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Editorial: Transit plans head for a crash

New Yorkers are compiling a list of transit projects of enormous scope and cost. There is no consensus over priorities, and that's sure to fuel anti-New York sentiment in Congress. Someone needs to take charge here.

The length of the list is the problem. It begins with two projects vitally needed to help downtown recover from the terrorist attack: a new PATH station and Fulton Street Transit Center, which have a combined cost of almost \$3 billion. Those projects could be extended to include transit links to John F. Kennedy International Airport, at anywhere from \$1.5 billion to \$3 billion, and a separate link to Newark Liberty International Airport, at a much more modest \$800 million.

Then there's the Second Avenue subway plan, which is sacrosanct to many transit advocates and planners, but comes with a \$15 billion price tag. East Side Access, which would bring Long Island Rail Road trains to Grand Central Terminal, is politically necessary for local Nassau and Suffolk legislators and those like the governor, who need votes on the Island. Last week, its projected cost soared by \$1 billion to more than \$6 billion.

The list also includes the conversion of the Farley Post Office into the new Penn Station for about \$1 billion, and the extension of the No. 7 subway line to the West Side. The cost of the No. 7 line is north of \$3 billion.

Then there are tunnels. Jerry Nadler's cross-harbor freight tunnel is picking up support since he's been selling it as insurance against a terrorist attack against the George Washington Bridge. Depending on the configuration, the tunnel could cost \$4 billion or \$7 billion. New Jersey interests also want a new route under the Hudson, a rail tunnel into Penn Station. It's about \$5 billion.

Farther north, the question is how to replace the Tappan Zee Bridge. Highway projects such as the reconstruction of the Gowanus Expressway add a few billion more.

Enough already? That's the point. There isn't enough money available from state and local taxes or borrowing or user fees to finance these projects. The federal government won't be this generous, no matter how hard New York lobbies.

Up to now, too much of the discussion has centered on making sure New York keeps its current allocation of Uncle Sam's largesse. That very effort is endangered because the list is so ambitious

and unrealistic.

The Partnership for New York City has shown a better way, with a new study of the economic benefits of some projects. The biggest gains come from the No. 7 line extension, the downtown transit center and the Farley Post Office. The Second Avenue subway costs far more than it would deliver, as does the Hudson rail tunnel.

Joseph Seymour, executive director of the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey, recently agreed that the list needed to be pared. He suggested the Regional Plan Association could help build a consensus, but an independent group lacks the clout required.

Instead, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Gov. George Pataki should put together an advisory group to make recommendations, and then follow its suggestions.

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