

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, suburbs of New York City that are in New York's 17th Congressional District. As you know, surface transportation across New York 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 known as TRIP.¹

Similarly, many of our bridges are old and in need of repair. In fact, nearly 10 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 with you about something you may not know, something that is a high priority for many of my constituents in Rockland County, which is the more under-resourced portion of my district and where I grew up. 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 of the river 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 train ride to New York City.

Currently, Rocklanders going into New York City must take New Jersey Transit into the State of New Jersey, then transfer to a different train at the Secaucus Junction station in New Jersey before finally getting to New York-Penn Station.

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/>

This is deeply inconvenient and makes Rockland a less attractive place to live for working families. Contrast that with my constituents in Westchester County, who live on the other side of the Hudson River and ride to and from our nation's economic capital, New York City, every day on the Metro-North Railroad without ever having to transfer to a different train.

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. As an initial matter, in most parts of Rockland County, which has over 325,000 residents, there is no train service. That means, in most parts of Rockland, you have to drive or take a bus to get into New York City, both of which are bad for the environment. I can also tell you from firsthand experience that bus service in Rockland is unreliable, which can be devastating when you depend on it to get to work.

Rockland's challenge of too few rail stations is compounded by a lack of direct service to New York City, which operates to deny Rocklanders the same benefits as their more affluent neighbors in Westchester.

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 between Rockland County and New York-Penn Station. Several of the projects that comprise the Gateway Program have a direct impact on my goal of securing a one-seat ride for Rocklanders.

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 currently impacting service into New York City.

Second is the expansion of New York-Penn Station, which will be necessary to accommodate the increased train capacity resulting from the new Hudson River tunnel. I am confident that with this new administration and support from Congress, these projects 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 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 another 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 from Rockland to New York City a reality. This is of the utmost importance to me and to the hundreds of thousands of my 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.