

PCAC Quarterly Report

January - March 2000

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Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee (PCAC)

PCAC Research Associate Moves On

In February, the PCAC bade farewell to Research Associate Sarah Massey, who had been with the PCAC since October 1997. Ms. Massey left the PCAC after receiving her Master of Urban Planning degree from Hunter College and has assumed the role of communications manager with West Harlem Environmental Action. She authored two reports at the PCAC: Privatizing MTA Services, Cost Savings or Political Buzzword?; and a soon-to-be-released study of the customer service departments at the MTA agencies.

Committee Hears MTA Plans for Expansion

The PCAC hosted a discussion on the MTA system expansion studies in March. Meeting with the members were representatives from several projects, including Long Island Rail Road East Side Access, Manhattan East Side Alternatives, and Lower Manhattan Access Alternatives. The PCAC used the occasion to voice its concern again over the fragmented nature of the MTA's planning process.

All too often, members said, the studies progress with little consideration on how they affect each other. The greatest concern is over the MTA's proposal to bring Long Island Rail Road trains into Grand Central Terminal without simultaneously advancing a full-length Second Avenue subway. The latter project is critical to easing crowding on the 4, 5, and 6 subway lines.

PCAC Comments on MTA Studies

Throughout the quarter, the PCAC played an active role in the studies. In March, staff participated in the inaugural advisory committee meetings for the Southeast Queens Local Area Transportation study. The project is examining ways to improve accessibility for residents of southeast Queens. In comments on the project, the PCAC urged the MTA not to rule out policies that would make the LIRR a more viable travel alternative in the study area.

The PCAC commented on the draft Environmental Impact Statement for East Side Access in January. Of concern to the PCAC was the superficial way in which the study treated the project's affect on Lexington Avenue subway riders and on properties along

Park Avenue. The PCAC added that train service to Flatbush Avenue should not be reduced by half when service to Grand Central Terminal commences.

Executive Director Meets with New York City Public Advocate

PCAC Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky participated in a February transportation roundtable with New York City Public Advocate Mark Green. The session was convened to solicit ideas for improving transportation in the city, and Mr. Green used several of Ms. Dolinsky's suggestions in a subsequent speech he gave on the topic. He called for a regional fare card good on all MTA systems, greater priority to buses on city streets, and real-time travel information at subway stations and bus stops. All are ideas the PCAC has long advocated.

PCAC Sorry to See LIRR President Thomas Prendergast Leave

In March, the PCAC learned that Thomas Prendergast is leaving the MTA family at the end of April. The PCAC worked with Mr. Prendergast in two capacities: in his current position as president of the LIRR; and in his previous post as senior vice president of the NYC Transit Department of Subways. In both roles, Mr. Prendergast did much to improve service for MTA riders, and the PCAC will miss him.

Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council (LIRRCC)

LIRRCC Fights Proposed Long Island Bus Service Reductions

With steep budget cuts threatening Long Island Bus service, the Council lobbied for more financial support for the transportation provider. In letters to Nassau County elected officials, the LIRRCC said that a healthy Long Island Bus is vital to Nassau County. The Council noted that bus service is the only affordable means of transportation for many people and that planned service cuts would exacerbate traffic congestion and air pollution problems. Newsday published an op-ed piece from Council chairman Lawrence Silverman expressing these sentiments and calling for a constructive solution to the problem. State elected officials promised more money for Long Island Bus following a public hearing on the service cuts.

Improved Access Sought for Manhasset

The Council wants to make it easier for customers to reach the Manhasset Station. Currently, residents living near the west end of the station do not have direct access to the platform and must instead walk out of their way. With the station scheduled for rehabilitation, the Council has asked the railroad to build a staircase at the west end of the platform, and the LIRR has responded by directing the contractor to evaluate the feasibility of the project.

Poor LIRR Communication Spurs Council Action

The LIRRCC took up the cause of Ronkonkoma Branch riders who received parking tickets when they were diverted to other branches because of a broken rail on January 28th. The LIRR had instructed customers to use the Port Jefferson and Babylon Branches

as an alternative. However, the railroad neglected to alert towns to anticipate the influx of commuters, who as a result unwittingly parked illegally.

The LIRRCC submitted a letter to local magistrates asking that they dismiss the tickets, and Mr. Silverman appeared at the court hearings. In Port Jefferson, the amount of the fine was reduced by more than half. In response to public comments from the Council, the LIRR has begun to work with towns to devise a method of alerting them if similar incidents occur in the future.

