



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

**BOROUGH PRESIDENT GALE A. BREWER
TESTIMONY TO THE MTA REINVENTION COMMISSION
PUBLIC HEARINGS
JULY 16, 2014**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'd also like to thank Governor Cuomo for calling for the creation of the MTA Transportation Reinvention Commission. By bringing transportation advocates, public officials, and City residents into a dialogue on the current state of the MTA, the commission is providing an important opportunity to think creatively about long-term solutions to some of the system's challenges.

New York's subway system—by far the largest on the continent—has a daily ridership of 5.5 million. Los Angeles would need for its entire population of 3.8 million to ride our subway system 1.5 times each day to achieve this figure. The MTA bus system, too, with its 5,700-vehicle fleet, is the largest in the nation. Such an extensive system is bound to encounter difficulties, particularly as ridership continues to grow. With smart planning and an eye toward long-term solutions, however, we can ensure that our transportation system continues to meet the needs of a major world city.

I'll now turn to several areas I hope the commission considers over the next few months.

Resiliency

The most pressing transportation concern is ensuring that our public transit system is prepared to operate in a climate that is warming and creating increasingly more threatening environmental conditions. It is no secret that our transportation system is vulnerable. This was made spectacularly clear in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, which in 2012 caused \$5 billion in damage to the MTA system, mostly through flooded subway tunnels. The MTA did an excellent job of getting the subway system back on track following that storm. As we enter the 2014 hurricane season, transportation officials acknowledge that the subway system is still not fully prepared to absorb the impact of a storm on par with Sandy.

I applaud transportation officials for the steps they have taken to make the system more resilient. Following Hurricane Sandy, for instance, the MTA built a two-mile wall of steel between the tracks and the water on the eastern side of the tracks on Brad Channel, an island in Jamaica Bay hit hard by Sandy, to protect against surges in water level. The MTA has also contracted with RSA Protective Technologies to design and provide removable coverings for 13 station stairwells in Lower Manhattan, another area particularly prone to surges.



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

There is still much more to be done, however, to protect our subway system from the next storm. The MTA acknowledges that, within Lower Manhattan alone, it has identified nearly 600 points, including stairways and ventilation grates, where floodwaters can enter subway stations. One project under consideration—the Resilient Tunnel Project, from the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate—could potentially protect subway tunnels system-wide. This project successfully tested a giant inflatable plug that can be filled with water or air in minutes to seal off tunnels before they flood. Since the question before us is not *if* but *when* another storm on the scale of Sandy hits our City, we need to be piloting innovative technologies such as the Resilient Tunnel Project to find the best system-wide solution for protecting our subways.

Funding

According to former City Comptroller John Liu’s Fiscal Year 2014 Annual Report, MTA debt has grown in all but one of the past 15 years. As of June 2013, the MTA had \$32.9 billion in debt, which is an increase of \$1.38 billion since June 30, 2012. If we are looking for ways to reinvent the MTA, we clearly need to identify methods to ensure that the authority is financially sound.

One proposal—“Move NY,” developed by engineering expert Sam Schwartz—would institute tolls on each of the four East River bridges into Manhattan’s Central Business District while decreasing tolls in less-congested parts of the region, such as those between the City’s outer boroughs. If implemented, this plan would raise an estimated \$1.26 billion annually and reduce the number of vehicles entering Manhattan’s Central Business District by 21%. The commission should consider looking into this plan or developing its own innovative plan that is equally aimed at increasing funding and easing transit in our City.

Accessibility

During my years in the City Council and now as Manhattan Borough President, I have learned from my constituents that navigating the City of New York with a mobility disability is no easy task. Our entire bus fleet is now wheelchair-accessible. And thanks to rules approved on April 30, 2014, by the Taxi and Limousine Commission, to which I delivered testimony in support of the plan, half of our taxi fleet will be wheelchair-accessible by 2020. These are both commendable developments that are improving transportation options for City residents and visitors who use wheelchairs.

Despite these achievements, however, only 110 of the City’s 421 subway stations currently meet standards set by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Moreover, only 19 further conversions are planned through the end of 2020, which means that New Yorkers and



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

City visitors who use wheelchairs will continue to have unequal access to our subway system. Of course, some subway stations are easier to convert than others, and the costs that accompany conversion can be significant. But any plan to “reinvent” the MTA must include finding the resources necessary to convert additional subway stations, giving the 90,000 New Yorkers who use wheelchairs greater access to our City’s extensive subway system.

Increased Interagency Coordination

This commission should also seek ways to foster better coordination and cooperation among all transit agencies across metropolitan New York. The East Side Access project is just one example of how better coordination among various agencies could have led to a better outcome. This project was originally conceived, in part, as a way to bring LIRR into Grand Central Station. But rather than working to devise a plan to bring LIRR onto existing tracks, the East Side Access project instead called for the creation of an entirely new terminal, 15 stories underneath Grand Central.

