

Long Island Rail Road Commuter's Council
Chair's Report
January 9, 2014

I want to start by wishing everyone a Happy New Year. We had a successful 2013 and a full agenda and new challenges for 2014. One of our main objectives in the coming year is to broaden our outreach and we will be doing this in several ways, including new times and places for meet the council events and the opening of our satellite office in Mineola. We'll discuss both of these efforts today.

The recent cold weather has led the LIRR to leave its waiting rooms open around the clock until tomorrow afternoon, and Newsday noted in its story about this decision that the LIRRCC was the first to call for extending waiting room hours. We've discussed this action on line and I think that we all agree that under the circumstances the 24 hour a day openings were the right thing to do. We also need to remember that our work on opening waiting rooms to provide a safe and climate-controlled space for riders is not complete. A number of station waiting areas are open for only limited hours. The LIRR's temporary policy change is a good opportunity to continue to press for waiting rooms to be open to all riders as the need them unless there is a compelling reason to close them.

Some of the service restorations that we have fought for since 2010 were put in place when new schedules took effect on November 11. Half hourly weekend service was returned to the Port Washington Branch and trains were added to the Main Line. We cannot forget that there is still service that needs to be restored, as well as new service needs that have been created over time, and we will continue to press for LIRR service improvements.

The Metro-North derailment on December 1 was a jolt to riders on the LIRR as well as Metro-North. As you know, we issued a statement expressing our concern for those affected by the derailment on the day it happened. In the next week we called upon the LIRR to communicate with its riders about the systems that LIRR trains use, the safety features in place and how they work. We also called for the LIRR to examine Metro-North's experience to make the Rail Road safer and to implement a confidential close call reporting system, as recommended by the Federal Railroad Administration. Today we will be receiving a briefing on the questions that we posed to the LIRR following the derailment.

Following our very public call for direct communication with Amtrak, on December 19 Ira and I met with Amtrak Chairman Anthony Coscia, Amtrak Senior Staff and MTA Chairman Tom Prendergast concerning LIRR rider issues that are related to the Rail Road's use of Amtrak's Penn Station, East River Tunnels, and tracks. In the meeting we also discussed Amtrak's plans for its Gateway project and how these plans might impact LIRR operations. Amtrak

would like our support for improvements that they wish to make in their infrastructure and Mr. Coscia said that Amtrak will provide the LIRRCC a briefing on these plans. We can discuss scheduling for this briefing, as well as a meeting between the LIRRCC and Mr. Prendergast, which the Chairman has offered us, in the business portion of our meeting. As a result of the meeting, we now have a direct channel to the Amtrak Chairman and the railroad's senior staff.

Unfortunately, we may be back to square one in our effort to have a Long Island representative appointed to the Amtrak Board of Directors. As you know, State Senator Charles Fuschillo unexpectedly announced his departure from elected office to head the Alzheimer's Foundation of America as its CEO. Having LIRR commuters represented on the Amtrak Board remains a priority for us, and I will be discussing next steps toward this goal with Senator Schumer's office. Further, Senator Fuschillo's departure and Senator Zeldin's decision to run for Congress may leave Long Island without adequate representation on the New York State Senate Transportation Committee. We will be reaching out to the Senate leadership to ensure that Long Island remains well represented on this important committee.

As we feared, the maximum pre-tax amount that transit commuters can set aside for travel to work fell from \$240 to \$130 a month on January 1. Senator Schumer's attempt to allow immediate consideration of extending the higher benefits in December failed when Senator Hatch of Utah objected. The effort to restore the benefit is now attached to a larger bill containing "extenders" for a wide variety of expired or expiring tax benefits that is to be considered in the first three months of the year. While the commuter benefit extension will likely be made retroactive, few commuters make the post-tax payroll deductions for transit that would be needed to claim the retroactive benefits. Members received the statement that we issued calling on Congress to swiftly restore the higher levels, and we signed on to a similar statement issued by Tri-State Transportation Campaign as well.

The budget and financial plan that was just approved by the MTA Board had some good news for riders. Instead of the recent pattern of actions designed to yield 7.5 percent increased fare revenues every two years, the financial plan projects a 2015 fare increase that increases fare yields by 4 percent. As you know, we have consistently stated that the 7.5 percent fare yield increases are an unacceptable burden on riders. Since the increases would not take effect until next year, it has not been adopted as part of the MTA operating budget, but this announcement is an encouraging step forward.

These lower fare increases are dependent on the MTA being able to achieve savings in a number of areas, including labor costs. On December 21, a Presidential Emergency Board recommended annual raises averaging 2.83 percent for represented LIRR employees, while the MTA's financial plans envision no raises without compensating savings. The MTA can reject the recommendation and request a second Presidential Emergency Board to review

the matter, but this makes an LIRR strike this summer more likely. Our role is to ensure that riders are protected in case of a job action. In our meeting today, we can discuss steps that the LIRRCC will take to press the LIRR and MTA to ensure that LIRR riders will have transportation in the event of a strike.

We recently received complaints from riders on several issues related to the construction of a new parking facility at the Wyandanch Station. We sent letters to Town of Babylon Supervisor Rich Schaffer and LIRR President Helena Williams raising the issues that riders had sent to us and asking for explanations of actions that each of them are taking to address these issues.