



PCAC

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Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA
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Testimony to NYC Council Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure with Public Safety
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Greetings! I'm Lisa Daglian, Executive Director of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA (PCAC). Thank you, Chairs Brooks-Powers, and Hanks and members of both Committees, for holding this hearing on a topic that is a top priority for New Yorkers around the five boroughs and the entire region.

It's no secret that COVID decimated ridership on subways, buses and trains. While it's coming back – with just about five million combined riders on December 7th – ridership is struggling to reach 70% of pre-pandemic levels and there are still people who don't feel safe enough to get back onboard. We know that it's important that riders feel safe, in addition to being safe, as we enter our post-COVID world and next normal.

In the run-up to last month's election, a spate of high-profile crimes on New York City buses and subways – highlighted in a too-political spotlight – brought safety concerns more sharply into focus. Following several devastating and high-profile tragedies, the city, state and MTA doubled down on their collaborative efforts to ensure riders are safe and feel safe. That's a crucial step toward getting more people back on transit.

Recent initiatives like the Cops, Cameras and Care program, with the greater and more visible police presence throughout the system – and letting riders know they are on platforms – better care options for those experiencing homelessness and/or mental illness and the investment in new technology are already proving to have a positive effect. With the restoration of a sense of order, crime on transit is now decreasing, especially when compared to pre-pandemic levels.

However, there is still more work to be done to change the narrative and regain the public's trust. Of course, without recurring – and new – sources of funding, these types of programs are unsustainable.

The fact of the matter is transit is safer when more people are using it because there are more "eyes on the system." However, the threat of fare hikes and service cuts looms large over the MTA. Taking these steps to plug a fiscal deficit would only further depress ridership levels and spark a death spiral of more fare hikes and service cuts, resulting in a less safe transit system.

The only way to break this cycle is to stabilize the MTA's finances. That means increasing revenue, which should be done through new sources of operating funding from the city, state and feds to keep and increase service levels, and congestion pricing for capital projects such as more cameras, new entry gates to reduce fare evasion and even platform doors.

Transit is an essential service, and it deserves to be funded as such—just like our fire and police departments. Riders cannot be expected to pay for saving this system that we all depend on. This is particularly true for low-income riders who often live the farthest from transit but depend on it the most. The Fair Fares program is an important first step to ensuring that all New Yorkers can afford a MetroCard. We applaud the Council for base-

lining funding for Fair Fares and investing in riders who need the extra support, and we believe this program must be expanded by doubling eligibility using twice the federal poverty level so more New Yorkers can take advantage of the underutilized program. It should also extend to the commuter rails so that riders who live close to those stations within the five boroughs, in subway deserts, can access the trains they often must forego for affordability. We ask that you consider this in your 2023/24 budget discussions.

A comprehensive marketing strategy that makes transit a more appealing option for New Yorkers would also help, making note of service and enhancements and safety improvements. The MTA should use every tool at their disposal—from rethinking fares to establishing new partnerships with private companies—to get people back on trains and buses. New Yorkers and tourists alike want to take transit, and more investment and improvements will only help prove that riders have made the right choice to depend on the MTA.

There are two additional safety issues that are top of mind that we want to raise as well. First, the presence of e-bikes, e-scooters and even e-mopeds in the transit system. Clearly, we recognize that these mobility devices are important to getting around our vast region, particularly for deliveristas. However – as you know and are looking into – the lithium ion batteries can be extremely dangerous when modified or damaged, especially when charging. They're also dangerous when being ridden on platforms and even in trains. It is critical to minimize risk to all riders and regulate passage of these e-devices, and we know that the MTA is in the process of developing a plan to do that, particularly forbidding charging of any kind, and riding in stations and on vehicles. We also ask that you don't forget the transit system when you consider legislation around the batteries and devices.

In addition, rising concerns about the “tripledeemic” caused us on Friday to ask the MTA to ramp up the language it uses on screens and in its communications to go from “Mask Use is Encouraged” to “Mask Use is Strongly Encouraged” as one known – and easy – way of helping keep riders safer during cold, flu, RSV and COVID season. It's best to bring joy, not germs home for the holidays.

Our transit system is the backbone of the city and region. We can't let it fall into a death spiral of low ridership and less service — long-term, sustainable operating revenue is crucial to the future of New York. With sustained investment, riders will feel the impacts of faster trips, better safety, and an all-around more pleasant transit experience. We want riders to feel and be healthy and safe at all levels in the system, and continuing to focus on what is showing to be working will help get more people back on board. Investing in transit is investing in riders, and the region.

Thank you.