



Regional Plan Association

... a research and planning agency supported by voluntary membership to promote the co-ordinated development of the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut Metropolitan Region.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MEETING AIR QUALITY GOALS REQUIRE NEW CONSTRUCTION, INCREASED FUNDING
FOR REHABILITATION, DIVERSION OF PEAK HOUR AUTO TRAFFIC

Attached is the statement of Boris Pushkarev, Regional Plan Association Vice President for Research and Planning, for presentation at today's joint hearing of the New York State Departments of Environmental Protection and Transportation on the New York State Air Quality Implementation Plan for Mass Transit Improvements for New York City.

Mr. Pushkarev makes the following points:

...The proposed program does not deal with the problem of current overcrowding on subway lines. On five of the thirteen overcrowded tracks entering Manhattan overcrowding can be eliminated only with new construction. New York has the world's only rapid transit system that is being reduced.

...There is no program for preventing a fare increase, although the Governor has indicated a commitment to maintaining the current level.

...The proposed level of expenditure for rehabilitation while almost doubled to \$266 million per year, in constant dollars actually will be about one third more because of inflation. At that rate, given the almost \$8 billion indicated need, it would take much more than 36 years to complete the rehabilitation program.

Mr. Pushkarev also takes issue with the State's contention that the impact of transit improvement on diversion of auto travel is limited by pointing out that only a one percent peak hour increase in transit use to Manhattan at the expense of the auto would produce a 10 percent reduction in peak hour auto traffic. As an example, Long Island Railroad access to Grand Central Station would divert 3,000 autos in the peak hour alone--most of the volume of the Queens Midtown tunnel.

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Statement of
Boris Pushkarev, Vice President, Research & Planning
Regional Plan Association
Hearing of
New York State Departments of
Environmental Conservation and Transportation
on the
New York State Air Quality Implementation Plan
for Mass Transit Improvements
in the New York City Metropolitan Area

World Trade Center, New York City
July 26, 1978

The Clean Air Act Amendments of 1977 require New York State to produce a plan for "comprehensive measures to establish, expand or improve public transportation to meet basic transportation needs as expeditiously as practicable." The "Mass Transportation Improvement Package" of the State Air Quality Implementation Plan, the subject of today's hearing, does not meet that Congressionally mandated requirement and as such cannot be considered a substitute for the deleted bridge tolls strategy which it was to replace. It is mostly a compilation of ongoing projects. No effort is made by the State document to examine "basic needs," to explain which methods of meeting them are most effective and why, or to indicate how far the proposal would go in attaining them. While we cannot provide such an analysis in this testimony, particularly on a one-week's notice, three examples are instructive.

1. Despite past drops in patronage, crowding on the New York City subways remains severe by national standards. Some 70 percent of the Transit Authority subway tracks entering the Manhattan Central Business District operate overcrowded cars, while on other rapid transit systems in the nation, only 20 percent of the tracks entering downtowns do so, if 5.4 square feet (0.5 square meters) of gross vehicle floorspace per passenger is adopted as a standard of comfort. On eight out of the thirteen overcrowded NYCTA lines, overcrowding can be eliminated by operating more trains, without new construction. The remaining five would benefit from new construction. Meanwhile, the "improvement package" merely states that 4 square feet per passenger are "desirable" and makes the attainment of this modest standard contingent upon cost savings and added Federal subsidy (p. A-2). There is no meaningful effort to alleviate overcrowding or to attain the related goal of more frequent off-peak service, which would greatly enhance the attractiveness of the system for mid-day use when there is the greatest temptation to use a car or cab.

2. The "Improvement Package" observes that higher transit fares can result in a diversion from transit to auto use. But it contains no program to assure the maintenance of the fare, beyond stating that the Governor and the Mayor have announced their "intention" to maintain current fares through 1981, an intention subject to annual legislative appropriations, as in the past. There is a clear hint that fare increases may be coming and that the Implementation Plan will have to be revised accordingly. (p. A-1).

3. The "Improvement Package" promises that the rehabilitation program for New York City subways and buses, "which has been advanced at the level of approximately \$145 million per year over the past few years, will be increased to approximately \$266 million per year over the next six years." Much of this increase is ephemeral, for it fails to take account of inflation. Over the past six years, the Construction Cost Index in the New York area increased by 42 percent, so that in constant dollars, the accelerated program will probably increase past funding by about one-third.

