

PCAC Quarterly Report

January - March 1999

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Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee (PCAC)

PCAC Privatization Report Shows Limited Benefits for MTA

In March, the PCAC released a report on the privatization experiences of several public transit providers, including the MTA. Entitled *Privatizing MTA Services: Cost Savings or Political Buzzword?*, the study found little benefit for the MTA to contract out existing routes. However, the MTA was urged to explore innovative ways to share capital costs with the private sector while maintaining public oversight. The report was written by PCAC Research Associate Sarah E. Massey and is available upon request.

PCAC Active in MTA Studies, Meets with MTA Planning Director

In March, PCAC welcomed William Wheeler, MTA director - Planning, to discuss the MTA's planning study process. Mr. Wheeler responded to Council concerns over the high cost of MTA studies by noting that the studies must abide by stringent federal requirements which tend to increase cost.

During the quarter, PCAC members and staff remained active participants in several MTA studies. In January, PCAC received a response to comments submitted last year regarding the final Phase II report of the *Access to the Region's Core Study*. The study seeks to ease commuter access to Midtown. The study team disagreed with PCAC's contention that a proposed link between Penn Station and Grand Central Terminal would bear insupportable costs and construction impacts. However, the team assured the PCAC that passenger concerns, rather than freight concerns, will drive consideration of any possible new East River tunnel.

PCAC members and staff actively participated in the activities of the alternatives and economic development subcommittees for the Lower Manhattan Access Alternatives Study, which is examining suburban access to Lower Manhattan. PCAC helped to define and choose the project alternatives to advance for environmental analysis. PCAC also helped to begin the identification of economic tools to measure project benefits. Also during the quarter, PCAC commented on the environmental scoping document of the LIRR East Side Access Project.

PCAC Monitors Regional Transportation Funding Debate

Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky attended the February meeting of the New York ISTEAs Works! Coalition. The coalition monitors the progress and administration of federal transportation funding legislation.

Also during the quarter, Associate Director Jonathan Sigall participated in several meetings of the Empire State Transportation Alliance (ESTA). ESTA is currently independently analyzing the MTA's capital needs to offer project and funding suggestions for the agency's next five-year capital funding plan, and will undertake a public outreach campaign.

PCAC Examines MTA's Tourist-Oriented Travel Information

During the quarter, PCAC staff completed a survey of the MTA's tourist-oriented travel information. The survey was undertaken to examine the usefulness to tourists of the travel information contained on the MTA's newly updated maps, brochures, and website. The PCAC compared the MTA's travel literature against the printed and electronic information offered by thirteen other North American transit providers. The PCAC found the MTA to be making strides to improve the tourist-friendliness of its travel information, but found room for further improvement. The PCAC suggested the publication of a multilingual subway map, the placement of points-of-interest information on the new regional map, and the timely posting of NYC Transit and LI Bus maps and schedules on the MTA website.

PCAC staff spoke with Constance DePalma, MTA deputy director - Market Development and External Affairs, regarding the survey. Ms. DePalma was hired by the MTA during the course of the survey specifically to address the needs of the tourist and business markets. Ms. DePalma welcomed the PCAC's effort, and said that the survey's recommendations would be considered. She also noted that under her tenure, several of the PCAC's suggestions are already in the pipeline.

No First-Aid Kits for LIRR or Metro-North Customers

This quarter, PCAC staff learned that neither the LIRR nor Metro-North have any plans to equip railcars with first-aid kits, because new Federal Railway Administration (FRA) safety regulations regarding the kits do not cover commuter carriers. Last year, after several prominent customer emergencies occurred aboard the vehicles of regional transit carriers, the two railroads informed the PCAC that they would consider installing the kits, pending the final version of the FRA regulations.

Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council (LIRRCC)

Council Meets with LIRR President Prendergast

In March, the Council met with LIRR President Thomas Prendergast to discuss service issues. Mr. Prendergast assured the Council that new maintenance practices and refinements in the design of undercarriage air-conditioning units would help prevent the reappearance of car-climate problems this year.

