



Last Stop for Long Island: How The MTA’s Doomsday Cuts Would Devastate Nassau and Suffolk Counties

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Last month, New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority Chair Patrick J. Foye announced that without federal aid, MTA riders would experience [devastating service cuts](#) starting this fall. Riders on the commuter rails north and east of the city could endure steep fare hikes and worse, service cuts of 50%, with all service eliminated on some lines, and trains only every hour or two on others.

Deep Long Island Rail Road cuts would seriously harm local families, businesses, and municipalities and could derail innovative, transit-centered initiatives by Suffolk and Nassau County leaders to keep young adults living on Long Island and boost the local economy. As the nation’s busiest commuter railroad, with over 91 million riders annually, the LIRR provides the lifeblood that keeps Long Island moving.

HOME VALUES IMPERILED

It is no exaggeration to say that without the LIRR, Long Islanders' very way of life would be threatened. Every day hundreds of thousands of Long Islanders rely on the LIRR to travel to and from work. Real estate values on Long Island are heavily impacted by proximity to LIRR stations, contributing significantly to the [“Long Island suburb price premium”](#) which increases and sustains home values for local homeowners.

[Ninety-one percent](#) of Long Island real estate professionals identified the expansion of LIRR service as the item that would have the biggest impact on increasing real estate values—it's not hard to conclude what the impacts of up to a 50% contraction of service would be. And many New York City residents contribute to the local economy by using the LIRR to enjoy beaches, visit family, go on vacation, and travel to second homes.

JOBS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ENDANGERED

The entire Island depends on robust commerce with New York City, which would be severely undermined if its rail link is weakened or broken. There is a precedent: in 2010, the LIRR was forced to cut service in its efforts to fill a \$900 million budget hole. The fiscal abyss is substantially larger now, and the pain inflicted will be much deeper. With 7,500 employees, the LIRR is an important source of middle-class jobs for Long Islanders. With an unemployment rate hovering around [13%](#), Long Island cannot afford to see essential workers lose their jobs too. But the MTA has made it clear that without the full emergency federal aid, [mass layoffs are on the table](#). And the economic consequences reach far beyond LIRR employees and their families.

One of the biggest crises facing Long Island is the steady departure of young adults. The failure of the federal government to save the LIRR will make the situation worse. Both Suffolk and Nassau County leaders have committed to Transit-Oriented Development projects (TODs) as a transformative strategy to keep young adults living on Long Island. These innovative development projects involve a [“mixed-use residential and commercial area designed to maximize access to public transportation.”](#) As Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone's office [describes it](#), “TODs are a response to reverse the decades-long trend of businesses and young people leaving Suffolk County and our region, and to make our region competitive again.” They are intended to address the issues that are turning away Long Island's young families, including the high cost of living, lack of affordable rental housing, the need for walkable downtowns, and more good paying jobs. Suffolk County is currently leading the way with 12 TODs and Nassau County [has committed](#) \$1 million to jumpstart the development of three TODs.

The Ronkonkoma Hub is one of the most ambitious and important of the TODs. [The intention is](#) to turn 53 acres of blighted land into 1,450 units of housing and 600,000 square feet of retail and office space. This major economic development project, led by TRITEC, is expected to significantly increase local jobs and business and is designed to transform the Ronkonkoma train station into a [gateway](#) to Brookhaven and Eastern Long Island. Like all the TODs, the entire project is premised on a robust LIRR with the potential for expanding, not severely contracting, commuter rail service. The 15 TODs in the works on Long Island could all be imperiled without Congressional action to save the LIRR. Even if the developments proceed as planned, they cannot have their intended impact of stanching the exit of young adults and creating vibrant downtown hubs if the MTA is forced to make dramatic cuts in service.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN JEOPARDY

Long Island's efforts to retain its young adults are doubly threatened by the prospect of LIRR cuts. Local students rely on LIRR for convenient transportation to Long Island colleges and universities like Stony Brook, Farmingdale, Hofstra, LIU, and Nassau and Suffolk Community Colleges.

THE END OF THE EAST END?

