

PCAC Quarterly Report

April - June 1997

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Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee (PCAC)

LIRRCC Vice Chair Elected PCAC Chair

At the June PCAC meeting, Barbara Josepher was elected to a two-year term as council chair, replacing Judith McClain, who had served as PCAC chair for four years. Ms. Josepher has been the vice chair of the Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council since 1994 and becomes the first LIRRCC member to serve as PCAC chair. The council praised Ms. McClain for her work as chair and for the leadership and dedication she demonstrated during her tenure.

In other action, Stephen Wilder of the New York City Transit Riders Council was elected PCAC first vice chair, and Martin Goldstein of the Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council was elected PCAC second vice chair. Mr. Goldstein was previously the first vice chair of the PCAC.

New Research Associate Joins PCAC

Albert Baime replaced Colette Thayer as the PCAC research associate in April. A doctoral student in literature at NYU, Mr. Baime is writing a dissertation on transportation history. Ms. Thayer left the PCAC to move to Washington, D.C., where she will look for a position in public policy. In May, she received her Master's Degree in public policy from NYU's Wagner School of public service.

PCAC Seeks to Maintain ISTEA As Is

In May, PCAC Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky and Associate Director Alan Foster traveled to Washington, D.C., with the ISTEA Works! coalition to rally for the reauthorization of ISTEA in its current form. ISTEA (the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act) will expire on September 30, 1997, and two proposals in Congress would dramatically alter the funding provisions of the law. One would eliminate the federal gasoline tax; the other would allocate federal transportation funds to states based on the amount of gasoline tax revenue they collect. In either scenario, New York State and the MTA would lose a substantial share of their transit grants.

Emil Frankel, consultant for the ISTEACoalition of the New York City Partnership and Chamber of Commerce, was a guest speaker at the PCAC's June meeting. He described the various Congressional proposals for reauthorizing ISTEACoalition and how they would affect New York State.

MTA Inspector General Addresses PCAC

Roland Malan, MTA Inspector General, addressed the PCAC at its June meeting. Mr. Malan highlighted some of the reports his office is currently working on, including one suggested by the LIRRCC: the adequacy of heat and air conditioning on Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North trains. Poor air conditioning on LIRR trains is one of the key issues on the LIRRCC's agenda.

PCAC Views Possible Routes for LaGuardia Rail Link

In June, PCAC Transportation Planner Jonathan Sigall toured four possible routes for a rail link to LaGuardia Airport from the Queensboro Plaza subway station. The tour was sponsored by an airport access task force founded by midtown Manhattan community boards. The PCAC is a member of the task force and has been actively involved in airport access. In July, LIRRCC members will meet with representatives from the Port Authority to discuss the planned rail link to Kennedy Airport.

PCAC Discusses Public Outreach with Hong Kong Government Representative

PCAC members and staff met with Nancy Law, deputy secretary of Transport for the Hong Kong Government, in May to discuss the role of the PCAC in the MTA's planning process. She was interested in learning how to involve the public in the planning for a new rail line that Hong Kong is seeking to develop.

LIRR East Side Access Study

The PCAC has been following the LIRR East Side Access study, for which direct LIRR service to Grand Central Terminal has been selected as the favored alternative. Public hearings on this option are expected to be held in September. In its capacity as a member of the technical advisory committee for the study, the PCAC submitted comments on the Grand Central Terminal alternative in March. The PCAC voiced support for the proposal, but noted that efforts need to be made to accommodate the additional people who will transfer to the Lexington Avenue subway line.

Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council (LIRRCC)

Main Line Track Rehabilitation of Concern to LIRRCC

The council has been closely monitoring the effect that the LIRR's Main Line Track rehabilitation project is having on railroad passengers. Lawrence Silverman, chair of the council, has discussed the issue with LIRR President Thomas Prendergast, inquiring about crowding conditions on trains since the start of the project. Mr. Silverman has also been in contact with a group of commuters from Long Beach that has mounted a petition campaign against schedule changes made to accommodate the work. Some trains were eliminated for the duration of the work. Mr. Silverman was quoted in an article in Long Island Newsday, expressing support for Long Beach riders.

LIRR President Responds to Council Complaint

In compiling the results of its eleventh annual LIRR report card, the council found that riders on the Ronkonkoma Branch are concerned about a familiar issue: LIRR employees who do not surrender their seats to standing passengers. As it has done in the past, the LIRRCC brought the problem to the attention of the railroad, this time in a letter to Mr. Prendergast. In response, Mr. Prendergast published a message to employees in the railroad's weekly employee newsletter. He reminded employees that their agreement requires them to surrender their seats to standees. He also noted that providing for passenger comfort is central to the railroad's mission.

