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MTA looks at wireless internet; Schumer urges haste

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If train time is a great time to work using your laptop, wouldn't it be convenient to be able to read e-mails and work online from Wassaic straight through to Grand Central Terminal?

Or from Poughkeepsie or New Haven?

Well, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority is studying wireless broadband Internet access for both Metro-North Railroad and Long Island Rail Road. But U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., said yesterday that the transit giant is not moving fast enough, even as other commuter rails around the country put wireless Internet services in place.

"Why is Metro-North lagging behind? We don't know," Schumer said at the Bronxville station. If the MTA passes a plan quickly enough, Schumer said, it may be able to obtain federal stimulus funds for the work under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Rail systems in places like Boston and San Francisco already use or are setting up wireless Internet services. Amtrak is testing a system on its Acela Express trains that run between Washington, D.C., and Boston, passing through New York City.

"They're almost inevitably an overwhelming success," Schumer said.

The MTA responded to Schumer's call with a statement saying that the agency has begun placing advertisements calling for companies interested in providing the service to contact the agency. The responses are due in September.

Schumer said the MTA's process could take two years, and he encouraged the agency to try a pilot program that he said could be available to at least some of its commuters within months.

In the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority system in and around Boston, commuters can access surf the Net through a wireless system on more than 200 train cars - at least two cars of every train on all 13 lines - said spokesman Joe Pesaturo. By the end of the summer, it will be available on 260 coaches, with three or four cars on some trains offering wireless Internet, he said.

"We get so many e-mails from people, actually e-mailing us right from the trains, telling us what a fantastic initiative this is," Pesaturo said.

In and around San Francisco, the Bay Area Rapid Transit is rigging its trains for wireless Internet and expects to complete the work by the end of 2010.

Metro-North installed wireless Internet access in the Station Master's Office, a waiting area in Grand Central with benches and restrooms, in May 2008.

Amtrak offers the service at some stations, including New York Penn Station, railroad spokesman Cliff Cole said. The national railroad expects to make an announcement on future plans for broadband access when it completes the test on the Acela trains, Cole said. While he said the test would be done soon, he did not know exactly when.

"Whether there's going to be a cost for it or how that's all going to shake out, that's to be determined," Cole said.

For now, he said, "we're just trying to see if we can get a system that works."

Representatives of the Westchester County Association, the Business Council of Westchester and the Bronxville government appeared with Schumer at the conference yesterday to support the push for the work on the Metro-North trains.

Paul Vitale, vice president of government and community relations for the business council, said the MTA should be out in front, providing wireless Internet before others.

"We should be a trendsetter," he said, "not a follower."