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Broad Coalition Calls on MTA to Expand Commuter Rail Discount Program with Release of Freedom Ticket Phase II: Now, More Than Ever!

PCAC's Proposal Builds on Successful Atlantic Ticket Pilot Program

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(October 13, 2021) Woodside, NY: Expanding commuter rail discounts throughout New York City and adding free transfers to subways and buses would offer tens of thousands of riders more affordable and equitable transit options and shorter travel times, while filling empty seats with paying customers on the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North Railroad, aiding in the region's and MTA's recovery. Further expansion through off-peak and reverse peak discounts would support inter- and intra-county travel on Long Island and into the Hudson Valley, further boosting ridership and supporting local economies. These are key findings of a new report released by the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA (PCAC), entitled "*Freedom Ticket Phase II: Now, More Than Ever!*"

Freedom Ticket's goals are to improve affordability and offer more equitable transit service, increase ridership on the railroads with new and returning commuters, and help the MTA meet its objective of getting riders back on board – thus bolstering its bottom line.

The report ushers in the next phase of the successful Atlantic Ticket reduced fare pilot program, which increased revenue at eligible stations by 45% between 2016 and 2019, and which came to fruition based on a recommendation from the New York City Transit Riders Council (NYCTRC) and the support of a host of elected officials. Many of the LIRR and Metro-North stations within New York City are in neighborhoods far from subways, requiring long bus-to-subway trips. With Atlantic Ticket, some riders saw their commutes reduced by more than an hour, each way.

Recommendations:

Phase I:

- Improve the Atlantic Ticket Pilot Program;
- Expand Freedom Ticket to All LIRR and MNR City Stations with Transfers to NYC Transit Subways and Buses;
- Create a *Freedom Ticket Task Force* to oversee a thorough fare restructuring study to help provide timely recommendations; make ridership and revenue data public; identify funding opportunities; and provide quarterly reports to the MTA Board.

Phase II:

- Implement Off-Peak & Reverse Peak Suburban Discount Pilot Programs;
- Make Phase I Pilot Programs Permanent and Establish Benchmarks for Phase II Permanence.

Noting that economic hardships for many riders caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the number of empty seats on both the railroads offer a unique opportunity for the MTA to help guide its own recovery and provide more equitable transit options, the PCAC recommends phased implementation of discounted rail fares – first within, and then outside, city limits. It also includes a series of improvements to the Atlantic Ticket to improve purchasing options and marketing strategies that would carry over to all the recommendations. PCAC also suggests repurposing funds from the Outer Borough Transportation Account to offer more significant discounts to riders and include transfers to subways and buses, and to support Phase I roll-out.

In advance of issuing its report, PCAC staff analyzed seat capacity on the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North, beginning in 2020 and continuing throughout the pandemic. Analysis showed that pre-pandemic, excess capacity existed during off-peak hours. Once the pandemic hit, excess capacity became available at all times of the day; ongoing review continues to prove that to be true. While commuter rail ridership numbers are breaking pandemic records daily, they are still less than half of pre-pandemic levels. And though riders are returning to the system faster than the forecasts by McKinsey & Company, ridership is still expected to reach just 80-90% of pre-pandemic levels by 2024.

Expansion projects like East Side Access, LIRR's Third Track, and Penn Station Access will provide even more available capacity and flexibility.

"The commuter railroads can be the backbone of regional recovery efforts," said **Gerard Bringmann, chair of PCAC and the LIRR Commuter Council, and MTA Board Member**. "This is a great opportunity for the MTA to take a proactive approach in reinventing the way it provides and charges for service in a way that benefit commuters and its own fiscal interests. We are asking the MTA to expand discounted LIRR and Metro-North fares with transit transfers in the city now, and to offer suburban commuters alternate ticket options – including discounted 20 trip tickets – while the results of the pilot program are being analyzed, in advance of Phase II expansion. Getting more paying riders onboard the railroads is a win-win all around."

