

MTA PUBLIC HEARING JANUARY 14, 2009
TESTIMONY OF COUNCIL MEMBER GALE A. BREWER

I am Gale A. Brewer and I represent residents of the Upper West Side and Clinton neighborhoods in the City Council. I appreciate the briefings that the MTA staff has given to Members of the Council, that Dick Ravitch has given to us, and I note that all members of the MTA Board and staff traveled by railroad – public transportation - to Albany to advocate for more funding from the Legislature. I know that you used public transportation because I was on the same train, on my way to a meeting of the Governor’s Broadband Commission.

The financial pressure on the Metropolitan Transportation Authority is unprecedented, but the MTA’s proposed response is short- sighted and counter-productive. Not only is it profoundly unfair to the ridership upon which the MTA relies, but the idea of dramatic fare increases and simultaneous massive service cuts will only worsen the MTA’s short-term finances, and also harm the loyal customer base that will be key to financial stability in the future.

Those men and women in my district who rely most completely on public transportation are working and middle-class and senior citizens, and they are also the populations most strongly challenged by the current economic crisis.

Along 10th Avenue, which turns into Amsterdam Avenue, there are thousands of residents, many of whom live in New York City Housing Authority developments, or in large complexes such as Manhattan Plaza or Clinton Towers, and they rely on the M11 bus to go to the only remaining hospital in the Clinton/lower West Side community, Roosevelt Hospital. In addition, the city is in the process of rezoning or has rezoned on these far west side avenues, and many more large residential and commercial buildings have been or are being constructed. The M11 bus, already plagued by unbearable delays and unpredictability, is slated to suffer a 25% decrease in service. At the same time, all of the 8th Avenue subway lines could suffer similar cuts. I think it is interesting that the newer private buildings, such as the Helena on West 57th Street, and the Ogilvy, are now providing private shuttle service to and from the subway, adding up to 46 trips per day per building. If there was coordinated planning and good bus service in these areas, the MTA would be obtaining revenue from new residents and workers. People who live west of the 8th Avenue subway depend on our buses; we cannot live with reduced service and we definitely cannot live without weekend or overnight service.

One of my other concerns is the elimination of overnight service for the Manhattan cross-town buses, and the elimination of cross-town M104 service east of Times Square. The M104 affects over 7,000 daily riders on weekdays, and over 5600 riders on the weekends. Many of these riders take the M104 to and from work on the east side of Manhattan, and would now have to change to either the 7, S or M42 buses, making each of these REALLY crowded. Don’t make these service reductions.

It is one of the greatest injustices of the MTA's plan that it places the burden of the Authority's own profligacy and poor financial management on the shoulders of its most vulnerable riders. Indeed, it is an unstated premise of the MTA that those who can least afford these changes are intended to bear their greatest burden. And an overlooked aspect of the current cutbacks is that the MTA has made no provision or plan to restore its service cuts. Indeed, the MTA will not even assure customers or the city that it ever intends to return to being a full-service system, or that it will provide mass transit at a reasonable price in the future.

Let me emphasize that I also agree with those who assert that some of the MTA's difficulties are not of its own making, and that a realistic, stable, long-term funding stream for public transportation must be found through state and local legislatures, and through a cooperative, regional approach to innovation, smart systems, and planning.

Commuters into the urban core have been the lifeblood of New York's economy since the late 19th century boom in ferry services. Today's subways and buses are the descendants of that system, and it is not simply a bad but also a preposterous idea that the MTA should decide to choke off that lifeblood by closing service booths, removing station customer assistants, drastically reducing off-peak running schedules, eliminating bus and subway services, and imposing onerous, unreasonable fares and tolls on riders and access-a-ride users. Self-destruction of services will inevitably usher in further declines in the system, and only hasten a return to the dark days of the 1960s and 1970s, whose catastrophic lessons I know that the current MTA leaders have not forgotten, including the billions in taxes and fees spent to restore the system from collapse. Surely that massive undertaking is not now to be sacrificed to short-term budget pressures, and by dismantling the gains of the past forty years, including the confidence, support, and loyalty of the riding public.

Public interest groups such as the Straphanger's Campaign, Transportation Alternatives, and Governor Paterson's Ravitch Commission have made a number of reasonable suggestions about maintaining service, increasing efficiency, and spreading the burden to all those who benefit from the city's economic prosperity, including its public transportation system. What is called for now is not a surrender to short-sighted thinking about self-limiting our potential, but both long and short term creative solutions made in cooperation among all concerned parties, including a vital plan for the MTA's long-term financial stability.

One key, and controversial, proposal of the Ravitch Commission is to collect vehicle tolls on the Harlem and East River Bridges. This revenue would provide critical capital funds for bridge maintenance and investment in more efficient mass transit, including an expected increase in ridership from drivers who would choose such mass transit over tolls. But economic fairness and political realism require that a controversial and difficult step like East River vehicle tolls must be accompanied by an unprecedented expansion in cost-competitive, high speed bus service from the outer boroughs into the city's core.

Needless to say, implementing the tolls is a political challenge. Could the amounts charged be based on the time of travel during the day or night? Are there other ideas to make this idea more palatable?

And any expansion of bus service cannot be simply that of additional current levels and types of service, but will require the implementation of widespread, easily accessible and frequent bus rapid transit (BRT), along with new infrastructure to ease transfers and connections to other system components. As my 2007 comprehensive policy study on BRT has shown, if new costs are to be imposed on citizens and users, then there must be a direct gain for them in services, and especially in access, comfort, speed, frequency, and reliability; in other words, taxes on users must result in the increased production of capital through improved services in the city and region, and we must fund the enhancement and maintenance of the existing infrastructure to grow that capital. As my study also showed, these gains are achievable now with current technology. By the way, what is the status of the smartcard?

The most important, and perhaps preferable, permanent step in addressing the MTA financial crisis would be authorization of a “regional mobility tax.” This tax, imposing a burden of only one-third of one percent of annual wages paid by *employers* and the *self-employed* would generate \$1.5 billion annually. Note that this amount would offset the shortfall requiring service cuts and fare hikes proposed by the MTA in its current budget. Also note that funding a “mobility tax” of this kind employs the principle of small levies on large populations to achieve economies of scale far greater than those produced by direct fare and toll increases, especially since it is well-documented that unreasonable fee increases reduce the number of mass transit users.

By having the wisdom and political and economic foresight to implement prudent, careful measures and long-term, broad-based efficiencies in funding and system design, we can meet today’s financial crisis, as well as the long-term challenges of 21st Century transportation policy in city and region. It is up to us to move either into the future with new ideas, or backward into the decline and self-destructive ideas of the past. The current ideas proposed by the MTA take the old way. I strongly encourage a rejection of that course as neither necessary nor prudent.

However, with this crisis, new ideas are emerging at the MTA. How can the Ravitch report in part or completely be implemented? How will a national infrastructure infusion of dollars be used? The subway to bus transfer program was brilliant and produced millions more riders; what is a newer and creative version of this transfer program? What is involved to use technology in a meaningful way? Should we raise the fare a small amount and at the same time provide equal or more service?

The notion that we have no choice but to go back suggests that the crisis in our transportation infrastructure is in part financial, but also, and perhaps most critically, a shortfall of vision and leadership.