

# PCAC Quarterly Report

## October - December 1998

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### **Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee (PCAC)**

#### **PCAC Mourns Loss of MNRCC Member Frederick D. Wilkinson, Jr.**

The PCAC regrets to announce the passing of long-time member and friend Frederick Wilkinson. Mr. Wilkinson succumbed to lung cancer on November 15 after a long bout with the disease.

Mr. Wilkinson was devoted to the interests of transit users, first as executive officer for surface transit at the New York City Transit Authority in the 1970s, and, in 1983, as an original member of the MNRCC. He was also noted widely for his corporate achievements as an African-American in the 1960s and 1970s, serving as senior vice president of corporate communications at the time of his retirement from American Express in 1993.

He is survived by his wife, Jeane, and children, Dana, Sharon, and Frederick. Donations were made in his name by the PCAC to the New York Transit Museum and the Westchester Clubmen's Association. At the PCAC's request, Metro-North will install a plaque in Mr. Wilkinson's memory at the newly renovated Mount Vernon East station.

#### **LIRRCC Chairperson Lawrence Silverman Assumes PCAC Non-Voting Seat on MTA Board**

In 1995, the PCAC gained a non-voting seat on the MTA Board and its operating committees. Each of the three PCAC Councils elects its own representative to serve on the corresponding operating committee. The non-voting Board seat rotates among those three, with each serving for 18 months. In October, LIRRCC Chairperson Lawrence Silverman replaced MNRCC member Ronnie Ackman as the non-voting MTA Board member.

#### **Grandeur Returns to Grand Central Terminal**

PCAC members and staff attended the October 1 rededication ceremony of the newly renovated Grand Central Terminal. During the quarter, PCAC Executive Director

Beverly Dolinsky learned that banners and back-lit information panels installed in the main concourse for the rededication ceremony were to remain, to be used for commercial advertising. During the Terminal's renovation, the MTA had maintained that advertising would be banned from the main concourse permanently. After consultation with Ms. Dolinsky, Chairman Conway informed the PCAC that the original intent of the panels and banners was for public service and MTA messages, and that he would not allow commercial advertising to be placed in the main concourse in the future.

### **PCAC Helps Improve LIRR Joint-Ticket Replacement Policy**

Following up on a customer complaint, the PCAC helped the LIRR to improve its joint-ticket replacement policy. Previously, when the MetroCard side of a joint ticket malfunctioned, customers were told to use the LIRR portion of the ticket until month's end before sending it in for inspection. Only after inspection would customers receive a credit for unused NYC Transit fare on the defective MetroCard. In the interim, customers bore the burden of paying twice in the same month for NYC Transit fare.

However, the PCAC learned that Metro-North gives joint-ticket customers replacement MetroCards, in \$15 increments, so that they can avoid the burden of double payment. Upon the PCAC's recommendation, the LIRR adopted the same replacement policy.

### **PCAC Continues to Follow Regional Transportation Studies**

The PCAC discussed the year-end status of MTA planning studies at its December meeting. The PCAC contracts with the MTA to provide supplementary public oversight of its planning activities and serves on the Technical and Public Advisory Committees for most MTA studies. The Committee questioned whether the MTA's Long Range Planning Framework allows the agency to address regional transportation problems in an adequately comprehensive and cost-effective manner. To address these concerns, the PCAC decided to invite MTA Planning Director William Wheeler to speak at its March 1999 meeting.

Members and staff continued to follow the activities of the MTA planning studies during the quarter. A third phase of work on the MTA/Port Authority/NJ Transit Access to the Region's Core study was approved by the three sponsoring agencies in December. The study team has chosen to examine a tunnel link between Penn Station and Grand Central Terminal as a possible capacity solution, but the PCAC commented that a new East River tunnel between Penn Station and Sunnyside Yard might prove more cost-effective.

PCAC members and staff participated in Technical and Public Advisory Committee activities of the MTA Lower Manhattan Access Alternatives study. The MTA is seeking to ease access to Lower Manhattan for commuters from northern and eastern suburbs. The PCAC helped select study alternatives for further consideration, and also helped begin the identification process of proper economic analysis tools for the project.

