

PCAC Quarterly Report

April - June 1999

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Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee (PCAC)

PCAC Critiques the MTA Planning Process

At its quarterly meeting in June, the PCAC discussed the MTA's planning process with Christopher Boylan, MTA deputy executive director - Corporate Affairs and Communications. The PCAC expressed concern that the MTA's planning process does not adequately integrate the agency's numerous separate planning studies, leading to increased costs and a decrease in the agency's ability to address regional transportation needs. The PCAC also questioned whether potential projects can be scaled back to respond to irregularities in the funding stream. However, according to Mr. Boylan, federal regulations prevent projects from being scaled-back once a final funding agreement is reached.

PCAC Monitors Federal Transit Funding Processes

In June, at the request of the PCAC Executive Committee, the Council as a whole and individual members wrote to key members of the New York Congressional delegation in opposition to a Senate proposal to cap federal transit funding to states at 12.5 percent of total federal funding. The New York region traditionally receives 16 to 18 percent of national transit funds, yet is home to more than one-quarter of the nation's transit riders.

During the quarter, PCAC staff also participated in meetings with federal transportation officials. In April, PCAC Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky attended a private meeting with USDOT Secretary Rodney Slater. The meeting was convened by Assemblyman Darryl Towns, vice-chair of the New York State Legislative Commission on Critical Transportation Choices. Secretary Slater assured those present that the Clinton administration supports public transportation, especially in the New York region.

Also in April, Ms. Dolinsky and Associate Director Jonathan Sigall attended a breakfast meeting with USDOT Deputy Secretary Mortimer Downey. Ms. Dolinsky expressed the PCAC's concern that New York is at a disadvantage to younger regions in terms of New Starts ratings criteria which favor transit projects which attract high numbers of new riders. Given that the existing number of transit riders in New York is the highest for any

region in the country, projects in New York would be better judged on their capacity to improve conditions for existing riders. Secretary Downey explained that USDOT does not expect the New York region to be competitive in terms of the new-riders funding criteria and takes this into account when rating projects in the area.

PCAC Participates in Empire State Transportation Alliance

Associate Director Jonathan Sigall represented the PCAC at several meetings of the Empire State Transportation Alliance (ESTA) during the quarter. ESTA is an alliance of regional transportation organizations concerned with improving transportation funding in New York State. Mr. Sigall helped the alliance begin to formulate suggestions on the scope and content of the MTA's 2000-2004 capital program. Mr. Sigall also participated in the development of a public outreach campaign which ESTA plans to launch in the fall to publicize its suggestions.

MTA and Media Attention for PCAC Privatization Report

The PCAC report, *Privatizing MTA Services, Cost Savings or Political Buzzword?*, released in March, received significant attention from the MTA and local news media during the quarter. The report explores possibilities for the MTA to privatize services and enter into innovative contract agreements for capital projects. Copies of the report were requested by Thomas Prendergast, LIRR president, and Howard Permut, Metro-North vice-president - Planning and Development. The report was also noted in *Mobilizing the Region*, the newsletter of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, and was requested by local planning officials. The report was written by PCAC Research Associate Sarah E. Massey.

Executive Director Invited to Speak on PCAC, Present Award

Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky spoke before the Transportation Committee of the New York Bar Association in April. Ms. Dolinsky addressed the history and activities of the PCAC and its Councils.

In May, Ms. Dolinsky was asked by the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service Council on Transportation to present an award for outstanding achievement to FAA Administrator Jane Garvey. Unfortunately, Ms. Garvey was ill. Ms. Dolinsky presented the award to Nick Gaurafis, FAA chief counsel.

PCAC Elections Held

At the June meeting, all incumbent PCAC officers were reelected to serve for the 1999-2001 term. They include: Barbara Josepher, chair; Stephen F. Wilder, first vice-chair; and Martin E. Goldstein, second vice-chair.

Press

TRC Chair Andrew Albert was quoted in a Journal News article regarding the reappointment by Governor Pataki of MTA Chair E. Virgil Conway for a second term.

Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council (LIRRCC)

Council Welcomes First-Ever Member from Queens County

In June, Governor Pataki appointed Daniel Garvey to the LIRRCC. Mr. Garvey is the Council's first representative from the County of Queens. He is an engineering professional and chairperson of the Transportation Committee of Queens Community Board 11. Mr. Garvey commutes from Bayside on the Port Washington Branch. The Council looks forward to working with him.

Last year, the Council requested and was granted a legislative expansion of its membership to officially include members from Queens and Brooklyn, in order to more fully represent the ridership of the LIRR. A representative from Brooklyn is still sought.

Council Discusses Funding Hurdles for East Side Access

In May, Christopher Boylan, MTA deputy executive director - Corporate Affairs and Communications, discussed federal funding possibilities for the East Side Access project. The project will connect LIRR service with Grand Central Terminal on Manhattan's East Side. Funding for the project was not recommended by the Federal Transit Administration in its 1999 New Starts project funding ratings.

Mr. Boylan told the Council that the FTA did not recommend the project because financing for the MTA's next capital plan has not yet been finalized. However, after the plan is released in the fall, a recommendation is expected. Mr. Boylan also pointed out that the New Starts ratings are only advisory for "East Side Access" because the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), the federal law regulating transportation funding, exempted the project from them.

Further, in May the Council sent a letter to Senator Chuck Schumer requesting his support in securing funding for the project.

Council Monitors Bi-Level Delivery Problems

During the quarter, the Council continued to monitor the delivery of the new bi-level fleet. For the past several months, the contractor, Kawasaki Railcar (KRC), has experienced labor difficulties at its American assembly plant, leading to increasing delays in delivery. In some instances, vehicles have needed to be sent to KRC's assembly plant in Japan for completion. As a result, full deployment of the fleet, expected for the middle

of this year, has been pushed back until year's end, and the much anticipated "Schedule 99" timetable revisions have been put on hold.

At the MTA Long Island Committee meeting in May, the MTA independent engineer found that KRC had not acted in good faith in the performance of its contractual duty to deliver the railcars on time, and counseled the LIRR to withhold payments in order to pressure KRC to fulfill its obligations.

As of the end of the quarter, the railroad feels that the bi-level fleet will be able to be fully deployed before 2000. The Council, however, remains guardedly optimistic.

Council Remains Vigilant on Car-Climate Issues

Following up on the Council's meeting with LIRR President Thomas Prendergast in March, Lawrence Silverman, LIRRCC chair, continued during the quarter to question the railroad regarding its preparedness for summer weather. At several MTA Board Long Island Committee meetings, Mr. Silverman raised this issue of preparedness in his capacity as the Council's MTA Board representative.

For its part, the railroad has said that it feels confident that last summer's widespread air-conditioning breakdowns would not recur, thanks to improved reporting and maintenance practices and increased inventory. However, as early as May of this year, Council members began to receive complaints about hot cars. The Council will continue to monitor the issue.

Council Discusses Security Issues with new MTA Police Chief

In April, the Council welcomed incoming MTA Police Chief James O'Donnell. Chief O'Donnell discussed policing practices and the challenges posed by a small patrol staff. During the quarter, the MTA Board approved a 100-person expansion of this staff, to be divided between the LIRR and Metro-North. Policing of NYC Transit is provided separately by the Transit Division of the NYPD.

"Happy Rails" in "Keeping Track"

Upon the request of the LIRRCC, the railroad agreed to publish an article about the Council's 1998 "Happy Rails to You" customer courtesy campaign in "Keeping Track", the LIRR's customer newsletter. The article, appearing in the June edition of the newsletter, included one of the winning drawings from the contest. The campaign was undertaken after the Council's 1998 Long Island Rail Road Report Card found loud cellphone conversations and onboard littering to be top commuter complaints.

