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# Long Island Rail Road Commuter Council

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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 Sheraton LaGuardia East Hotel November 15, 2012**

Good Evening. My name is Owen Costello. I am a member of the Long Island Rail Road Commuter Council (LIRRCC), the legislatively mandated representatives of Long Island Rail Road riders, appointed by the Governor. I represent Nassau County on the Council and commute daily on the Port Washington Branch.

Many Long Islanders have had a difficult past several weeks. Riders in my area faced storm damage and power outages, in addition to disrupted LIRR service. It wasn't perfect, but the LIRR brought service back limited service on my branch on Thursday after the hurricane. On behalf of the Council, I want to thank all of the LIRR staff that worked so hard to bring the system back into service. Unfortunately, much remains to be done for a full recovery, and damage to Amtrak's East River tunnels continues to limit LIRR capacity, constrain schedules, and make commuting difficult. The LIRRCC asks the MTA and LIRR to work with Amtrak to restore full service as soon as possible.

In view of what we have been through, it's difficult to focus on fares, but the outcome of this process is important to thousands of riders and will affect Long Island, Queens, and Brooklyn for years to come. While our context tonight is unique, we are discussing the same issues that were raised in prior fare hearings. Once again, we're not talking about improving the LIRR and how it serves the community, but only about the need to impose another large fare increase on a ridership that is at the breaking point economically. The LIRRCC opposes these proposed fare increases, as they are too large and shift too much of the burden of operating expenses onto the riders.

Riders may need to share in funding increasing operating expenses, but MTA riders already bear a heavy burden, paying for 55.7 percent of the MTA's operating expenditures in 2011. This is the highest such percentage of any large transit system in the nation. In 2009 we were told that riders, drivers, and the State would all contribute to resolve the MTA's financial crisis in exchange for no major service cuts. Shortly after this the state had taken \$243 million in funding from the MTA and the 2010 service cuts had begun. Some cuts were restored, but we wait for full restoration. Riders pay more than in 2008, when 44.3 percent of operating expenditures were paid from fares. This year, it will be 47 percent.

We know this Board is in a difficult position; our riders are also in an extremely difficult position. They are being stretched beyond their limits by the cost of commuting. Not only have LIRR riders' costs shot up with MTA fare increases of 21.4 percent since 2008, far above the 8.9 percent inflation rate, many of these riders also use subways and buses that also have fare increases. Rising costs are making commuters question the value of commuting by public transportation, and the pretax dollars that they can use for commuting expenses have nearly been cut in half. Riders are being hammered from every direction, facing even increased rates for station parking in many communities.

We need to do more than discuss programmed fare increases and instead search for ways to lift some of the burden from riders. We need to find ways to increase ridership and make better use of the existing system. We need to work hard to find funding that doesn't depend on fares, like station area development and advertising revenue. We also know that the package of taxes, fees, and other support that State and local governments provide for the MTA is not stable, reliable, and able to grow to meet increasing costs, and we must work with elected officials to revisit this funding formula.

Finally, we have to insist that the MTA continue to improve the efficiency of its operations. Some progress has been made, but much remains to be done, as we recently saw in the MTA Inspector General's findings that over \$160,000 had been wasted on the construction of stairs at the Great Neck Station. As a rider of the LIRR and of the Port Washington line, it is offensive to me that, to my knowledge, no one has been held personally accountable for clearly inadequate supervision. There must be accountability to increase efficiency. In addition, every fare dollar that is legitimately due should be collected, as uncollected fares only raise costs to other riders.

We urge this Board to reject these proposals and the path that piles unaffordable fare increases upon each other every two years. We need to strike a balance that is fair to the riders and all who benefit from the MTA.