

PCAC Quarterly Report October - December 1999

You may jump down the document by clicking on the appropriate link below:

- Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council
 - Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council
 - New York City Transit Riders Council
-

Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee (PCAC)

PCAC Dissatisfied with MTA Capital Plan, Testifies Before State Assembly

In early November, PCAC staff testified at a hearing convened by the New York State Assembly to solicit public input on the MTA's recently proposed 2000-2004 capital plan. Staff criticized the plan for its over-reliance on bond financing and lack of a State funding component, cautioning that these inadequacies, if left unchecked, could lead to greatly increased transit fares by 2004. The PCAC also criticized the MTA for offering no forum for the public to comment on the proposed plan before it was forwarded to the Capital Program Review Board (CPRB) for consideration. Further, the PCAC urged that the LIRR East Side Access Project be opened in tandem with a new Second Avenue subway in order to avoid severe overcrowding on the existing Lexington Avenue subway south of Grand Central Terminal.

The CPRB, a four-member body composed of representatives of the Governor, State Senate, State Assembly, and NYC Mayor's Office, must approve the plan unanimously for it to take effect. In December, CPRB State Senate representative Dean Skelos vetoed the plan on the grounds that proposed State highway funding should receive the same level of investment as the MTA's \$16.5 billion plan. PCAC will continue to monitor the approval process for the plan into 2000.

PCAC Logs-On to 2000 with Improved Website

In November, the newly overhauled PCAC website debuted. The site now offers expanded information about the PCAC and Councils, an improved navigation scheme, and a separate e-mail address for the PCAC and each of the Councils. As well, the PCAC and Councils now have the ability to make research reports available for download (in Internet-standard PDF format), making it much easier for information to be disseminated to riders, public officials, and the press. Several recent reports are already available for download, with more to come.

MTA Assures Committee, "We're Prepared for Y2K"

The PCAC welcomed Charles Conn, MTA director - Technology and Planning, to its December meeting. Mr. Conn discussed the preparations the MTA had taken to guard against the appearance of Y2K-related computer problems and ensure transit service into 2000. By the end of closeout activities in early 2000, the agency will have spent \$36 million on Y2K preparation, including upgrading all computer hardware and software and stocking up on fuel, batteries, portable generators, and cell phones.

Federal Agency Agrees, Better Public Information Necessary for All MTA Studies

At an MTA project-planning oversight meeting attended by PCAC staff in November, officials from the Federal Transit Administration, the federal funding organization for transit, requested that the MTA provide them with better, more detailed information about all of its planning studies. By law, the MTA must brief the FTA regularly regarding projects for which the agency expects to seek federal funding. However, up to now, the MTA has been hesitant to release information to regulators or the public regarding locally financed planning studies, such as the JFK Airport One-Seat Ride Study, which is exploring opportunities to link Manhattan with the airport via the Port Authority's AirTrain right-of-way, now under construction in Queens.

The PCAC and other local transit advocates have long asserted that, as a public entity, the MTA does not have the right to withhold any planning information, regardless of funding source. The FTA justified its request by noting that locally funded MTA planning activities have the potential to financially impact the federally funded projects about which the MTA must brief federal regulators.

Threatened MTA Pullout May Carry High Costs for Rockland

During the quarter, Rockland County continued to explore options for pulling out of the MTA service area, owing to what it perceives to be a lack of adequate attention to the needs of Rockland commuters. According to the county, it sends more money to the MTA than it receives back in transit service.

However, leaving might pose serious problems for Rockland. The MTA would most likely seek to have the county held responsible for the cost of capital improvements made within Rockland, as well as those made outside the county but from which Rockland would benefit, such as the forthcoming Secaucus Transfer station. Such a requirement was originally included in a now-expired portion of the State's Public Authorities Law. For its part, the PCAC believes that the benefits of MTA membership are regional in scope. MTA monies collected from member counties go towards improving transit across the New York metropolitan area, and it is access to this vast network which is a primary benefit of MTA membership.

Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council (LIRRCC)

Railroad Fails to Make the Grade on Council's 1999 Report Card Survey

In October, the Council released the results of its annual Report Card riders' survey. Overall, the railroad earned a C, its lowest mark since 1995, with 30 percent of riders feeling that service had declined since 1998. Worse, ratings dropped in 24 out of 46 service categories, with only home station ticket selling hours showing an improved score. The Council attributes the railroad's markedly poor performance on the survey to chronic problems which continued to manifest during 1999, including maintenance and air-conditioning woes and inadequate seating on both diesel and electric fleets. These problems stem in part from lack of mid-life overhauls, proper fleet maintenance, or fleet expansion in previous years.

However, some survey categories did earn good grades, including new bi-level coaches, train crews, public-address announcements, home-station cleanliness, and personal security.

LIRR President Prendergast Meets with Council; Attends Annual Forum

In November, the LIRRCC met with LIRR President Thomas Prendergast to discuss recent maintenance and service problems.

Mr. Prendergast informed the Council that delivery of the new bi-level diesel fleet would be completed by the end of 1999. According to Mr. Prendergast, the railroad is working to address quality-control issues regarding the cars, including door, public-address, and air-conditioning problems. In addition, new dynamic braking systems have been disabled on the fleet due to software problems, forcing use of traditional pneumatic brakes (also installed on the fleet) until the software can be updated.

In response to public complaints, impact mitigations, including a noise-barrier fence and reduced overnight lighting, have been implemented at the new Port Jefferson yard. However, diesel locomotives will still need to idle during extremely cold weather to avoid freezing.

Further, the railroad has decided to replace electric horns on new locomotives with traditional pneumatic horns. The electric horns are side mounted, and louder and of a different pitch than older horns. The new mounting and pitch was chosen to make the horns more audible at crossings. However, they generated numerous complaints from residents along the railroad's rights-of-way. The replacements will be front mounted and will sound the same as previous horns.

The Council also questioned Mr. Prendergast about severe crowding conditions which occurred at Penn Station the afternoon of Tropical Storm Floyd. According to the

railroad, although a nine-train contingency plan was in effect, the railroad could not have anticipated Mayor Giuliani's broadcast appeals for workers to go home early. Due to the mayor's appeals, the railroad added 11 additional trains for a total of 20 supplemental runs. However, between 1:00 p.m. and 2:00 p.m. severe crowding was experienced. Although partial access restrictions were put in place, severe weather outside prevented the station's closure.

Mr. Prendergast discussed several of the same issues with riders at the Council's 1999 President's Forum, held also in November. These annual forums allow commuters an opportunity to speak directly with railroad management regarding issues of their own choosing. Turnout for the forum was notably improved from the previous year, with almost 30 public speakers and many more in attendance.

Council Concerned Over Hunters-point Avenue Service Cutback

In correspondence and conversations with railroad management during the quarter, the Council expressed its strong opposition to the cancellation of the 5:17 p.m. Hunterspoint evening train. The train was replaced by a new, dual-mode bi-level train running direct to diesel territory from Penn Station. Although the Long Island City area adjacent to Hunterspoint station is a growing business district, due to the cancellation, Hunterspoint customers now face an 18-minute gap in rush-hour service between the remaining trains at 5:11 and 5:29.

While the Council realizes that schedule adjustments will need to be made to accommodate the implementation of new through bi-level services, adequate levels of service must be maintained for rush-hour commuters who do not travel to or from Penn Station. The railroad maintains that no perfect solution exists to the problem of balancing both of these needs due to capacity limitations at Penn Station and on main line tracks. These problems will come to a head as the railroad prepares to implement a wholly new schedule, based around through bi-level service, in early-to-mid 2000.

New Port Jefferson Stairway Remains a Step Too Far

Since 1998, the Council has requested that a new stairway and path be constructed at Port Jefferson station in order to facilitate pedestrian traffic between the station and a new adjacent development. Originally, the Council was told that the lack of a stop sign on a neighboring street would make crossing to a new station stairway and path too dangerous.

The Council reiterated its request in late 1999 after learning that the necessary stop sign had been installed. However, the railroad has again declined to provide the improvements, now citing pedestrian dangers from roadway curvature and lack of an existing sidewalk in the area in question - obstacles which were not originally identified to the Council in 1998. In either event, the Village of Port Jefferson, which owns the land proposed to be used for the stairway and path, would need to approve any construction plans.