The accelerated program targets \$460 million for the rehabilitation of present subway lines and \$150 million for subway stations over the next six years in addition to continued current levels of expenditure for these

purposes, about \$720 million over six years, for a total of \$1.33 billion in current dollars, unadjusted for inflation. It is instructive to compare this to "basic needs," as formulated in the MTA submission to UMTA, dated July, 1977. In that document, the rehabilitation needs of the subway system for an identical list of items total \$7.872 billion in constant 1977 dollars. Station improvement needs, included in that figure, are priced at \$1.641 billion, rather conservatively from Regional Plan's viewpoint. The six-year program before us meets about one-sixth of the need, MTA's stated need even without considering inflation. By implication, New Yorkers are being asked to wait more than thirty-six years for the rehabilitation cycle to be completed.

Because the program is supposed to be a substitute for bridge tolls, it is instructive to compare these minimal levels of funding with what a bridge toll strategy could have achieved. At least \$141 million annually in net income was expected from the bridge tolls with a uniform 75¢ one-way toll. If only half of that were used as the state-local share of capital funds, it could leverage \$280 million annually in federal grants, producing an additional six-year capital amount of \$2.1 billion, instead of the \$610 million addition to present expenditures proposed.

Equally important, \$70 million annually remaining from the bridge tolls could have gone to replace the so-called "Beame transfer," or the borrowing of State and City capital funds for operating subsidies. This cannibalistic practice, despite promises to discontinue it, was still in the budget at \$75 million in State Fiscal Year 1977-78 and has so far deprived New York City of \$1.1 billion in Federal capital grants, enough to build the Second Avenue Subway from 63rd Street to Water Street. This is so because \$281 million in scarce State-City capital funds, instead of being used to match federal capital grants, was used to replace federal capital grants spent on operating expenses. When the "Beame transfer" is finally discontinued, the remaining half of the toll revenue could go a long way to bring service frequency and space per passenger closer to accepted norms. The State package makes no effort to explore substitute sources of added operating funds.

Nor is the issue of expanding and improving public transportation limited to questions of where the money comes from. Perhaps more important in the New York context are institutional barriers to spending the money expeditiously and effectively. There are unbelievable delays in shepherding a project from conception to execution. These delays undermine the arguments of the Region for receiving additional transit aid and drain available resources through inflation. While rapid transit expansion worldwide is progressing at a fast pace, the New York Region has the dubious distinction of being the only urban region in the world with a shrinking rapid transit system, shrinking on the average by one mile a year. Our rate of construction progress--4.7 miles of new routes placed under construction in nine years--is difficult to believe compared to cities such as Washington, which placed over 50 miles under construction in the same period, or Boston and Atlanta. These cities have no hesitation to build new lines for traffic densities one-quarter or less than those of New York. The State package does not address these issues, which clearly are a part of "comprehensive measures to expand public transportation."

Lastly, the Introduction to the State's "Improvement Package" contains much general discussion to the effect that the impact of transit improvements on the diversion of auto travel is limited; Regional Plan Association's book, Public Transportation and Land Use Policy, is referred to in this context. The book does, indeed, state: "if reducing auto use is the policy objective, transit improvements are not enough"; but it goes on to say "direct restraints on the auto will be necessary" (p.1). This second part of the statement is totally neglected in the State's discussion. Furthermore, the fact that transit improvements have a modest effect on auto use does not mean that they have no effect. Modest or not, their effect must be evaluated in a site-specific context. For example, it would take only a one percent peak hour increase in transit use at the expense of the auto on the gateways to Manhattan to produce a 10 percent reduction in peak hour auto travel--with very substantial improvements in air quality. The same site-specific evaluation is required for particular new construction projects. Both the 63rd Street tunnel and the Second Avenue subway, because of the line-haul and distribution-end time savings they offer, do promise a noticeable diversion of auto travel. Per dollar of expenditure, the

diversion may be greatest in the case of Long Island Railroad access to Grand Central terminal, which would divert some 3,000 autos in the peak hour alone--most of the volume in the Queens-Midtown tunnel. However, some restraints would be required to prevent the tunnel from being filled up with newly induced auto travel.

In sum, transit improvements are related to a clean air strategy. They loom particularly large in the future as national policy, both for clean air and energy conservation, will place constraints on auto use. Of course, as the State statement observes, a rehabilitated and expanded public transportation system serving New York City will benefit its economy by making it more accessible and a more pleasant place for business, for living or for visiting.