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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
The Milton G. Bassin Performing Arts Center at York College
94-20 Guy R. Brewer Blvd, Jamaica, NY**

December 5, 2016

Good Evening. My name is Gerard Bringmann. I am a regular commuter on the Long Island Rail Road and a member 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.

We have reviewed the fare proposals that MTA management has presented with a mixed reaction. We remain concerned about the inordinately high percentage of the cost of operations that riders pay and about the affordability of fares, which move ever upward, for hard working commuters. Many of these riders have not yet seen their incomes recover to the levels of several years ago. Further, many of our riders also pay to use subways and buses to complete their journeys, so they are being hit twice by proposed fare increases. We acknowledge that this proposal imposes the smallest increases on the LIRR's most frequent and most heavily burdened riders by capping both the percentage and absolute dollar increase in the cost of weekly and monthly tickets. This is a step in the right direction.

Despite this small positive step, a fare increase is still a fare increase, and this hike will add to the already heavy fare burden on LIRR riders. My fellow members and I are increasingly hearing the question "what am I getting for my money" from Long Island Rail Road commuters. Our commuters recognize that someone must pay the cost of operating the Rail Road, but they want something in return. There are several areas that the LIRR must address to keep faith with their riders.

Service is at the foundation of what riders want. The LIRR runs through Queens, but provides a relatively small amount of service for the people of this Borough. Areas such as Southeast Queens are underserved by transit, but the LIRR is not providing the service that people in these areas need. In addition, as the City changes the LIRR must change service patterns to meet demand, but service to rapidly growing areas such as Long Island City has not changed to reflect the increased activity there.

Beyond the availability of service, the LIRR's rolling stock and infrastructure must deliver riders to their destinations as promised. Riders are beginning to feel that they are more likely to stand in crowded conditions because of a "short train" or be delayed through common causes such as signal problems than to arrive seated and according to schedule. To do so, we need reliable cars and locomotives, working signal and electrical systems, and properly maintained tracks and rights of way. Queens riders are particularly affected by crowding, as they are the last to board on inbound trips. We recognize that no system is foolproof, but commuters are too often subject to signal, capacity, and other problems that make reaching our destination according to published schedules a dismayingly uncertain endeavor.

Another significant area is communication. At a basic level, commuters just want to be told what is going on so that they can plan and adjust accordingly for any delays. We should have the best available information obtainable before we reach the station, at the station and while riding the Rail Road. Riders are not getting this level of communication, and are often faced with contradictory information or in some cases the absence of information. We want the LIRR to explore options for transmitting information directly to trains, as can be done on some NJ Transit equipment, and riders. We are not asking for the LIRR to give us information that it does not have, but the Rail Road must share more information about disruption in service with riders, even if this information does not include a firm timeline for the restoration of service.

At our stations, riders have the right to expect clean, safe, and comfortable waiting areas that are available for their use to the maximum extent practicable. Waiting areas should not be closed to the public at times when there is a substantial number of travelers wanting to use these facilities, even if this is outside of normal commuting hours. These stations, in addition to being open, must include passenger amenities such as coffee stands or newsstands where those awaiting trains can purchase something to eat, drink, or read and obtain other items that will make their travel more bearable. Many station waiting areas that are not convenient to nearby businesses do not have even vending machines where thirsty riders can purchase water or other cold drinks.

On board the LIRR's trains, riders have a right to a clean, well maintained, and comfortable environment. Improvements in new generations of rolling stock are welcome and we are pleased that the M-9 designs incorporate some of the amenities that the LIRRCC has discussed with LIRR officials. Nevertheless, many of our suggestions were not heeded and riders live in the present, where what they regularly experience is not acceptable. Our commuters see worn and damaged seats and car interiors that are often sloppily repaired with adhesive tape and even advertising materials from passenger car walls. They endure dirty and poorly maintained on board restrooms that are commonly used only as an absolute last resort and car floors covered that are sometimes covered with refuse and liquids. We can debate the cause of these conditions, but riders deserve better and it is the LIRR's duty to deliver it for them.

Despite some progress in raising on-time performance from the woeful levels of 2015, the chance of being delayed in peak periods is still too high and has a great impact on regular riders and in some cases their careers. The LIRR owes its riders a reliable service throughout the days and nights and to deliver anything less to them is damaging to the riders, their communities, and Long Island and its economic well-being.

The LIRRCC appreciates the opportunity to share our views with MTA management and the members of its Board.