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**Statement of LIRRCC Chair Mark Epstein at the
LIRR Expansion Project Draft Environmental Impact Statement Public Meeting
Yes We Can Community Center, Westbury, NY
January 17, 2017**

My name is Mark Epstein, and I am Chair of the Long Island Rail Road Commuter Council (LIRRCC). The Council is composed of LIRR riders who serve as the legislatively mandated voice of LIRR riders. I am here today to offer our support for the improvement of the Main Line and the Draft Environmental Impact Statement on the project.

The LIRRCC recognizes that a decision to proceed with this project involves a major commitment. Large scale construction is disruptive, and we understand that communities and riders alike may be inconvenienced during the improvement of the Main Line. We are also mindful of the cost of this project. Commuters are not only LIRR riders who are concerned with the impact of capital investments on their fares, but also Long Island residents and taxpayers who want to see the maximum value from their tax dollars. In the end, we believe that the benefits of this project outweigh its costs, but it must be managed carefully to ensure that it is completed on time and on budget. Too many Rail Road projects have gone beyond their schedule deadlines or original budgets, and this project must be different.

We support the expansion of the Main Line because continued improvement of the Long Island Rail Road infrastructure is critical to meet the demands of Long Islanders for safe, efficient, and affordable transportation. While the Rail Road's capacity is constrained and there is no room to add peak hour service, ridership continues to increase. In 2015, the last full year where ridership figures are available, a total of 87.6 million passengers rode the LIRR, accounting for the highest usage since 1949. This growth trend continued in 2016, with ridership gains of 2 percent through October. Commutation ridership has increased even more, at 2.5 percent. This popularity has a cost. The system that Long Islanders are increasingly choosing to ride is heavily burdened, without sufficient operational flexibility to deal with problems. About 40 percent of the Rail Road's total riders are traveling over the particularly outdated and overburdened section of track that we know as the Main Line. The volume of train traffic on this section prevents any serious consideration of two way service and often reduces rush hour travel to a crawl. These issues exist even if nothing goes wrong, but problems like a stalled train, malfunctioning crossing gate, or track defect can mean serious problems for the LIRR and its riders. Even LIRR riders that do not

travel over the Main Line are regularly affected, as problems on the Main Line can and do back up traffic and delay trains behind them.

As we know, the East Side Access project is under construction and will add new capacity to get LIRR trains under the East River. The reality of the situation is, however, that once East Side Access is completed trains will still have to deal with the same old chokepoints on the Main Line. These chokepoints make achieving goals such as increased reverse commuting only a dream. Without improvements to the Main Line, the over-\$10 billion East Side Access project will never realize its full potential. It is unthinkable that we would spend this sum on East Side Access and leave major benefits on the table because we fail to upgrade supporting infrastructure. If there were less expensive, less intrusive, and more effective alternatives to adding a third track to the Main Line, we would support them without reservation, but in fact no such alternatives have been proposed. The need for this improvement is clear from both the limitations that the LIRR faces in normal operations and the huge delays that result when any problem on the tracks disrupts service between Floral Park and Hicksville.

The current service is not working for riders, their families, and their employers. There has to be a better way. While we must minimize impacts on riders and surrounding communities, we nonetheless must move forward to increase capacity and operational flexibility so that the LIRR can operate as a modern railroad. This project is critical to Long Island's economic health, quality of life and desirability as a community. We have a unique opportunity to move forward and leverage the increased capacity that will be generated by new East River tunnels and the Second Track project to create real benefits for Long Island and those who call it home. We must take advantage of this opportunity. The commuters of the LIRR strongly support this long-awaited project.