

Testimony of
Council Member Gale A. Brewer
New York City Council
before the
MTA Board of Directors
on
MTA Proposed Service Changes, Student Fares, and Crossing Charges
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My name is Gale Brewer and I represent the residents of the Upper West Side and northern Clinton in the City Council. I am here to vehemently oppose the proposed MTA service cuts. These cuts will have a dramatic, negative impact on constituents in my district and on citizens throughout the city.

First, I am opposed to termination or reduction of nighttime crosstown Manhattan bus service on the M66, or any other crosstown buses, and on corridor service such as the M10. Currently, the M10 operates from Penn Station to Harlem, and I do not support discontinuing this service south of Columbus Circle. The M20 is not a viable substitute as the connection is never a seamless transition. Additionally, the subway line along the bus route is not a substitute method of travel for many of my constituents who ride only the bus. These reductions will place undue hardship on workers, families, and especially seniors who rely on these lines for travel to jobs, medical appointments, and cultural events. Both lines are major providers of service to Lincoln Center and Broadway theaters, especially before and after evening events, and to a revitalized Columbus Circle.

Needless to say, I am also opposed to cuts to Access-A-Ride which services the disabled and seniors. Without it, many people would not have been able to come to testify at the hearing tonight.

Second, I am appalled by the MTA's proposal to discontinue full fare student MetroCards. This decision would adversely affect the education of over 500,000 New York City students who use public transportation. Many students need full fare MetroCards, not only to attend school, but to enrich their careers through various after-school programs, athletics, and internships, which are crucial to their academic and personal growth.

In addition, changing the seated load on the subway system from 100 percent to 125 percent is a mistake. Subway cars are currently crowded and this increase will only force riders to travel in an increasingly uncomfortable and potentially dangerous situation. Over-crowded cars will force people into the path of subway car doorways, making the service unreliable, and causing additional service delays.

I understand that the MTA's current budget shortfall will have serious consequences. But the elderly and public school children, who can least afford to pay more for service, are not the constituencies

to punish with service reductions and cost increases. It appears that your proposal to end the student MetroCard program is not primarily a cost-saving measure but an effort to impose new charges on vulnerable constituencies. This "punish the vulnerable" approach is a shortsighted way to operate a publically funded transit system, and it runs counter to the MTA's own efforts to improve good will among its ridership. This is especially the case with young riders, who will have a lifetime to remember how they were treated.

There are options to avoid the budget and service reductions. For example, Speaker Quinn and transit advocates have suggested reallocating some federal capital funds to close the current operating deficit. While this step is not one to be taken in ordinary times, and it is not supported by the building/construction industry, it is unreasonable to transfer the Authority's budget problems to those least able to bear them. Also, it is reasonable to consider additional city and state funding for our transit system in this year's budget; several Council Members, including myself, brought this issue up as a priority at today's Finance hearing with Budget Director Mark Page. Extraordinary times require extraordinary measures and among these are flexibility in addressing the balance between long-term costs and short-term needs.

As another option to avoid the budget and service reductions, I support the tolling of East River bridges as a source of revenue for the MTA. Along with various organizations, and transportation experts such as Sam Schwartz, Gene Russianoff, and Robert Paaswell, I believe that tolls could provide a steady, reliable revenue stream for the MTA, but only if the tolls are dedicated to subsidize the city's buses and subways. Not only is relief needed for those who can least afford ever-increasing fares, but a larger, dedicated revenue stream is required to keep subway and bus infrastructure secure from the crippling disinvestment of the 1970's and 80's and to allow the MTA to face upcoming challenges to its infrastructure, such as an increased risk of flooding in the subway system due to stronger storms and higher water levels brought about by climate change. Tolling the East River bridges would provide a direly needed source of revenue that would prevent service cuts and protect crucial infrastructure.

In addition to revenue for the MTA, tolls on East River bridges offer several potentially wide-ranging benefits. These include: 1. A reduction in carbon emissions through lower traffic flow and fewer vehicles in Manhattan, whose residents currently suffer the city's worst congestion and highest levels of vehicle emissions; 2. An increase in public transportation use by drivers who give up their cars; 3. A benefit for those who must drive, by creating a more rational distribution of traffic flow and reduced congestion at the East River bridges as drivers no longer seek to avoid existing tolls. In addition, there should be toll relief for drivers at bridges such as the Whitestone, Throgs Neck, Triborough, and Verrazano, which do not contribute to the East River congestion problem. In other words, charge drivers at these bridges LESS (\$1-\$2 less) than what is currently charged, and eliminate the Cross Bay Bridge toll.

Any toll plan must be artfully designed before a single dollar is collected. Not only must the income be dedicated to benefit New York City Transit, we must also seek to avoid increasing the financial burden on small city businesses and on companies that use the cross-Manhattan corridors, such as Canal Street, to move their goods to market. The current economic downturn has severely impacted small businesses, which do not, of course, have the authority to tax the general public when revenue is

short of expenses. East River bridge tolls must be designed to impose the smallest possible cost on business, especially on firms whose customers reside throughout the boroughs. These businesses, which are the lifeblood of New York, can ill-afford a large daily increase in costs due to tolls. Special provision must be made for them, either in the form of direct subsidies, a sliding rate scale, "monthly pass" approach, year-end reimbursement, tax offset, or other mechanism to reduce the cost of tolls.

I believe that the emphasis in creating East River bridge tolls should be to reduce optional private vehicle traffic and to encourage these drivers to use public transportation. Day-night differentials should be in place, perhaps allowing free access after 6pm for vehicles entering Manhattan for a "night out," and placing the burden on daily commuters who form the bulk of car traffic into the Manhattan core. Perhaps the cost of tolls should be set to the benchmark fare for buses and subways.

Finally, to encourage a transition from car to transit, income from East River tolls should be dedicated to expanded Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service from the outer boroughs. A rapid, affordable, well-planned BRT system is an ideal alternative for car users who now avoid the overcrowded subways, and the imposition of tolls offers a real opportunity to entice riders out of their cars- if the alternatives are attractive, comfortable, fast, and cost-effective.

BRT may already be on the horizon for four out of five boroughs, but my point is that with any increase in revenue, improved transit service must be implemented to really get people to seek an alternative to the car. People need to know that the transit service is reliable, even better than it is now. Along those lines, subway stations must be clean, safe and hospitable. I also support retaining the station agents at their fixed posts in the booths, where New Yorkers, seniors and tourists can find them. I personally have been in stations with no personnel, and I have helped seniors navigate a non-functioning MetroCard; they cannot go back up the stairs, across the street, down more stairs, find an agent, and return to the original platform. I let them through the gate with my MetroCard.

Getting the MTA and especially New York City Transit on the right track is a formidable task, and I encourage you in your efforts to rationalize the system, improve service, and put the Authority back on a sound financial footing. We will not always agree on the solutions, especially in the area of service cuts and layoffs, because these steps will only worsen the system, lower the city's quality of life, and drive away customers. But we are all willing to work with you to find a practical and amicable solution to the challenges ahead and to help enable the MTA to continue providing traditional and improved levels of service to the millions who depend on it.