

Testimony of Representative Mondaire Jones of New York
U.S. House of Representatives
Transportation & Infrastructure Committee Member Day Hearing

April 14, 2021

Thank you, Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves, and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to appear before you and share my testimony. It is a great honor to speak to you today about the district where I grew up and now represent in the United States Congress.

There is no shortage of transportation and infrastructure needs in Westchester and Rockland Counties in New York's 17th Congressional District. As you know, surface transportation across the state is notoriously in bad shape. Nearly half of all locally or state-maintained roads in New York are in poor or mediocre condition, according to a study by the national transportation research nonprofit TRIP.¹

Similarly, many of our bridges are old and in need of repair. In fact, over 1,700, or as many as 9.9 percent of all bridges in the State of New York were determined to be structurally deficient, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers.² That number should be zero.

But this is all information you can find easily and will likely hear from my colleagues in the New York delegation. I am here because I want to talk to you about something you may not know, something that is personal to me and a high priority for many of my constituents. And that is the need for improved commuter rail from Rockland County to New York City.

The Hudson River runs through the middle of my district, with Rockland County on the west bank and Westchester County on the east bank of the river. I grew up in Rockland County and since I was a child, I can remember people talking about the need for a one-seat commuter rail service to New York City.

Commuter rail is a lifeline for many of my constituents who ride to and from the city every day on the Metro-North Railroad. Every morning, tens of thousands of constituents in Westchester County ride the Hudson, Harlem, and New Haven lines directly into New York City to work in our nation's economic capital.

¹ "New York Transportation by the Numbers: Meeting the State's Need for Safe, Smooth, and Efficient Mobility," TRIP: A National Transportation Research Nonprofit, December 2020, https://tripnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/TRIP_New_York_Transportation_by_the_Numbers_Report_December_2020.pdf

² "2021 Report Card for America's Infrastructure: New York Infrastructure Overview," American Society of Civil Engineers, accessed April 10, 2021, <https://infrastructurereportcard.org/state-item/new-york/>

Westchester County enjoys convenient and reliable access to the city through the commuter rail, making it an attractive place to live and invest. The one-seat ride to the city has helped Westchester County prosper and has encouraged transit-oriented sustainable development.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about rail service in Rockland County. With only a few stations in the County, and a lack of direct service to the city, Rocklanders are denied the same benefits as their neighbors in Westchester. Those who wish to commute into the city by rail are at a disadvantage compared to their Westchester counterparts because they have to stop in New Jersey and transfer trains to get into the city. Without a one-seat ride to New York City, Rockland County has not been able to benefit as much from rail service.

People in suburban communities benefit from convenient, reliable public transportation to urban areas. It allows them the ability to move to more affordable neighborhoods while maintaining access to the economic opportunities in the city. This is evident in Westchester County where the one-seat ride makes it easy to get off the roads and commute by train. And that is what my constituents in Rockland deserve.

In researching this issue, I have found that completion of the Gateway Program is key to delivering a one-seat ride to Rockland County. Several of the projects that comprise the Gateway Program have a direct impact on my goal of securing a one-seat ride to Rockland.

Chief among them are two projects that are underway. First, the new Hudson River tunnel which will help expand rail capacity, improve safety, and reduce delays that currently impact service into New York City.

Second, is the expansion of Penn Station, which will be necessary to accommodate the increased train capacity resulting from the new tunnel. I am confident that with this administration and support from Congress, these will be built without further delay.

My concern is about what comes next. In order to secure a one-seat ride for my constituents in Rockland County, the next piece of the Gateway Program that must come into place is completion of the Bergen Loop project, also known as the Secaucus Loop. If built, the Bergen Loop will help create a pathway for the one-seat ride that Rockland County needs. Passengers will no longer have to transfer at Secaucus Station and wait for a train that heads into the city.

With robust funding in the Surface Transportation Reauthorization bill for major infrastructure projects like Gateway, we can make the one-seat ride to Rockland a reality. This is of utmost importance to me and to the thousands of constituents who deserve convenient and reliable access to economic opportunities in the city.

As Congress considers legislation to build and improve our infrastructure for a more sustainable future, commuter rail must be an important part of the conversation. I strongly believe that we must invest in commuter rail to improve existing service and expand it for those who lack access.

I urge the committee to provide strong funding and resources to complete infrastructure projects of national and regional significance, including the Gateway Program, so that Rockland County and communities like it can enjoy convenient and reliable access to economic opportunities in the city.