

PCAC Quarterly Report January - March 1997

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Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee (PCAC)

Executive Director Named Woman of the Year

PCAC Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky was honored in March by the Women's Transportation Seminar of Greater New York as its 1996 Woman of the Year. Ms. Dolinsky received the award in recognition of her lengthy career in public service and her work at the PCAC. She has been in public service for twenty-five years, fifteen of those as executive director of the PCAC. In her tenure, she has been an outspoken voice for riders' interests, using her position as the riders' representative on the MTA Board to oppose the 1995 transit and commuter rail fare increase.

Also in March, Ms. Dolinsky was a panelist at a forum sponsored by the MTA Diversity Committee in honor of Women's History Month.

PCAC Report on MTA Financing Released

On January 22, the PCAC released its report on operating and capital financing for the MTA and transit agencies in five other large U.S. cities. Of the systems studied, the MTA receives the lowest level of government support. New York State provides almost no direct assistance and subsidies account for approximately 40 percent of the agency's operating and capital funds. The report discusses several options for generating additional revenue for the MTA, including New York State providing more support and the use of various innovative financing techniques.

Proposed Bill Would Add NYC Residents to Commuter Rail Councils

In response to a suggestion from the PCAC, New York State Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan introduced legislation in March that would add a Bronx member to the Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council and a Queens member to the Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council. If adopted, this legislation would give city residents who use the railroads an official voice on the councils. Approximately 5 percent of Metro-North's customers are from the Bronx and 12 percent of the LIRR's customers are from Queens.

The PCAC has solicited the names of potential candidates and invited them to attend council meetings.

PCAC Holds Forum on MTA Expansion Studies

In March, the PCAC held a special forum on the system expansion studies that the MTA is conducting through its long-range planning framework. Through these major investment studies Access to the Region's Core, the Long Island Rail Road East Side Access study, and New York City Transit's Manhattan East Side Alternatives and East River Crossing studies the MTA is examining various options for expanding the transit and commuter rail systems serving New York City. Project managers from each study discussed the issues their studies are addressing, described the alternatives being considered to resolve these problems, and responded to questions and comments from PCAC members and the public. The meeting was a rare opportunity to see the studies together and how the issues that each is addressing overlap.

PCAC Involved in ITS Task Force

In recent months, PCAC staff have participated in a task force that is developing a strategic plan for deploying an intelligent transportation systems network in the metropolitan area. PCAC staff serve on two committees of the task force: the Public Agency Advisory Group, which is working to integrate the needs of different agencies into a coordinated system; and the Traveler Advisory Group, which is working to identify the needs of travelers.

PCAC Discusses Ferry Service in Region

At its March meeting, the PCAC met with George Cancro, director of the Port Authority's Office of Ferry Transportation. Mr. Cancro discussed the Port Authority's role in overseeing private ferry service and in promoting the development of new routes. He also spoke about existing ferry service in the region and plans for new routes. One of the proposed routes is service to LaGuardia Airport.

PCAC Selects 1997 Summer Research Project

The PCAC selected the topic for its 1997 summer research project at its March meeting. The project will examine emergency management procedures at the MTA and other large U.S. public transportation agencies.

Press Coverage

The New York Post and New York 1 featured stories about the PCAC's report on financing for the MTA. PCAC Transportation Planner Jonathan Sigall was quoted in the Post, noting that it is shortsighted of New York State to cut the MTA's subsidies. He also appeared on New York 1, commenting that New York City Transit may have to raise its

fare by twenty-five cents in 2001 if the MTA does not receive additional financial support.

Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council (LIRRCC)

LIRRCC Meets with LIRR President

LIRRCC members and staff met with LIRR President Thomas Prendergast in January to discuss several issues, including problems with disorderly customers on late-night weekend trains, overcrowding on Oyster Bay trains during the evening peak period, the status of the rehabilitation of Huntington Station, and measures the railroad is taking to respond more quickly to emergency situations that disrupt train service. Other topics discussed at the meeting included parking security at the Port Jefferson station, difficulties customers experience in parking at various stations, and a survey being conducted to determine customer demand for new dual-mode service that will begin operation in late 1997.