Council Investigates Northport Parking Rehab Delays

During 1999, the Council has attempted to follow up with the railroad on the status of Northport parking rehabilitation plans, with little headway. In response to several inquiries, the Council has received multiple conflicting reports of funding responsibility from the railroad. As recently as November, LIRR President Thomas Prendergast told the Council that the design phase of the project is complete, and that a newly rehabilitated lot might be open by the end of 2001, pending the approval of the railroad's portion of the MTA 2000-2004 capital plan.

However, in December the Council was informed by the Town of Huntington that project funding has been denied by the railroad. It is unclear whether the project remains in the MTA's 2000-2004 capital plan proposal. The Council will continue to investigate the issue.

Press

In October, the Council's 1999 LIRR Report Card received its best ever press coverage, with Council Chair Lawrence Silverman interviewed widely by all major local print and broadcast media.

Mr. Silverman was also quoted in an October New York Times article regarding the upcoming replacement and refurbishment of the electric fleet, saying, "Long Island commuters have to be satisfied that the powers that be are finally paying attention."

In December, Mr. Silverman was quoted in a Newsday article regarding the LIRR East Side Access and NYC Transit Manhattan East Side Alternatives (Second Avenue Subway) projects, saying, "There's no way the two can practically be built in tandem."

Also in December, Mr. Silverman authored an op-ed piece for Newsday regarding the need for the railroad to address cell-phone abuse on trains.

Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council (MNRCC)

Metro-North President Cannito Meets with Council; Attends Annual Forum

At the MNRCC meeting in October, the Council for the first time welcomed new Metro-North President Peter Cannito. Mr. Cannito told the Council that he believes it to be his duty to continue the customer service initiatives initiated by his predecessor, Donald Nelson, and discussed the railroad's portion of the MTA's proposed 2000-2004 capital plan.

In November, Mr. Cannito also attended the Council's annual President's Forum. These forums give customers the opportunity to discuss issues of their own choosing directly

with railroad officials. Also represented at the forum were Connecticut DOT and the Connecticut's own Metro-North Commuter Council. Many in attendance complained about various problems on the New Haven Line in Connecticut, including poor service on the branch lines and poor conditions of stations. For much of 1999, the State of Connecticut disputed its required share of New Haven Line funding, at one point threatening service cutbacks due to budgetary limitations. The MTA remains in negotiation with Connecticut regarding funding levels for 2000.

On a brighter note, a representative from Tri-State Transportation Campaign, a regional transportation advocacy group, praised the railroad's response to community concerns about the future of the Melrose station in the Bronx. At a public meeting for the recently completed Melrose Station study, Bronx officials and residents expressed a desire for immediate improvements to be made to the station. As a result, the station was cleaned and repainted, signage and lighting were improved, and service improvements were planned for early 2000. Longer-term capital improvements are expected to be proposed when the final report of the Melrose study is released.

For Council, Replacements for Old Diesel Coaches Can't Come too Soon

Through the end of 1999, the Council continued to monitor problems on the railroad's old ACMU diesel fleet. These Johnson-era cars experience frequent public-address system breakdowns. When PA breakdowns do occur, in many instances, train crews do not walk through problem cars to announce upcoming stations although required to do so by railroad policy. The Council has repeatedly asked Metro-North to ensure that train crews announce stations when PA systems are not functioning, but the problem persists. The cars also experience heating, air-conditioning, and end-door problems.

The Council again discussed this issue with Metro-North officials at its November meeting. According to the railroad the old coaches are run only during peak hours, when their use is necessary due to current limitations in the size of the diesel fleet. However an order has been placed for 52 new, modern Bombardier coaches to replace the ACMU cars and expand the fleet. These coaches will arrive in 2002 and 2003. However the Council feels that the railroad should also explore opportunities for minimizing or eliminating use of the ACMU fleet in the interim.

Metro-North Briefs Council on Millennium Eve Service Plan

In November, the Council met with Robert MacLagger, Metro-North director - Operations Planning, and Walter Brett, manager - Schedule Development, to discuss the railroad's Millennium Eve 2000 service plan. Messrs. MacLagger and Brett reported the railroad prepared to carry 50,000 seated passengers, double the ridership of a regular New Year's Eve, with increased train frequencies and all-night service. The railroad also requested that residential restrictions at municipally owned station parking lots be waived beginning at 10:00 a.m. on December 31. Further, in case of a Y2K-related power outage, the railroad planned to hold trains outside of the Park Avenue tunnel from shortly before until shortly after midnight.