The Council requested that newly arriving bi-level train sets be placed in service during rush hours to test their heavy usage endurance. However, according to Mr. Prendergast, the railroad prefers to utilize a schedule which maximizes the number of hours per day the train sets are in service, in order to familiarize train crews with them. The Council also reiterated its requests for train crews to make customer courtesy announcements, and for the railroad to post the winning drawings of the Council's "Happy Rails to You" courtesy campaign in Keeping Track, the railroad's customer newsletter.

Other issues discussed at the meeting included the status of the investigation into last year's shoe-beam fire problem, and the elimination of pedestrian crossings on the Oyster Bay Branch.

Taylor "Anti-Strike" Law Supported by Council

In January, the Council wrote to the Long Island congressional delegation to request that LIRR employees be removed from coverage under the right-to-strike provision of the Federal Railway Labor Act. The Council believes that railroad employees should instead be covered by the New York State Taylor Law which prohibits strikes by public employees. The Council felt that the letter was best written at a time when no strike threat existed, rather than in the wake of a crisis.

Employees Sit while Customers Stand: Council Won't Stand for It

During the quarter, the Council repeatedly complained about the disregard of a policy which requires LIRR employees to give up their seats to customers in crowded cars. The Council regularly receives complaints from riders who witness railroad employees, some in uniform, refusing to relinquish their seats to paying customers. In March, the Council was informed by LIRR President Thomas Prendergast that the railroad was working to address the problem.

MTA Inspector General's Office Discusses Air-Conditioning Report with Council

In January, the Council spoke with Gary Henderson, audit manager for the MTA Inspector General, regarding a recently released report on the LIRR's 1996 air-conditioning problems. The Inspector General's report attributed problems to inadequate

maintenance practices and performance measures, and suggested that these areas be improved. While the railroad has since improved maintenance practices and procedures, Mr. Henderson told the Council that it has been reticent to update its performance measures. In 1997, the LIRRCC played an instrumental role in bringing the air-conditioning problems to the attention of the MTA Inspector General.

Council Speaks with Head of MTA Police - Eastern Region

In February, the Council welcomed Inspector Kathleen Finneran, head of the MTA Police eastern region. Inspector Finneran discussed patrol procedures and a step-up in the ticketing of scofflaw drivers at grade crossings. The Council asked whether police officers, granted free passage by state law, could be required to wear their uniforms on-board trains to increase the perception of safety. However, Inspector Finneran told the Council that the idea had been considered in Albany, but was rejected because some departments do not allow officers to wear uniforms while not on duty.

Press

In January, Council Chair Lawrence Silverman was quoted in a Newsday article regarding the MTA Inspector General's Herricks Road report. In reference to concerns raised in the report over the railroad's treatment of two employees who complained about the use of substandard rail at Herricks Road, Mr. Silverman said, "...these employees are in the best position to see if there is going to be a problem."

In February, Mr. Silverman was interviewed by Fox News Channel 5 regarding the MTA Inspector General's air-conditioning report.

Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council (MNRCC)

After Long Wait, New Dutchess Member Welcomed by Council

In February, Governor Pataki approved the appointment of Dutchess County resident Andrew Forman to the MNRCC. Mr. Forman fills a slot left vacant for several years by the resignation of the previous representative from Dutchess. Mr. Forman is a finance professional, and commutes from Beacon on the Hudson Line. The MNRCC looks forward to Mr. Forman's participation in Council business.

Council Begins Participation in Two New Metro-North Studies

During the quarter, the Council reviewed the public involvement plans of two new Metro-North planning studies. The new studies will be examining possible ways to run service to Penn Station and to extend the Hudson Line beyond Poughkeepsie. At the suggestion of the Council, in order to enhance the public's access to information, the websites for each study will make study documents available for download in electronic

form. The Council will also serve on the project advisory committees for the two studies. The Council discussed the studies in January.

Council Examines Unreliability of Hudson Line Announcements

At its meeting in February, the MNRCC discussed chronic announcement problems on the Hudson Line with Maurice Kiniry, Metro-North general superintendent - Transportation. The Council noted that reliable announcements are especially important after dark, since station signage is not illuminated on platforms.