NY State Senator Leroy Comrie said, "There are two certain ways to increase ridership within the MTA's network—make the fares affordable and ensure that with one ticket, you can travel the whole system, rail to bus and back—from Montauk to Poughkeepsie, Port Jervis to St. Albans and everywhere in between. I wholeheartedly endorse the excellent work of the PCAC, thoughtfully and thoroughly expanding upon the successful Atlantic Ticket Pilot Program, with a series of additional steps that will begin to move our system to the level of ease, interconnectivity and travel equity that all of our MTA riders deserve. I urge the MTA Board to take up these proposals this Fall so they can be implemented for the benefit of our commuters and our communities."

"The success of the Atlantic Ticket program shows that riders will take the trains that are often much closer to home once they are brought within financial reach. It's a no-brainer to expand this to the rest of the city LIRR stations and include Metro-North. It will help reduce long travel times and provide a more equitable regional fare structure, allowing the MTA to attract commuters back, bring in new riders, and better accommodate regional essential workers," said **Andrew Albert, chair of the NYC Transit Riders Council, MTA Board Member** and architect of the original Freedom Ticket-turned-Atlantic Ticket proposal.

"I've been proud to champion the Freedom Ticket since 2016, recognizing its potential to revolutionize the commutes of thousands of public transit users. The MTA must build on its success in the Atlantic Branch and take steps to strengthen the program by improving outreach and marketing as well as expanding the program to all LIRR and MNR stations within NYC to ensure it is reaching those who need it most. At a time when regional transit ridership is still recovering from its nadir during the height of the pandemic, we must use our existing infrastructure in innovative ways to encourage riders to return to the system," said **Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams**.

"Our public transit system is one of New York City's greatest assets, and increasing ridership in an affordable and efficient way for commuters will play a crucial role in our recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic," said **Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr.** "Freedom Ticket Phase II will be a step in the right direction towards ensuring that Bronxites and all New Yorkers that have faced economic hardships due to the pandemic, or live in areas with less transit options and far commutes, will have fiscal incentive to take public transit instead of driving."

"This is the right time for the MTA to move forward with bold efforts to get riders back on board. Freedom Ticket Phase II will help ensure that riders in areas with the longest commutes and fewest options have access to transit – especially on the LIRR and Metro-North, which for many are financially inaccessible. It will also give drivers good alternatives for getting out of their cars in advance of congestion pricing," said **Randy Glucksman, chair of the Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council and MTA Board Member**.

NY State Senator John Liu said, "The MTA's long-standing position that there isn't sufficient capacity on the commuter rails to accommodate more NYC riders is fully debunked by this eye-opening report from the PCAC, which lays out the practicality of expanding rail access to NYC residents. The MTA has a sordid history of rejecting ideas on the basis of cost-impact only to be proven wrong when revenue increases are actually realized – notable examples being the Atlantic Ticket, MetroCard discounts, and the elimination of the two-fare (bus-to-subway) zones. It's time for the MTA to get its head out of the sand and adopt these thoughtful and valuable recommendations. Try it, MTA, you might like it!"

"By expanding the Commuter Rail Discount Program, the MTA has an opportunity to build an equitable transit system and drastically reduce travel time for thousands in need of shorter and more affordable commutes to work," said **NY State Senator Alessandra Biaggi**. "The implementation of the Freedom Ticket Phase Two will connect hundreds of thousands of essential workers unable to telecommute with affordable and reliable public transit options. I urge the MTA to implement the PCAC's thoughtful and detailed proposal that will benefit New Yorkers in every corner of the city."

"Though New York City is famous for its subways, eastern Queens and similar areas across the city have no access to the subway system. But we have access to the railroad, so commuter rail discounts would go a long way toward transit equity, creating affordable access to and from areas that are otherwise transit deserts," said **City Council Member Barry S. Grodenchik**. "Without laying a single track or spending a dollar on new construction, we can provide mass transit to more New Yorkers; we can help fill trains whose ridership has been decimated by the pandemic; and we can increase the use of mass transit at a time when the devastating impacts of climate change make plain that public transportation is an essential component of reducing carbon emissions."

