

After two years of steadily increasing ridership on New York City Transit subways and buses, the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) and Metro-North Railroad (MNR), the COVID-19 pandemic essentially brought the region – and its regular stream of daily commutes – to a halt.

As our region continues to reopen, riders are beginning to return to the region's transit system: as of July 2021, subway and bus ridership has rebounded by 50.6 percent, and 41.4 percent and 38.7 percent for LIRR and MNR, respectively.¹

While these figures are showing signs of surpassing McKinsey & Company projections from the MTA-funded forecast that anticipated a return of only 80- to 90-percent of ridership by 2024, it is also anticipated that a significant number of commuters will continue to work from home, and that travel patterns and travel times have also changed - perhaps permanently. According to the Partnership for New York City, the total share of office employees expected to return by the end of September 2021 is 62%. The vast majority (71%) of employers plan to adopt a rotating or "hybrid" office schedule; of those employers implementing a hybrid model, most (63%) will require employees to be in the office three days per week.² These issues have highlighted the need to re-think the MTA's fare structure to better accommodate the changing paradigm.

Providing riders with more flexible and affordable fares will help attract them back to transit, filling thousands of empty seats and achieving the more equitable fare policy elucidated by the MTA Board. The commuter railroads can be the backbone of regional recovery efforts, while allowing the MTA the unique opportunity to guide its ridership return.

Furthermore, thousands of essential workers live in the outer boroughs and suburban communities who cannot work from home. For example, only 33 percent of residents living near the Bayside, Queens LIRR station have telework capabilities; and only 28 percent of residents living near the Bronx's Tremont MNR station, compared to 48 percent telework

capabilities for many Manhattan residents, like those in Midtown.³ These essential workers would benefit from reduced fare commuter rail options, like their neighbors in Southeast Queens who benefit from Atlantic Ticket.

The original Freedom Ticket proposal helped persuade the MTA-LIRR to implement the Atlantic Ticket Field Study (Pilot Program) in June 2018 for ten select LIRR stations in Southeast Queens and Brooklyn. The Field Study has been a success for the railroad and riders – resulting in over 2 million tickets sold and producing nearly \$16 million in revenue.

The economic hardship for many riders caused by the pandemic and available capacity created by the decrease in ridership on both the LIRR and MNR, combined with the MTA Board's interest in restructuring fares and the agency's need for revenue, makes this exactly the right time to expand the Freedom Ticket concept – the opportunity is now!

The MTA must find ways to attract its ridership back and attract new riders in the changing paradigm.

Benefits: Reducing long travel times and providing a more equitable regional fare structure will allow the following to happen:

- Help regional riders and essential workers travel more affordably and efficiently.
- Fill empty commuter rail seats with fare paying riders.
- Support regional economic recovery efforts.
- Attract drivers out of their cars in time for congestion pricing implementation, reducing roadway congestion and CO2 emissions.

1 MTA - NYCT and Buses Committee Meeting Book (<https://new.mta.info/document/44216>; Joint MNR and LIRR Committee Meeting Book (<https://new.mta.info/document/44211>).

2 Partnership for New York City - Return to Office Survey Results Released - June 2021 (pnyc.org/news/return-to-office-survey-results-released-june-2021/).

3 New York City Department of City Planning - NYC Metropolitan Region Telework Capability (<https://dcp.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/>).

Improve Atlantic Ticket

The Atlantic Ticket Pilot Program has been a success – but it could be and do so much more for so many more people. Due to a lack of widespread ticket availability and visibility, several improvements must be made to ensure the continued success of the program and to help riders benefit from the pilot and the MTA-LIRR gain much-needed revenue. The Atlantic Ticket is not available for purchase via eTix or through onboard conductors and ticket vending machines do not direct

riders to the Atlantic Ticket option at participating stations. Therefore, improving purchasing options and expanding Atlantic Ticket’s marketing campaign are necessary to attract more riders and better direct them to this cost- and time-saving travel option.

