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Rail bridges will double N.J.-N.Y. capacity

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A long-range transit plan to decrease commuter rail delays and increase train capacity between New Jersey and Manhattan cleared an important hurdle this week when a federal agency approved a \$1.3 billion project to replace an old train bridge over the Hackensack River.

The Federal Railroad Administration, which was reviewing the replacement project's environmental impacts, ruled that plans can go forward for two new bridges with a combined five tracks. The bridges will take the place of a problematic two-track bridge between Secaucus and Kearny that presently carries all NJ Transit and Amtrak trains between New York and New Jersey.

"It's a significant milestone in the project," said Dan Stessel, a spokesman for NJ Transit. "They issued a decision which allows money to flow ... It brings the project into a shovel-ready status, meaning we can move to construction within a relatively short period of time."

Amtrak and NJ Transit will now begin designing the new structures. That work is expected to take between 18 and 24 months, said Richard Sarles, executive director of NJ Transit. Construction could then start around 2011 and would take an estimated five and a half years.

The current 99-year-old structure, known as the "portal bridge," poses problems because its lowest point is only 20 feet from the river. The bridge can pivot to allow boats and barges room to pass, but when that happens train riders are often kept waiting in both directions. And sometimes, when the river traffic has passed, it does not smoothly revert to bridge form.

"It's 100 years old, and despite Amtrak's best efforts to maintain it, it doesn't close as soon as you'd like it to close," Sarles said.

The two new bridges -- one to the south of the current bridge, and one to the north -- will be 40 and 50 feet above the river, respectively. The two-track southern bridge would be high enough that far fewer trains will be disrupted by maritime traffic than are disrupted with the current bridge. All passing boats would be able to fit under the three-track northern bridge, Sarles said.

Three years ago, the U.S. Coast Guard began limiting river traffic at the portal bridge, allowing it to stay in continuous operation shouldering trains from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. and from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

The new bridges, when paired with a proposed new \$8.7 billion train tunnel under the Hudson River expected to open in 2017, will allow NJ Transit and Amtrak to more than double their combined number of hourly rush-hour trains entering or leaving Manhattan from 23 to 48, Stessel said.

In a 23-page document, the Department of Railroad Administration contends the added train capacity will lead to fewer automobile trips across the Hudson River and improve air quality.