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The Public Ought To Know: City needs to improve freight access to Kennedy

By Corey Bearak

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The city's two airports help drive its economy, especially here in Queens. As important as Kennedy and LaGuardia are as terminals for tourists, the air cargo and freight uses, particularly at Kennedy, also provide meaningful jobs, including many for less-educated local residents.

Proposals for air freights and air shipping often come before Community Board 13 on which I serve and which extends from Glen Oaks and North Shore Towers south to JFK Airport.

One proposal not presented and perhaps not even conceived must deal with easing freight access to maintain the primacy of JFK International Airport as an air cargo hub.

The city and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey came to terms over the bi-state agency's continuing to operate the two city airports.

The certainty of operation should make it easier to move with the planning needed to improve freight access. The AirTrain that many civics opposed has fostered discussion on a direct rail link to Kennedy from Lower Manhattan.

Much building goes on at the airport as existing and new carriers expand operations there. Airport access for shipping poses a problem that government needs to address, or sooner or later an important industry that provides good paying jobs may face diminished long-term growth. In the first six months of 2002, air cargo through JFK declined 10 percent.

New York has already lost many tons of cargo to Pennsylvania and New Jersey, where the Port Authority operates Newark Airport. That makes somewhat misleading PA statistics indicating that all three airports combined top international trade at 302,600 metric tons of cargo last year.

Operators resent high tolls, traffic congestion, fuel prices, taxes and fees, parking and traffic rules and fines, as well as other miscellaneous charges.

Absent change, we face a devastating trickle-down effect of cargo diverting to other states, with landlords, operators, support services etc. no longer needed. This requires creative resolutions for economic survival - but government planners must never use it to introduce heavy commercial truck access to local streets.

You have probably driven on the Van Wyck Expressway to Kennedy and experienced the traffic jams and tie-ups that back up past the Grand Central Parkway-Jackie Robinson Parkway interchange all the way north to the Long Island Expressway. Imagine a trucker with no recourse but the lone congested Van Wyck route. Truckers really don't enjoy the luxury of driving through side streets and face ticketing for diverting off truck routes.

When my friend Tony and I carpoled to our Bronx jobs from his home near JFK, we'd invariably hit traffic on the Van Wyck. We took shortcuts through Forest Hills I knew from my college days working at my uncle's package store there; Tony shared his knowledge of traffic avoiding routes through Jamaica.

I liked it when he drove to Bellerose; we could jump on the Cross Island Parkway or drive to the Clearview Expressway.

Time is money. Anything that shortens the drive to or from Kennedy to deliver air cargo improves the business climate and encourages a job-providing industry's expansion.

With the AirTrain completed and federal support for a one-seat ride from Lower Manhattan through Brooklyn to JFK, the city and the Port Authority need to

improve cargo access.

How?

Studies are in progress for a rail freight tunnel across the Hudson River from New Jersey to Brooklyn. Civics and others express concern over plans to route the freight to and from a terminus in Queens. They make a good case to divert some freight to truck transfer points elsewhere.

Trucks from the airport to the planned rail site or any other additional sites recommended, including one on Long Island, still face using the almost always clogged Van Wyck.

The Cross Harbor rail tunnel should increase freight opportunities at JFK; that means more trucks.

The infrastructure appears lacking to develop a rail freight link to Kennedy. Barging probably faces similar issues.

The original Clearview Expressway plan envisioned its continuation south to the airport. Instead it terminates at Hillside Avenue. That prevented destruction of neighborhoods and homes.

The limited route did not prevent a period of neighborhood instability in the communities saved from an extended expressway.

Just because many original occupants fled or otherwise left town provides not justification to raise homes saved a generation ago. The technology that facilitates a cross harbor rail tunnel and the Third Water Tunnel, which will enable the unfettered delivery of safe drinking water from upstate reservoirs, might just be employed to develop a second truck route to Kennedy. Why not an underground extension of the Clearview Expressway to Kennedy Airport that leaves the neighborhoods above alone? It's worth a look.

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