LIRRCC Chairman Testifies on Proposal to Close Stations

LIRRCC Chairman Lawrence Silverman testified in January at public hearings on the LIRR's plan to close thirteen lightly used stations. Mr. Silverman questioned the railroad's assumption that passenger volume at the stations will remain low, noting that ridership at these stations may increase when the new diesel fleet is introduced. He commented that the costs of building platforms to accommodate the fleet are low and that it is worth the investment in order to give people the option of using the railroad to travel to New York City. In March, the MTA Board approved a modified plan that keeps three of the thirteen stations open.

LIRR Responds to LIRRCC Concerns About Policing on Late-Night Trains

At its January meeting, the LIRRCC discussed the problem of disorderly customers on late-night trains with LIRR Chief of Police John O'Connor. The council commented that part of the problem is lack of police patrols on trains during off-hours. Chief O'Connor agreed that there is a problem, and following the meeting, he spoke with his crews about the issue and sent high-level staff to ride the trains on weekend nights. In addition, the Nassau County District Attorney's office approved the LIRR's proposal to use forfeiture funds to pay for a pilot program to augment late-night patrols. The next step is approval from the federal government, which is expected to be granted. The LIRRCC wrote a letter in support of the proposal.

LIRR Acts on LIRRCC Proposals

In response to concerns raised by the LIRRCC, the LIRR is including in its rehabilitation of the Babylon station a project to rebuild the platform stairs at the eastern end of the

station. The LIRR also acted on another LIRRCC proposal: to extend the hours of the station building at the Southampton Station. Instead of closing the building at 2:00 pm, the railroad will keep it open until 4:30 pm as part of a pilot program.

LIRRCC Assists with Inspector General Study of LIRR Climate Control

In February, LIRRCC members engaged in a project to measure the temperature on board trains in order to estimate the ranges at which they feel comfortable. The project was done at the request of the Office of the MTA Inspector General, which is conducting a study to determine how well climate control systems on LIRR trains are functioning. The information from the LIRRCC will be used as a benchmark for assessing whether climate control systems maintain a temperature that is comfortable for passengers.

LIRRCC Town Liaison Program Yields Action

In response to a suggestion from LIRRCC member Edward Rich, Huntington Town Supervisor Frank Petrone has agreed to create a task force to deal with commuter issues in Huntington. Mr. Rich met with Mr. Petrone as part of the LIRRCC's town liaison program, which was created in late 1996 to establish a regular dialogue between the LIRRCC and local governments on Long Island.

Council Meetings

In January, the LIRRCC met with LIRR Chief of Police John O'Connor to discuss issues relating to policing the railroad, including problems with disorderly customers on late-night trains. Chief O'Connor also spoke about new initiatives to deter automobile theft at LIRR parking lots and garages. In addition, Nicholas LaRocco, director of infrastructure strategy for the LIRR, discussed the railroad's proposed station closings.

At its February meeting, the LIRRCC met with representatives from the Office of the MTA Inspector General to discuss the project to measure the temperature on board LIRR trains.

Press Coverage

On March 19, Long Island Newsday featured an op-ed piece from Mr. Silverman regarding the LIRR's proposal to close thirteen lightly used stations. Mr. Silverman wrote that the costs of building platforms to accommodate the new diesel fleet are relatively low and that the LIRR should make this investment. He said that ridership at the stations may increase after the new diesel fleet is introduced in late 1997.

Mr. Silverman was quoted in several news stories about the station closings. He appeared on Channel 12 following a public hearing in Roslyn on January 12, and on the same day, he was quoted in Long Island Newsday. On March 28, he appeared in a Newsday story about the MTA Board's approval of a modified plan that keeps three of the stations open.

On February 15, Mr. Silverman was quoted in Long Island Newsday regarding the LIRR's East Side Access study, which proposes to link the railroad to Grand Central Terminal. Ms. Dolinsky was also quoted on this issue, noting in a March 9 Newsday article that the connection would benefit a large number of LIRR commuters and merits support.