LIRRCC Seeks Money to Fix Northport Parking

Mr. Silverman met with Huntington Town Councilman Steve Israel to discuss possibilities for funding parking improvements at Northport Station. With the parking lot in a poor state of repair, the Council has been working since 1999 to find ways to finance the project. Mr. Silverman learned that funding may become available through the discretionary budgets of area elected officials.

Staff Hears Rider Opinion on New Rail Car Design

PCAC staff observed focus groups held by the LIRR in March on the design for the railroad's next generation of electric rail cars. Customers commented favorably on some aspects of the cars, including the larger bathroom, and negatively on others, including seat width and leg room. Staff saw a mock-up of the car prior to the groups and echoed some of these views.

Council Meetings

At its March meeting, the Council discussed service issues with Jim Dermody, LIRR senior vice president for Operations. Guests in January included Susan McGowan and Robert Brennan from LIRR public affairs. They discussed the railroad's procedures for responding to customer inquiries. Also meeting with members was LIRR Chief Transportation Officer Raymond Kenny, who talked about problems with doors on the new diesel cars opening off platforms.

Press

Mr. Silverman was quoted in several newspaper articles regarding the resignation of LIRR President Thomas Prendergast. He credited Mr. Prendergast for the steps he took to improve railroad service, including advocating for East Side Access. Mr. Silverman was also cited in coverage of the broken-rail incident on the Ronkonkoma Branch.

Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council (MNRCC)

Extra! Extra! Read All About Us!

Riders who were unfamiliar with the MNRCC or were just curious to know more got all the information they needed in February. That month, the railroad featured the Council in Mileposts, its monthly customer newsletter. The generous write-up gave readers complete

details on the MNRCC—from its founding by the New York State Legislature in 1981 to its structure (11 volunteer members) and its work on behalf of commuters.

Upper Hudson Riders to Get New Evening Train

In February, the Council learned that Upper Hudson riders will get another evening train later in the year. The MNRCC had pointed out the need for an additional train between 5:30 and 6:00 pm, noting that the 5:09 pm train is too early for riders who work downtown. Metro-North told the Council it will add another train in July or October.

Calling Upstate? Now Riders Can

A glitch in the thirty-second, twenty-five-cent phones at Grand Central Terminal was discovered and fixed thanks to MNRCC member James Blair. A resident of Ossining, Mr. Blair found that he could not place calls from the phones to numbers in the 914 area code. The MTA investigated, pinpointed, and corrected the problem.

Railroad Installs New Mail&Ride Box

At MNRCC Urging During the quarter, Metro-North acted on a Council suggestion and installed a Mail&Ride box in Grand Central North. Riders using Grand Central North can drop their monthly Mail&Ride payment in the box rather than having to go out of their way to use the one on the upper level of Grand Central Terminal. The MNRCC proposed the idea last fall.

Cold Spring Riders Won't Be Kept in the Dark

Acting on a customer complaint, the Council contacted Metro-North about lighting the walkway leading from the street to the northbound platform at the Cold Spring Station. The railroad said that once it reaches an agreement with the local g

Council Follows-up on Grand Central Signage

In February, the MNRCC sent a follow-up letter to Metro-North regarding its suggestions on improving the visibility of Grand Central Terminal signage. Along with a rider who is visually impaired, Council staff went on a walk-through of the Terminal in November to discuss ways to improve the signs. The railroad agreed to explore the suggestions and is even experimenting with one of the ideas: posting lower level track numbers in more prominent locations. Still, the MNRCC has not received a formal response, prompting the letter. The Council will continue to work on the issue in the second quarter.

MNRCC Speaks, Railroad Listens

Council input led to changes in Metro-North's customer satisfaction survey covering the first quarter of 2000. At the railroad's request, the MNRCC reviews all survey drafts, offering thoughts on how the questionnaires can be made better. In response to Council suggestions, Metro-North clarified questions asking riders about train heating and for their general comments.

Harlem-125th Street Station on Council Agenda

The recent renovation of the Harlem-125th Street Station was a focus for the Council during the quarter. In January, members met with Walter Sewell, Metro-North director -

Construction Management, who managed the project. He gave a presentation on the rehabilitation and on the restoration of the Park Avenue Viaduct. In March, PCAC Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky and Associate Director Jonathan Sigall toured the station. For the MNRCC, station rehabilitation is an important aspect of Metro-North's capital program. As the gateway to the system, stations should be welcoming and give riders a positive impression.