Staff also attended the monthly meetings of the Manhattan Inter-Community Board Airport Access Task Force during the quarter to monitor the progress of the Port Authority JFK AirTrain project.

### **Staff Testifies Before New York City Council**

Associate Director Jonathan Sigall testified before the New York City Council in October to support the extension of a recently implemented federal transit benefit to municipal employees. Under the new Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), employees may choose to have a pre-tax portion of salary removed by their employers to purchase transit fare. Mr. Sigall noted that the benefit, administered in the New York region by TransitChek, would be good for the regional economy, since it would allow municipal employees to reduce their commutation costs and to make discretionary trips they might not otherwise be able to afford.

### **Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky Speaks at American Public Transit Association Conference**

In October, Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky spoke on a panel regarding customer-focused marketing strategies at the American Public Transit Association conference, held in Manhattan. Ms. Dolinsky noted that the MTA has improved its customer focus greatly since the 1970s, when the agency considered transit riders a captive market.

### **Press**

In October, LIRRCC Chairperson Lawrence Silverman and TRC Chairperson Andrew Albert appeared on an MSG Metro cable channel forum to discuss regional transportation issues, including recent air conditioning problems on the LIRR, and the need for NYC Transit bus and subway service increases to meet growing demand.

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## **Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council (LIRRCC)**

### **Maintenance and Service Problems Addressed at Annual President's Forum**

The LIRRCC held its Annual President's Forum in November. LIRR President Thomas Prendergast and railroad staff responded to public questions and comments regarding service and parking issues, including the railroad's continued summer air conditioning problems. Mr. Prendergast promised that the railroad was working to ensure that the problems would not recur in summer 1999.

### **Rail Road Scores a "C+" on 1998 Report Card**

The Council released the results of its annual Report Card survey at a press conference in October. The survey asks riders to rate various aspects of LIRR service. For the third year in a row, the LIRR scored an overall grade of "C+".

Survey categories are chosen by the Council based primarily on rider input. Grades improved this year for waiting area and rest room cleanliness, building access hours, and station maintenance. Grades worsened for peak on-time performance, morning and midday service, on-board cleanliness, and air conditioning. Increased service frequency was the most-requested improvement. It was the second most-requested improvement in 1997.

### **"Happy Rails to You" Contest A Success**

The winners of the "Happy Rails to You" customer conduct campaign contest were also announced at the Report Card press conference. For their efforts, the winners, LIRR commuters Joseph Giglio and Laura Patterson, received books about Long Island and certificates of appreciation from the Council. Their winning entries, submitted as a team, were humorous line drawings which reminded customers to keep feet and packages off seats and to refrain from littering and shouting into cellular telephones, reminiscent of New York City's "Subway Sun" public service campaign from years past. The Council has requested that the LIRR post the designs in the system as public service announcements.

### **Council Congratulates LIRR on Rollout of New Bi-Level Coaches**

The Council sent a letter to LIRR President Thomas Prendergast in October to congratulate the railroad on the successful introduction of the first bi-level diesel coaches into passenger service. The new coaches and forthcoming dual-mode locomotives will replace the aged, Eisenhower-era diesel fleet by the end of 1999, and will allow the railroad to offer one-seat rides from diesel territory into Penn Station.

### **Council Remains Vigilant on Car Climate Problems; MTA Inspector General Releases Report**

During the quarter, LIRRCC Chairperson Lawrence Silverman raised the issue of the summer's chronic air-conditioning problems with the MTA Board's Long Island Committee, on which the Council holds a non-voting seat. LIRR President Thomas Prendergast informed Mr. Silverman that the railroad's temperature criteria do not necessarily match what passengers find to be comfortable, and that the railroad will work on a new reporting system for problems.

In December, the Office of the MTA Inspector General released the results of an examination of the railroad's 1996 car climate problems. The report cited poor car climate grades received by the LIRR on the Council's Report Card as one reason for the study. The inquiry found that manpower, equipment, and maintenance-tracking deficiencies led

to the problems. The Council invited a representative from the Inspector General's office to speak at its January 1999 meeting.