According to Mr. Kiniry, the line's MU 1100 railcars suffer from a defect in their public address systems which can prevent the transmission of announcements from car to car. The problem is currently being addressed. In the interim, the Council asked that the railroad redouble its efforts to ensure that conductors walk through problem cars to announce upcoming stations. The Council also wrote to the railroad to request the illumination of station signage.

Railroad Discusses Station Parking Plan with Council

Also in February, Randall Fleischer, Metro-North director - Parking Planning and Development, presented the railroad's parking plan to the Council. The railroad has made significant improvements to station parking in recent months, including facility upgrades along the Harlem Line in Upper Westchester and the creation of three new shuttle bus routes. However, according to Mr. Fleischer, the railroad finds it difficult to improve station parking because of opposition from local municipalities, which control two-thirds of Metro-North's parking facilities and do not wish to encourage traffic within their boundaries. The Council offered to help the railroad foster support for parking initiatives among northern suburban town boards.

Diesels Still in Use at GCT, Despite Terminal Restoration

Last quarter, the Council observed several diesels in operation at Grand Central Terminal. In January, the Council was informed that the need to de-energize third rails for off-peak construction work and occasional mechanical failures on diesel-electric locomotives have caused locomotives to be operated into GCT on diesel power. The Council urged Metro-North to operate diesels into GCT only when absolutely necessary, to avoid spoiling the terminal's newly renovated interior spaces. Soot and grime removed from the terminal's main concourse and sky ceiling after several years of difficult restoration work was originally deposited there by the operation of diesel locomotives and customer smoking in GCT.

Council Continues to Track Progress of Capital Projects

In January, Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky and MNRCC member Ronnie Ackman participated in an MTA Board tour of the North End Access Project. Although work had

progressed since the Council's previous tour in November, it did not seem likely that the project would open during the quarter, as planned.

In February, Council staff visited Grand Central Terminal to check on the installation status of special 25-cent, 30-second long-distance telephones. Staff found seven of the phones installed adjacent to Tracks 17, 18, and 34. Metro-North informed the Council that an assessment of the terminal's telephone layout will be undertaken when the retail areas are complete. The Council desires as many of the phones be installed in the terminal as possible.

During the quarter, the Council also continued to monitor the progress of station rehabilitation activities at Ossining and Croton-Harmon, including the installation of the Audio-Visual Information System (AVIS) at Croton-Harmon.

Railroad Invites Council to Comment on February Survey

At the standing invitation of the railroad, the Council reviewed Metro-North's February customer satisfaction survey. Among the Council's comments was the suggestion that questions regarding satisfaction with GCT be expanded. The railroad agreed that GCT questions should be wider in scope, but felt that such questions would be better asked after the completion of the retail areas.

New York City Transit Riders Council (NYCTRC)

Council Joins Manhattan Second Avenue Subway Task Force

At the request of Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields, during the quarter the TRC lent its support to the Manhattan Second Avenue Subway Task Force. Sponsored by Borough President Fields, the Task Force will undertake a public outreach campaign to demonstrate to the MTA the need for a full-length Second Avenue subway in order to adequately serve Manhattan's east side communities and to address crowding issues on the Lexington Avenue line. TRC members and staff attended several meetings to discuss the outreach campaign and strategies for funding construction.

In its Manhattan East Side Alternatives Study, now under federal review, NYC Transit studied the construction of a Second Avenue line between 125th and 63rd Streets, feeding into the existing Broadway line. However, the TRC fears that any uncrowding benefits achieved on the Lexington Avenue line by the construction of such a "northern-alignment" subway will be negated when the LIRR completes its connection to Grand Central Terminal sometime in the next decade. For its part, the MTA is examining a southern extension of the line, including a connection to GCT, as part of the Lower Manhattan Access Alternatives Study.

Council Resolution, Testimony on Second Avenue Subway

In March, the TRC approved a resolution concerning a future Second Avenue subway line. Under the resolution, the TRC supports MTA plans to build a subway under Second Avenue between 125th and 63rd Street connecting into the existing Broadway line, but only as a first step towards the construction of a full-length east side line.

