Advocating for the obvious solutions

Thomas Wright, 46, recently took the reins as president at a critical juncture for the Regional Plan Association, a nonprofit that generates urban-planning initiatives and ideas for the tristate area.

For the fourth time in its nearly 100-year history, the association is beginning research on a long-range strategic plan. This time around, that blueprint must address the sudden influx of new residents. That trend has made the region more economically competitive, but at the same time, it is threatening to strain the housing market and transportation infrastructure to the breaking point.

What's the greatest transportation need facing the area right now?

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority capital plan is in high priority on a funding level.

Half the MTA's $35 billion plan is unfunded. Is that an intractable situation?

You can't be a civic advocate if you think nothing can improve. The frustrating thing is that solutions to problems like this are sometimes obvious. With gas being at historic low right now, [a penny tax] on a gallon of gas in the region would probably generate more than $62 million a year by itself. If you did a surcharge on the MTA and New Jersey Transit regions of around 10 cents a mile, that could allow you to pay for New York's entire transportation capital needs on a pay-as-you-go basis without even borrowing money.

Do you feel the MTA isn't investing enough capital in maintenance?

IF[MTA Chairman] Tom Prendergast says the authority is a trillion-dollar capital asset, then according to good public finance accounting, let's say most of this stuff needs to be replaced every 50 years. Just to deal with the wear and tear on a trillion-dollar system, we would need to spend $30 billion a year. We're doing about $5 billion. And we've also seen how transit operators around the world are much more heavily invested in tech. The MetroCard was obsolete 15 years ago, and we are stuck with it for the foreseeable future. Seoul is replacing a system they've had for 10 years.

What do you think about Gov. Andrew Cuomo's AirTrain plan to LaGuardia?

It's great that he is focusing on this issue. But there is a concern that the line [which would run along the Grand Central Parkway to a subway or rail connection in Flushing] is not as fast as we really need, or would even compete that well with bus service or taxis. The other two airports have more obvious needs that are probably even higher priorities. The Port Authority already has endorsed a proposal to extend the PATH from downtown Newark to Newark airport. That is a deliverable project that will enormously benefit both lower Manhattan and the World Trade Center site, and also the rest of the PATH system.

What about JFT? It already has an AirTrain that connects to the A train.

Those AirTrain cars were designed to run on the Long Island Railroad tracks and connect to Penn Station, so you could essentially add a JFT line once East Side Access is complete. They didn't build it because there was no room at Penn Station. But this is where things get fun, with regional planning. The LIRR is building a basement under the Grand Central station to bring 60% of their riders here instead of there. The LIRR will say they still need all the capacity they have at Penn Station, but that's absurd. That doesn't pass the laugh test.

What's the most pressing transportation investment question?

Gateway, the proposed transit project. We have to find a way to finance, plan and build a new commuter rail tunnel.

What do you think about a plan to tell the East River bridges?

In London they charge people to drive into the core of the city. It helps manage traffic and generates a lot of money to invest in transport infrastructure. We've got to get on that boat. That's why the MoveNY campaign is so important. It will fund the MTA's capital plan and help fix that crisis, but it also establishes the principle that these investments will pay for themselves.

The brilliance that [planning architect Sam Schwartz] had was to reduce the tolls for the outer crossings, because those people are getting screwed. Then the people who are going to pay in the system are the ones who are going to benefit, either with less congestion, or with better transit options so they don't have to drive.

The RPA first proposed a new subway line that would run from Brooklyn to Queens in the '90s. You're bringing it back?

What we've learned since then is that it can be an at-grade service, much less expensive to build. It just has to split the right-of-way between passenger and freight rails. So much growth is in Brooklyn and Queens. And like many cities, New York has this radial transit system with freight-rail right-of-way that circles it. This will be the next wave of transit investment. In New York, it's the obvious one. I don't necessarily think the MTA should just be asked to build that.

Why not create a franchise, a concession, and offer it to a consortium to provide that service? This is being done in Stockholm. Their transit system is being run by Hong Kong's Mass Transit Railway Corp, which has a financial incentive to do it all, seems to run it pretty well, and does it at a much lower cost and a greater efficiency than the old Stockholm system.