

**Testimony of the Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council  
before the New York State Commission on MTA Financing**

**Monday, September 22, 2008**

Good evening. I am Gerard Bringmann, Chairman of the Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council (LIRRCC). The LIRRCC was created by the New York State Legislature in 1981. At the time, our legislators in Albany felt that if they were to approve five year MTA Capital Programs, then LIRR riders ought to have a voice in the allocation of capital funding through a riders' council. Within a week legislators representing New York City and the Metro-North service area developed proposals for similar riders' councils for New York City Transit and the Metro-North Railroad. Thus the three riders' councils that exist today were born and the existing Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA, which had been established as a not-for-profit organization separate from the MTA, was retained to serve as a coordinating organization and funding mechanism for the three riders' councils. In 1996, the State Legislature created a non-voting seat on the MTA Board to be filled on a rotating basis by a member of one of the three riders' councils. As has been the case since 1981, the Long Island Rail Road Commuter Council's volunteer members are appointed by the Governor upon the recommendation of local elected officials to represent the interests of the users of the LIRR.

Thank you for inviting the LIRRCC to testify at this hearing. The Council is heartened that this commission has been charged by the Governor to recommend strategies to fund the MTA's capital projects and operating needs for the next ten years. Throughout our 27-year history the Council has often experienced a substantial gap between the LIRR's infrastructure needs and available capital funding. The shortfall has contributed to a continuing series of operational issues on the Rail Road, an extremely high turnover rate in the leadership of the LIRR, demoralized staff, and frustrated riders. As a result, I am here today to ask you to base your funding recommendations on the MTA's actual capital needs, rather than MTA Capital Programs that fall short of fulfilling those needs.

To be blunt, Long Islanders do not understand why in order to travel to a first rate urban center that is the economic engine of not only the State and region, but in a very real sense the entire nation, they must endure a second or third-rate commuting experience. With the MTA's LIRR East Side Access study, our riders gained hope that the infrastructure investments needed to transform their experience of the Rail Road would be forthcoming. The construction of the East Side Access project itself is well underway, but many of the proposed system infrastructure improvements supporting East Side Access remain to be

completed. A prime example of this supporting infrastructure is the Main Line Corridor Improvements project, which is critical to unlocking much of the potential of the East Side Access project.

The Council was dismayed to learn that this project, which was included in the current MTA Capital Program, was reduced from its current funding level by over \$50 million and delayed at least 3 years in the 2008-2013 Capital Program prepared pursuant to State congestion pricing legislation. Worse yet, according to LIRR President Helena Williams, the Main Line Corridor Improvements project is unlikely to be included at all in the proposed 2010-2014 Capital Program. The postponement of this important project defies all logic. The LIRR is the busiest railroad in the nation, but has five of its branches funneling into a two track segment for ten and one-half miles. These five branches carry 42 percent of the total LIRR ridership. The MTA is in the process of building a 300,000 square foot terminal under Grand Central Terminal to welcome LIRR riders to the East Side of Manhattan, yet almost half of those riders will be using the two-track Main Line Corridor. Not only does this leave riders in the primary direction of travel with limited options for express service and vulnerable to incidents such as accidents, stalled trains, and track and signal damage, but this omission also severely restricts the LIRR's ability to operate a meaningful level of reverse peak service.

As you are aware, LIRR ridership is booming. Last week the LIRR reported that year-to-date ridership through July is up 5.1 percent above 2007. Traffic and the high cost of driving appear to be major factors driving these increases, and both factors are likely to persist into the future. This is a time to make targeted investments to support ridership growth, and absolutely not a time to cut major capital projects. The East Side Access project will reduce commuting time for many Long Islanders by 20 minutes. The LIRR's proposed Third Track project will bring express rail service to thousands of Long Islanders and substantially improve the Rail Road's on-time performance.

In his September 2007 assessment of the condition of the MTA Long Island Railroad, former Metro-North Railroad President Donald Nelson linked the East Side Access and Main Line Corridor Improvements projects as a unified package. We believe that this is the proper approach and should be reflected in this Commission's assessment of the LIRR's capital needs. This approach, however, is not reflected in the MTA's 2008-2013 Capital Program proposal and is not in keeping with the LIRR's current plans for the next Capital Program. As a result, if this Commission's assessment of LIRR capital needs is based on these sources, we believe that it would understate the Rail Road's true capital needs by at least \$1.5 to \$2 billion.

Instead of relying upon Capital Programs where some needs have been left unaddressed to meet fiscal targets, the LIRRCC calls upon this Commission to base its work on estimates of MTA capital needs that have been developed through agency needs assessment processes. We believe that these needs assessments provide a more accurate inventory of the work needed to meet the increasing demands upon our transportation system. In the end there may not be enough funding available to meet all needs, but in that case we should at least understand the benefits that we would forego by failing to provide adequate funding.