Ultimately, Metro-North experienced no Y2K problems and even found itself overprepared for the holiday. Since many people chose to spend Millennium Eve 2000 at home with friends and family instead of travelling, all MTA transit agencies in general reported ridership levels almost one-third below New Year's Eve 1999.

At Council's Suggestion, New Combined West-of-Hudson Schedule Pamphlet Created

During the quarter, Metro-North published its first-ever West-of-Hudson schedule, combining Port Jervis and Pascack Valley schedule information in one convenient pamphlet. Although Metro-North services, these lines originate in Hoboken and are operated under contract by New Jersey Transit. Until the publication of the Metro-North combined schedule, customers were forced to rely upon individual NJ Transit schedule pamphlets, which included information on trains that did not service New York stations.

The new schedule pamphlet was originally suggested to the railroad by Councilmember George Zobelein. At the October MNRCC meeting, Metro-North President Peter Cannito praised the suggestion and thanked the Council for its input.

Railroad Implements Mail-and-Ride, Customer Survey Suggestions

After a Council request, Metro-North informed the MNRCC that a Mail-and-Ride drop box would be installed on the lower level of Grand Central Terminal to help improve the convenience of the program. Additional drop boxes are also being considered for Grand Central North.

In October, for the first time, the Metro-North Customer Satisfaction Survey asked customers to include their e-mail addresses. The Council suggested several times previously that the railroad's customer surveys collect this information. Although Metro-North does not currently correspond with customers electronically, the Council feels that an existing database of customer e-mail addresses could prove useful to the railroad should this policy change in the future.

Council Suggests GCT Signage Improvements for the Visually Impaired

Following up on a Council suggestion from the previous quarter, in October, Metro-North officials joined Associate Director Jonathan Sigall and visually impaired customer Ken Stewart on a walking tour of Grand Central Terminal. The goal of the tour was to help determine ways to make signage within the terminal more useful and easily legible for persons with visual impairments. As a result of the tour, the railroad agreed to explore several proposed improvements including white backgrounds and better locations for track numbers, especially on the lower level, and a higher-contrast color for tactile warning strips on stairways.

New York City Transit Riders Council (NYCTRC)

Council Holds Annual President's Forum

In November, the Council held its annual President's Forum. The forums provide an opportunity for transit riders to speak directly with NYC Transit management on topics of their own choosing. As in years past, the forum was a success, with many more riders signing up to speak than time permitted. NYC Transit President Lawrence Reuter and his staff fielded questions and comments on issues including opposition to the rebuilding of the 100th Street bus depot in Manhattan, poor bus-service reliability, and Access-A-Ride problems.

Although attendance was good, staff and members of the public did notice that meeting posters had not been put up by NYC Transit in many stations. Posters should have been posted systemwide. The Council noted this oversight in a letter to NYC Transit's Senior Vice President - Department of Subways, Joseph Hoffman.

Council Discusses MTA Capital Plan with State Assembly Speaker Silver

In November, members of the Council met with State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver to discuss the MTA's proposed 2000-2004 capital plan. Speaker Silver informed the Council he supports a return to the historic 77/23 funding split between NYC Transit and commuter rail agencies. The proposed plan increases the funding share for commuter rail to almost 33 percent. Speaker Silver also believes that the commuter railroads should be required to improve inner-city service in return for the newly increased funding share. The Council continues to follow the approval process for the plan.

Council Concerned Over City Service Gaps in LIRR Strike Contingency Plan

In December, the Council criticized the contingency plan of the Long Island Rail Road for service within NYC boundaries in the event of a threatened Transport Workers Union bus and subway strike. The plan called for the cessation of most rush-hour service to the almost two-dozen LIRR stations within New York City. The plan angered several local officials including City Council Speaker Peter Vallone and Queens Borough President Claire Shulman, who charged that the plan was devised to force city riders to bear most of the pain of a strike while insulating suburban commuters.

