of support to the Governor on her plan/initiative to try and renovate Penn Station and the surrounding community. I understand there's been several proposals in there. Do you have an update on where things stand?

Robert Free:

I don't have any specifics. I'm sorry, John. There have been different proposals out there. This mainly goes through our construction and development. I know, as I mentioned previously, it's a priority for the Governor. She really wants to enhance Penn Station. I don't have any sense of timing.

John Cameron:

It's been out there, and we had supported the Governor's initiative, so we are just interested. If you hear anything, please let us know. This is something we want to stay on top of.

If there are no other questions or comments, on behalf of the Council and all those who have tuned into the meeting today, thank you Rob. This has been very informative. The Rail Road is our backbone. We do pride ourselves on the fact that we have a good mass transit system here on the island. One, which we believe, still needs to grow for the future. I want to salute you and the Rail Road for what you provide. We look forward to continuing to work together for the betterment of Long Island and the New York metropolitan area. Thanks so much for your attendance today and for the presentation.

Robert Free:

Well, thank you for having me. The work that you do is critical for Long Island. As I said, I'm a lifelong resident of Long Island and I want my children to stay here. The work that you do is absolutely essential to ensure that Long Island is not forgotten about and that we make sure that we can continue to go forward. I appreciate all the work that you do. It's essential.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

John Cameron:

While we as Long Islanders live on an island, we are most definitely affected by what's happening in our state, our nation, and the world. Globally, there is so much unrest and true war taking place in the Middle East, specifically in Israel/Palestine, Russia/Ukraine, attacks on our merchant ships in the Red

Sea, and bombings of bases we have in the Middle East. These tumultuous times impact our service members, but also our economy.

Additionally, the economies in Europe and Asia are not strong. There is an article in the Times today about Japan slipping into a recession and falling behind Germany in terms of economic growth and economic output.

Nationally, there is also friction between the Senate and the House, principally on how we secure the US southern border. That major disagreement has caused a stalemate as exhibited by a failure to pass two House bills to fund Israel and Ukraine.

The election of Tom Suozzi in the third congressional district on Long Island further shrinks the Republicans slim majority in the House. And, while inflation has been muted somewhat in the last few months, the latest numbers indicate that it will continue to be an issue for most of this year and that affects Long Islanders. The unrest in the Middle East and the Red Sea is going to contribute toward increased oil and fuel costs translating to a higher cost of living on Long Island.

I think the upcoming presidential elections will start to dominate the news media for the rest of this year. At the state level, the Governor's proposed budget significantly reduced school aid to many Long Island districts despite the recent LIRPC published study, which showed that Long Island is sending \$15 billion a year more to Albany than we are getting back. This new budget translates into major cutbacks in a lot of school districts. I'm aware of at least one district which is closing a school as a result.

Immigration is affecting Long Island. Tens of thousands of migrants have relocated to the city and in the region. I believe that immigration has risen to become the number one issue, even ahead of the economy, for most Americans nationwide.

The Governor has stated her priority for downstate to provide additional housing, which is also a priority for this Council. Housing and economic goals need to be met if we're going to continue to have a thriving sustainable, Long Island for the present and future of Long Islanders. It's something we will continue to work on. I believe Long Islanders are resistant to change, but change might be what we need in order to address these challenges.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Rich Guardino:

Thank you, John. As many of you are familiar with, as part of the Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan, the Council developed the Long Island Water Quality STEM Challenge to promote project-based learning in science, technology, engineering, and math for all middle and high schools on Long Island. The Long Island Water Quality Challenge is an opportunity for students in grades six through twelve to play an important role in improving water quality by designing green infrastructure to reduce nitrogen on school grounds. Twenty-one project proposals were received by the February 2nd due date. This is the largest number of proposals received since the program began five years ago. The Selection Committee is reviewing the proposals now and the winning teams will be announced in early March. The winning teams have the opportunity of being awarded a \$2,500 grant for use in implementation or partial implementation of their winning project designs. We are really excited about the participation of our youth in this program reducing nitrogen. That completes my report, John.

John Cameron:

Thank you, Rich.

Any new business? Any public comment?

With that, we will close the meeting for today. Thank you everyone.

Motion to adjourn. So moved. All in favor.

The Executive Committee has been discussing some upcoming meeting topics and as we all know, there's plenty to discuss on the island. Enjoy the rest of the winter and we'll be talking soon. Be well and take care. Thanks, everyone.