Mr. Silverman was quoted in a March 16 Long Island Newsday article about the addition of a morning rush-hour train on the Ronkonkoma Branch. Mr. Silverman credited the LIRR for responding to the needs of riders, though he noted that more needs to be done to address overcrowding on the branch.

On March 9, Mr. Silverman was quoted in a New York Times article about problems with inadequate parking capacity at LIRR stations. Mr. Silverman noted that it is critical for the railroad to develop a long-term parking strategy because parking capacity at stations will become even more of an issue as ridership grows.

In other news coverage, Long Island Business News ran a story on February 17 about the LIRRCC's town liaison program, and on February 16, Mr. Silverman was quoted in Long Island Newsday regarding a report by the LIRR that found that customer injuries on the railroad are increasing.

Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council (MNRCC)

Putnam County Responds to Request for Council Member

Putnam County Executive Robert Bondi has responded to a request from the MNRCC for a nominee from the county. He sent letters to five prospective candidates and said that he will issue a press release asking for resumes if these people do not express an interest in joining the council. In October, the MNRCC had written to Mr. Bondi and Dutchess County Executive William Steinhaus asking them to nominate members to the council. Neither county has had a representative on the council for several years.

Metro-North to Replace Platforms at Croton-Harmon

The MNRCC has learned that Metro-North will replace the platforms at track one at the Croton-Harmon station in 1997. Based on a complaint from a customer, the council had notified Metro-North that the size of the gaps between the trains and the platform is hazardous.

Metro-North Repairs Damaged Lights at Ossining Station

In March, Metro-North repaired the damaged carriage lights at the Ossining Station. The MNRCC had noted that the glass enclosures were missing from some of the lights.

MNRCC Conducts Public Outreach Effort

At the council's request, Metro-North is periodically publishing the dates of upcoming MNRCC meetings in Mileposts and Mileposts West, the railroad's monthly customer information newsletters. This initiative is part of an outreach effort that the council is engaging in to publicize its activities more widely and to increase public participation. The MNRCC is exploring other options for advertising its meetings, including placing notices in riders' monthly ticket mailings.

MNRCC Observes Focus Groups

In recent months, staff has attended several market research focus groups conducted by Metro-North. Scheduling on the Hudson Line was the subject of one series of focus groups. Participants from Dutchess County commented that they are more concerned with the evening schedule than the morning schedule. They also said that they would be willing to sacrifice frequency of service for trains that make fewer stops.

In a series of focus groups in March, Metro-North solicited customer feedback that will be used in designing the railroad's next generation of electric rail cars. Participants discussed various aspects of current cars, including their preferences for seating, lighting, and windows. Customers commented that the atmosphere inside cars is dreary and suggested that Metro-North use brighter lights and more vivid colors for seats and floors.

Council Meetings

At its January meeting, the MNRCC met with Genevieve Firnhaber, Metro-North's executive vice president for finance and administration, to present the railroad's 1997 operating budget. Ms. Firnhaber discussed the railroad's goals for 1997, including becoming more self sufficient, improving its on-time performance, and controlling growth in its operating expenses. She also discussed the railroad's "Vision 2003" program, which outlines corporate goals for the year 2003 (Metro-North's twentieth anniversary).

The council met with MTA Chief of Staff Forrest Taylor in February to discuss the Grand Central Terminal Revitalization Project. Mr. Taylor outlined some of the elements of the project, including an expansion of the retail space in the terminal, and spoke out about the work schedule. Gary Henderson from the Office of the MTA Inspector General also met with the council to discuss the results of a study on Metro-North's on-time performance. Conducted in April 1996, the survey recorded an on-time performance of 93.7 percent, lower than Metro-North's record of 97.7 percent. Mr. Henderson noted that primary reason for the difference is that the study recorded train arrivals differently than Metro-North. He added that the railroad is considering the study's recommendation to change how it clocks trains.

