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Cuomo Unveils Giant LI Infrastructure Package

Long Island builders and planners are understandably thrilled by Gov. Andrew Cuomo's ambitious plan to pour hundreds of millions of dollars into Long Island's infrastructure – though local leaders acknowledge there are many political dogfights waiting between here and fruition.

Cuomo's proposals, unveiled Tuesday before an appreciative audience of MTA officials and regional rainmakers at the Long Island Association's January meeting, covers everything from sewers to airports, a controversial third track for the LIRR and aggressively innovative bioelectronics medicine center at the Nassau Hub.

The plan also includes money for local parks and storm protection, as well as an outflow pipe that would restore Reynolds Channel near Long Beach. While all components of the governor's infrastructure proposal are individually important, the bioelectronics medicine center and the third track initiative hold the most promise for Long Island's future. And make no mistake, noted John Cameron, chairman of the Long Island Regional Planning Council, every other project in the governor's grandiose Island agenda, even the bioelectronics center, is "dwarfed by the third track."

"The third track is a billion-dollar project," Cameron told Innovate LI. "It's also probably the most controversial, and for the governor to step out there and take an aggressive leadership role ... we thank him for that."

The long-debated project would significantly improve train traffic through a 9.8-mile stretch between Floral Park and Hicksville, where five major LIRR branches join the mainline. The bottleneck makes eastbound commuting a nightmare and hamstringing the Island's ability to attract talented New York City workers.

Mitch Pally, CEO of the Long Island Builders Institute, agreed that "as an MTA board member, the mainline development is perhaps the most important piece that [Cuomo] put out there."

"All have enormous benefits," Pally noted. "But the mainline development is a major project for us."

The next-gen medical center, proposed by Feinstein Institute for Medical Research chief Kevin Tracey, would advance research and product development in bioelectronics, which uses electrical bursts to stimulate the immune system – offering potential treatments for everything from rheumatoid arthritis to epilepsy to Crohn's disease. Follow-on research is focusing on controlling blood flow.

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Tracey, a pioneer in the field, has proposed a \$350 million center that would employ 650 and spin off dozens of new companies. Cuomo agreed to fund the first \$50 million – Cameron called that promise “game-changing” – with more to come from federal and private coffers.

The governor said he’d also seek funds for a federal inspection center to MacArthur Airport, opening the tarmac to international flights, and bring professional management to state-owned Republic Airport in Farmingdale. He also plans to fund tax-free development at Republic, including a 12.5 acre mixed-use, transit-oriented development with a new LIRR stop.

Among other initiatives in Cuomo’s wide-ranging agenda: \$50 million for a Ronkonkoma Hub parking structure; \$5 million to study the feasibility of a tunnel connecting Long Island to either the Bronx, Westchester County or Connecticut; and \$1 million to study the potential for a deep-water port at the former Shoreham power plant, with an eye toward significantly reducing commercial traffic on Long Island’s congested roads. Many of those projects come straight from the Regional Planning Council’s playbook – at least, Cameron noted, from Plan 2035, a 25-year “regional comprehensive sustainability study” the council produced in 2010.

“We recommended the deep-water port study and the tunnel study, and the federal inspection station (at MacArthur),” Cameron noted. “Today, the governor has advanced a number of initiatives included in Plan 2035.”

Cuomo also announced Tuesday a \$230 million agreement with the Army Corps of Engineers to protect six miles of Long Beach Island and an additional \$54.5 million for state parks on the Island – but while every one of the projects he outlined is a regional winner, even ardent supporters like Cameron and Pally recognize none will happen easily.

“It’s going to take a lot of political capital to get these done,” Cameron noted. The third rail project, for instance, has been on the table for years, but has never been funded due to stiff opposition from local communities. Cuomo said his plan dramatically minimizes its impact by confining virtually all construction to the LIRR’s existing right of way and reducing the number of required property acquisitions from about 200 – a common number in prior proposals – to just 50.

All told, only 20 houses would be affected, the governor said, and affected homeowners will be offered the chance to sell out completely. Affected commercial property owners would be in line for relocation assistance.

While acknowledging the need to mitigate its construction-related effects, Cuomo left no doubt about the importance of the third-rail project, noting “Long Island’s future

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prosperity depends on a modern transportation network that eases congestion on our roads, improves service on the LIRR, helps this region's economy and preserves the character of these great communities.”

That sort of selling will be required on many projects on the governor's expensive agenda, particularly when it comes time footing the bill. While horsetrading and other wheeling-dealing is all but assured, Pally doesn't think any particular proposals are more or less realistic than others, however high their cost or deep the political opposition.

“I think all of them are realistic,” the LIBI chief said. “With the right credibility and the right backing, all of them can be done, and be done in a reasonable period of time.” Securing that backing, however, may be easier said than done, particularly since it will “require the cooperation of the Legislature,” Cameron noted.

“Where's the funding for the third track?” he asked. “I don't believe that's in the MTA's capital plan, so the governor is going to have to work on that, and there's going to be some political pushback for sure.

“Let's see what happens,” Cameron added. “But the Planning Council is strongly behind the governor's agenda. Today, Gov. Cuomo is my favorite elected official.”

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