The resolution further calls on the MTA to develop a regional transit plan to coordinate its numerous planning studies, and applauds the Regional Plan Association for the scope of its "MetroLink" proposal.

Also in March, TRC Chair Andrew Albert and Associate Director Jonathan Sigall testified at a public hearing called by State Senator Roy Goodman to express the Council's support for a Second Avenue line.

Regional Plan Association Presents "MetroLink" Proposal

In February, the Council discussed the Regional Plan Association's "MetroLink" Second Avenue subway proposal with Jeffrey Zupan, RPA senior fellow, and Steven Weber, RPA transportation planner. The plan calls for a full-length east side line with service to Grand Central Terminal and connections to the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens. The Council questioned the construction cost estimate given in the proposal which, at \$500 million per mile, seems too low by local standards.

Council Discusses Williamsburg Bridge Closure with NYC Transit

In January, the Council discussed the Williamsburg Bridge service diversion plan with Norman Silverman, NYC Transit senior director - Route and System Planning, and Peter Cafiero, manager - Route and System Planning. The plan will provide increased A, C, L, and local bus service from May until October while NYCDOT work prevents J, M, and Z subway service over the bridge.

The Council suggested that some empty L trains be placed into service at Broadway - East New York to deal with potential car crowding, but was told by Mr. Silverman that the service plan had already been finalized. TRC Chair Andrew Albert and Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky discussed the issue with NYC Transit President Lawrence Reuter in March. Mr. Reuter assented to the Council's request regarding additional L service. Some trains will be placed in service one station prior to Broadway - East New York.

During the quarter, Council staff also observed focus groups for the diversion plan's customer information brochure. Several refinements were made to the brochure as suggested by the Council, including a reassessment of the preferred itineraries listed in the brochure's trip chart, and the printing of a Yiddish translation.

Council Monitors Rollout of First MetroCard Vending Machines

In January, Council staff observed a series of MetroCard Vending Machine (MVM) focus groups. The MVMs allow customers to use cash and credit/debit cards to purchase Pay-Per-Ride and Unlimited-Ride MetroCards. Although most participants liked the machines, visually impaired riders found them difficult to use. The Council was later informed that visually impaired riders would be taught how to use the machines as part of the Reduced Fare MetroCard Program. During the quarter, the Council also monitored the rollout of the first ten pilot MVMs for in-service testing.

Council Tells NYC Transit to Mind Manners - and ADA Requirements

In March, TRC staff spoke with NYC Transit President Reuter and Joseph Hofmann, senior vice-president - Department of Subways, to express the Council's objection to an NYC Transit plan to restrict subway conductors from using the word 'please' and making route-identification announcements in order to save time. The plan, mentioned by Mr. Hofmann in a March Daily News article, was met with immediate public criticism. Staff noted that the courtesy of Transit employees is important to customers, and that the Americans with Disabilities Act requires most route announcements for the benefit of visually impaired customers. NYC Transit dropped the plan the same day. Mr. Hofmann had originally mentioned the plan when he spoke with the Council at its March meeting, but at the time he did not mention the plan's specific elements.

Chair Andrew Albert Panelist at Community Transit Forums

During the quarter, TRC Chair Andrew Albert was a panelist at two community transit forums on the Upper East Side and in Manhattan Community District 2. Mr. Albert expressed the Council's support for a Second Avenue subway line, and its opposition to the reroute and planned route split of the M10 bus.

Press

During the quarter, Mr. Albert was quoted widely in the local press, expressing the Council's dissatisfaction with bench-style seating on newly purchased subway cars and with a plan to close the 181st Street IRT station to expedite elevator replacement. Mr. Albert also commented on a downward trend in system crime.

In March, Ms. Dolinsky was quoted in a Post article regarding poor en-route on-time performance figures, saying, "On-time performance at terminals means nothing...it's not what riders experience."

Also in March, Transportation Planner Michael T. Doyle was quoted in a Daily News article on the plan to shorten on-board announcements, saying, "The way I was brought up, please and thank you were required, not optional."