As we consider the economic consequences for Long Island of a severely hampered LIRR, the impacts on Long Island's East End will have a ripple effect on the entire region. Home of the world famous Hamptons, Shelter Island and North Fork resort destinations, East End communities depend in particular on the LIRR to bring affluent visitors, and their spending, from New York City and other points west. Doomsday service cuts could leave the North Fork without any trains at all and reduce rail service to the Hamptons to just a few trains each day. Rail cuts would bring debilitating increases in [summer gridlock](#) and ear-splitting spikes in [noise pollution](#) associated with helicopters.

With Long Island Rail Road service to the East End sharply curtailed, and accompanied by steep fare hikes to support the remaining trains, the Hamptons and North Fork would suffer dramatic, repeated reductions in quality of life, property values, and tax revenue. Like the public transit they depend on, the local communities of the East End would enter a [death spiral](#) and, in striking parallel to many low-income urban and suburban neighborhoods, become increasingly walled off from one another and the surrounding region.

THE PATH FORWARD FOR LONG ISLAND

The alternative to these devastating consequences for Nassau and Suffolk Counties is for Congress to rescue the MTA, which drives as much as [10 percent](#) of US GDP, and nearly nine million pre-COVID daily public transit riders. This will require \$12 billion in aid through 2021. MTA COVID-related losses exceed \$1 billion each month. The CARES Act assisted the MTA only through July 2020. CARES relied on highly inequitable federal funding formulas that granted the MTA just 15% of the total transit aid pot, despite metropolitan New York being the nation's hardest-hit region and our transit system accounting for nearly 40% of all US transit trips.

Aid negotiations are stalled because Republicans in the Congress and the White House fail to recognize the severity of the problem and seem to approach the issue of COVID funding as a partisan political issue, rather than focus on the needs of everyday Americans like the 7.6 million Long Islanders. US Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer has repeatedly asserted his absolute commitment to deliver MTA aid in the next COVID relief package, and to not allow such a plan to leave the Senate floor with transit funding. He repeated his [pledge](#) on Labor Day.

And on September 10th, he spoke about the transit crisis on the floor of the U.S. Senate and specifically talked about [the need for Congress to fund the LIRR](#).

In this context, it is fair to anticipate that all of Long Island's Congressional delegation would do everything in their power to save the Long Island Rail Road. In particular, Long Islanders need those with the most access to the White House to lean in to save public transit. Long Island has one member of Congress with this kind of influence. Congressman Lee Zeldin is seen as a rising star in Republican circles. At the invitation of President Trump, he spoke at the Republican National Convention. His profile and access should equip him to wield considerable political influence on behalf of Long Island commuters and the eastern Suffolk communities he represents. But at this very moment when Democrats in Congress and the White House are locking horns over whether to save or abandon public transit through a COVID relief package, Rep. Zeldin is not raising his voice in support of a bipartisan action to save the LIRR, the MTA, and public transit systems around the country. In May, he voted against the House's HEROES bill, which included \$3.9 billion for the MTA to maintain service levels through the end of 2020.

Based on constituent interactions with his office, it is apparent that saving the LIRR is not yet being prioritized. The accounts of two LIRR riders who called Rep. Zeldin's office in the week following Labor Day to advocate for the needed funding are quite revealing.

One caller was told that funding for MTA was a "state issue," even after reminding the congressional staffer that the federal government had already provided \$3 billion in assistance a few months earlier.

When a second caller asked for Rep. Zeldin's position on securing the \$12 billion in federal COVID relief funding that the MTA has identified as needed to avoid cuts, they were asked, "is that \$12 billion with a 'B'?" Then they were told that Rep. Zeldin "doesn't have a statement" on the need for federal funding to save the MTA.

During this time, the debate over COVID relief negotiations was the primary focus of business in Congress and the MTA had recently made dire and specific public warnings about the magnitude of cuts being considered.

It's all too easy to imagine what could come as a consequence of inaction, as MTA Chair Pat Foye laid out in his emergency August message to board members. Service could be slashed in half, every other train removed from today's schedules in the coming months. Entire lines could lose service, removing essential arteries from Long Island's circulatory system. On the following page, we represent potential LIRR schedules of the near future, without the federal help Long Islanders badly need. While these schedules look frightening and dramatic, there are well within the realm of possibilities based upon information released by the MTA, statements of MTA Chairman Patrick Foye, and cuts that were made during earlier, less severe, fiscal crises.