Council Corresponds with LIRR on Maintenance, Service Issues

After the occurrence of several delays related to mechanical problems which Council members felt were poorly handled, in April, the Council wrote to the railroad to request

information about the decision-making process regarding mechanical delays. The railroad explained why the incidents in question occurred, and noted that delays are handled on a case-by-case basis by supervision staff.

In May, the Council wrote to the railroad to inquire about the volume of the horns on the new diesel fleet. Council members and some residents living along LIRR rights-of-way have felt that these horns are excessively loud. The railroad responded that the volume of the horns is within federally mandated limits, and that, while their sounding can be kept to a minimum, strict safety regulations govern where and when and for how long they must be sounded.

Press

LIRRCC Chair Lawrence Silverman was quoted widely during the quarter. Mr. Silverman expressed the Council's dissatisfaction with bi-level delivery, maintenance, and car-climate problems in several articles in Newsday and the New York Post. Mr. Silverman was also interviewed by WCBS NewsRadio regarding an April police shooting incident in Penn Station.

Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council (MNRCC)

Council Wins Openable Windows for New M7 Fleet

Thanks to the efforts of Council member Ronnie Ackman, the Metro-North portion of new M-7 railcars to be purchased jointly with the Long Island Rail Road will include openable windows. The Council feels that openable windows provide a convenient and inexpensive means of ventilation in the event that a car's air conditioning system breaks down. Ms. Ackman lobbied unceasingly for the windows in her capacity as the Council's representative to the Metro-North Operating Committee of the MTA Board.

Council Participates in New Hudson Line Extension Study

The Council actively participated in the railroad's new Hudson Line Extension Study during the quarter. The study is examining possibilities to extend service from the current terminal at Poughkeepsie into northern Dutchess County. In June, Transportation Planner Michael T. Doyle attended advisory committee meetings and an environmental scoping hearing for the study, held in Dutchess County. At the meetings and the hearing, several representatives from both Dutchess and Columbia counties requested that the study area be extended further north to the City of Hudson, in Columbia County. Dutchess County residents expressed concerns over the potential for the project to induce additional growth and traffic impacts, and residents from both counties pointed out that Hudson has railyard facilities necessary for the service extension which northern Dutchess County does not.

Although beyond its legally defined service area, Metro-North has said that it would be

open to extending the study boundaries to Hudson if asked to do so by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), which is sponsoring the study. Due to strong local interest in both counties, and the presence of the railyards, the Council formally requested that the railroad extend the study boundaries to Hudson, and informed the FTA of this request.

Council Gives Support to Mid-Harlem Third Track Project

In June, the Council gave its support to a Metro-North plan to construct a third-track between Mount Vernon West and Fleetwood stations in order to improve capacity and service along the Harlem Line. Staff voiced this support at a public hearing held on the project's recently released Draft Environmental Impact Statement in White Plains. Several individuals at the hearing, many of whom live along the right-of-way, voiced opposition to the project. However, a good number of others, including Council staff, noted that commuter service began operating along the Harlem Line more than a century ago, and in fact helped create many of the towns along the right-of-way, and that the railroad has promised to do all it can to mitigate noise, vibration, and visual impacts.

Council Comments on May Metro-North Customer Satisfaction Survey

At the standing invitation of the railroad, the Council commented on Metro-North's Quarterly Customer Satisfaction Survey in May. While the Council found the survey to be well thought-out, it did suggest that a question on parking facility security and lighting would be useful. The railroad agreed and included the question in the survey.

Council Seeks Better On-Board Announcements and Station Signage Lighting

For the past several months, the Council has noted a decline in the announcements on older, 1100-series diesel-fleet cars on the Harlem and Hudson lines. The cars, to be replaced within the next few years, suffer from aged cable connections which frequently cause the public address systems to go down.

According to Metro-North, crews are required to walk through trains and make verbal announcements in cars without working public address systems. However, the Council has observed that such announcements are not made consistently. This is problematic, especially after dark, when station signage is not illuminated. Without adequate announcements, it can be difficult for customers to discern stations stops at night.