### **Open-Car Policy Questioned**

In November, the Council sent a letter to the LIRR to request the details of the "Open Car" policy. The policy governs the number of cars which must be open on each train for customers to use. This number depends on the branch and time of day. The Council requested the information after witnessing and receiving public complaints about train crews refusing to open locked coaches on overcrowded trains. It is general LIRR policy to open locked cars when all seats are occupied and customers are standing. Furthermore, railroad employees are not permitted to sit until all standing customers are seated.

### **Council Meetings**

In October, the LIRRCC discussed the railroad's car climate problems, parking issues, and the "Happy Rails to You" contest.

The Council welcomed Raymond Kenny, LIRR general superintendent - Transportation, and William Jeffries, superintendent - Engine Service, to its November meeting. They discussed the provision of on-board announcements and the proper conduct of train crews with the Council.

### **Press**

The press conference for the LIRR Report Card and the "Happy Rails to You" Contest was covered widely by the television and print media, including NewsChannel 12, The New York Times, and Newsday.

In December, the Glen Cove Record-Pilot printed a letter to the editor from Councilmember W. Michael Shaffer regarding problems with new high-level platforms along the Oyster Bay Branch.

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## **Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council (MNRCC)**

### **Calls for Service Improvements at Annual President's Forum**

In October, the Council held its annual President's Forum at MTA headquarters. Genevieve Firnhaber, Metro-North's executive vice-president, and Metro-North staff responded to questions raised by members of the public.

Several Connecticut customers complained about service on the New Haven Line, especially noting mechanical failures on the Line's Danbury branch. Metro-North

contracts with the State of Connecticut to provide rail services there. Changes in service must be negotiated with the State, making improvements difficult to implement. However, Ms. Firnhaber acknowledged that the railroad is aware of customer complaints regarding service and equipment failures on the Danbury branch, and is eager for the State to address the problem. However, any decision to overhaul or replace equipment is ultimately Connecticut's to make.

Several customers also questioned whether Harlem and New Haven Line trains could be allowed to make additional local stops in Westchester and the Bronx. Howard Permut, Metro-North vice-president - Planning and Development, responded that limited track capacity on the Harlem Line, and service agreements with the State of Connecticut regarding the New Haven Line, constrain the railroad from providing the extra services.

### **At Long Last, MNRCC Welcomes Putnam County Member**

In December, Governor Pataki approved the appointment of Thomas Jennings as the Council's Putnam County representative. Mr. Jennings, a finance professional, resides in Carmel, and commutes from the Croton Falls station on the Harlem Line. He is the first Putnam member in over a decade, and the Council looks forward to his participation at its January meeting.

### **Staff Meets with Metro-North Planning to Discuss New Transportation Studies**

In December, MNRCC staff met with Metro-North Planning officials to discuss the Council's role in two new Metro-North transportation studies. The Penn Station Access study will explore ways to run Metro-North service to Penn Station on Manhattan's west side. The Hudson Line Extension study will examine possibilities for extending the Hudson Line north of Poughkeepsie, into Dutchess County. The Council will serve on the advisory committees of the two studies, and will meet with the public outreach consultants to discuss the public information plans for the two studies.

### **Staff Tours North End Access Worksite**

In November, railroad officials led Council staff on a tour of the worksite of the Grand Central Terminal North End Access project. The tour was requested by Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky after the release of an audit by the MTA's independent engineer which suggested that the project would not be completed until March 1999. The project was originally scheduled to be completed in December and opened to the public in January, after two years of delays. However, problems forced the railroad to push the completion date to February 15.

Staff were impressed by the quality of the work, including the comfortable design of the passageways and the site-specific artwork. However, the scope of ongoing construction activities led staff to question whether the project would be completed by February.

### **Council Reviews Customer Satisfaction Surveys**

At the standing invitation of Metro-North, the Council reviewed draft versions of the Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey and the West-of-Hudson Customer Satisfaction Survey. After minor suggestions and corrections, the Council approved both surveys, which bear the signature of Council Chairperson Richard Cataggio, and participated in the distribution of survey forms.

### **Station Rehabilitation Efforts Continue During Quarter**

During the quarter, the Council continued to track ongoing Hudson Line station rehabilitation work. In October, the Council inquired about poor conditions in the underpass at the Cold Spring station. Metro-North informed the Council that conditions would improve as part of a planned renovation of the station, out for bid in November.

