

Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council  
Chair's Report  
November 20, 2014

Last month I met with MTA Chairman and CEO Tom Prendergast to discuss MTA issues related to the LIRR and the state of the relationship between our Council and the LIRR and MTA. Obviously, the Chairman is very focused on a successful resolution of the MTA 2015-2019 Capital Program and understands that the MTA needs advocates to ensure that the MTA has the resources that it needs to maintain and improve the system.

There isn't much progress to report on the Amtrak front. We wrote a letter to Amtrak's Chairman asking for a briefing on the impacts of tunnel damage on LIRR service. The response that we received indicated that Amtrak is still in discussion with NJ Transit and the MTA on the implications of tunnel repair needs and that Amtrak's view is that our point of contact will be through the LIRR, which they will assist in preparing a briefing for us. Also, we're told that there is currently no movement in the nomination of a new Amtrak Board member.

The elections that just concluded have considerably reshaped the political landscape of Long Island, with several long time elected officials deciding not to run for reelection and others losing attempts to retain their seats or win higher office. We will have to touch base with these elected officials and build relationships with new officeholders and we can discuss how to do this in our meeting today.

We also have fare hearings on the horizon, with hearings in Queens and Melville on Wednesday December 3 and in Brooklyn on Thursday December 11. We can discuss our positions on the proposed fare increase under New Business.

On Monday, November 17 new schedules went into effect on the railroad. The most significant feature of these schedules is the restoration of weekend service on the West Hempstead Branch, which was approved by the MTA Board in July. This schedule change also includes modifications to accommodate track work on several branches, extra Thanksgiving holiday service, and a shift to the departure time of an early morning Long Beach train to better match demand from commuters who start work between 5:00 and 5:30 am.

Once again, we're working with Senator Schumer to highlight the push to pass legislation establishing parity between pre-tax benefit limits for commuter parking and transit. For many years Senator Schumer has been a consistent champion for equality between automobile commuters and transit riders with regard to pre-tax benefits, and this year he is working to pass legislation that would permanently establish parity between parking and transit benefits. This legislation would be a part of a large package of tax extenders to be taken up in

Congress' lame duck session in the next several months. I appeared with the Senator at an event at the Mineola train station on Veterans' Day, November 11, to highlight these issues. Thanks to Matt Kessler and Ray Pagano who joined me at this event.

As you know, may recall, the most recent extension of parity between parking and transit benefit limits expired on December 31, 2013. As a result of Congress' failure to extend parity, the amount that our commuters can set aside on a pre-tax basis for LIRR fares dropped from \$245 per month to \$130 per month. That created an instant increase of almost \$1,400 in a commuter's taxable income annually, as well as a corresponding increase in his or her employer's payroll taxes.

On November 14 the LIRR released the results of its annual customer satisfaction survey. The overall satisfaction numbers reported were equal to last year's figures and the highest of any MTA agency. However, within the results there are some year-to-year variation in responses to individual questions. We have requested and received more detailed data from the survey and will be taking a closer look at the results.

The LIRR has embarked on a new public safety campaign, entitled "Don't Shortcut Your Life," which focuses on the need for persons to cross railroad tracks only at designated grade crossings and in accordance with signals. Trespassing on LIRR rights of way is a continuing issue for the Rail Road, with a total of 35 trespassers struck by trains and 28 fatalities last year, up from 28 incidents and 18 fatalities in 2012. The campaign makes use of television and radio as well as online and print advertising to deliver the message that trespassing on train tracks is illegal as well as extremely dangerous and that one should cross tracks only at designated grade crossings when permitted. The LIRR will also deliver the message directly via public address announcements, electronic message boards, posters and social media.

Tomorrow I'm attending Long Island Future's Smart Growth Summit. This is an excellent opportunity to hear the transportation issues that are important to Long Island leaders. This year's Summit will feature presentations on new transit opportunities as well as several of the new town centers being created around LIRR stations. In addition, County Executives Bellone and Mangano will speak at the event.

Please mark your calendars for our final PCAC meeting of 2014, Thursday December 4 at noon in the 16<sup>th</sup> Floor conference room at 2 Broadway. We will be considering our annual budget, and our special guest for the meeting will be MTA Senior Director of Capital Programs Craig Stewart, who, together with his team will brief us on the current state of the MTA's 2015-2019 Capital Program and the way forward to approval.