

PCAC Quarterly Report

April - June 1996

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Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee (PCAC)

PCAC Hires New Research Associate

The PCAC hired Jonathan Sigall as its new research associate in June. Mr. Sigall, a student at NYU's Wagner School of Public Service, replaces Martha Prinz, who left the PCAC in May to take a position with the NYC Independent Budget Office. Mr. Sigall is primarily responsible for developing a report on capital and operating funding at the MTA and other large U.S. transportation agencies.

PCAC Urges Congress to Increase Aid for Transit and Amtrak

The PCAC sent a letter to New York State congressional representatives expressing the importance of providing the highest possible levels of federal funding for transit and Amtrak in the Fiscal Year 1997 transportation budget. Last year, drastic cuts in transportation aid forced transit agencies across the country to raise fares and cut service. The letter asked Congress to work with President Clinton to increase transit operating assistance and to preserve the current 80-percent match for transit capital grants. President Clinton's proposed budget for FY 1997 includes an additional \$250 million for transit and an additional \$170 million for Amtrak.

TRC & LIRRCC Seek Reopening of Gimbel's/Penn Station Passageway

In a letter to Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and MTA Chairman E. Virgil Conway, the TRC and the LIRRCC proposed that the Gimbel's/Penn Station Passageway be reopened. Reopening the tunnel would enable LIRR riders to access the 6th Avenue subway lines via a weatherproof transfer and could allow for a free transfer between the 7th Avenue and 6th Avenue subway lines at 34th Street. Peter Fleischer of the Mayor's Transportation Office told PCAC Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky that they will follow-up on this suggestion.

MTA Revises Capital Plan to Reduce Borrowing

In April, the MTA Board approved a revised capital plan for 1995-1999 that reduces the program's reliance on fare-backed borrowing by almost \$1 billion. The plan includes \$750 million more in city, state, and federal aid and \$268 million that would be raised through the sale of MTA property. Two critical pieces of the \$11.9 billion program are restored funding for the rehabilitation of the Franklin Avenue Shuttle and \$50 million for the LIRR East Side Access Study. The PCAC opposed the original capital plan because of its impact on debt service and fought to have funding for the Franklin Avenue Shuttle project restored.

PCAC Views Proposed Rail Link to JFK Airport

At its June meeting, the PCAC reviewed the Port Authority's proposal for a rail link to JFK Airport. The link would be a light rail line extending from the Jamaica LIRR station to the Howard Beach station and then to JFK. The proposal replaces an earlier plan for a 22-mile line that would have connected to both LaGuardia and JFK. PCAC members raised several concerns about the project, most notably that it would not be convenient for passengers with luggage.

Executive Director Guest at Forum

Ms. Dolinsky was a panelist at a forum on Transportation and Economic Development held at the New School in May. Ms. Dolinsky spoke about the importance of transportation to the area's economy and called for sustained capital and operating support for mass transportation.

PCAC Observes Customer Focus Groups

PCAC members and staff observed focus groups held by the LIRR and Metro-North in June to determine how ticket vending machines could be changed to better suit customer preferences. Customers said that for ease of use machines should be made more like ATMs and noted that machines should accept credit cards.

PCAC Meets with Urban Policy Exchange Fellows

Ms. Dolinsky, TRC Chair Andrew Albert, and PCAC Associate Director Alan Foster met in June with a group of McCloy Urban Policy Fellows who are part of a U.S./Germany exchange program. The visitors toured MTA New York City Transit's command center and then discussed citizen and community participation in New York City with Ms. Dolinsky, Mr. Albert, and Mr. Foster.

PCAC Comments on New MTA Regional Transit Map

In April, the MTA released its Regional Transit Map, which shows all the agency's transportation services and contains valuable information regarding transfers between services. PCAC members and staff reviewed the map and offered several suggestions and corrections, many of which were incorporated into a revised edition of the map.

Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council (LIRRCC)

LIRRCC Meets with LIRR President

LIRRCC members and staff met with LIRR President Thomas Prendergast in June to discuss the 1997 budget, results of a survey on alcohol consumption on-board trains, scheduling changes, comment card response procedures, complaint procedures, and procurement of dual-mode locomotives.

LIRRCC Clean Train Proposals Acted On

In May, the LIRR instituted the Clean Train Campaign, an effort aimed at improving the appearance of trains, stations, and terminals. Riders will be reminded not to leave litter on the trains and to deposit trash in receptacles on the platforms. The LIRR will incorporate the LIRRCC's suggestion to hold the attention of riders by using a variety of announcements. The LIRRCC had urged the LIRR for several years to implement such a program.

LIRRCC to View Seat Design for Bi-Level Diesel Coaches

The LIRR has invited the LIRRCC to review the prototype for the seats on the new bi-level diesel coaches later this summer. The Council toured a mock-up of the interior for the coaches last September.

LIRRCC Views Focus Groups on Ticket Sales and Customer Preferences

LIRRCC members and staff observed two series of focus groups held by the LIRR in June: one to determine why sales of weekly tickets have declined and the other to study what customers expect in terms of cleanliness, comfort, and courtesy. In the latter series of groups, customers toured cars in various states of cleanliness and commented on the conditions of seats, floors, and bathrooms.

LIRRCC Stays Involved in Proposed Ticket Window Closings

A study of the LIRR's long-term ticket sales and revenue collection practices recommends that the agency close or reduce ticket window operations at 59 stations. The LIRR has already begun eliminating 32 ticket clerks at various stations. LIRRCC Chair Lawrence Silverman has been quoted in several newspaper articles regarding the plan. On March 31, he was quoted in a Newsday article, urging development in and around the stations slated for closure. The move to eliminate ticket clerks is pending in the courts and LIRRCC will keep track of any developments.

Press Coverage

On June 30, Mr. Silverman was quoted in a *Long Island Newsday* article regarding problems with malfunctioning air conditioning aboard LIRR trains. Mr. Silverman noted that the situation is "a lot worse than it's been in past years. Even the railroad admits that." He said that he believes ridership will drop off if the problems are not corrected. "Commuters are charged a fixed amount per month," he said, "and if more than occasionally they have to bear this heat, then it's outrageous."

Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council (MNRCC)

MNRCC Notes Issues with Leased Cars

The MNRCC alerted Metro-North to several problems regarding the cars they are leasing from the Virginia Railway for use on the Hudson Line. Problems include dilapidated interiors, broken seats, and a lack of emergency exits. George Walker, Metro-North's vice president of operations, agrees that the cars are in poor condition, but says they do have emergency windows that are clearly labeled and that safety should not be a concern. He notes that the cars are needed to fill service requirements on the Hudson Line and that Metro-North would refurbish the cars if the agency purchases them. The MNRCC will continue to follow this issue in its Tracking Report.

MNRCC Expresses Concern About Frequent Schedule Changes

At the April meeting of the MNRCC, Robert MacLagger, Metro-North's director of operations planning, discussed schedule changes that would go into effect on June 30. MNRCC members and staff voiced concerns about the carrier's frequent schedule changes. Mr. MacLagger said that Metro-North generally changes its schedule three times a year, adding that capital projects may sometimes force additional changes. He said that the agency tries not to change the schedule for any one train more than once a year.

Mr. MacLagger also noted that Metro-North's concrete tie installation project on the Hudson and Harlem lines is scheduled to last from July 27 to September 8. The work will necessitate single-track operations in four locations south of Beacon from August 27 to September 8.

MNRCC Meets with Metro-North Communications Director

At its May meeting, the MNRCC met with Harriet Arnone, Metro-North's director of corporate communications, regarding the railroad's outreach efforts to customers. Ms. Arnone said that Metro-North communicates with its customers in several ways: through two newsletters, seat notices, a customer information center, a customer services department, and public address announcements. MNRCC Chair Richard Cataggio suggested that Metro-North provide riders with a ticket holder that would contain instructions on how to use the railroad's automated information system. In a follow-up

letter, Ms. Arnone agreed that the suggestion is a good idea, but noted that Metro-North cannot implement it at the current time because of financial constraints.