Freedom Ticket Concept Expansion is Needed

Freedom Ticket concept discounts in Northeast and Central Queens, Far Rockaway and in the Bronx will bring improved travel times to many more New Yorkers. There are nearly **300,000 essential workers in these combined proposed Freedom Ticket expansion areas – 35 percent are employed either in healthcare or the service industry.** In areas like Northeast Queens, travel times can be as high as an hour and a half each way when using local buses to subway connections, compared to just 30 minutes on the LIRR. Similarly, in the Bronx, travel times via bus connections to the subway can be well over an hour each way, compared to just 25 minutes on MNR.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, both railroads have ample available seats that are going unused by riders, producing no revenue for the MTA. In 2020, LIRR trains traveling from Jamaica to Penn Station and trains traveling from the Port

Washington Branch to Penn Station had overall **86 percent empty seats, totaling over 212,000 available seats on any given weekday.** On MNR, throughout 2020, total weekday ridership in and out of Grand Central Terminal was **down nearly 84 percent; and weekday off-peak ridership was down nearly 80 percent** – clearly illustrating the need to attract riders back at all hours of the day.

In its pre-pandemic research, PCAC found that in 2019 there was ample capacity to accommodate off-peak fare reductions with transfers. LIRR trains between Jamaica and the Port Washington Branch to Penn Station had overall **78 percent empty seats, totaling over 121,000 available weekday seats;** and for MNR’s Hudson and Harlem Lines to Grand Central, off-peak empty seats amounted to **79 percent and 70 percent,** respectively.

Suburban Discounts are Needed More Than Ever

Off-Peak & Reverse Peak Suburban discounts will provide long-term travel options which can help support the workforce and economy for the region’s suburban communities. Providing essential workers and the 190,000 daily pre-pandemic commuter rail users with more affordable fares will help attract them back, while generating revenue for both MNR and LIRR by filling empty seats. LIRR and MNR commuters who live the furthest out pay up to \$500-\$600 per month when factoring in city subway/bus fares – not including parking fees at home stations. Lowering these fares will support reverse commuting and inter-island and intra-county travel on Long Island and in the MNR region.

In 2020, **87 percent of seats were empty on trains traveling from Long Island to Jamaica**

and on city-bound Port Washington Branch trains, totaling over 244,000 available seats on any given weekday. On MNR, throughout 2020, total weekday ridership in and out of Grand Central Terminal was down nearly 84 percent; weekday off-peak ridership was down nearly 80 percent: **the railroad saw nearly 60 million fewer rides in 2020.**

PCAC found sufficient space pre-pandemic to accommodate off-peak fare reductions with transfers as well: in 2019, LIRR trains between Long Island and Jamaica had overall **80 percent empty seats, totaling over 141,000 available weekday seats;** and for MNR’s Hudson and Harlem Lines to Grand Central, off-peak empty seats amounted to **79 percent and 70 percent,** respectively.

- **Improve the Atlantic Ticket purchasing options for riders.**
 - Provide expanded ticket options such as monthlies and 20-trip tickets with included transfers to NYC Transit subways and buses.
 - Provide a transfer option with the current one-way fare, and extend the expiration date to 60 days, just as it is for regular one-way tickets.
 - Include Atlantic Ticket on eTix, and ultimately on OMNY.
 - Fix and reprogram LIRR ticket vending machines (TVMs) to not only function properly, but to also make Atlantic Ticket the default option for lower fares at all eligible stations.¹
 - Include the Atlantic Ticket at JFK AirTrain ticket vending machines, with advertisements to inform incoming airline passengers of its availability; and provide similar subway station advertisements informing riders of a faster way to get to the airport.
- **Expand the Atlantic Ticket marketing campaign to attract more riders.**
 - Increase the amount of electronic and paper advertisements in LIRR city stations and onboard trains; in subway stations and onboard trains; and at bus stops and onboard buses.
 - Better utilize social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the MTA's website and YouTube channel with targeted Facebook and Instagram ads by neighborhood.
 - Include commercial advertising blasts on radio and television and in newspaper and newsletter ads, both print and online.
 - Distribute marketing information at targeted locations such as at nearby subway stations, express bus stops, schools and houses of worship in Southeast Queens and along the Atlantic Branch while collecting voluntary rider contact information (emails) to conduct follow-up.
 - Create marketing campaign benchmarks to ensure progress is being made and develop an Atlantic Ticket-specific rider survey to better understand how riders learned of the program and what improvements they would like to see.

