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**BOROUGH PRESIDENT GALE A. BREWER
TESTIMONY TO THE NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY
COMMITTEE ON CORPORATIONS, AUTHORITIES
AND COMMISSIONS ON THE MTA'S 2015-2019
CAPITAL PLAN
August 7, 2014**

Thank you Chair Brennan, and the members of the Committee on Corporations, Authorities, and Commissions for this opportunity to help inform the MTA's 2015-2019 capital plan.

The NYC subway system has a daily ridership of 5.5 million, one and half times greater than the population of Los Angeles, and the MTA bus system is the nation's largest with 5700 vehicles. And the city and region will continue to grow over the next several decades, requiring continuous investment in our transportation infrastructure. As you know, the MTA has several large projects underway to address these current and future needs, including East Side Access and the Second Avenue and #7 subway line extensions. They are on a scale not seen in NY for a generation, and each has suffered major setbacks. We need to learn from them if we are to reduce costs and speed completion of these and future projects.

In April I met with Michael Horodniceanu, President of MTA Capital Construction, and Richard Mulieri, Senior Director of Government and Community Affairs, about delays, engineering problems, and cost overruns that have plagued their capital projects in Manhattan. Today I'd like to share two main, general take-aways:

First, the MTA needs to plan a lot smarter. These types of infrastructure projects are enormously expensive, and even small oversights in planning translate into fixes costing millions and years of delay. One way to reduce costs is to better anticipate future work on existing systems like the #7 and 2nd Avenue subway lines. For example, tunnel and station construction costs are reduced by three-quarters when the tunneling machinery and other major equipment is already in place underground. For projects like the Second Avenue subway that will need to be extended further downtown, Mr. Horodniceanu's view strongly suggests that the MTA consider mothballing major tunneling components in place rather than starting again from scratch. The #7 line extension, which is now nearing completion but without its planned Tenth Avenue station due to cost overruns, would have presumably benefited from this approach; if ever completed, the MTA will have to start station tunneling completely from scratch, presumably at a much higher than original cost. At this scale, it does not pay to plan piecemeal or retroactively.



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East Side Access, one of the largest such projects in the nation's history, also illustrates how smarter planning would have yielded major savings. Designed to bring the LIRR into Grand Central Station, it was initiated knowing that the LIRR track gauge differed from that of Metro North and the subway system, preventing interoperability. Instead, an entirely new terminus had to be created 15 stories below Grand Central, exponentially increasing the 4.3 billion cost and 2009 completion date to (an estimated) 10.8 billion and 2023. In addition, placing the new terminus so far beneath Grand Central will create long delays and inconvenience in transferring to Metro North, the subway, and surface transportation. Smarter planning, better cooperation among agencies, and more realistic engineering and cost estimates would have saved billions, gotten a better result, and in less time.

My second takeaway is that we need not only smarter engineering but that without it we cannot have more strategic and realistic financing. As you know, a July report by State Controller DiNapoli estimates that the MTA capital plan may be short \$12 billion, largely as the result of cost overruns like those cited above. If the MTA is to complete any of the major projects it has underway without additional financing problems, or to begin planning more realistically for future needs, we must ensure that the Authority is financially sound and fiscally prudent in its cost projections. Debt and borrowing can be structured many ways, but ultimately it is the public that pays through the issuance of more debt, by increasing fares and tolls beyond those scheduled for 2015 and 2017, or by increasing city and state contributions at least back to previous levels of support. Most importantly, we must be transparent about the fiscal implication of the projects that the MTA proposes to undertake, as well as the needs they intend to meet. As with errors in engineering, underestimated costs and new borrowing are far more expensive than prudent management at the outset. In this regard, the MTA should be expected to meet a higher standard of accountability and oversight in all current and future projects.

Another approach to projected overruns and shortfalls is to encourage the MTA, elected officials, and city and state transportation planners to think creatively about potential new revenue sources. One proposal by former city commissioner and engineering expert Sam Schwartz is called "Move NY." It revisits the plan to toll the city's four major East River bridges, while decreasing tolls on outer borough bridges and in other less congested parts of the region. If implemented, Schwartz estimates his plan could raise \$1.6 billion annually and reduce the number of vehicles entering the core of Manhattan by 21%. The Committee should give serious consideration to this plan, or use its outline to develop its own recommendations to increase revenue while easing congestion. One important aspect of a reduction in private vehicle entries to Manhattan is a potential shift to improved Bus Rapid Transit services, creating new revenues for the MTA.



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I'll next address resiliency, accessibility, buses, and technology priorities for the 2015-2019 MTA capital plan.

Resiliency

Planning for system resiliency is of utmost importance. The system's profound vulnerabilities were exposed by Sandy in 2012, with \$5 billion and counting in damage, primarily to the subway system. MTA did an excellent job of getting much of the system back on track quickly, but major repairs will continue for years. More urgently, as we enter the 2014 hurricane season the system is still highly vulnerable and little-better prepared to absorb a storm like Sandy.

