

Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council

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2001 LIRR REPORT CARD Results: Majority Of Riders Say Railroad Getting Better But Improvement Still Needed In Key Areas

The Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council (LIRRCC), the official voice of LIRR riders, today released the 2001 LIRR Report Card, the results of its fifteenth annual, independent rider survey. The report details the results of a survey of over 1,100 LIRR commuters who were asked to grade the railroad's performance in dozens of areas, including on-time performance, air conditioning, seat availability, cleanliness, scheduling, crew performance, and safety, and to rate several important possible capital projects and service improvements. The LIRRCC has undertaken the Report Card survey every year since 1987 to determine the issues of importance to LIRR riders necessitating the attention of the Council.

Riders gave the railroad an overall grade of C+, the same as last year when riders first began to notice significant improvements in railroad service. The results of the 2001 Report Card show riders to be more confident than ever that railroad service is improving. This year, more than a third of riders (34.5%) told the Council that service was on the upswing, the railroad's best showing in this area since 1994. Only 20.2 percent thought that service was getting worse. This marks a big change from previous years. For example, in 1999 only 20 percent of riders said that service was getting better while 30 percent thought it was getting worse. The picture is even clearer for diesel riders, the majority of whom told us that service is getting better, including an astounding 60 percent of riders on each of the Montauk, Oyster Bay, and Port Jefferson branches. This is likely due to a high level of satisfaction with the new bi-level fleet.

However, scores marginally declined for 18 out of the 48 performance indicators that the Council asks riders to grade every year and rose only in three categories. Categories with lower grades than 2000 include: morning train crews (B); evening train crews (B-); Penn Station waiting area cleanliness (B-); personal security onboard trains (B-); personal security at home stations (C+); evening on-time performance (C+); morning seat availability (C+); morning schedule adequacy (C+); evening schedule adequacy (C+); home station maintenance (C+); morning home station announcements (C); management performance (C); personal security in parking areas (C); home station ticket-selling hours (C); evening home station announcements (C); Jamaica Station restroom cleanliness (C-);

Flatbush Avenue waiting area cleanliness (C-); and Flatbush Avenue restroom cleanliness (D+).

Categories with grade increases over 2000 are: personal security at Penn Station (B); morning peak service (B-); personal security at Jamaica Station (C+); and evening peak service (C+).

The three highest grades were for morning and evening train crews (B and B- respectively), and perceived security at Penn Station (B-). Lowest grades went to the Flatbush Avenue waiting area (C-), Flatbush Avenue restrooms (D+), and onboard restrooms (D+).

Most grades, though, including fully half of the declined grades listed above, were still above average grades (i.e. C+ or better) and the declines were all modest. Moreover, some problems identified by riders as critical in previous years have abated. For example, for the first time since the mid-1990s, riders did not identify air-conditioning as one of the top-three areas needing to be improved (this year it fell to twelfth place).

This seems to indicate to the Council that for the most part riders continue to recognize a pattern of improvements begun last year under the administration of new LIRR President Ken Bauer. However, the declines in grade do indicate that the railroad still has much work to accomplish to fully win over the hearts of riders.

Riders told the Council the three areas in which improvements are most necessary are: seat availability; on-time performance; and parking. Riders were also asked to rank the most-important improvements from 2000 and still on-time performance and seat availability came out in the top two spots. Even more to the point, more than one-quarter of riders (28.2 %) told the Council they don't use the railroad station closest to their homes, primarily due to poor schedules, a lack of parking, and slow service.

Reasons for these problems are many. Rising ridership and a chronic car shortage continue to cause crowding and short trains, problems for which no easy solution exists until new M7 electric railcars come online. Congestion at Penn Station, used jointly by the LIRR, Amtrak, and New Jersey Transit, is critical, especially following the events of September 11, causing delays and limiting the ability of the railroad to provide additional service. This will continue until and unless the railroad's East Side Access connection to Grand Central Terminal opens, as is planned, at the end of this decade. Worse, because many parking facilities are owned by municipalities which generally wish to restrict parking to local residents. The railroad would expand lots and open them to all commuters.

Riders also identified what they thought were the most important capital improvements for LIRR riders. More than half of all riders said that fire and life-safety improvements in the Amtrak-owned East River Tunnels were a top priority, while almost half (46.7%) said that LIRR state-of-good-repair activities were a top priority. Meanwhile, almost half of

riders (48.6%) called the economic development project to build a new Amtrak terminal in the Farley post office building as being a low priority.

The Council recognizes that under President Bauer the railroad has gone out of its way to be responsive to customer input and has worked hard to improve service and riders' total railroad experience. The Council applauds these efforts. However, as the Council's 2001 results demonstrate, core problems remain and may be worsening. The railroad must do all in its power to deal with seat availability, parking, and on-time performance issues. This should include: ensuring that riders with free passes stand for paying commuters (as is required by State law); closely monitoring the construction and delivery of M7 cars to avoid delays; continuing to push for adequate federal funding for East Side Access; and working with municipalities and the State, if need be to get all parking lots opened to all commuters. Otherwise, the gains in customer satisfaction the railroad began to see in 2000 may evaporate.

Said Acting Council Chair Barbara Josepher, "We know there are no easy answers, but we hope that railroad management and the MTA will explore all possible solutions that these problems may require."

Detailed results may be found in the full report, which may be downloaded via the below link. For a hard copy, please [email](#) or call the Council directly at (212) 878-7087.

[DOWNLOAD THE REPORT](#) (PDF format).