¹ Currently, Atlantic Ticket is not one of the initial options on the TVMs. Unless a rider knows about the Atlantic Ticket, they could choose a station combination like Hollis to Atlantic Terminal and pay the full peak fare. If a rider chooses any station combination where Atlantic Ticket can be used, the fare should automatically go to the lower value instead of the full-price fare. In fact, many riders have been overcharged: 188,000 in 2018; 300,000 in 2019; and 231,817 in 2020 [The Long Island Rail Road Today, *LIRR overcharged 566,635 riders in 2020*, (September 30, 2021), Date accessed: October 6, 2021, <https://www.thelirrtoday.com/2021/09/lirr-overcharged-566635-riders-in-2020.html>].

- **Transparency:** Create a Freedom Ticket Task Force to oversee a thorough fare restructuring study to help provide timely recommendations; make ridership and revenue data public; identify funding opportunities; and provide quarterly reports to the MTA Board.^{1 2}
- **Service:** Restore pre-pandemic service, expand service frequency where needed, and make necessary adjustments to midday and shoulder-of-the-peak service to accommodate more riders traveling during these times.
- **Crews:** Ensure appropriate staffing levels and necessary training for all railroad personnel to be equipped with the knowledge of the new fare program to better assist riders.
- **Transfers:** Improve bus service to outer borough commuter rail stations to enable more seamless connections between the two modes.³
- **Fare Payment Flexibility:** Expedite OMNY rollout on the commuter railroads to allow for easier reduced fare implementation.
- **Expansion Projects:**
 - Include Freedom Ticket discounts while developing service plans for East Side Access, Third Track, and Penn Station Access.⁴
 - Build platform extensions at various stations to accommodate more passengers.⁵

Integrated and Flexible Fare Structures Elsewhere

Boston: The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's (MBTA) fare payment systems can be loaded with subway, bus, commuter rail tickets, but free transfers are not available between modes unless riders get a monthly CharlieTicket pass.⁶ However, the CharlieCard pilot program for Zone 1A at Fairmount Line stations, provides free transfers between commuter rail and subways and buses. The system uses fare validators on station platforms.⁷

London: London has contactless cards (available on mobile devices) and Oyster Cards, which can be used for buses, tubes (subway), trams, the London Overground, the DLR (Docklands Light Railway), TfL Rail, and most National Rail service within London. Both cards support daily fare capping, but contactless cards also support weekly fare capping. Riders can add travelcards to Oyster Cards, allowing for unlimited day, week, or monthly travels within valid zones.⁸

Paris: Paris's Navigo Pass provides weekly, monthly, and annual fare packages that can be used on all modes-metro within specified fare zones.⁹ Cardboard T+ tickets are available for single trips, and allow for free transfers between buses and trams, or between the RER and the Metro in 90 minutes. There is a mobile app for fares, where riders can get daily, weekly, and monthly fare packages.¹⁰

1 CH2M Hill (CH2M) and LTK Engineering Services (LTK) studied California's MetroLink fare system, evaluating ridership, fare elasticities, fare changes, and revenue impacts [Metrolink – Southern California Regional Rail Authority, *Metrolink Board of Directors Meeting*, (July 24, 2015), Date accessed: February 5, 2021, http://metrolink.granicus.com/DocumentViewer.php?file=metrolink_3a03b149d424633411da0df0a22d59a7.pdf&view=1#page=45].

2 PCAC sees an expanded Freedom Ticket concept as revenue generating. However, there may be situations that may require additional funding (i.e. transfers). Funding opportunities should be evaluated to help support the program (See Outer Borough Transportation Account, p.28).

3 See Appendix E: Outer Borough and Suburban Bus Connections, p.39.

4 Penn Station Access includes four new Bronx stations: Hunts Point; Parkchester/ Van Nest; Morris Park; Co-Op City.

5 See Appendix F for a list of stations that need platform extensions, p.41.

6 Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), *Fares Overview*, Date accessed: August 9, 2021, <https://www.mbta.com/fares>.