I applaud some steps taken to date to harden MTA infrastructure, including the two-mile surge barrier along the Broad Channel trestle and causeway, and the contract with RSA Protective Technologies to design removable coverings for 13 subway station stairwells in lower Manhattan that are vulnerable to storm surges. However, the MTA has identified nearly 600 points, including stairwells and ventilation grates, where flood waters can enter the subway system just within lower Manhattan. I strongly urge the MTA to accelerate testing and implementation of the Resilient Tunnel Project, partnered with the Department of Homeland Security, in which entry points can be made water tight by deploying an inflatable plug filled with air or water. Since the question is not if but when the next Sandy-scale storm will strike, we need to get these and other protections on line now. If a comparable storm were to strike this fall, it is likely that most of the billions spent on infrastructure repair to date will have been wasted.

Accessibility

The roughly 90,000 city residents who use wheelchairs deserve equal access to the transportation system. Years of work on this issue have taught me how difficult it is to navigate the buses and subways, and to maintain a personal and work schedule, while using a wheelchair. Some major improvements have been made. The MTA should be lauded for making its bus fleet accessible, and thanks to new rules that I supported in the City Council, the city's Taxi and Limousine Commission now requires that half of the taxi fleet be wheelchair accessible by 2020.

Despite this progress, just 110 of 421 subway stations meet ADA standards and only 19 additional accessibility projects are planned through 2020, leaving tens of thousands of passengers without equal access for decades to come. I urge the MTA to prioritize accessibility in its 2015-2019 capital plan.

Buses



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We must 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, here in New York City, bus service is often slow and unreliable. Ridership is decreasing as a result. My office is looking into helping reverse this trend here in New York City. At least part of the reason is the need for MTA buses to compete with private buses companies, such as intercity and tourist buses, for curb space along bus lanes. We hope to work with relevant City and State officials companies to find ways to better operate and regulate these private bus companies so they don't unduly impeded the efficiency along MTA bus routes.

The introduction of Select Bus Service (SBS) is another great step towards improving bus service in our City. I hope to see additional routes implemented as soon as possible, particularly to help ease crosstown commute times in Manhattan. A couple SBS routes crosstown already exist, such as those along 34th street, and another, launched just this year, across 125th street. But as anyone who has ever taken the M50 bus crosstown on 49th street can tell you—a route which won the "Pokey" award from the Straphangers Campaign and Transportation Alternatives for being the City's slowest bus—traveling river to river in Manhattan via bus is still a trying experience in many parts of the City. In addition to the routes already under consideration, the MTA should consider expanding SBS to other crosstown routes in Manhattan.

Additionally, some of the features of the Select Bus Service can be implemented across the City's bus stops. For instance, travelers now pay for SBS fares at machines at bus stops prior to boarding, either with coins or with a MetroCard. This helps speed up bus service by not forcing the bus to wait at the stop while each individual traveler pays their fare onboard the bus. The MTA should consider expanding this method of payment to all buses, whether or not they run on Select Bus Service routes, to help speed up all routes and ease the flow of traffic.

Technology

Over the last decade "countdown clocks" along the 1/2/3/4/5/6/L/S subway lines have made the system much more user-friendly. Older signal systems is use along the city's lettered lines will slow further installations and make them more costly, but I strongly advocate for this popular and necessary improvement, and for signal upgrades and system-wide "countdown clocks" to be part of the 2015-2019 capital plan.

The MTA has so far resisted calls to install similar clocks at bus shelters. It prefers that riders use their schedule app or text from a cell phone to the next scheduled arrival time. Unfortunately, many bus riders are senior citizens for whom these innovations are not helpful. You may be aware that City Council members, including Chin, Garodnick, Johnson, and Kallos in Manhattan, have allocated a large part of their discretionary funds to bring "countdown



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clocks” to more than 100 bus stops. I applaud them, but transit riders should not have to rely on Council discretionary funds to obtain essential Capital improvements.

Installing “countdown clocks” throughout the subway and bus system would increase inter-operability. The clocks could display not only route information but connection times between buses and subways, notify users of service outages or delays, and include information about the LIRR and MetroNorth rail schedules and ferry operations.

Lastly, our transit system must look beyond the MetroCard as the source of payment. Our City is far beyond many others, including Chicago and Philadelphia, cities that have already 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 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 MTA to make this system a reality as soon as possible.

These recommendations reflect both strategic and operational needs recognized as essential by users, advocates, and transportation planners. I hope that they will help inform your oversight and due diligence of the MTA budget and strategic plans, and encourage an open discussion about the priorities of the millions of New Yorkers who rely on this system and pay for its services.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to working closely with the members of the Committee to improve the city’s transportation operations and infrastructure.