Council Views New Bicycle Policy

At the LIRRCC's May meeting, the railroad presented its proposed new bicycle policy to members. The rules are based on a proposal that the council submitted to the railroad in August 1996. Although the policy incorporates many of the council's suggestions, including establishing special weekend bicycle trains and enabling people to obtain bicycle permits at Penn Station, members said that it is inadequate. A chief concern was that the LIRR will not implement the new regulations until summer 1998, two years after the LIRRCC made its recommendations. In addition, the council asked the railroad to reconsider its decision not to operate weekend bicycle trains to Montauk during the summer. The LIRR said that there is insufficient capacity on the Montauk Branch to do so. However, members said that Montauk is a good place for bicyclists because it is a popular recreational area. The LIRRCC asked the railroad to revise the policy and will revisit the issue.

LIRRCC Discusses Safety Issues

Jose Fernandez, the railroad's new executive director of system safety, also addressed the LIRRCC at its May meeting. Mr. Fernandez discussed a number of issues, including initiatives the LIRR is taking to reduce the number of customer injuries. Also present at the meeting was Ron Massiana of the LIRR Police to discuss an area of particular concern to the council: accidents at grade crossings. The LIRRCC has been working with the LIRR to increase the public's awareness of the hazards at grade crossings. LIRRCC Chairman Lawrence Silverman was interviewed by Channel 12 regarding accidents at the grade crossing at the Syosset station.

Parking Discussed at April Meeting

Problems with parking at LIRR stations was the subject of the council's April meeting. Members are primarily concerned about the lack of adequate parking at many stations. Also of concern are the poor condition of some lots and security problems at others. Robert Brickman, director of planning for the LIRR, and Dennis George, chief engineer of strategic investment, discussed initiatives that the railroad is taking to improve parking. The LIRR is developing a strategic plan for increasing parking at key locations. It will present a draft of the plan to the LIRRCC later this year.

Council Views Focus Groups

In June, PCAC Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky, Associate Director Alan Foster, and Transportation Planner Jonathan Sigall observed focus groups held by the LIRR to determine how it can increase its share of the seasonal travel market to the East End of Long Island. Participants discussed what they like and dislike about their current mode of travel and amenities that would make the railroad more attractive. People who drive said that they are not likely to use the railroad, even if service is improved, because it is not as comfortable or convenient as traveling by car. Riders of the Hampton Jitney were split on this issue, with some saying that they might use the railroad if service were improved.

Press Coverage

Mr. Silverman was quoted in Long Island Business News, expressing the council's discontent with the railroad's plans to close thirteen stations.

He also appeared in a Long Island Newsday article about a grade-crossing accident that killed a teenager. Mr. Silverman commented that the LIRR needs to do more to prevent people from walking or driving around lowered gates.

Mr. Silverman was quoted in a New York Times article about the new double-decker coaches that the railroad is buying. He said that the new coaches are desperately needed, since they are replacing cars bought in the 1950s.

Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council (MNRCC)

MNRCC Lobbies for Mid-Harlem Line Third Track

The council has been actively supporting Metro-North's proposed Mid-Harlem Line third track project. The project involves the addition of a third track between the Mount Vernon West and Crestwood stations. With the third track, Metro-North would be able to expand service on the entire Harlem Line to meet better the needs of its customers and to keep pace with growing ridership in Dutchess and Putnam Counties. In June, Mr. Sigall testified at two public hearings on the project, noting that it is vital to the future of Metro-

North and to the region. In addition, Ms. Dolinsky and Mr. Foster traveled to Albany to enlist the support of state legislators, and the council distributed leaflets at Grand Central Terminal highlighting the project's benefits.

MNRCC Pushes for Yankee Stadium Station

At its April meeting, the MNRCC formed a subcommittee to make the case for constructing a Metro-North station at Yankee Stadium, regardless of whether the team remains in the Bronx. Metro-North has said that it would build the station only if the Yankees stay. However, at the April meeting, council member Robert Schumacher said that the station would be useful even if the Yankees relocate. He noted that the parking garages at Yankee Stadium make the area a natural spot for a park-and-ride facility. Howard Permut, vice president of planning and development for Metro-North, said that Metro-North is now performing market research to determine who would use a park-and-ride. He added that there is a market from Bergen, Orange, and Rockland counties.