7 Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), *Fairmount Line Weekday Service Pilot*, Date accessed: August 9, 2021, <https://www.mbta.com/projects/fairmount-line-weekday-service-pilot>.

8 Transport For London (TfL), *Oyster pay as you go*, Date accessed: August 9, 2021, <https://tfl.gov.uk/fares/how-to-pay-and-where-to-buy-tickets-and-oyster/pay-as-you-go/oyster-pay-as-you-go?intcmp=55536>.

9 Ile-de-France, *Navigo Week package*, Date accessed: August 9, 2021, https://www.iledefrance--mobilites-fr.translate.goog/titres-et-tarifs/detail/forfait-navigo-semaine? x_tr_sl=fr& x_tr_tl=en& x_tr_hl=en-US& x_tr_pto=ajax,elem.

10 Ile-de-France, *Ticket t+*, Date accessed: August 9, 2021, https://www.iledefrance--mobilites-fr.translate.goog/titres-et-tarifs/detail/ticket-t? x_tr_sl=fr& x_tr_tl=en& x_tr_hl=en-US& x_tr_pto=ajax,elem.

Provide suburban discounts for all commuter rail riders traveling to and from New York City and within suburban zones, including discounts for MNR riders within New York State on the New Haven Line.

- **Transparency:** Incorporate an Off-Peak and Reverse Peak Suburban Discount Pilot Program component into the fare restructuring study of the Freedom Ticket Task Force included in Recommendation 2 to provide timely recommendations; make ridership and revenue data public; identify funding opportunities; and provide quarterly reports to the MTA Board.
- **Service:** Restore pre-pandemic service, expand service frequency where needed, and make needed adjustments to midday and shoulder-of-the-peak service to accommodate more riders traveling during these times.
- **Crews:** Ensure appropriate staffing levels and necessary training for all railroad personnel to be equipped with the knowledge of the new fare program to better assist riders.
- **Transfers:**
 - Work with local elected officials to help identify funding opportunities to provide transfers to New York City Transit subways and buses for city-bound commuters and suburb-bound reverse-commuters.
 - Work with suburban bus operators to improve connections to rail stations and develop funding strategies to provide transfers between modes and providers.¹
- **Fare Payment Flexibility:** Expedite OMNY rollout on the commuter railroads to allow for easier reduced fare implementation.

- **Expansion Projects:**

- Include these discounts in developing service plans for East Side Access (ESA), LIRR's Third Track, and Penn Stations Access (PSA), and examine ridership data to determine feasibility of including peak-hour suburban discounts as operational capacity expands.
- In addition to weekday discounts, include weekend one-way discounts similar to the CityTicket program to support inter-zone suburban weekend travel.²

Current Suburban Discounts:

Both railroads have intermediate fares between certain zones and stations. On the LIRR, one-way fares within a specific zone and between neighboring zones are just \$3.25. For example, in Zone 10 the \$3.25 fare is good for travel within Zone 10 and to Zones 9 and 12. This fare is in place to encourage local travel.

On MNR's Harlem Line, travel between Scarsdale through North White Plains is just \$3.00. This is also true for travel between stations like Valhalla and Chappaqua, and Mount Vernon West and Crestwood.

While these discounted fares are low and provide relief to some riders, more can still be done. Between zones 4 and 10 on the LIRR, one-way off-peak fares are \$7.50, with some off-peak one-way fares climbing to \$17.00 - \$22.25. While these riders are traveling further distances, these fares could be lowered to encourage even more people to get onboard.³

¹ See Appendix E: Suburban Bus Connections for more details on the need to provide improved connections and transfers between suburban bus operators and the MTA's commuter railroads' which also includes discussion points on the relatively unknown UniTicket program, p.39.

² Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), *CityTicket*, Date accessed: February 9, 2021, <https://new.mta.info/fares/Cityticket>.

³ Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), *LIRR and Metro-North fares*, Date accessed: September 23, 2020, <https://new.mta.info/fares/lirr-metro-north>.