

NEW JERSEY

Amtrak, NJ Transit execs face frustrated lawmakers

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Frustrated state lawmakers grilled top officials from Amtrak and NJ Transit about the state of the trans-Hudson rail system Friday, demanding answers for recent train derailments and details on upcoming repairs to New York Penn Station.

In a meeting of a Joint Legislative Oversight Committee tasked with examining transit issues, Assemblywoman Elizabeth Maher Muoio, D-Mercer, said chronic delays over the past month, set off by a pair of derailments at Penn Station, have infuriated commuters and called the competency of both agencies into question.

“I view your mission as being simple: to deliver your passengers safely and reliably and you have failed in that mission,” she said shortly before Wick Moorman, Amtrak’s President and Chief Executive officer, testified. “These delays and cancellations affect people’s lives. These are missed soccer games, missed school productions, missed family meals.”

Moorman defended his company’s performance despite what he said were years of underfunding by the federal government and growing ridership. And he vowed to do better despite train traffic that has tripled since 1976 in a “century-old station with 40-year-old tracks.”

“We have done a good job maintaining old and fragile infrastructure that supports the highest density of train traffic in North America,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean that we can’t do a better job with maintaining rail lines. We should, we can and we will.”

Amtrak announced plans Thursday to embark on a series of major repairs to its aging infrastructure this summer that will shut down tracks at the train station, the nation’s busiest, on both weekends and weekdays.

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CHRISTIE: Governor 'proud' of his record amid transit problems

Penn Station handles 600,000 passengers and 1,300 trains daily, largely from NJ Transit and the Long Island Rail Road.

The work will cause two or three “significant” outages, according to Scot Naparstek, Amtrak’s Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, to allow crews to expedite track replacements normally confined to three- to four-hour maintenance windows on weekdays and 55-hour outages on weekends.

Minor repairs, mostly on weekends, will stretch into 2018.

Steven Santoro, NJ Transit’s executive director, expressed concerns Friday that the impending shutdowns would mirror those caused by a derailment at Penn Station on April 3, when eight of 21 tracks at the station closed and crippled service throughout the region for days.

“We’ve experienced what that impact will be,” he said.

NJ Transit officials are expected to meet with Amtrak next week to discuss potential closures. A public announcement will be made the following week, according to Moorman.

Santoro said he wants NJ Transit to have a “stronger seat at the table” with Amtrak, which owns most of the rail lines in the Northeast Corridor, as well as Penn Station, and charges NJ Transit for their use.

While the two agencies maintain a good relationship and speak every day, communication and coordination must be improved going forward, said Santoro. NJ Transit sent a letter to Amtrak earlier this month calling for a risk assessment of the corridor.

“We are demanding change,” said Santoro. “NJ Transit must have more input on priority and replacement of infrastructure.”

Lawmakers, in turn, demanded change from NJ Transit in how it deals with its customers, many of whom were struck in a Hudson River tunnel for three hours on April 14 due to a power failure.

Santoro said the agency is rolling out a mobile app for notifications and appointing a coordinator to oversee communication across all platforms in the coming weeks.

The legislative committee also had harsh words for Amtrak's officials, who have taken responsibility for the two train derailments and admitted that the latest was caused by weak timber inspectors knew needed replacing.

"You saw something was wrong and thought it wouldn't fail," said Senator John McKeon, D-Essex, the committee's co-chairman. "Will it happen again?"

Naparstek said Amtrak often exceeds standards mandated by the Federal Railroad Administration and has tightened specifications for its tracks and infrastructure in the wake of the derailments.

"We never want incidents like this to happen and we work hard to prevent them," he said. "These incidents highlight just how vulnerable this system is... a single, relatively minor incident can cause chaos."

Amtrak is pinning its hopes for long-term service improvement on the developing Gateway project, a \$24 billion plan to build a new trans-Hudson tunnel and double rail capacity between Newark and New York City.

Funding for Gateway, considered one of the most important infrastructure projects in the country, currently hangs in the balance as the White House considers a budget proposal that would strip money from one of its major financial contributors.

Without it, Amtrak and NJ Transit are left with a two-track tunnel under the Hudson River in dire need of repair from damage caused by Superstorm Sandy. Renovations would require closing each of the tunnel's tubes one at a time over the next 10 to 20 years.

Completion of Gateway is at least a decade away, said McKeon, who blamed much of the recent transit mishaps on Gov. Chris Christie, who has canceled or cut billions of dollars of rail investment in New Jersey.

When McKeon asked Moorman how Amtrak will handle the next decade, Moorman said he had no solution.

"I don't have an answer other than to say we'll go in and ensure that service runs as well as it possibly can under these conditions," he said. "We're not going to put any more trains in Penn Station in the next ten years."