Statement of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee
to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority
Before a Hearing Convened by Senator Craig M. Johnson,
Senate Majority Appointee to the MTA Capital Program Review Board
on the MTA 2010-2014 Capital Program

Thursday, October 29, 2009

Good Afternoon, my name is William Henderson. I am the Executive Director of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA (PCAC). The PCAC has been established by the State Legislature as the umbrella organization for three legislatively-mandated Councils representing the interests of public transportation users: the Long Island Rail Road Commuter's Council, the Metro-North Rail Road Commuters Council, and the New York City Transit Riders Council. These members of the Councils, who are ex officio members of the PCAC, are volunteers who are appointed to their position by the Governor at the recommendation of local officials within the service area covered by each Council. A representative from each Council participates as a non-voting member on the MTA Board. The Councils were created by the New York State legislature in 1981.

We acknowledge that the MTA's 2010-2014 Capital Program represents an enormous sum of money. The total program of $28.08 billion, $25.57 billion of which will be considered by the MTA Capital Program Review Board, is large by any possible definition of the word. At the same time, we must recognize that the stakes that we face in maintaining our public transportation system to support our mobility and economy are enormous as well. Public transportation is the engine that drives the region's economy and we cannot afford for this engine to stall. To reduce it to its simplest level, if everyone in this region attempted to travel by private car, no one would be able to travel effectively. For this region to function, its transit system must function.

Aside from the economic argument, we should also consider the human and environmental costs of allowing our transportation system to decline. Millions of our neighbors depend upon the MTA system to get to work, to attend school, to visit family, and to get to medical appointments. For many of these persons, there is no other choice but to travel by transit, and cutbacks in the system will translate directly into loss of economic opportunity and loss of the ability to travel. Similarly, if we do not continue to invest in transit, we will pay the price in terms of both degradation of environmental quality in the short run and the very real risk of climate change in the longer term.

The expenditures contained in the MTA Capital Program are in a true sense investments, and they are investments from which we should expect a return. The work of building and maintaining the transportation system supports the tax base upon which State and local government revenue depends. We have previously depended heavily upon fare backed debt to fund the MTA system, but our capacity to raise funds in this way is nearly exhausted. The MTA is the fifth largest public debtor in the United States; by 2012 MTA debt service will amount to 40 percent of its fare and toll revenue.

There are very few new commitments proposed in this Capital Program. About three quarters of the spending is proposed to maintain existing infrastructure or to reverse deterioration that should not have been allowed to occur. Most of the remaining one-quarter of the plan is committed toward completing major projects to which the MTA has already made firm commitments and for which substantial federal funding has already been received.

Following the release of the MTA Capital Program this August the PCAC leadership and staff reviewed the proposed plan in detail and had extensive discussions with MTA staff on its content. We are pleased to report that many of the comments and suggestions were incorporated into the document through changes such as reworking the discussion of State of Good Repair and expanding the Capital Program’s treatment of the LIRR’s Transit Oriented Development and station area planning efforts. We believe that these changes will clarify and strengthen the document and provide for a closer relationship between the MTA and the communities that it serves.

In analyzing the MTA operating agencies' investment plans, we identified promising initiatives, such as NYC Transit's station renewal strategy, the movement toward smart card fare technology in NYC Transit and the commuter railroads, and Metro-North's progress toward modernizing the Harmon shops. With regard to the Long Island Rail Road, we are pleased to see the Rail Road's commitment to maintaining and modernizing core infrastructure and investments, such as the full Main Line second track between Farmingdale and Ronkonkoma, which will allow the LIRR to respond to changing demands for mobility. We are also pleased with movement toward developing a detailed parking and station access program to respond to the demands that will accompany the opening of East Side Access. It is only through supporting investments on Long Island that the full potential of the East Side Access project can be realized.

We must also note several concerns that we have regarding the LIRR's portion of the Capital Program. The Long Island Rail Road Commuter's Council, supported by the full PCAC, continues to believe that the omission of the Main Line Corridor Improvements Project from this document is a serious shortcoming. While construction may not proceed in the next five years, we believe that this project should have access to the design and planning funds necessary to keep these improvements moving forward, particularly in view of the many issues that will need to be resolved prior to its completion. While the LIRR's intention to pursue several projects in this corridor to immediately address state of good repair issues is positive, the limitations of the Main Line Corridor must ultimately be addressed comprehensively.

The Council is also deeply concerned with the quality of the LIRR diesel fleet. The LIRR's efforts to improve this equipment have provided some cause for hope, but the diesel fleet continues to frustrate riders who depend upon it. The performance of the diesel electric and dual mode locomotives remains woeful, and they remain unable to consistently meet even a mean distance between failures goal that has recently been adjusted downward from 30,000 to 18,000 miles. While the proposed capital program includes funding to develop a diesel multiple unit car, we are not convinced that this will be enough to raise reliability in diesel territory, Long Island's growth area, to an acceptable level.

The Capital Program's major deficiency, however, is a lack of available resources for the MTA and its operating agencies to address the critical mobility needs of this region. At the funding levels that have been proposed, this Capital Program faces a funding shortfall of almost $10 Billion dollars. The MTA funding package passed by the State Legislature in May will provide funding for only two of the five years of the Program. Even so, the Capital Program fails to meet the needs that have been identified in the MTA's Twenty Year Needs Assessment. The document that will be before the CPRB will, unfortunately, provide for just over two-thirds of the needs that have been identified in the Needs Assessment for the period from 2010 to 2014.

We fully understand that resources are extremely tight at the State as well as the local government level. Conditions may not improve greatly anytime soon, and some are predicting a prolonged period of minimal economic growth. That said, in past years some of our most valuable public assets were created in times of economic distress. Those who came before us did not fail to make public investments that benefit us today. We call upon you to protect the future by making these investments in the coming five years.