New Shuttle Bus for Cortlandt Station

As part of a funding agreement with Metro-North for shuttle-bus service, the Westchester County Department of Transportation added a shuttle-bus route between the Veterans Administration Hospital in Montrose and Metro-North's Cortlandt station. When the railroad replaced the Crugers and Montrose stations with the Cortlandt station in 1996, the MNRCC suggested that Metro-North establish shuttle-bus service to the hospital. The council noted that it is difficult to walk to the facility from the Cortlandt station.

Council Continues to Seek Dutchess and Putnam Members

Council staff contacted Dutchess and Putnam counties regarding vacancies in the MNRCC from those constituencies. Neither locality has a candidate at this time, though the county executive's office for Dutchess said that it is reaching out to local mayors and supervisors for prospective members.

Metro-North Responds to Council Suggestions

In response to an inquiry from the MNRCC, Metro-North said it will explore the possibility of developing a window replacement program for its trains. The council had expressed concern about the condition of train windows, which have become clouded with age and appear to be dirty.

Metro-North has instructed its train crews to pre-cool trains that are stored in Grand Central Terminal during the day and activated for the evening rush. The MNRCC had noted that the cars were uncomfortably hot when they were first put into service.

Council Meetings

Howard Permut, vice president of planning and development for Metro-North, was the guest speaker at the council's April meeting. Mr. Permut discussed Metro-North's key expansion projects, including the proposed Mid-Harlem Line third track and studies to explore the feasibility of extending the Hudson Line to Rhinecliff and establishing service from Hopewell Junction to White Plains. Mr. Permut added that the railroad will initiate new ferry routes and will institute a guaranteed-ride-home program for Tappan ZExpress subscribers. Metro-North will provide free taxi service to commuters when the Rockland County buses are not running.

Jeffrey Olwell, market research manager for Metro-North, addressed the MNRCC at its May meeting. He presented the results of the railroad's 1996 customer satisfaction survey. He also discussed the findings of market research that Metro-North conducted to determine customer preferences for the interior design of new rail cars that the railroad will be buying. In March, Ms. Dolinsky, Mr. Foster, and Mr. Sigall observed focus groups on this topic.

New York City Transit Riders Council (NYCTRC)

Council Welcomes New Members

Four members were formally appointed to the TRC, filling vacancies that had existed for several years. In May, William Guild and Sharon Santa Maria were confirmed by Governor Pataki, and in June, Shirley Genn and Susan Scheer became official members. Also in June, Janet Eriv was nominated to the TRC by Mayor Giuliani, and Council Chairman Andrew Albert was reappointed. Nominees Marisol Halpern and Mitzie Wilson are waiting for confirmation from the Governor.

TRC Chair and Vice Chair Reelected

At the council's June meeting, Mr. Albert and Stephen Dobrow were reelected to one-year terms as chair and vice chair, respectively. In addition, Judith McClain and Michael Sinansky were reelected to the council's three-person executive committee. Thomas Jost was voted in as a new member of the executive committee.

Annual Bus Forum

The TRC held its annual bus forum on April 2, offering riders the opportunity to voice their concerns regarding bus service directly to senior management at NYC Transit. Present at the forum were Millard Seay, senior vice president of the Department of Buses, and his key staff members. More than thirty people spoke, asking questions on a range of issues. Of primary concern to riders were bus bunching and regularity of service. The forum was covered in a story on New York 1, and Mr. Albert was subsequently a guest on the news channel's Straphangers Report.

Council Meets with NYCT President

The TRC met with NYC Transit President Lawrence Reuter twice during the quarter. In April, members inquired about the status of a contract to purchase new subway cars and discussed several issues relating to the planned free transfer between subways and buses. The council also suggested that NYC Transit provide reimbursements to customers for lost or stolen MetroCards, noting that many transit riders are reluctant to buy the card because they are concerned about losing the value encoded on it. In response, NYC Transit said that it plans to implement a policy to provide reimbursements to half-fare card customers.

In June, Mr. Reuter and his senior staff discussed the agency's plans to buy new subway cars for the "B" division (the lettered routes). Also addressed were the status of the preparation for the free transfer and other MetroCard issues. Members said that it is important for NYC Transit to expand the number and type of venues outside the subway system where people can add value to MetroCards.

Council Discusses Free Transfer

The free transfer between buses and subways was the subject at the council's May meeting. Norman Silverman, senior director of route and system planning, was on hand to respond to questions and comments on the policy, which will take effect on July 4. The TRC is primarily concerned that people who must use two buses and a subway to complete their trip will continue to pay two fares under the new policy. Mr. Sigall testified on this issue at the May meeting of the MTA Board. In June, the MTA agreed to provide an additional transfer for passengers on the Q79 bus route in Queens and the S60 bus route in Staten Island. However, since other bus routes fall into the same category, the TRC will continue to explore this issue.