New York City Transit Riders Council (NYCTRC)

NYC Transit Acts on TRC Letter About MetroCard Program

In February, the TRC wrote to NYC Transit President Lawrence Reuter to alert him to a potential problem with the MetroCard rollout plan: the subway system's token-only high entrance turnstiles (HETs) will not be replaced until late 1997. At nineteen stations, HETs are the only means of access to outbound trains during off-peak hours, which would have posed a problem when the free intermodal transfer is introduced this July. Customers using these stations either would not have been able to take advantage of the free transfer or would have had to travel out of their way to stations where they could use MetroCard. In response, NYC Transit has said that it will expedite the delivery of 20 prototype MetroCard high-entry/exit turnstiles and install them at the affected locations by July. These stations will be equipped with both the old and new turnstiles until tokens are completely phased out.

TRC Submits Testimony on Proposed LIRR Station Closings in Queens

The TRC submitted a statement to the MTA in January opposing the LIRR's proposal to close five Queens stations along the Montauk Branch: the Penny Bridge, Haberman, Fresh Pond, Glendale, and Richmond Hill stations. The closings were part of the railroad's plan to close thirteen lightly used stations. In its statement, the TRC noted that transit alternatives are limited for the communities served by the five stations and that the LIRR is potentially the most convenient way to reach Manhattan. The TRC commented as well that the LIRR should do more for Queens residents, rather than less, and called on the railroad to explore low-cost alternatives that would enable it to maintain service at the five stations. In March, the MTA Board approved a modified plan to close ten stations.

TRC Comments on Proposed Subway Car Design

In February, the TRC submitted comments to NYC Transit on the proposed design for the new IRT subway car. For the most part, the TRC is satisfied with the design, though members expressed concern about the absence of a handhold near the ends of the car and about the positioning of vertical poles by the seats. In a mock-up of the car that it is using to solicit customer feedback, NYC Transit added a pole in the end section. The TRC toured the mock-up in January.

TRC Meets with Chief of Police Department's New Transportation Bureau

Ms. Dolinsky and PCAC Chairwoman Judy McClain met with Chief Kenneth Donohue and Inspector Ronald Rowland of the New York Police Department in March to discuss the department's new Transportation Bureau, which replaces the Transit and Traffic Bureaus. Chief Donohue, who will head the Transportation Bureau, said that the change will have no effect on Transit patrol strength. The TRC had co-signed a letter to Chief Donohue in January expressing concern that police presence in the subway system would decline as a result of the change.

TRC Suggests Alternatives to Reduced Bus Service

In January, PCAC Associate Director Alan Foster testified at the MTA Board's NYC Transit Committee regarding a plan to reduce the frequency of bus service on several routes throughout the city. In some cases, the plan proposed cutting service to one bus every sixty minutes during late-night hours. Mr. Foster acknowledged that ridership on the affected lines is low, but he said that the low patronage may be a result of the infrequent service on these routes. He stated the council's recommendation that rather than cutting service further NYC Transit should market the routes better and make timetables more widely available. Otherwise, the service cuts could result in even lower ridership, perpetuating the downward spiral.

NYCT Decides on Floor Tile Strategy

In March, NYC Transit announced measures that it will use to rectify problems with the Granirex floor tiles that have been used in many subway station rehabilitation projects. As the TRC had pointed out early on, the tiles are extremely slippery when wet. NYC Transit will continue to install the tiles at stations where it has already begun to install them and explore alternative flooring materials for stations where rehabilitation work has not started. In order to give the Granirex tiles more traction, NYC Transit will treat them with an acid wash. Unfortunately, the costs for the treatment will be high since forty-four stations are affected and the wash will have to be applied approximately every ninety days.

TRC Observes Focus Groups

In recent months, the staff has observed a number of market research focus groups conducted by NYC Transit. MetroCard vending machines were the subject of a focus group in January. The prototype was an ATM-style machine that accepts cash as well as credit and debit cards. Participants liked the ATM-style prototype and the ability to use various forms of payment.

Several focus groups were held in March. In one series of groups, people viewed several possible designs for the next generation of IRT subway cars. The designs featured different placements of poles and handholds as well as various options for a panel at the end of each row of seats. Participants in focus groups on NYC Transit's public service advertisements said that they prefer advertisements that are concise, not overly technical, and that make use of graphics, vivid colors, and humor.

