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MTA CAPITAL PROGRAM DESERVES MORE PUBLIC DEBATE

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The impact of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's \$32 billion Capital Program will have far-ranging implications for the future of New York's transit network. However, with Mayor Bill de Blasio raising the issue of the state paying a larger share

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of funding for the program, it remains unclear how the agency's capital needs will be funded. Options include toll hikes, service cuts and other unpalatable changes that could make transit less affordable and accessible.

Answers to these questions can't be hashed out in a backroom far from the public's view. We need to start a conversation on this program today to understand how we can fund our future growth.

The capital program will affect everything from the provision of new bus routes and frequency of train service to the future of megaprojects like the Second Avenue Subway. It will also play a continuing role in reducing income inequality by giving New Yorkers access to an affordable form of transit that offsets rising housing costs. With New York facing numerous challenges in coming years, it is vital that both city and state continue to support renewal and expansion of the network.

Since its inception in 1982 the capital program has injected billions into the MTA's physical infrastructure, reinvigorating the system's ability to serve the region. The vibrant network that has emerged has helped ignite New York's revival. Annual ridership is up 72 percent on New York City subways, while train delays and mechanical failures have plummeted. Today, one of every three U.S. transit rides is on the MTA network.

Capital investments have facilitated the growth of new neighborhoods and an influx of tourists. The transformation of areas like Williamsburg and the Far West Side have been directly supported by infrastructure improvements, be it a new waterfront bus route in Brooklyn or the 7 line extension through Manhattan. By easing travel around the city, these improvements have also helped boost visitors to a record high of 54.3 million in 2013.

Affordable public transit also promotes social equity. In a 2014 analysis, New York was ranked the fourth most affordable transportation network of 15 major global cities, and combined transportation and housing costs make up less of a New Yorker's budget than most other major U.S. cities.

However, new dynamics are reshaping the New York City metro region, and the MTA must constantly plan ahead to meet emerging challenges ranging from climate change to global competition.

First and foremost, the agency must ramp up resiliency efforts to prepare for the looming effects of climate change. Superstorm Sandy brought New York to its knees with over \$25 billion in damage to the region, and the MTA must continue to make extensive repairs and

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upgrades to improve the resiliency of its system.

Moreover, travel patterns around New York are shifting. For the first time since World War II, more people are moving to New York City than Long Island, New Jersey and Southwest Connecticut combined, resulting in overcrowding. Every weekday, the 4/5/6 subway line carries more commuters than the total ridership of San Francisco, Chicago and Boston combined. The growth rate of commutes from boroughs and counties has outpaced the traditional daily service into Manhattan. The MTA needs to boost its service to allow for added capacity and accommodate emerging neighborhoods outside Manhattan.

Finally, New York will need to do more in the coming decades to maintain its stature against other cities. While New York outperforms most other cities on measures like the ease of doing business, intellectual capital and innovation, its infrastructure ranked 16th on a recent PriceWaterhouseCoopers report, well behind London, Hong Kong and Paris. Updating MTA infrastructure will be critical to keeping New York competitive.

All of these priorities are captured in the capital program, the primary vehicle for keeping the MTA running. The majority of the plan will pay for visible changes like new subway cars and Metro-North station restorations, as well as unseen but critical improvements to train signals, power and core infrastructure essential for maintaining safety, reliability and resiliency. The plan will also include expansion projects such as the Second Avenue Subway and a fast new rail service to Penn Station for transit-starved residents of the Northeast Bronx. Yet this level of investment is significantly less than in private industries like freight railroads and logistics, suggesting that this program prudently balances the need for transit development in a world of constrained resources.

With so much riding on fully funding a five-year Capital Program, it is critical to engage the public in the debate. Tough questions must be asked of policymakers, such as how to better align the MTA with the mayor's larger economic development agenda and how much to rely on debt for the primary funding source.

In the months to come, we hope public and private leaders will commence these discussions and commit to a robust plan that sustainably promotes the continued health of regional transit. Doing so will support the continued prosperity of New York and keep the city on track for the long run.

Robert C. Lieber is the Chairman of the Urban Land Institute New York

William Henderson is the Executive Director of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA

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**MTA Capital Program
Deserves More Public Debate**

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