In response to the problem, the Council has requested that the railroad step-up efforts to enforce the requirement that crews make verbal announcements when public address systems are inoperable. The Council has also requested that the railroad consider methods to illuminate station signage so that station names are visible after dark.

Despite Restoration, First Diesels, Now Smokers Return to GCT

During the quarter, the Council was surprised to learn from Metro-North that all retail tenants of the newly refurbished Grand Central Terminal have been granted waivers of

New York City's smoking regulations, which prohibit smoking in public facilities. According to the railroad, as state entities, the MTA and its agencies are not legally bound by local laws.

The Council inquired about smoking restrictions in Grand Central upon learning that the Michael Jordan's Steakhouse restaurant allows smoking in its bar area located on the East Balcony of the Main Concourse. The Council is concerned that the remaining restaurant tenants will allow balcony smoking as well. Moreover, last quarter, the Council was informed that construction projects and ridership growth have forced the railroad to begin to operate some trains into the terminal on diesel power.

All of this is unfortunate, because smoke and diesel fumes led to the sullyng of the Main Concourse and sky ceiling mural in the first place, recently restored at great cost. For its part, Metro-North has said that it has requested that retail tenants voluntarily abide by the city's smoking restrictions "where feasible".

Council Follows-Up on GCT, Right-of-Way Issues

During the quarter, the Council followed-up on several Grand Central Terminal issues. The Council learned that Metro-North planned to convert some of the new pay phones in the terminal to special twenty-five cent/thirty-second long-distance telephones as soon as all the new phones were installed. The Council has learned that these conversions have begun, and will monitor the locations chosen for the thirty-second phones.

The Council also learned that the streetlamps currently installed on the Park Avenue viaduct in front of GCT are to be refurbished by the Grand Central Partnership, and given new, historically sensitive lamptops by NYCDOT, sometime in the future.

In addition, following a previous inquiry, the Council was also informed that the railroad is aware of right-of-way dumping problems at Mott Haven and Glenwood and cleans those areas when possible. However, dumping is a chronic problem and refuse, when collected and disposed of, soon reappears.

Council Discusses Fare Policy and Customer Service Issues

The Council discussed the manner by which fare policy is set with Jay Fiegerman, Metro-North assistant director - Fare Policy/Rider Analysis, in April.

In May, Thomas Tendy, Metro-North director - Customer Services, gave the Council an update on the progress of the railroad's new Customer Service department. Mr. Tendy first discussed the new department with the Council shortly after its creation in 1998.

Council Holds Public Forums on Transit Service

During the quarter, the TRC held two in a continuing series of public transit forums. The TRC holds these forums to give riders an opportunity to pose questions about transit policy and service directly to top NYC Transit officials.

In April, the TRC held its annual Bus Forum at MTA Headquarters in Manhattan. The forum panel included Millard Seay, NYC Transit senior vice-president - Buses, Louis Calcagno, NYCDOT assistant deputy commissioner - Surface Transit, and Henry Cronin, NYPD deputy chief - Traffic Division. At the forum, Chief Cronin announced that scofflaw drivers who park at bus stops and in bus lanes will now lose points on their licenses in addition to receiving increased fines. Previous regulations did not include point penalties, and thus were ignored by drivers of commercial vehicles, who make up the majority of bus stop and bus lane scofflaws.

In June, the Council held its second Staten Island Transit Forum at the Staten Island Institute of the Arts. Participants included John McCabe, Staten Island Railway chief officer, Alfred Moscola, NYC Transit general manager - Department of Buses/Staten Island Division, and James Simpson, MTA Board member from Staten Island. Although turnout was modest, a wide-ranging discussion of Staten Island transit issues ensued, covering such topics as the recent introduction of new local and express buses to the Staten Island fleet, the need for increased rush-hour and weekend express bus service, and possibilities to connect Staten Island Railway service with New Jersey's forthcoming Hudson-Bergen Light Rail Transit line.