Also in October, Vice-Chair Jim Blair reported that the roof at the Ossining station continues to leak. Staff researched the issue and learned that a new roof will be installed as part of an ongoing renovation of the station.

### **Council Inquires About Wayside Litter and Debris**

In October, the Council received responses to inquiries regarding litter and debris located along the rights-of-way of the Hudson and Harlem Lines. The railroad reported that litter in the vicinity of Spuyten Duyvil station on the Hudson Line is removed during periodic right-of-way maintenance activities, occasionally assisted by a local community group. However, according to the railroad, debris left from a fire along the Harlem Line, near its junction with the New Haven Line, is not on Metro-North property and, therefore, not its responsibility.

### **Council Meetings**

At its October meeting, the Council followed-up on the above station rehabilitation and right-of-way maintenance issues.

In November, the Council welcomed Howard Permut, Metro-North vice-president - Planning and Development, and John Kennard, director - Capital and Long-Range Planning, who discussed the railroad's ongoing planning studies.

### **Press**

In November, Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky was quoted in the Journal News regarding Metro-North's increased cost-efficiency over the past ten years, saying, "they've done a fantastic job...improving their on-time performance and customer satisfaction."

In December, Council member Martin Goldstein was quoted in a Journal News article on MTA Chairman E. Virgil Conway.

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## **New York City Transit Riders Council (NYCTRC)**

### **TRC Asks MTA for Service Improvements**

TRC staff testified before the NYC Transit Committee and the MTA Board during the quarter, calling for bus and subway service increases to meet the needs of NYC Transit's quickly growing ridership. In December, owing to skyrocketing demand, and pressure from the TRC and other rider advocacy groups, Governor Pataki announced NYC Transit's biggest-ever plan for service improvements. The plan, slated to begin in early 1999, will be funded by the agency's 1998 \$379 million operating surplus. The plan calls for increases on two-thirds of NYC Transit's bus and subway routes, mainly during offpeak hours. Funds will also be spent to improve system maintenance, and to expedite the purchase of 112 new railcars.

When the agency announced an earlier version of the plan, the TRC sent a letter to MTA Chairman E. Virgil Conway suggesting that the plan did not take into account future ridership. Already, the city's buses and subways carry 5.1 million passengers on an average weekday, the highest number in 25 years. While the Council is pleased with the scope of the latest plan, it doubts whether it will be enough to meet the system's needs.

### **Reduced Fare MetroCard Mail & Ride to be Permanent Program**

The service improvement plan also calls for the expansion of the pilot Reduced-Fare MetroCard Mail & Ride program to become a permanent option for all Reduced-Fare customers. Previously, NYC Transit announced that it would drop the program. However, the Council strongly objected to the proposed elimination of a program that has proved to be highly popular with elderly and disabled customers.

### **Fun Pass No Fun For Daily Riders**

On January 1, NYC Transit finally unveiled its One Day Fun Pass. The pass, priced at \$4, gives customers unlimited bus and subway rides until 2:59 a.m. the following day. However, the agency decided not to sell the pass within the system, giving as a reason the possibility of longer lines at token booths.

The TRC testified during the quarter before the MTA Board and NYC Transit Committee in support of token booth sales for the pass. In its testimony, the TRC noted that out-of-system sales benefit tourists more than regular customers, and questioned whether in-system sales would have an effect on lines.

### **Annual President's Forum a Success**

In October, Lawrence Reuter and NYC Transit staff answered questions from a standing-room-only crowd at the Council's Annual NYC Transit President's Forum. Advocates for

the mentally challenged, in strong attendance, called for an expansion of Reduced-Fare MetroCard eligibility to include customers who suffer mental disabilities but are not entirely incapacitated. Currently, eligibility is limited to mentally challenged customers who are dependent entirely upon others for personal needs. However, Mr. Reuter said that such an expansion requires MTA approval, and is beyond the purview of NYC Transit.

Several customers also called for service increases on Manhattan and Brooklyn bus lines to deal with recent offpeak ridership increases.

### **TRC Survey Finds Deficiencies in New Bus Stop Signage**

In November, the Council released *Destination: Unknown*, the results of a field survey of new NYC Transit/NYCDOT bus stop signs recently installed across the city. The report found that 59% of the 286 randomly chosen signs in the survey contained inaccurate or inadequate information, or were installed in the wrong locations.

