



2 Broadway, 16th Floor, New York, NY 10004  
1 West Street, Mineola, NY 11501  
(212) 878-7087 [mail@pcac.org](mailto:mail@pcac.org)

MARK J. EPSTEIN CHAIR  
GERARD P. BRINGMANN VICE CHAIR

NASSAU COUNTY MICHAEL GODINO  
RAYMOND PAGANO • BRYAN PERANZO  
LARRY RUBINSTEIN

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BRADLEY BRASHEARS PLANNING MANAGER  
SHEILA BINESH TRANSPORTATION PLANNER  
KARYL BERGER CAFIERO RESEARCH ASSOCIATE  
DEBORAH MORRISON ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

## LIRRCC Testimony Presented to NY State Senate Hearing on the Long Island Rail Road and New York's Transit Systems March 1, 2019

Good afternoon, my name is Mark Epstein and I am the Chair of the Long Island Rail Road Commuter Council. Created by the state legislature in 1981, the LIRRCC is the voice of Nassau, Suffolk, Queens and Brooklyn LIRR riders.

I come before you today to speak on behalf of those beleaguered riders. All we are asking for is a safe, affordable and reliable way to get where we are going. Unfortunately, significant underfunding and disinvestment have left the system – and the riders – in a precarious position. The MTA Board passed fare increases this week, hitting LIRR rider wallets especially hard, with increases in both our monthly fare and the MetroCards, which most of us also need – not to mention the additional cost of parking fees. I come here hat in hand to plead with you to find new and sustainable funding sources and save riders from bearing the brunt of years of disinvestment, combined with bureaucratic bloat.

As riders and rider representatives, we support the plans put forth by the current Presidents of the MTA Operating Agencies, including *Long Island Rail Road Forward*. It is critical that funding be identified to modernize signals, upgrade infrastructure and improve safety by increasing inspections across the systems. These improvements are not a wish list for riders, but are fundamental needs to ensure the railroad's viability.

These investments work, and we are already seeing improvements from projects like Double Track – in fact, I see them on my commute. The upgraded signaling system is more reliable, and the additional track allows trains to keep moving during an unplanned incident. Unfortunately, incidents like the fatal crash on Tuesday are an example of what can cause delays, and we mourn the loss of life. Eliminating LIRR grade crossings, as is currently being done as part of the Third Track project, increases the safety of drivers and the riding public and should be prioritized, fully funded and expedited. Positive Train Control is another safety feature, and at the same time we support its installation and implementation, it comes as an unfunded federal mandate. Clearly, we want the safest railroad possible, but additional requirements should come with additional funds.

To ensure that the needs of the riders are heard when priorities are being set, we hereby renew our request that the three rider representatives who sit on the MTA Board be given a vote. Currently, each of the three commuter councils that make up the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee – the LIRR and Metro North Commuter Councils and NYC Transit Riders Council – have a State Senate-confirmed representative on the Board. However, we have no right to a vote. We can sit at the table but not eat. To regain the riders' faith that the MTA Board hears them, give us – their legislatively-mandated representatives – a vote.



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Also, we all know AMTRAK owns and controls Penn Station and that the LIRR is the biggest user of Penn Station, which makes its users the largest stakeholder without any input. Although it is a Federal Agency, we are asking the State Senate to support our continued call for a LIRR commuter to be appointed to the Amtrak Board.

We also ask for a seat at the Regional Transit Committee, if enacted, which was proposed by the Governor earlier this week as part of his ten-point restructuring announcement with Mayor de Blasio. We share your concerns about the exclusion of representation from Long Island and the lower Hudson Valley, and appreciate the concerns you voiced about congestion pricing. At the same time we recognize the dire need for the \$15 billion it is expected to raise, Long Islanders need assurances that funds will come to the LIRR. We continue to urge the MTA to tell us what improvements we can expect to see. We do agree with and have sought for years “lockbox” assurances to ensure these and other revenues and funds set aside for capital projects are not diverted to pay for other operating expenses.

We believe that having strong, full time and independent leadership at the MTA is the best first step to re-instilling confidence in the agency. We are hopeful that a new Chair will be appointed soon who will help guide the restructuring that is being considered and already underway. However, we don't think any restructuring has to fit into an arbitrary June deadline and ask for a longer, multi-stepped approach, leading to a well thought out proposal with input from stakeholders.

They say that desperate times call for desperate measures. These are desperate times and now's the time to look at every possible revenue source. The LIRR and MTA as a whole need to do a better job of capturing all the value that proximity to transit adds. Agreements with developers and better use of LIRR-owned land could net significant sums for the agency. Mechanisms already exist for these types of agreements; they should be expanded.

At the same time, debt service is through the roof. Borrowing money that is not backed by income takes a huge chunk out of the MTA's operating budget – and the debt is expected to grow up to \$3 billion over the next two-to-three years. The next capital plan must address the MTA debt issue and start figuring out ways to ratchet debt DOWN.

It is clear that the MTA must do its part to regain the trust of the legislature, and the faith of the riders it serves. The New York region is built around a robust transit system. It's critical that it remain the driver that supports our growth, vitality, and identity. LIRR riders are doing their part, and despite the problems, ridership is up. We need the State and the MTA to do their part and help riders so we can continue to use the LIRR now, and into the future.

Thank you.