MNRCC Chair Guest at Meeting of Orange County Group

Mr. Cataggio was the guest speaker at the April 16 meeting of the Orange County Citizens Transportation Advisory Committee. He spoke about the MNRCC and discussed its priorities and West-of-Hudson activities.

New York City Transit Riders Council (NYCTRC)

TRC Holds First Staten Island Transit Forum

On June 10, the TRC held its first public forum on Staten Island. Samuel Holmes of MTA Staten Island Railway and Kevin Hyland of the Staten Island division of NYC Transit's department of buses were on hand to field questions and comments from riders. Issues discussed include adding more evening and weekend express bus service and better coordination of rail, bus, and ferry service. The forum was featured in a June 11 article in the *Staten Island Advance*.

TRC Meets with NYC Transit President

TRC members met with newly appointed NYC Transit President Larry Reuter in May to discuss the Franklin Avenue Shuttle rehabilitation project, the seating arrangement in the new subway cars, and the impact of budget reductions on passenger service.

NYC Transit Responds to Complaints on Floor Tiles

After years of complaints from the TRC and subway riders, NYC Transit has decided to abandon the installation of the new floor tiles at subway stations undergoing rehabilitation. Several problems had been found with the tiles, including that they are slippery and are difficult and expensive to maintain. NYC Transit will continue to lay tiles in stations where work has begun or for which tiles have already been bought. An abrasive finish will be applied to the tiles to reduce the risk of slipping. NYC Transit will use concrete flooring in future station rehabilitation projects, with the exception of flagship stations such as Grand Central. For those stations, an alternative tile will be sought.

While the TRC is pleased that NYC Transit has addressed the situation, it would prefer that the agency not simply opt for concrete flooring. The use of tiles, as opposed to concrete, gives rehabilitated stations a finished look. The TRC wrote to President Reuter urging that NYC Transit find a workable brand of tile.

TRC Speaks Out on Low MetroCard Usage

Ms. Dolinsky has continued to voice concerns about the disappointing rates of MetroCard usage on subways and especially buses. At the June meeting of the MTA Finance Committee, she questioned the agency's assumption that riders will easily adapt to the card in July 1997 when all subway stations are on line and tokens are phased out. She said that it is not realistic to expect passengers to adjust to the card overnight when so few of them use it today. She urged the MTA to market the MetroCard more actively, including introducing discounts for bus riders who use it.

In response to previous comments by Ms. Dolinsky, the MTA has created a MetroCard Bus that will visit busy stops and allow customers to try the card for free. Ms. Dolinsky had noted that riders who are unaccustomed to using the card may be reluctant to try it because they are concerned that they will hold up the line at the farebox.

On another note, New York City media reported on June 25 that the MTA plans to introduce a free transfer between subways and buses when the MetroCard is fully installed at subway stations. Passengers would be able to transfer from north-south routes to east-west routes and vice versa. For example, riders on the 1, 2, 3, or 9 lines would be able to transfer to a crosstown bus at 34th Street, but could not transfer to a 7th Avenue bus. In the first year, it is estimated that the free transfer would cost \$168 million in lost fare revenue.

TRC Responds to Proposed Station Access Changes

The TRC commented on proposed changes to subway station access at several stations. The Council suggested some revisions to the plan, including providing a new entrance to the Times Square subway station at the site to be developed by the Durst organization. The Council noted as well that proposals to eliminate or restrict access to entrances at a number of stations would inconvenience customers while providing little benefit to NYC Transit.