Council Meetings

Along with Mr. Sewell, Ronald Yutko, Metro-North senior director - Capital Programs, met with the Council in January. Mr. Yutko briefed members on current and recently completed capital projects. Discussion in February centered on the final report by the I-287 Task Force, a group assessing options for improving travel on I-287. Council member George Zobelein was involved in public meetings of the Task Force.

New York City Transit Riders Council (NYCTRC)

Council Suggests Different Strategy on Bus Emissions

The TRC released a report in February recommending a different approach to reducing exhaust emissions from NYC Transit buses. Instead of embracing an all compressed natural gas (CNG) policy, as many environmental advocates have, the Council suggested that NYC Transit focus on other technologies that equal or exceed CNG engines in lowering emissions.

The study found that natural gas is not the panacea that its proponents claim. CNG engines may release more ultrafine particles than diesel engines, and these smaller particles are now thought to pose a greater threat to human health. An all-CNG policy would delay delivery of new buses while NYC Transit converts its bus garages to accommodate natural gas fueling. With bus ridership soaring, the agency needs more buses immediately.

The TRC recommended that NYC Transit buy only hybrid diesel-electric buses in the future. These buses run primarily on electric power and have performed as well as CNG buses in tests. The Council suggested that existing diesel buses be run only on low-sulfur diesel fuel and be fitted with exhaust treatment systems. When combined, these technologies produce gains comparable to CNG. The report was well received and covered extensively in the media.

TRC Calls on Bronx Borough President

Hoping to forestall a planned subway change in the Bronx, Council representatives met with Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer in February. The change would replace 2 service with 5 service at stations between East 180th and East 149th Streets. Although meant to improve reliability on these lines, the switch would cut train service in half for

residents in the affected corridor. The TRC has lobbied against the change since it was announced in late 1999, and Borough President Ferrer offered his support.

Members Meet with NYC Transit President

Concerns about the 2 and 5 service change were among the topics discussed in January when the TRC met with NYC Transit President Lawrence Reuter. The TRC asked for data to determine the effect of the switch on riders and on travel patterns. Members also urged NYC Transit to move more decisively to resolve problems with a test of an automated bus tracking system. The program, now two years late, is of great interest to the TRC. It should improve bus service reliability and give riders real-time information about when the next bus will arrive.

Council Seeks Reopening of Passageway

In March, the TRC protested the overnight closure of the underground passageway connecting the Herald Square subway station with the 33rd Street PATH station. The Port Authority and NYC Transit now gate the walkway from 11 pm to 5 am because it became sleeping quarters to several homeless people. Concerned that riders transferring outside will be exposed to inclement weather and feel more vulnerable, the TRC sent a letter objecting to the plan. The letter said that the agencies should do more to address the needs of the homeless people before inconveniencing riders. The TRC's involvement led to a story on New York One.

Transit Responds to TRC Concern on Service Diversion Notices

Pressure from the Council has led to action to improve subway service diversion notices. The TRC has long been critical of the process by which NYC Transit notifies riders of diversions. Notices are often confusing and are sometimes inaccurate, and they are frequently not posted at affected stations or are posted late. After encountering several problems during the quarter, the TRC resolved to write to Mr. Reuter whenever it finds a mistake. In response to the TRC's persistence, NYC Transit formed a working committee to improve the process.

Executive Director Addresses Police Graduating Class

For the second straight year, PCAC Executive Director Beverly Dolinsky spoke at the graduation ceremony for Police Academy cadets assigned to police the transit system. Invited to share the customer perspective on subway security, Ms. Dolinsky told the graduates that riders appreciate nothing more than seeing officers on trains and in stations, but not in bunches.

TRC Seeks More Out-of-System MetroCard Sales

MetroCard was the topic of conversation at the March TRC meeting, when Thomas Savage, NYC Transit senior vice president - MetroCard Operations, was the Council's guest. The TRC wants MetroCards to be more widely available outside the subway system. The need is greatest on Staten Island, where in-system MetroCards are sold only at the St. George Ferry Terminal, and for riders who find it a hardship to access subway stations.

TRC Seeks Half-Fare Privileges for SSI Recipients

In January, the Council wrote to MTA Chairman E. Virgil Conway urging him to extend reduced-fare privileges to Supplemental Security Income recipients diagnosed with a severe mental illness. New York State adopted a law to this effect in 1999, but the MTA said that the statute did not apply to NYC Transit because of a technical error. Following the passage of corrective legislation, the MTA adopted a policy in March providing these privileges.