

Testimony of Regional Plan Association

Senate Standing Committee on Corporations, Authorities and Commissions

Senate Committee on Transportation

September 29, 2021

Good afternoon. I am Kate Slevin, Executive Vice President at Regional Plan Association, a 100-year old non profit civic organization working towards better mobility, economic opportunity, and resiliency in the NYC metropolitan area. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and to the leaders of these Committees for their commitment to a better transit system for all New Yorkers.

I want to start by highlighting some deeply concerning data. Vehicles are using MTA Bridge and Tunnel crossings at about 115% of pre pandemic levels. Transit ridership, however, hovers around 50% of pre pandemic levels. Spikes in driving have dangerous consequences, and 2021 has already been the deadliest year on record in NYC under the current Mayoral Administration, and erased years of improvements.

A well functioning transit system connects people with work opportunities, education, and more. Yet there are significant hurdles that prevent our transit systems from returning to pre-pandemic levels. This increased reliance on cars as we emerge from the pandemic is deeply problematic for our air, wallets, and overall recovery.

We are at a critical point where more people will need to get back on transit. Guaranteed reliable, frequent service, along with strict mask regulations will help, so could a public awareness campaign connecting climate protection with transit.

I'd be remiss if I didn't say it - we are in a climate emergency, and getting on a train is a simple step people can take for a better, safer future for our

children. And given that the MTA provides 38% of all public transit trips in the country, according to Comptroller DiNapoli, our national climate goals are tied to the success of NYC's transit system.

We urge MTA and state officials to look to innovative ideas to entice riders back. Beyond reliable service, they could take the lead from other places. For example, Washington DC's WMATA has a series of promotions, discounts, and fare reductions to lure riders back, and is looking at longer term fare restructuring.

Traffic management and congestion pricing

The growth in traffic is one of the reasons why we need congestion pricing as soon as possible. We are pleased the MTA is moving forward with implementation. As a tri-state organization, we see the benefits for our entire region.

Our report from 2019 has several recommendations for implementation, these include:

1. Implementing transit and bicycle improvements prior to starting congestion pricing.
2. Adopting specific objectives and metrics to meet traffic, environmental, and public health goals while ensuring benefits are equitably shared. This data should also be reported publicly. Even if the targets are somewhat aspirational, it helps the public understand "how we are doing". Right now the only goal with a specific target in the legislation is a revenue goal, as you know.
3. Create a consistent toll rate for all similar trips by providing toll credits to drivers at MTA river crossings. This will reduce "shopping" for the cheapest tolls. RPA has found that 25% of morning peak traffic on the BQE comes from drivers avoiding tolls on the Hugh Carey Tunnel to take advantage of the free East River bridges. We support toll

credits for all crossings in Manhattan including MTA crossings and Hudson River crossings.

4. Introduce two-way tolling in the congestion zone.
5. Vary the congestion fee by the level of congestion at different times of the day, and by size of vehicle. RPA has found that higher variable rates have larger traffic speed benefits.
6. And finally, exemptions should be limited to those listed in the legislation.

Invest in the MTA capital program

RPA has been a strong and long standing supporter of the agency's capital investments, and has supported every capital program in the agency's history since the 1980s. We remain deeply committed to these programs because their projects will improve mobility, protect our climate, and create jobs. In fact, the agency's current capital program is expected to create over 287,000 direct and indirect jobs over its five year period.

At this point, the MTA may soon need to publicly explain its financial situation and how it affects its capital program. The public should know - will the program be scaled back or delayed? If so, how will those decisions be made? And the MTA should be proud of these investments, and use simple explanations about how projects in the program will help communities across the region. As my colleagues here have already stated, the current Capital Program dashboard has limitations -- terminology is technical and information is not thorough.

Every project in the capital program is important, but priorities include signal upgrades, accessibility improvements, and new bus purchases and investments that focus on improving outer borough transit. Resiliency upgrades to protect the system from storms will also be increasingly important as storms become more frequent. We also support planned improvements in Penn Station, and hope the agency will start to plan new

projects, like the Triboro Line, an RPA proposal to create a surface transit line on tracks that already exist between Brooklyn and the Bronx.

Reduce cost of construction

The MTA has made progress to reduce construction timelines, and use money efficiently. But so much more is left to be done. Both RPA's own research and analysis by the Eno Center for Transportation, among others, found that new transit projects are much more expensive to build in New York than in other U.S. regions, and two-to-three times as expensive as most of our international peers.

Recommended reforms include creating realistic budgets and project timelines, engaging the public early and often, reducing customization for individual projects, and putting one team of professionals in charge of each new project from start to end. Other reforms, such as streamlining the environmental review process and providing steady, reliable funding streams so projects don't start and stop will require actions by state, city and federal governments as well as the MTA.

We urge the MTA to provide periodic, detailed information on how much it is improving project delivery and reducing costs and delays.

Plan for increased flooding regionwide

Hurricane Ida showed the dangers of climate change for our region, including our subway system. Our analysis has found that up to 20 percent of all New York City subway station entrances — more than 400 in total — could be affected by an extreme rain scenario, also known as a "once-a-century" flood event.

Now, however, "once-a-century" flood events occur every couple years, regularly inundating stations despite earnest efforts from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). The agency has invested \$2.6 billion in resiliency projects since Hurricane Sandy, including fortifying 3,500 subway openings like vents, staircases, and elevator shafts against flooding. But again, much work still needs to be done.

MTA's longer term outlook is bleak

Thanks to Senator Schumer and our Congressional leaders, federal relief money is expected to allow existing transit service to operate until 2023.

But the MTA July financial plan clearly states that service reductions are on the table in 2023: It states that “service reductions assumed to be implemented in 2023 based on right-sizing of “new normal” under the worst-case scenario – generating \$1.255 billion of savings through 2024.”

We are deeply worried about this scenario. The magnitude necessary for service reductions to reach this \$1.2 billion marker is terrifying for our regional economy.

In addition, the debt burden of the agency is growing, and is now hovering around 21%. The portion of fare and toll revenue funding debt service is also growing, a troublesome sign.

And while we may see drops in transit ridership continue over the next few years, our region is still growing, and we anticipate transit use will come back to pre-pandemic levels, though transit schedules may need to adapt, especially on commuter rail systems.

Thank you again for your time today, and for holding this hearing.