

Long Island Rail Road Commuter's Council  
Chair's Report  
April 3, 2014

Even with warming temperatures, difficult conditions have continued to impact commuters on the LIRR. This year, we started off the year with delays due to a derailment of a freight train carrying stone near Brentwood and continued on with numerous weather-related delays and track, equipment, and signal problems. Riders sometimes receive multiple alerts when a situation is unchanged, but sometimes receive no alerts when there are significant delays. We've also noticed a growing disconnect between the explanations of a delay given through the alerts and through other channels, such as in-station announcements. We can discuss the issue and ways that alerts and other communication can be more effective in the business portion of our meeting today.

After the resignation of Charles Fuschillo from the State Senate, I contacted Senator Schumer's office to inquire about the open seat on the Amtrak Board and about what if any effect Mr. Fuschillo's resignation would have. I was told that the process of having Mr. Fuschillo nominated for the open Board seat will move forward and that his leaving the State Senate will not have an effect on the process.

We furnished a quote for Senator Schumer's press release on LIRR safety, which was included in several news reports, and I was quoted in a Newsday article last month supporting the Senator's call for the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) to investigate the safety of LIRR operations. This investigation would be similar to but less extensive than the FRA's "Operation Deep Dive" at Metro-North. The Newsday article pointed out a rise in the number of reported incidents on the Rail Road over the past ten years, although it noted that much of this increase was due to changes in reporting implemented after the August 2006 gap-related fatality at the Woodside station. I said that the complex nature of the LIRR and its specific safety challenges, as well as the increasing number of incidents warranted FRA attention.

We also supported Suffolk County's call for increased State funding for its bus operations, joining with other community and transportation advocates. The Suffolk County bus system is already an important connection to the LIRR for many riders and has the potential to increase in importance as a link to the Rail Road if it is provided with sufficient funding. Suffolk County is seeking an additional \$10 million in funding from the State. Unfortunately, this additional funding was not included in the State budget that was approved March 31.

Following the PCAC meeting where the LIRR labor negotiations were discussed, I was quoted in a Newsday article in which I called for the LIRRCC to be brought into the contingency planning process for a possible strike. I noted the importance of thinking outside the box and exploring innovative ways of ensuring

that workers who cannot work from home and must travel to or from New York City will be able to do so. Later in the meeting, we will discuss the current status of the LIRR's labor contracts and steps that we can take to protect the riders.

There is at least some movement on pre-tax commuter benefits, although the news isn't all encouraging. A package of tax extenders has been introduced in the Senate, and this package includes an increase in the pre-tax benefit for transit commuters from \$130 to \$250 per month, equal to the parking benefit for commuters who drive. The package is scheduled to be marked up by the Senate Finance Committee today. This proposal would make the \$250 limit retroactive, but, as we saw the last time higher limits expired, very few employers and commuters are realistically in a position to take advantage of these benefits. The task of restoring commuter benefits is complicated by the desire of House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Dave Camp to hold individual hearings on each of the policies included in a tax extender package. The likely result of this would be that pre-tax transit commuter benefits won't be raised before a lame duck session after the November elections, if they are increased at all.

Over the past several years, we've discussed issues about freight use of LIRR tracks on several occasions. The freight operations' access to the tracks is mandated by the federal government, but the MTA will be installing monitoring equipment on the LIRR to detect problems before they result in accidents. The LIRR will install hot box detectors, which warn of overheated axle bearings, and wheel impact detectors, which spot wheel defects before they lead to derailments or damage. Both of these systems will be useful for passenger as well as freight equipment. The LIRR will also install tag readers, which allows the LIRR to track freight in the system by automatically capturing codes that identify freight cars. On the passenger side, the LIRR is installing inward and outward facing cameras and audio recorders on its own rolling stock to monitor the activities of train engineers and allow the Rail Road to detect issues with operating personnel before they result in accidents.

In response to our letter on the difficulties that commuters are having navigating the area around Wyandanch Station during construction of the Wyandanch Rising project, last month the LIRR and Town of Babylon got together and developed and installed new wayfinding signage to direct riders to station parking lots. Because some parking was relocated and access to other parking had been changed, there was considerable confusion about the location of and access to parking at the station.