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Statement of the New York City Transit Riders Council Before the New York City Council Transportation Committee Oversight Hearing on Improving the New York City Subway System

Tuesday, August 8, 2017

Good morning, my name is William Henderson. I am the Executive Director of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA (PCAC), which is an umbrella organization established by the New York State Legislature to coordinate the activities of three legislatively-mandated Councils that represent the interests of riders of the Metro-North Railroad, Long Island Rail Road and New York City Transit system. I am speaking today on behalf of the New York City Transit Riders Council.

We appreciate the opportunity to discuss the steps necessary to improve the New York City Subway System. We believe that the riders deserve better and NYC Transit must take aggressive action to ensure that the deterioration in service that we have seen over the past five years is reversed. Riders have a right to expect that the subway system and the service it provides is clean, convenient, efficient, and safe, but we have some work to do to make reality meet this expectation. Recent events, including derailments on June 27 and July 21 and a July 17 track fire that sent nine persons to the hospital, have garnered widespread public attention, but equally concerning is the slow degradation of the riders' experience.

This deterioration in service quality is not as dramatic as incidents such as track fires, but since 2012 the number of delays in the subway system has more than doubled from about 28,000 per month to about 70,000 per month. Other indicators paint a similar picture, as the Mean Distance Between Failures (MDBF) of subway cars has steadily declined over the past several years. Fewer trains are meeting their schedules, and particularly on the busiest lines this is leading to cancellations of trains and less service available to riders than is scheduled. Fewer trains, of course, lead to increased crowding, which further delays the trains that are running as riders squeeze into already packed subway cars. It is no surprise that according to NYC Transit figures crowding accounts for about one quarter of the delays in the system.

The subway system that we rely upon is severely stressed. Ridership on the subway has almost doubled in the past forty years, from 917 million in 1977 to 1.757 billion in 2016. While 2016 ridership showed a slight decline compared with 2015, the average annual increase in ridership since 2009 amounts to around 30 million passengers. Population growth from the current 8.5 million to over 9 million by 2030 will only increase the pressure. This is a heavy burden for the system that was already near capacity.

At the same time ridership was increasing, the subway system was dealing with financial stress related to the last economic recession, which by 2010 forced service and personnel cuts. While many cuts have been restored, the impacts of these resource constraints persist. Add to this the need to repair damage from Superstorm Sandy in 2012 and protect the system against future storm events and a system that is operating near its capacity, limiting NYC Transit's ability to take parts of the system out of service, and we have a situation where an isolated incident can have major impacts on the ability of New Yorkers to move around the City. The scoreboards of delays are not just numbers. As Comptroller Scott Stringer noted in a report issued last month, they have a real human cost in terms of riders' job security, family life, and healthcare.

We believe that the initiatives that have been implemented and announced by NYC Transit are generally steps in the right direction. Efforts like the FASTRACK maintenance program, which takes subway line segments out of service in overnight hours to perform necessary repairs, and the creation of rapid response teams to address incidents that cause delays in peak hours are valuable steps. It is just that they will not by themselves reverse the unacceptable trends in subway performance that we are seeing. We need a concentrated effort to restore the subway system to what it must be to deal with the demands that are being placed upon it. We must also continue with efforts to expand the system, both to handle future growth in demand and to provide needed capacity that will allow for restoration of the current system. Unfortunately, this is not a rapid process, as can be seen in the restoration of the L train's Canarsie Tube. Damaged by flood waters in 2012, it will not close for restoration until April of 2019 and will not be completed until the second half of 2020.

This concerted effort is needed in many areas, but I will concentrate on one of the most critical needs in the system, a modern signal system. This system is coming, but its pace is far too slow. The L was the first line to be converted to Communication Based Train Control, an automated signal system that has the ability to improve performance and expand capacity, but this work began in the late 1990's and took over a decade. The second CBTC line, the 7, has taken seven years to convert and will go into service soon. Work on the Queens Boulevard lines will come next, as more CBTC installation moves to more complex environments. We cannot afford to wait decades for these modernization efforts to be completed and must find ways to accelerate them.

Restoring and improving the subway system will require a new way of thinking, but it will also require an increased commitment of resources. It is in the interest of both the City and State to ensure that the system functions well. Subway riders need the City and MTA to work as partners to ensure that the transportation system that is the lifeblood of this region is maintained and improved. We are not taking a position on the funding of these improvements, but note that there are a number of proposals, including dedicated taxes, crossing charges, and equitable adjustments of City payments for responsibilities such as pupil transportation and paratransit. We look forward to a vigorous discussion of what needs to be done and how to pay for it and encourage the members of the City Council and this Committee to fully participate in this dialogue.