TRC Efforts on Franklin Avenue Shuttle Recognized

Ms. Dolinsky received a certificate of appreciation for her efforts to have funding restored for the rehabilitation of the Franklin Avenue Shuttle. The project, originally slated to be included in the 1995-1999 capital plan, was one of the casualties of reduced city subsidies and the MTA's cost-cutting initiatives. Ms. Dolinsky and Mr. Albert strongly opposed the elimination of the project, and along with other transit advocates, successfully pressed to have the funding restored. The certificate was awarded by the Office of the Brooklyn Borough President.

TRC Seeks Further Extension of Q79 Bus

TRC Chair Andrew Albert wrote to MTA Chairman E. Virgil Conway regarding the abandonment of a plan to extend the Q79 bus route to the Floral Park LIRR station. In the face of opposition from the mayor of Floral Park, the MTA curtailed its proposal, opting to extend the route only to the Nassau County border. Mr. Albert wrote that the agency's

decision is unacceptable and that its failure to implement the full extension should not be used as a reason to discontinue the route in the future.

TRC Moves to Have Vacant Positions Filled

Ms. Dolinsky wrote to Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Public Advocate Mark Green regarding their failure to recommend people for the TRC. Neither of them has sent any recommendations to the Governor in the nearly two-and-one-half years they have been in office. Mr. Giuliani has two vacancies to fill and Mr. Green has three. Both men's offices said they expect to act soon.

NYPD Transit Bureau Official Addresses TRC

Inspector Henry Cronin, Manhattan borough commander for the NYPD Transit Bureau, addressed the June meeting of the TRC. He discussed the changes in transit policing since the Transit Police was merged with the NYPD last year and took fielded questions and comments. Mr. Albert noted that panhandling on subways seems to have increased and also expressed concern about pick-pocketing. Inspector Cronin said that department statistics show occurrences to be on the decline, but encouraged TRC members to report any incidents of panhandling they witness.

TRC Observes Focus Groups on MetroCard Usage

TRC staff observed focus groups held by NYC Transit in June to determine what steps the agency can take to increase usage of MetroCard. Users and non-users of MetroCard participated in the focus groups. Many non-users said that they do not use the card because it is not accepted at all subway stations. Participants also noted that discounts and monthly passes would induce them to buy the card.

Press Coverage

In the last week of June, Ms. Dolinsky made several press appearances regarding MetroCard. On June 24, she was quoted in a New York 1 story on MetroCard's poor performance. The next day she appeared on the *Carol Jenkins Live* show on Channel 5 to discuss the MTA's plan for the free transfer. Also on that day, she was quoted in a *New York Times* story on the transfer and she was interviewed by WABC Radio. And she even made it into a Chinese-language newspaper, which ran a story on the transfer.

Also on the MetroCard front, *Queens Newsday* ran a letter to the editor from TRC Vice Chair Stephen Dobrow in May. Mr. Dobrow suggested that NYC Transit institute a \$1.00 off-peak bus fare for riders who pay with the MetroCard. All others would continue to pay \$1.50.

When the escalator replacement project at 53rd Street and Lexington Avenue made headlines, Ms. Dolinsky and Mr. Albert were featured in several stories. Mr. Albert discussed problems caused by the project on New York 1's *Straphangers Report* and on

Channel 5's *Good Day New York*. On Channel 2 news, Ms. Dolinsky discussed the potential problems of eliminating the free transfer during the replacement work.

On May 15, Mr. Foster was quoted in a *New York Times* article on the improved performance of subway cars. The story noted that cars are breaking down less frequently than they did in the past. In the article, Mr. Foster noted that NYC Transit "should be congratulated. Obviously, they're doing something right."

Ms. Dolinsky and Mr. Albert were featured on Santiago Nieves' call-in radio program on WBAI and Mr. Albert's letters to the editor were published in the *New York Post* and *Daily News* in April. In his letter to the *Post*, Mr. Albert wrote that Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver was right to veto the MTA's amendment to its current capital plan. The *Post* had run an editorial criticizing Mr. Silver for vetoing the amendment.