In another series of focus groups, bus riders were shown the prototype for a new bus stop sign and different designs for bus guide-a-ride signs. The new bus stop sign uses color coded panels to distinguish local, limited, and express buses, and indicates the location of the bus stop and the major destinations for each route. Participants liked the various elements of the sign and that the print is larger than it is on current signs.

Bus riders were asked in another series of focus groups what type of information they would like to have available on electronic signs at bus stops. They expressed a preference for real-time information indicating when the next bus will arrive and said that the signs should be made as simple as possible.

Council Meetings

Two representatives from NYC Transit's Capital Program Management office Mysore Nagaraja, vice president, and Tony D'Amico, chief budget officer met with the TRC in January to discuss initiatives that the agency is taking to improve the efficiency of its capital program. More detailed records on contractors will be kept in order to enable NYC Transit to identify contractors who have performed poorly on projects. In addition, scoping will be done more thoroughly to uncover in the early stages of work site conditions that will pose a problem during rehabilitation work.

In February, Ann Cameron and Rick Stewart of NYC Transit's Marketing Services office met with the council to discuss design changes made to service change notices in order to make the notices more readable. In response to preferences that customers expressed in market research surveys, the notices were revised to prioritize the most important information, use larger print, and convey the message in a concise format. Ms. Cameron also presented the latest signs for NYC Transit's "The ABCs of MetroCard" campaign, a public service initiative designed to educate people on how to use MetroCard.

Patricia Clark and Robert Davidson of the Port Authority met with the TRC in March to present the design for the agency's proposed rail line to Kennedy Airport. The system will be compatible with subway and commuter rail technology, which provides for the possibility of connecting the line with the MTA's existing right-of-way. At Jamaica Station, the terminus for the route, the system will operate on a new third level above the LIRR tracks. The Port Authority proposes to build a street-level concourse connecting to the airport line and to the LIRR and the subways. The Port Authority estimates ridership of 34,000 people per day (split almost evenly between airport passengers and employees).

Press Coverage

On January 29, Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky was quoted in the Daily News and appeared on Channel 4 and New York 1 regarding a report by Public Advocate Mark Green citing problems with a contractor NYC Transit had selected to manage its paratransit scheduling. Ms. Dolinsky noted that NYC Transit had investigated the company thoroughly and that other cities had said they would use the contractor again despite the problems.

On February 3, Ms. Dolinsky appeared on New York 1 regarding NYC Transit's plan to expedite train service at Grand Central Terminal by enforcing a rule that requires conductors to close subway doors within forty-five seconds.

Ms. Dolinsky was quoted in a February 4 New York Times article on the high farebox operating ratio for subways, commenting that the low level of subsidies provided to NYC Transit "flies in the face of what public transit systems are all about."

On February 9, Transportation Planner Jonathan Sigall was quoted in a New York Post article regarding proposed cuts in federal transit operating assistance. Mr. Sigall noted that the cuts will not affect subway or bus fares since the MTA had planned on using the funds for NYC Transit's capital program. The Post subsequently published a letter to the editor from Associate Director Alan Foster, in which he noted that although the cuts will not affect transit operations, the loss of funds could mean that important capital projects will have to be deferred.

Ms. Dolinsky appeared on Channel 4 on March 10 regarding the problem of high entry turnstiles not being equipped to accept MetroCard. On the same day, she was also quoted on New York 1 regarding measures NYC Transit is taking to mitigate problems with the slippery floor tiles that have been used in many subway station rehabilitation projects.

On March 10, Mr. Alan Foster was quoted in a New York Post article regarding new subway cars that NYC Transit is testing on some routes.

Ms. Dolinsky was quoted in a March 11 Daily News article about delays in a project to install modern public address systems in subway stations. Ms. Dolinsky said that other cities have used similar technology successfully and questioned why New York City Transit is experiencing problems with the project.

On March 20, Ms. Dolinsky appeared on New York 1 to discuss NYC Transit's proposal to wrap its buses and subway trains in advertisements. Ms. Dolinsky referred to the proposal as "institutionalized graffiti."