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Israel puts pressure on Amtrak to repair tunnels for LIRR trains



Photo courtesy MTA Long Island Rail Road

Crowds of commuters file into morning rush hour trains as the Long Island Rail Road restored limited service on all branches except Long Beach Nov. 5. Photo courtesy MTA LIRR

By Phil Corso

TimesLedger Newspapers

More than 40 rush hour Long Island Rail Road trains still crippled by the effects of Hurricane Sandy should be

restored by Christmas week, U.S. Rep. Steve Israel (D-Hauppauge) and Amtrak said Tuesday.

Israel joined LIRR Commuter Council Chairman Mark Epstein Tuesday at the Hicksville, L.I. train station to call on Amtrak to be more transparent when it comes to repairing its four East River tunnels between Manhattan and Queens.

With the holidays approaching, Israel said now was not the time for Amtrak to keep commuters in the dark when it comes to a timetable on tunnel repairs.

“Up to now, Amtrak has not been as transparent and responsive as we would have liked. I understand the scope of this job is huge, but we are not asking Amtrak to build a new transcontinental railroad going from the Atlantic to the Pacific here,” Israel said. “We are heading into the busiest season in the busiest railroad in America, and we do not want Christmas chaos.”

Israel said he spoke with Amtrak President Joseph Boardman Tuesday morning after he and members of the LIRR Commuter Council put pressure on Amtrak to be more upfront about its restoration updates.

According to the congressman, Boardman promised Amtrak would have all four tunnels repaired and operational by Christmas week.

“We understand the importance of restoring full LIRR service and are committed to doing so by the Christmas holiday,” Boardman said. “We appreciate the continued cooperation from LIRR and are diligently working to make the needed repairs.”

But to avoid any more confusion, Israel said the next step was to hold Amtrak accountable for its promise.

“Mr. Boardman told me he was instituting a top-down focus of his resources, his own personal attention and the entire Amtrak team to reopening the tunnels,” Israel said.

Since the storm, only two of the four Amtrak-owned East River tunnels have been operational by using makeshift and temporary signal systems, LIRR spokesman Sal Arena said. Because of this, Arena said the LIRR has been unable to run its full complement of trains through the tunnels.

“So while we are back on our regular, published schedule, with the exception of the Long Beach branch, as a base reference for our customers, we can only run it by canceling some trains on each branch,” Arena said. “Only when the tunnel signal system is again fully operational will we be able to run without cancellations.”

According to Epstein, who chairs the LIRR Commuter Council, the tunnel damage has forced the ongoing cancellations of 26 morning rush hour and 27 evening rush hour trains across several different lines.



U.S. Rep. Steve Israel (c.) takes questions during the news conference, Photo by Phil Corso



Photo courtesy MTA Long Island Rail Road/Emmanuel "Anwar" Cumberbatch

LIRR employees replace concrete track ties between Jamaica and Queens Village. The work was postponed due to preparation work before and restoration work after Hurricane Sandy. Photo courtesy MTA Long Island Rail Road/Emmanuel "Anwar" Cumberbatch

At the height of travel on Thanksgiving eve, Penn Station was reduced to chaos when Amtrak, the LIRR and New Jersey Transit all suspended service after the makeshift signal system operating inside the East River tunnels malfunctioned around 5p.m.

“LIRR riders now have fewer, more crowded trains providing rush hour service that is more susceptible to disruption from another incident,” Epstein said. “Amtrak, as a publicly chartered entity, owes transparency to the public — especially those who use its facilities.”

Amtrak, a for-profit corporation, was created by Congress in 1970 and is provided support and federal dollars from the Federal Railroad Administration. The four East River tunnels are the only non-LIRR-owned tracks in the entire railroad system.

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