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**Testimony of the Long Island Rail Road Commuter Council to the
Board of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority
On Proposed Fare Increases
Walt Whitman Theater at Brooklyn College, 2900 Campus Road, Brooklyn, NY**

December 11, 2014

Good Evening. My name is Matthew L. Kessler and I am the Brooklyn representative of the Long Island Rail Road Commuter Council (LIRRCC), the legislatively mandated representatives of the Long Island Rail Road riders. The LIRRCC was established in 1981 by the State Legislature to represent the LIRR riders. Our volunteer members are recommended by the Nassau and Suffolk County Executives and the Brooklyn and Queens Borough Presidents and appointed by the Governor.

Today it seems like we are in the same place that we were following Superstorm Sandy, although this proposal is less onerous than the 2012 proposal. We continue to have many of the same concerns that we expressed in the past about fare increases. Although we firmly believe that LIRR riders should shoulder their fair share of the costs to support the operations of the Rail Road – they must not stand alone in this effort. We do not see a commitment on the part of other stakeholders to join us in doing more to support the MTA's operating and capital needs and those of the Long Island Rail Road and thus cannot support this proposal.

There are several issues that particularly affect Long Island. Many riders will be subject to an increased fare on both the LIRR & NYC Transit. This is an undue financial burden to many LIRR riders since many utilize NYCT to complete their travel. While there are small discounts for commutation tickets and MetroCards, the discount does little to soften the fiscal impact of higher fares on both systems.

Another issue is the LIRR fare structure as a whole, particularly at times and on routes when capacity is available. Other transit systems in the region find ways to accommodate all kinds of riders, why can't we do so here? Why can't we do more to make LIRR an attractive alternative? The fare structure needs to be reanalyzed and although the concept of changing policy may seem to threaten revenue, the long-term consequences are increased loss of potential riders utilizing their cars and less convenient choices.

Some examples for the need of reexamination are: LI will soon face the loss of the NY Islanders, leaving Nassau and Suffolk Counties with no major league professional sports teams. We recommend that the LIRR implement a “Fan Fare” to encourage Long Islanders attending sporting events in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens to use LIRR; charging commuting college students full fare when capacity is arguably available; we also hear from many riders that they would like to take the LIRR for weekend family outings but find that once their children become 11 years of age they are required to purchase full fare tickets. Moreover, the City Ticket program seriously discriminates against riders from Far Rockaway. The argument that revenue will be lost because riders along the western part of that branch will take extra-special effort to travel to Far Rockaway to avoid paying the higher off-peak fare is a very poor one. These are some of the examples of the consequences of fare increases especially when compared to the transportation options available making riding LIRR very unattractive.

The current funding structure of the MTA is rooted in a May 2009 agreement between the State and MTA that provided for increased State financial assistance through new taxes and fees on motorists, taxi users, and business and increased rider support through a series of regular fare adjustments. Planned service cuts were taken off the table as a part of this agreement, but shortly afterwards MTA finances turned negative when new revenues failed to meet projections and money promised for the operation of MTA services was used to eliminate deficits in the State’s general fund. The result were substantial service cuts, many of which have at last been restored. This practice continues to the present day, as the State this year raided dedicated transit funding to pay debt service that had previously come from its General Fund and promises to do so again. All the while, riders are keeping their end of the “bargain”.

Most significantly, these fare proposals do not address the fundamental issues facing the MTA. Riders already pay a substantial share of the cost of operations, recently estimated by MTA management at 55.2 percent for 2015. This is above 2014’s projected farebox operating ratio of 54.6 percent and far higher than other large American transit systems providing similar services. Added to this is the chronic failure of State and local government to provide for MTA capital improvements, which results in their financing through bonds serviced from operating funds, and riders face a bleak future. Yet another blow to the riders is on the horizon, as the MTA’s proposed 2015-2019 Capital Program contains a funding gap of \$15 billion. The MTA can characterize this plan as a starting point for discussion, but it’s going to take a lot of talk to find sources other than riders to meet this shortfall.

Riders need the MTA Board to take an active stance and respect its responsibilities to the riders. The Board must seriously and carefully consider the implications of its actions and refuse to shrink from telling elected officials that more resources are required. If we do not find alternative means of providing resources to the MTA and LIRR, every two years we will be facing a steady shift of the cost of operating the system to riders. We call on you to join with us in advocating for the MTA system and its passengers.

The LIRRCC knows that this Board is in a difficult position with costs that are often beyond its control and has a need to borrow heavily to provide for the necessary replacement,

rehabilitation, and expansion to the system. We ask you to understand that riders are also being stretched beyond their monetary and economic limits and to stand with them.