TRC Protests Temporary Station Closure

In June, Mr. Albert wrote to NYC Transit President Lawrence Reuter, protesting the agency's plan to close temporarily the 168th Street and Broadway 1/9 station to facilitate elevator work there. NYC Transit will close the station from July to September as it replaces three of the four elevators. The fourth elevator will be replaced at a later time. The agency says that replacing three elevators at once is the most efficient way to address long-standing problems with the elevators. However, in his letter, Mr. Albert noted that the station is one of the busiest in the system and serves Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center. He said that NYC Transit must ensure that people are well aware of the closure and of their travel options. Mr. Albert expressed hope that the closure does not represent a shift in NYC Transit's policy to keep stations open during rehabilitation projects. Mr. Sigall noted the TRC's concerns in testimony at the MTA Board's June meeting.

NYCT Acts on Council Suggestion

NYC Transit informed the TRC that it plans to establish a policy to provide reimbursements to customers for lost or stolen half-fare MetroCards. The council proposed this policy at an April meeting with NYC Transit President Lawrence Reuter and followed up with a letter to Mr. Reuter and MTA Chairman E. Virgil Conway. In addition, the TRC suggested that NYC Transit also explore options for providing reimbursements for all lost or stolen MetroCards. It is easier to do so for half-fare MetroCards since the cardholder's name is already registered.

MetroCard by Mail

In April, Mr. Foster observed a focus group sponsored by NYC Transit to solicit customer feedback on its proposed MetroCard Choice program. Through this program, half-fare customers who use MetroCard will be billed at the end of the month for their trips. NYC Transit will implement the program on a pilot basis later this year. In response to questions from council members, NYC Transit said that it will probably explore expanding the program to all customers, depending on the results of the pilot.

TRC Comments on NYCT Study

In June, the council submitted comments on the short list of alternatives for NYC Transit's East River Crossing study. Members expressed support for immediate implementation of the transportation systems management alternative, which contains low-cost options for improving transit service between Brooklyn and Manhattan. Elements of this alternative include improved bus service and construction of transfer areas between the Broadway-Lafayette and Bleecker Street subway stations in Manhattan, and between the Jay Street/Borough Hall and Lawrence Street subway stations in Brooklyn. However, the TRC recommended that NYC Transit first test the use of MetroCard transfers at these locations, as a potential way of saving the estimated \$50 million needed to build physical connections.

New Station Initiative

Ms. Dolinsky and Mr. Foster observed a focus group sponsored by New York City Transit on its initiative to replace subway token booth clerks with automated fare vending machines. A panel of experts on personal security design discussed issues relating to the program, including how it will impact on customers' comfort and security. The panel provided feedback on how best to implement the initiative.

Council Meetings

Lois Tandler, NYC Transit director of government and community relations and acting chief of operations planning, was the guest speaker at the council's April meeting. She discussed the process for implementing service changes and responded to concerns that members raised about the conversion of the M5 bus route in Manhattan to limited-stop service during weekdays.

Norman Silverman, senior director of route and system planning for NYC Transit, discussed the free intermodal transfer at the TRC's May meeting. As noted above, he responded to several concerns voiced about the policy, notably that it will not benefit people who must use two buses and a subway to complete their trip.

Michael Scagnelli, assistant chief of the NYPD Transit Division, met with the TRC in June. He discussed issues regarding the recent merger of the Transit Bureau and the Traffic Division into the Transportation Bureau. In response to inquiries from members, he noted that the department has established a special task force to deal with peddlers and panhandlers on subway trains.

Press Coverage

The New York Post published a letter that Mr. Albert wrote in response to negative comments about the subways and buses made by the legal advisor of France's mission to the U.N. Mr. Albert noted that the subway system provides a vital service to the 3.5 million customers who rely on it daily and that the system has improved significantly in recent years.

In addition, Mr. Albert was a guest on Channel 5's Good Day New York, where he spoke in support of the MTA's plans to put advertisements on the back of MetroCards. Ms. Dolinsky also commented on this issue, appearing in a New York Post article.

Ms. Dolinsky appeared on New York 1 and Channel 4 about the approval of a contract to buy 1,080 new subway cars for NYC Transit. She noted that the procurement is an important element of the agency's efforts to modernize its system.

She was also quoted in the New York Times congratulating the MTA and NYC Transit on the vote to implement a free transfer between buses and subways. In addition, Ms. Dolinsky was quoted in the New York Post, criticizing plans for a pilot program to wrap subway trains and buses in advertisements.