

A better future 73 years in the making

Persistence on the LIRR's Third Track shows that big changes are possible



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It only took 73 years.

In 1949, the Nassau County Transit Commission described the addition of a third track to the railroad between Hicksville and Floral Park as one of “seven categories of inadequacies requiring immediate relief.”

In the seven decades that followed, the Long Island Railroad’s Third Track remained a pipe dream.

Generations of rail commuters faced delays when one of the two tracks on the main trunk had a problem. Generations of New York City residents couldn’t easily take a job on Long Island because timely trains to make the reverse commute feasible remained elusive. Generations of drivers found themselves at the whim of dangerous grade crossings.

But this week, trains began to traverse the now-open

10-mile stretch of the Third Track. New schedules allow for travel in both directions. Eight grade crossings are gone.

The significance of this moment cannot be overstated. The opening of the Third Track can transform Long Island’s economy in a way few other singular projects have. Rising home values. New high-paying jobs. Growing companies. And, as Gov. Kathy Hochul emphasized, more time and opportunities for commuters.

On Monday, a host of officials, past and present, were on hand to celebrate. Several speakers, including Hochul, had little involvement in the project’s fraught approval process. But knowing the history is the only way to prepare for the future.

The LIRR Third Track project spent decades stuck in the muck of missing money, vision and support. Former Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo was among the first elected officials to take it seriously, after former Greenport Mayor Dave



KEVIN P. COUGHLIN / OFFICE OF GOVERNOR KATHY HOCHUL

This week, trains began to traverse the now-open approximately 10-mile stretch of the LIRR’s Third Track.

Kapell brought him the issue. Cuomo’s persistence, combined with a small but mighty band of supporters that included Kapell, Suffolk County Chief Deputy County Executive Lisa Black, the Rauch Foundation’s Nancy Rauch Douzinas and others, pushed the project forward. They wouldn’t take no for an answer — no matter how many times they heard it.

Five years ago, in the summer of 2017, some local elected officials desperately tried again to stop the project in its tracks.

Mayors sought so-called “community benefits” — pots of cash and giveaways in exchange for their support. State senators held up the final approval until the last possible moment, until their local villages got what they wanted. A lack of leadership and vision again threatened to derail Long Island’s future.

Those who remember those tense weeks may have found it a bit head-scratching to see Hochul thank, among others, former State Senate Majority Leader John Flanagan, the

leader who refused to lead during that pivotal time.

But now, the Third Track’s completion serves as a reminder that strong leaders and persistent advocates can deliver joy like that felt on Monday, and the promise of a new and better future.

“Protecting Long Island’s future means recognizing that we sometimes need to change the model a little bit,” Metropolitan Transportation Authority chairman Janno Lieber said. “And if we’re going to meet the challenges of a fast-moving world with big projects that address big challenges, it can’t take 73 years.”

So, what’s next? Well, there’s alleviating road congestion, remaking Penn Station, building new downtowns, and finally doing something at the Nassau Hub. And Lieber rightly has his eye on the Jamaica Capacity Improvements — the reconfiguring of century-old tracks and yards and interlockings to end the infamous Jamaica crawl.

Perhaps some of that will get done, long before 2095.

■ **COLUMNIST RANDI F. MARSHALL’S** opinions are her own.