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May 4, 2017

Veronique Hakim, Interim Executive Director
MTA
2 Broadway
New York, NY 10004

Dear Interim Director Hakim:

As the most significant tenant at Penn Station, the MTA has an obligation to its customers and to the entire region to assume a central role in planning for the major and long-overdue reconstruction and repair of critical infrastructure at the nation's busiest rail terminal.

New York City's economy runs through Penn Station, and while safety and reliability of the Penn infrastructure are top priorities, so too is the need to minimize headaches for hundreds of thousands of daily LIRR commuters and businesses during a year or more of major reconstruction. The purpose of this letter is to offer some key points that will help ensure the needs of these commuters retain a high priority in planning and throughout the reconstruction project.

1. "Fare deal" for commuters

First and foremost, the MTA and Amtrak must compensate commuters for weeks and months of delays, cancellations and closures that will be required to complete the planned station work. More than just inconvenient, these delays will mean actual costs to businesses and individual commuters, both in terms of monetary damage as well as lost time at work, and with family at home. The LIRR should provide across-the-board fare reductions to commuters, with the discounts funded by Amtrak or by reducing payments from the LIRR for use of the terminal.

2. Prioritize LIRR repairs and access

The LIRR is, by far, Penn Station's most significant tenant, with 300,000 daily users, followed by NJ Transit and then, Amtrak. Yet preliminary plans for major reconstruction work this summer appear to focus on improvements that will largely benefit cross-Hudson commuters and long-distance rail travelers. Amtrak should devise plans to shift its relatively limited service uptown, to Grand Central Terminal, to the largest degree possible, freeing more platform and track space for LIRR commuters. Trains from north and west of the city that do not absolutely need to enter Penn should be diverted throughout the repair process.

And work schedules should be adjusted to benefit the largest numbers of customers first. Amtrak should also amend its proposed schedule to include the July 4th and Labor Day holidays to take advantage of lower commuter ridership as well as schedule the most disruptive work during off-peak and nighttime hours.

3. Public hearings, real-time information to commuters

The MTA must assume a leadership role in ensuring that LIRR customers receive regular and complete updates about the project, including specific benchmarks and timelines for completion of each phase. Similar to the effort that the agency has undertaken with its own planned reconstruction of the NYC Subway's "L" line, the MTA must also commit to a series of ongoing public hearings, held at times and in locations that are convenient to commuters, to engage the public and collect feedback on each stage of the project. The MTA should also be sure it is using every means of available communication, including posters, station and on-board announcements, and 21st century electronic, email, text messaging and social media platforms to keep its customers informed in advance and real-time of closures, delays and service changes.

4. Find Penn alternatives outside the box

The MTA and LIRR must find alternates to Penn Station to help minimize delays and crowding, including expanding service from Jamaica to Woodside, Brooklyn's Atlantic Terminal and Hunterspoint Avenue, cross-honoring Metrocards on more frequent connecting subway and bus service, encouraging car pools and ride-sharing with reduced parking and bridge tolls, expanded ferry service and providing incentives for staggered work hours.

5. Increased accountability

The MTA needs to work with Amtrak and other stakeholders to provide real-time updates on project status and delays, and measure the agencies' performance against pre-determined goals for effectively mitigating disruptions, as well as safety and other benchmarks. The MTA should insist on specific monetary penalties for Amtrak and independent contractors who fail to meet specific deadlines or benchmark goals. The MTA should designate specific personnel who will be available to respond to commuter and community concerns throughout the project, and provide detailed reports to legislative oversight committees at least monthly. The MTA should also ensure that all documents and information relevant to the project are immediately available for public inspection throughout the project. Toward that end, I would like to request copies of Amtrak's Penn Station plan, as well as updates to the Penn Vision and Moynihan Station plans.

Veronique Hakim

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A lack of effective coordination, communication and investment by Amtrak and its tenant agencies has already contributed to repeated incidents that have paralyzed not just Penn Station, the LIRR and the region's economy, but also led to frustration and inconvenience for hundreds of thousands of individual New Yorkers. We cannot allow this necessary project to improve safety, reliability and service at Penn to result in an even worse debacle.

I stand ready to assist you in any way that I can and look forward to your response to this letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elaine Phillips". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Senator Elaine Phillips

7th Senate District

Chair, Senate Committee on Infrastructure and Capital Investment