Council Monitors Security, Announcement, MetroCard Issues

In April, the Council discussed security and safety issues with NYPD Assistant Chief George Brown, head of the Transit Division.

John Diekman, NYC Transit manager - Rapid Transit operations/Customer Communications, spoke with the Council regarding NYC Transit's station announcement program in May.

In June, the Council discussed the status of the MetroCard Automated Fare Collection project with Atefeh Riazzi, NYC Transit vice-president and chief information officer.

Council Criticizes Public Input Component of LaGuardia Airport Subway Access Project

In May, Council staff testified at public hearings held on the environmental scoping document for NYC Transit's LaGuardia Airport Subway Access Project. Although the Council supports the concept of airport access, staff testified that the public had not been invited into the study process soon enough. At the hearings, many members of the public expressed disapproval for the route alternatives which the agency has chosen for environmental analysis. The Council urged the MTA to redouble efforts to bring the

public deeper into the study process and to address its concerns. Many previous transit access plans for LaGuardia Airport have been scuttled due to local opposition.

Council Says No to Plan to Eliminate Late Night 2 Express

The TRC wrote to NYC Transit in May to protest a plan to eliminate late night 2 express service. The agency has proposed to run 2 trains as locals during late-night hours to improve service between 96th Street and Chambers Street in Manhattan. However, as the Council noted in its letter, the proposal will lengthen travel times for late-night 2 riders heading home to Brooklyn and the Bronx, making the change a decrease in service for these customers.

Council Asks NYCDOT to Reject Bay Ridge One-Way Avenues Plan

In May, the Council wrote to NYCDOT to request that the agency reject a plan to remove two-way traffic from Third and Fifth Avenues in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. Local business and political interests hope the plan to make the avenues one-way thoroughfares will ease traffic and increase commercial activity. However, local bus service would be severely impacted, reducing transit access for Bay Ridge residents and making the neighborhood harder to get to for shoppers - a fact ignored by the plans supporters. A decision by NYCDOT is imminent.

Staff Finds Chronic Problems on NYC Transit's Website

Throughout the quarter, Council staff informed NYC Transit about repeated instances of incorrect, outdated, or unhelpful service diversion information listed on the agency's website. NYC Transit informed the Council that software errors had caused some of the problems. However, problems continue to appear, negatively impacting customers. One occasional rider informed the Council that he would no longer take the subway because he did not trust NYC Transit's travel information. The Council believes the loss of even one rider due to faulty travel information to be unacceptable, and is continuing to monitor the website.

Council Opposes Platform Railings

In June, the TRC submitted written testimony to an NYC Council hearing on subway platform safety railings. Platform railings would be prohibitively expensive to design and install in a system with 468 stations, each served by different types of subway car. Railings would need to have multiple openings for different door configurations, severely undercutting their usefulness. Instead, potential safety issues caused by crowded platforms can more easily be addressed by increasing the frequency of trains.

TRC Elections Held

In June, TRC officers Andrew Albert, Chair, and Stephen Dobrow, Vice-Chair, were reelected for the 1999-2000 term. In addition, the Council elected Marisol Halpern,

Michael Sinansky, and Steven Wilder to serve on the TRC Executive Committee. As per the TRC bylaws, the Chair and Vice-Chair also serve on this committee.

Press

TRC Chair Andrew Albert was quoted in a Newsday regarding the Williamsburg Bridge subway diversion, and interviewed for New York One News story on subway platform railings.

Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky was quoted in Newsday, Post, and New York Times articles regarding poor en-route on-time performance and ridership increases, and was interviewed for a New York One report on a plan to split the M10 bus route.

Associate Director Jonathan Sigall was interviewed for a New York One report on the possible expansion of the Adopt-A-Station program.

Transportation Planner Michael T. Doyle was quoted in Post and Times articles regarding a drop in system crime and an NYCDOT plan to shorten new bus stop signposts.