"The overwhelming success of the Atlantic Ticket Pilot showed us what we already knew - that reducing the barrier to entry for commuters greatly benefits working people and also increases revenue for commuter rail. As ridership remains at a record low, expanding access through Freedom Ticket expansion is a no-brainer. Not only are we capturing lost dollars, but we are also reducing commutes by hours and freeing up time and money that can be reinvested in families and local communities," said **City Council Member I. Daneek Miller**.

Assemblymember Jeffrey Dinowitz said, "The best way to get people on to mass transit is by making it a clearly superior option to driving, and expanded access to Metro-North service is a critical step towards that goal for many parts of my district in the north and northwest Bronx. In 2019, the MTA agreed to offer discounted Metro-North fares for intra-borough commutes. While we are still waiting for that program to begin, Freedom Ticket is an excellent proposal that would undoubtedly increase mass transit use amongst outer borough residents like my constituents."

"Many of my Bronx constituents rely on both the MTA and Metro-North to commute to their respective workplace. Recent economic hardships have caused an increased burden on these hard-working individuals. Freedom Ticket Phase II will help address these issues and ensure that my fellow Bronxites have the ability to easily access public transportation," said **Assemblymember Kenny Burgos**.

"Commuter rail in the New York City metropolitan area has changed little since its origin, providing limited service at a premium price for affluent workers who live in the suburbs and work in the central business district. This is an antiquated business and operations model that no longer reflects modern working and commuting patterns," said **Liam Blank, Policy and Communications Manager for Tri-State Transportation Campaign**. "The Freedom Ticket proposal moves us closer to unlocking a world-class regional rail system with equitable fares and more frequent, all-day service. This is the course we must follow to cut greenhouse gas emissions, expand access to critical services and opportunities for thousands of New Yorkers, and stimulate transit-oriented development."

"New York needs to significantly reduce transportation emissions, the largest sources of emissions in the state, which means creating accessible and reliable public transit. The New York League of Conservation Voters supports expanding commuter rail discounts for the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North, which will make our public transit more affordable and equitable for New Yorkers. We need to reduce our reliance on cars by providing affordable options. In addition to implementing congestion pricing, these programs will help us significantly reduce transportation pollution in New York City," said **Julie Tighe, President of the New York League of Conservation Voters**.

"Our research shows that high fares for LIRR and Metro-North are a significant barrier to opportunity for New York City residents. For hundreds of thousands of people in the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn, the number of jobs reachable by transit would nearly double if they could afford to ride these trains," said **David Bragdon, Executive Director, TransitCenter**. "These New Yorkers need Freedom Ticket to fully access their city, and the railroads need a program like Freedom Ticket to get riders back on board."

"Affordable public transit is essential to New York's equitable recovery. There's so much we can do to leverage existing infrastructure and better connect our neighborhoods by modernizing fare

policy. Thank you to our partners at PCAC for this comprehensive vision. Governor Hochul and MTA leaders should take it to heart and seize the moment to bring our whole transit system within reach of all New Yorkers,” said **Danny Pearlstein, Communications Director for Riders Alliance**.

“We support expanding the Freedom Ticket because it would open up more transit options for disabled New Yorkers to travel within the city. Offering a single fare to connect via bus to MNR and LIRR stations within the city could help to reduce reliance on paratransit for those who live in accessible subway deserts. Wheelchair users deserve to have affordable and efficient modes of transportation within the city and the Freedom Ticket would be a huge boost to that effort,” said **Jessica Murray, Lead Organizer, Rise and Resist Elevator Action Group**.

“We have long been proponents of expanding the Freedom Ticket, and it’s an idea that is universally popular with elected officials and candidates at the city and state levels. Building on the success of the Atlantic Ticket pilot will shorten commutes, increase equitable access to the transit system, and raise critical revenue for the MTA. It’s a win-win-win, and we urge the complete and speedy adoption of the PCAC’s recommendations,” said **Eric McClure, Executive Director, StreetsPAC**.