

# Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council

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## **Testimony of the Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council to the Board of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority on Proposed Fare Increases Westchester County Center White Plains, NY November 15, 2012**

Good Evening. My name is David Buchwald. I am the Chairman of the Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council (MNRCC), the legislatively mandated representatives of Metro-North Railroad riders. I was appointed to the MNRCC by the Governor, representing Westchester County and I ride the Harlem line.

The Council thanks Metro-North and the MTA for the extraordinary job that they did in restoring service following Hurricane Sandy. Early reports led us to expect long service outages, and we were regularly pleasantly surprised with the recovery effort. This is the kind of performance that Metro-North riders have come to expect from the Railroad, and a primary reason that most riders think that Metro-North service is a good value. We are, however, concerned about the impacts that this fare proposal has on families who are struggling to balance household budgets in difficult economic times.

This Council's position has long been that we support moderate fare increases at predictable intervals designed for riders to pay their fair share of increasing operating costs. We agree that those who reap benefits from the transportation system should pay for its support. This includes riders, but also property owners, businesses, and the wide range of New Yorkers who share in economic benefits attributable to the MTA system.

The practice of implementing fare hikes that the MTA has been following every two years, however, makes no allowance for our precarious economic condition, despite a firm relationship between transportation, employment, and the economy. The potential economic impacts of these increases must be considered.

We are concerned that the proposed increases will make fares unaffordable for many of our fellow riders. While the stereotype of the Metro-North rider may be the high income commuter to Manhattan, in truth, our riders are largely a cross section of the communities that Metro-North serves. One of the largest growth areas in ridership has been reverse peak service that transports large numbers of riders to employment in Westchester County and Connecticut. Some of these riders work in service industries and have relatively low earnings. A fare increase for these riders, who are now paying full peak fares for many trips, is not merely an inconvenience. It is a real hardship.

We are also concerned that these proposals continue a trend of shifting more responsibility for funding operating costs onto our riders. Metro-North riders pay the highest percentage of operating-related expenditures of any of the MTA's operating agencies, 59.6 percent in 2011, exceeding even NYC Transit. Further, the MTA recovers operating expenses from riders at the highest rate of any large transit system nationally. On average, these non-New York transit systems recover 38 percent of expenditures from the farebox, in sharp contrast with 55.7 percent for the MTA in 2011 and the 59.6 percent for Metro-North.

The MNRCC concludes that our State must fundamentally reexamine how the MTA is funded. Our consistent position is that the MTA's funding sources must be stable, reliable, and able to grow to meet increasing costs. We believe that with funding cuts, unpopular taxes, and dramatic drops in revenue from some sources our present funding mix is failing this test, and we ask for your commitment as Board members to be forceful advocates for change in this area.

Until the MTA funding structure is changed, we ask that this Board commit to do what it can to ease the burden on our riders. Many commuters are facing not only an increase to their Metro-North fares but an increase to the NYC Transit fares that take them to their final destinations. The regular users of both systems must be protected and not disadvantaged by extraordinary efforts to keep a largely symbolic base fare from increasing.

We call on this Board to make a commitment to hold the line on other commuting costs that it can control, such as station parking. Similarly, there should be common sense policy changes, such as extending until noon the grace period where a prior month's monthly ticket is accepted for passage on the first weekday of the month, as is the case on NJ TRANSIT and West of Hudson trains.

We also ask this Board to consider fare structure modifications that make the MTA system more usable for the people of the region. For example, while current family and child fares offer substantial discounts for riders with younger children, families with children over 11 years of age often find outings that use the railroad unaffordable. There are a number of transit agencies, including several in the Northeast, that offer more accommodating fares for family outings.

We believe that Metro-North provides excellent service for our fare dollars and can do so into the future. The MNRCC asks that you take our comments into account and that the MTA together with the State work toward a financial structure that is fair and equitable for all who benefit from the Railroad and the MTA system as a whole.