This decision increased the cost and pushed back the completion of this project significantly. East Side Access, originally projected to cost \$4.3 billion and be completed in 2009, is now estimated at \$10.8 billion with a completion date in 2023. Putting this new station so far beneath the surface of Grand Central also decreases much of the original purpose of this project—to speed crosstown travel times for LIRR users. Better cooperation among MTA authorities could have resulted in a less costly and less protracted solution to provide better crosstown service.

Additionally, on July 9 of this year, Council Member Garodnick and I announced the creation of the East Midtown Steering Committee. This committee will study the East Midtown area to identify its needs, including its transportation needs. This area is already a major transit hub, and its transportation needs will no doubt increase as plans to rezone the area for new commercial and residential developments move forward. We encourage all transit agencies to provide input into this Steering Committee process so that we can devise the most comprehensive and beneficial development plan possible.

Buses

The commission should also look at ways to improve the MTA’s bus system. While other major cities have created popular, user-friendly bus systems that are growing, New York City’s bus service is often slow and unreliable. Ridership is decreasing as a result. My office is looking into helping reverse this trend. At least part of the reason is competition from private buses companies, such as intercity and tourist buses, for curb space along bus lanes. We hope to work



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

with relevant City and State officials and companies to find better ways to operate and regulate private bus companies so that they don't unduly impede the efficiency along MTA bus routes.

The introduction of Select Bus Service (SBS) is another great step toward improving bus service in our City. I hope to see additional routes implemented as soon as possible in Manhattan, particularly to help ease crosstown commute times. Several crosstown SBS routes are up and running, including those along 34th Street and another across 125th Street launched just this year. But as anyone who has ever taken the M50 across 49th Street—a route that won the “Pokey” award from the Straphangers Campaign and Transportation Alternatives for being the City's slowest—will tell you: traveling river to river by bus is still a trying experience in many parts of Manhattan. In addition to the routes under consideration, the MTA should consider expanding SBS to other crosstown routes in Manhattan.

Additionally, some SBS features can be implemented across the City's bus stops. For instance, SBS travelers pay their fares at bus-stop machines prior to boarding, with either coins or a MetroCard. Because the bus is not required to wait while each traveler pays his or her fare onboard, service is more prompt. The MTA should consider expanding this payment method to all buses to help speed up routes and ease the flow of traffic.

Technology

Over the past decade or so, much of the City's transportation system has been outfitted with updated technology to make it more user-friendly. Probably the most noticeable development for subway riders are the new countdown clocks installed in many subway stations along the 1/2/3/4/5/6/L/S lines. These clocks alert riders to the next arriving train and are widely popular among commuters. The MTA has stated that installation of these clocks in stations along the system's lettered lines, however, is unlikely in the near term, partly because these lines have older signal systems. But if we are here today to “reinvent” the MTA, finding the resources and technology to outfit the entire subway system with these clocks should be a priority.

We shouldn't stop there, however. The MTA has also resisted calls to install similar clocks in the City's bus shelters. Instead, it offers a text-based system for bus riders, which allows people to text a number from their cellphones to determine the arrival time of the next bus. Although a helpful resource for many, this feature ignores those riders, particularly senior citizens, who don't own cell phones. I know that many on the City Council—including Manhattan Council members Chin, Garodnick, Johnson, and Kallos—recently allocated large portions of their discretionary funds to bring countdown clocks to over 100 new bus stops across the City. While I applaud these Council members for not waiting for the MTA to act, bus riders shouldn't have to rely on Council members' discretionary funds for these types of projects.



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

This technology could also help increase the interoperability of all MTA modes of transport. All too often, our City's subways and buses operate as separate systems. But many users rely on both modes of transport to travel to and from work, get to doctors' appointments, or visit family and friends elsewhere in the City. Installing widely visible countdown clocks throughout the subway system and at bus shelters would allow for increased interoperability between these modes of transport. Each of these clocks could potentially list connection times between bus and subway systems or notify users of service outages through the MTA system. This system could perhaps one day be further expanded to the City's ferries and railroad networks.

Lastly, any re-envisioning of our transit system must look beyond the MetroCard as the source of payment. Our City is far beyond many others—including Chicago and Philadelphia—that have begun to use a cardless, contactless transit system. I applaud the recent introduction of the \$1 surcharge on new MetroCards, which I understand is helping cut down on the number of cards produced. But the cards are outdated, still costly, and easy to tamper with to evade fares. I understand that the MTA is developing plans to eventually replace the MetroCard, potentially by as soon as 2020, with contactless fare payment technology. I would urge the commission to develop recommendations for helping the MTA make this system a reality as soon as possible.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to working with members of this commission to help implement these and other innovative ideas to improve the transportation infrastructure in our City.