Echoing this consternation, the TRC asked the LIRR for an explanation of the contingency plan and was told that the railroad feared crowding and rioting at inner-city stations. However, the Council believes that as long as the LIRR maintains local stations in Brooklyn and Queens it has a responsibility to service those stations, and that the contingency plan should have been more equitable. The Council will continue to follow-up on the issue in 2000.

Transit Briefs Council on Millennium Eve Service Plans

In November, the Council welcomed Larry Gould, NYC Transit director - Operation Analysis. Mr. Gould discussed Transit's plans to increase late-evening and overnight subway service on Millennium Eve to accommodate anticipated crowds travelling to events in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens. The Council expressed its concern that late-night Millennium Eve bus service would be restricted primarily to shuttle services between subway stations and outlying areas. Unlike subway operators, bus operators are not contractually obligated to work outside their regular shifts, thus Transit was unable to plan for increased overnight bus service. The Council also requested that Transit publish the details of the Millennium Eve service plan to the agency's website.

The Council's fears of insufficient bus service eventually proved unwarranted. Quite unexpectedly, NYC Transit, and all other MTA transit services, experienced below-average ridership levels as many people simply chose to spend Millennium Eve at home.

Council Opposes Transit on Brooklyn Bridge Entrance Closure Plan

During the quarter, the Council sent letters to NYC Transit and the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation in opposition to the Brooklyn Bridge-City Hall station complex located on the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge walkway. Closure of this entrance was requested by NYCDOT in order to widen the walkway, and Parks included the closure as part of ongoing walkway renovation activities. For its part, Transit says a hearing will be held in early 2000 after the closure to gauge whether significant public interest exists to reopen the entrance. However, the Council fears that the entrance, once closed, will be closed for good.

Council Corresponds with Transit, NYCDOT on Service Proposals and Problems

Throughout the quarter, the Council has corresponded with NYC Transit to follow-up on a variety of issues. Among these, the Council wrote to Transit to request data regarding a proposed permanent change in 2 and 5 service between 149th and 180th Streets in the Bronx which the Council fears will degrade local service at interim stations.

At the suggestion of a customer, the Council wrote to NYC Transit and Metro-North in November to request that the agencies explore possibilities to improve the pedestrian transfer between the Marble Hill subway and commuter-rail stations.

In December, the Council wrote to NYC Transit and NYCDOT in support of a request, made by State Senator Vincent Gentile, for an extension of the M34 bus route to the East 34th Street ferry landing in Manhattan. The Council also reported to Transit a rise in rat sightings at several stations citywide. Transit responded by rebaiting the reported stations.

Still More Errors, Omissions Found in Print and Online Service Information

For the third quarter in a row, Council staff found wrong or inadequate information given in customer brochures and on the NYC Transit website. In one example, the customer brochure announcing the reopening of the newly rehabilitated Franklin Avenue Shuttle neglected to inform riders that a transfer to the IRT is now available at the Botanic Garden station. In another, the brochure and web information regarding an N/R diversion erroneously informed riders to transfer to the 6 train at the Fifth Avenue IND station, where the 6 does not stop. The Council continues to press NYC Transit for improvements in the provision of diversion information, and hopes that the agency can do better in 2000.

Press

In October, Associate Director Jonathan Sigall was quoted in a New York Times article regarding a deal between NYC Transit and Times Square developer Rudin Corporation to allow the latter to renege, in the Council's opinion, on an agreement to build customer escalators at the Times Square station entrance beneath its current project there. Instead, Reuters paid transit a one-time fee of \$1.3 million, less than the cost of construction and maintenance for the escalators, which subsequently went unbuilt. Said Mr. Sigall, "The developer got off easy. This was a bad deal for Transit and for transit riders."

In November, Transportation Planner Michael T. Doyle was interviewed by the Kings Courier regarding the need for NYC Transit to implement wider bus service improvements in Brooklyn, saying, "They've steadfastly refused to consider any changes or routes that are not related to the (ridership) increase. That's been for over a year now and I think that's unfortunate."

In December, TRC Chair Andrew Albert was a guest on the Alan Colmes Show, a radio call-in program on WEVD AM, opposite New Directions caucus attorney Alan Schwartz, to discuss December's threatened Transport Workers Union strike. Mr. Sigall was also interviewed by the broadcast media regarding the issue, appearing on suburban Regional News Network's The Big Story.