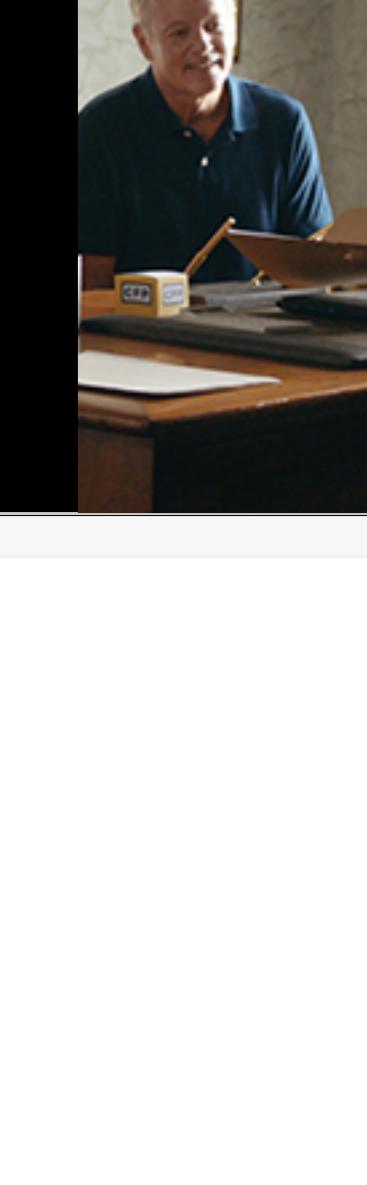


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At Long Last, a New Rail Tunnel Under the Hudson River Can Be Built

After four years of stalling by the Trump administration, officials in Washington approved the \$11.6 billion project for federal funding.

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The existing rail tunnels under the Hudson River were badly damaged by flooding during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times



By Patrick McGeehan

May 28, 2021, 11:13 a.m. ET

For five years, the plan to build a second pair of rail tunnels between New York City and New Jersey has been deemed one of the most critical infrastructure projects in the country.

But it needed a green light from federal officials.

On Friday, after years of delays during the Trump administration, that approval officially arrived from the new administration in Washington. Now, the \$11.6 billion needed for the [tunnel project](#) could come from the giant infrastructure bill that Republican and Democratic lawmakers are wrangling over on Capitol Hill.

“We’re now where we should have been four years ago,” said Steven M. Cohen, co-chairman of the Gateway Program Development Corporation, the agency overseeing the project. “All of this has been in suspended animation for four years for no reason other than politics and games.”

The Biden administration has indicated its support for the project and the transportation secretary, Pete Buttigieg, has acknowledged its importance to the economy of the region and the nation. “This is a big step for the Northeast, and for the entire country, as these tunnels connect so many people, jobs and businesses,” Mr. Buttigieg said in a statement announcing the approval.

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The tunnels, which would carry trains deep under the Hudson River, are part of a massive project known as Gateway that aims to modernize the rail system that serves New York City. They would supplement the existing tunnels that are more than 110 years old and were severely damaged during Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

Under the existing construction timetable, the new tunnels could be finished by the end of the decade.

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Before the pandemic, 450 trains carried about 200,000 passengers each weekday through the old tubes, which connect to Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan. Most riders were commuters, but many others were traveling from other cities on Amtrak, the national railroad that owns the tunnels and Penn Station.

Since the hurricane, transportation officials in the New York region have worried about the deteriorating condition of the existing tubes under the Hudson. Salt left over from the flooding has been eating away at the interior walls and electrical cables, forcing occasional shutdowns for repairs.

Amtrak officials say that the old tubes cannot be fully fixed until there are new ones to handle the daily traffic. About \$1.8 billion of the \$11.6 billion estimated cost for the tunnel project would go toward overhauling the old tubes, they say.

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During Barack Obama’s presidency, there had been a general agreement that the federal government would cover half the cost of building the tunnels, with New York and New Jersey sharing the other half. That commitment from the states still stands, said Anthony Coscia, the chairman of Amtrak.

The two states had intended to borrow much of their shares of the cost from the federal government, a standard practice in big, expensive projects. But the Trump administration ruled that such borrowings would not count as contributions from the states. The Biden administration quickly reversed that position in February, clearing one hurdle for the tunnel project.

A bigger hurdle was the lack of a response to the application from the project’s sponsor for a decision on its environmental impact statement. That decision could have come as far back as 2018, Mr. Coscia said.

But the federal Department of Transportation, which under President Trump was headed by Elaine Chao, did not respond to the application, despite repeated entreaties from Mr. Coscia and elected officials from New York and New Jersey. Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, a Democrat and now the majority leader,

was an ardent champion of the Gateway project throughout the Trump administration’s time in office, to no avail.

“After nearly four years in political captivity, as of this moment, Gateway has officially been set free,” Mr. Schumer said on Friday.

“It is a sign of relief to know that this critical project, of national significance, is once again being taken seriously for its benefits to our entire economy, countless jobs and even safety.”

A few weeks ago, the Biden administration signaled that a decision on the project was coming soon. And its arrival offered long-awaited relief to those who have been planning the tunnel project for eight years.

“This approval means a lot of things,” Mr. Coscia said, “but what it really means is that it’s time to stop talking about this project and it’s time to start building it.”

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