The report recommended that NYC Transit revise the policies which govern the information contained on the signposts to require more detailed information, and requested that NYCDOT improve the accuracy of its installations. The report is available upon request from the TRC.

### **MTA Developer Giveaways Continue**

In October, the TRC wrote to MTA Chairman E. Virgil Conway to protest the MTA decision to let the Rudin Organization out of an agreement to provide escalators in a new entrance to the Times Square subway complex in its forthcoming 42nd Street building. The escalators were to be provided in return for a zoning bonus which the developer has already received. The Council also requested that the MTA explore ways to improve access to the complex from north of 42nd Street. The MTA responded that northern access to the station will be reexamined, but that the agency sees no need for escalators at the disputed entrance.

### **Council Calls for Service Increases on OPTO Lines**

Also in October, the Council wrote to NYC Transit to protest the agency's recent position that current ridership on subway lines using One Person Train Operation (OPTO) does not merit service increases during the times when OPTO is used. In a letter to President Reuter, the Council reminded the agency that it had promised offpeak service increases as a benefit of OPTO. The Council gave its support to the OPTO program based on the possibility of such increases, and would like the agency to fulfill its promise.

### **No Window Seats for New Trains**

The Council wrote to NYC Transit in October to protest the agency's decision to forgo including standard conversational-style seating, which allows for popular back-to-back

window seats, in its new R143 car procurement. The new cars instead will have IRT-style longitudinal benches running down each side. NYC Transit informed the Council that sideways-only seating will improve passenger loading times and that focus group participants have expressed satisfaction with the design. However, participants of earlier focus groups, observed by Council staff, expressed a strong preference for a design which included window seats, a fact the Council noted in its letter.

### **Council Defends Shorter Subway Lockout for MetroCard Pass Users**

The Council objected to NYC Transit's plan to maintain the current 18-minute subway station lockout for customers using unlimited-ride MetroCards. When NYC Transit introduced unlimited-ride MetroCards in July, it said that software limitations precluded a shorter lockout, but that the lockout would be reduced later in the year. However, the agency now maintains that keeping the eighteen-minute lockout will reduce fraud. The Council has requested that NYC Transit eliminate the lockout entirely for station-to-station transfers, and reduce the station-specific lockout to six minutes, similar to the lockouts placed upon the agency's employee passes.

### **Williamsburg Bridge Subway Shutdown Looms Closer**

Beginning in Spring 1999, NYCDOT rehabilitation work on the Williamsburg bridge will force a five-month suspension of subway service across the span. During the quarter, the Council's Service and Planning Subcommittee considered writing another letter to request that a bypass track be constructed to allow subway service to continue during the rehab work. However, after consultation with NYC Transit and NYCDOT officials, it was learned that building such a bypass would entail almost as many days of disrupted service as a total closure, and extend the duration of the project. The TRC has requested that an NYC Transit representative discuss the agency's service diversion plans at the January Council meeting.

### **Council Meetings**

In October, Millard Seay, NYC Transit senior vice-president - Department of Buses, discussed bus service issues with the Council. In November, Stations Division general superintendent Jeanette Strickland made a presentation to the Council on station cleaning schedules and activities. The NYC Transit 1998 surplus and 1999 budget were the subjects of discussion at the Council's December meeting.

### **Press**

The release of the bus stop signage survey received significant media attention, including reports and interviews on New York One, channels 2, 4, 5, and 7, and radio stations WINS, WFUV, and NewsRadio 88. Articles also appeared in the Daily News, New York Post, and World Journal.

In October, TRC Chairperson Andrew Albert was quoted in the Daily News, and Associate Director Jonathan Sigall was quoted in The New York Times, regarding the early completion of the Lenox Avenue subway reconstruction project.

In December, Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky was interviewed by the Daily News and New York Times regarding the NYC Transit surplus and proposed service increases. Ms. Dolinsky expressed the TRC's support for the increases, but said it was too early to tell if they would be adequate to meet growing demand.

Also in December, Transportation Planner Michael T. Doyle was quoted in the Daily News regarding growth in weekend ridership, which Mr. Doyle partially attributed to the popularity of 7- and 30-day MetroCard passes.