

Design competition for new Port Authority bus terminal at an impasse

By [Dana Rubinstein](#)

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Absent a miraculous change of heart on the part of New York officials, the Port Authority's design competition for a new bus terminal on Manhattan's West Side for New Jersey commuters has reached a mortal impasse.

New Jersey officials can protest, but the leverage in the battle between New Jersey and a coterie of terminal-skeptical New York officials resides in Manhattan.

More precisely, it resides with first-term Manhattan Councilman Corey Johnson, whose district encompasses the bus terminal and who effectively wields veto power over megaprojects in his district via a city land use approval process known, in bureaucratese, as ULURP.

The Port Authority expects any new bus terminal will have to go through that process, and in an interview Friday, Johnson said he would not support any bus terminal concept that emerges from the ongoing design competition, even as he acknowledged the existing facility, which is over-capacity, run-down, widely reviled and slowly crumbling, must somehow be replaced.

"It's fair to say we need to reset and restart the process," Johnson said.

"All we have is the proposal that is before us," said Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, who also has a formal role in the review process. "And that is not acceptable to us."

Those sentiments have been echoed by the de Blasio administration, which would also need to sign onto the megaproject, and whose first deputy mayor, Tony Shorris, recently argued that, "New York City and its residents must have a full voice in key issues such as site selection, terminal size, operational improvements and how to avoid the need for condemnation of private property in the area."

[Last October](#), after a fit of angst about the Port Authority's planning processes — a fit that featured one board member despairing, "We don't know what we're doing" — the board authorized an international design competition for a new bus terminal west of the existing one on Manhattan's West Side.

In a concession to then-vice chairman and New York appointee [Scott Rechler](#), the competition allowed for competitors to consider alternate locations. [But in March](#), the New York side of the bistate authority [traded](#) that option away for New Jersey approval of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's LaGuardia Airport rebuild. Because the Port Authority had been planning for a new bus terminal since at least 2013 and had seven months earlier settled on [five possible concepts](#), the creation of a design competition to prolong the decision was seen as a stall. The stall continued.

“Advancing its commitment to design and construct a 21st century successor to America's largest and busiest bus terminal, the Port Authority today is launching the 'Port Authority Bus Terminal International Design + Deliverability Competition,' a two-stage competition seeking an inspired and qualified team that can deliver a winning conceptual design for this complex undertaking,” the Port Authority declared in [a March press release](#).

The Port went on to name an “international jury of experts” to judge the competition. A winner was to be announced in September.

This past month changed everything.

Newly awakened to the prospect of a massive new bus terminal on the west side, New York's elected officials scrambled into action, asserting in press conferences, press releases and publicly released letters that the existing design competition was illegitimate, ill-advised, and premature. They've called for the Port to scrap it. The Port has insisted it won't.

Now, the whole thing is undergoing what might be called a course correction.

"It's not dead," Port Authority vice chairman Steve Cohen, a New York appointee, said in an interview. “There has been a readjustment as a result of what happened [over] the past three weeks. It's not dead because everyone concedes we need a new bus terminal. The only real issue is where will it be, what does it look like, what is the acceptable disruption and who shares the burden.”

That burden is at the heart of it all.

“I don't know why the Port Authority is categorically, unilaterally ruling out looking at potential options across the river,” Johnson said Friday. “The competition that they've started, they're putting the cart before the horse.”

On Thursday, a bipartisan group of 20 state lawmakers from New Jersey and 20 members of Congress — including the state's two U.S. senators — sent a letter

to the city leaders who have been objecting to the terminal plans. It urged them to reconsider their positions, saying a new facility in New Jersey would be “a recipe for disaster” because trains wouldn’t have the capacity to move that many people from New Jersey into New York.

State Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg, who represents Bergen County and has been a vocal advocate for a new terminal in Manhattan, said she remained hopeful the New York officials would see things her way, even if she wasn’t certain her counterparts were willing to be “partners” in the process.

“I can’t say they will be,” Weinberg said. “I’m hopeful that they will be, that we’ll come an understanding that we shouldn’t be at loggerheads on this.”

On Friday afternoon, the bistate agency issued the following statement: “Big projects are never easy and never without their own unique complexities. We currently have a process that will take into consideration Manhattan’s West Side community as represented by the local Community Board, elected officials and City Hall. We remain optimistic that, as anticipated and with the input of all interested parties, we will come up with a preliminary design that is the initial step moving forward with a new, much-needed Bus Terminal.”

--additional reporting by Ryan Hutchins