

Service cuts now? Fugheddaboutit

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As of late, New York transit riders have become cautiously optimistic that the system is on its way back, that the Subway Action Plan is paying off. (Marcus Santos / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS)

At the MTA's emergency board meeting on Aug. 16, Chair Pat Foye noted that given the serious fiscal issues the agency facing, it was looking at "Service Guideline Adjustments"

as part of its cost containment efforts. Make no mistake about it: This is a euphemism for service cuts, and that's a big mistake.

The board meeting at which the cuts were announced was ostensibly called to release the final MTA Transformation Plan, conducted by outside consultants. The plan at its most basic was created to identify savings opportunities and operational efficiencies, all in the interest of improving service. Given that the recommendations haven't yet been implemented, we do not understand how cuts can even be considered.

There are important history lessons that parallel this charted course. The transit Armageddon of 2010 was in response to the MTA's fiscal crisis; the ensuing effort to reduce deficits led to significant service cuts across the board at New York City Transit, the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North. More than 1,000 people lost their jobs; Access-A-Ride and free student MetroCards were threatened; dozens of bus routes were shortened or eliminated; the V train vanished; and Metro-North and the LIRR saw service reduced at the same time a payroll mobility tax went into effect, adding a double whammy of suburban pain.

Ridership took a toll, faring even worse than anticipated, according to the MTA's own review. New York City Transit's internal report concluded, "Despite attempts to minimize negative impacts, the service reductions did result in certain customers losing access to transit service or experiencing a degradation in their service. When service cuts are driven by the need to reduce costs, such customer impacts are essentially unavoidable."

Which is to say: Crisis beget crisis, with less service leading to less ridership leading to less revenue. Thus began the downward spiral that ultimately morphed into the 2017 emergency declarations.

Has the MTA learned anything from that experience? Speaking on behalf of nearly 9 million daily riders, we fear not.

As of late, New York transit riders have become cautiously optimistic that the system is on its way back, that the Subway Action Plan is paying off. Riders across the system are hopeful that visions laid out in recent reform blueprints, including Andy Byford's Fast Forward agenda, will lead to a 21st century system.

Progress is incremental but evident: Subway on-time performance continues to improve as trains come more regularly and move faster. System expansion projects like the LIRR's third track are on time and on budget, with more community input. And track repair and replacement along Metro-North routes are helping reduce major incidents. Investment in the system has led to improvements that riders see every day. It isn't perfect by any means, but after hitting bottom, our trains and buses are finally getting back on track.

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That's why the specter of service cuts is so alarming. We understand that the MTA is again in dire fiscal straits, but fare increases came with the understanding that service would not be cut for the very reason that service cuts lead to fewer riders, which grows the deficit and drives people to drive or into for-hire vehicles.

At the same time congestion pricing is getting underway, cutting service sends exactly the wrong message. If you want people to get out of cars, they need viable alternatives including robust subways, bus and commuter rail service. Encouraging people to get out of cars means you must provide real service alternatives. Redesigning bus routes and eliminating root causes of delay to get people where they're going faster are meant to provide better service to attract riders.

Cutting service is counterintuitive and counterproductive. The MTA must balance its books, but not on the backs of riders.

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