

RIDERS ALLIANCE

January 24, 2024

2024 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing - Transportation - January 24, 2024 at 9:30 A.M.

Testimony of Danny Pearlstein, Policy & Communications Director

Good afternoon Chairs and Committee members, my name is Danny Pearlstein. I am the Policy & Communications Director for the Riders Alliance, New York City's grassroots organization of subway and bus riders. We organize riders in all five boroughs to hold our leaders accountable for better public transit and, through it, a more just and equitable New York. Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today.

Millions of New York City public transit riders need fast, frequent, affordable, accessible, reliable and resilient bus and rail service, which requires capital and expense funding for the MTA now and in the future to meet new and existing needs and address new and existing challenges. We are grateful for the funding package adopted last year, including more frequent service on over a dozen subway lines, which is still being rolled out.

We are also grateful for your historic adoption of congestion pricing in 2019 and eager to see that first in the nation program begin later this year. The program has the support of dozens of leading environmental organizations in New York and New Jersey. Litigation to stop the program, misusing environmental law to torpedo a strongly pro-environment policy, is baseless.

MTA officials spent nearly three years producing over 4,000 pages worth of environmental studies and received over 28,000 pages worth of comments on those studies. Everyone in 28 counties in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut has had numerous opportunities to weigh in. Now it is time to turn the system on, make the essential reliability and accessibility upgrades to the subway that it promises, improve bus speeds and emergency response times, and allow all of us in the downstate region to breathe easier. Any further concerns about congestion pricing should be addressed by additional investments in transit operations, improving bus service in communities without subway stations, and making existing services like express buses and commuter rail more affordable to working families by reducing fares.

Moreover, it is important that the state be consistent in our transportation policy. While congestion pricing will support \$15 billion worth of public transit upgrades, the state is also in the midst of spending \$5 billion in state and federal funds to expand highways within New York City, highways that exacerbate climate change and divide our communities. Instead, the state should adopt an across-the-board, whole of government policy to invest federal and state transportation funding in public transit and active modes that afford New Yorkers more freedom to get around within and among our communities.

City transit riders are working closely with New Yorkers for Transportation Equity, a statewide coalition, to win new resources for public transit, cycling, and walking in rural, suburban, and urban communities across the state. Our coalition supports the goal in legislation proposed by

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Assemblymember McMahon and Senator Gounardes ([A4120/S1981](#)) to cut vehicle miles traveled 15% by 2050. Expanding on that legislation, New York should adopt an approach pioneered last year in Minnesota, that will shift the gears of transportation policy in favor of greater freedom of mobility and more access to basic needs for all New Yorkers.

Our goal is the reinvestment of infrastructure funds, consistent with the New York's Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, in projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and vehicle miles traveled, that lessen the climate risks and inequities of disadvantaged communities, and promote inclusive transportation statewide. Planners of the past, backed by the auto, tire, and fossil fuel industries that profit from making us pay to fuel and maintain cars, invested our transportation money in roads and highways -- denying us the freedom to use forms of transportation that better serve our needs and the needs of our communities. In some cities, these interests literally divided us based on race: destroying Black neighborhoods with highways designed for white suburbanites, instead of funding transportation solutions that work for all of us. New York has proven that people can win big reinvestments in public transportation, as advocates and communities worked with lawmakers in 2019 and 2023 to end the neglect of New York City's iconic subway.

With abundant federal infrastructure funding, state leaders can now provide unparalleled freedom to access work, school, healthcare and other basic needs within and among our communities. State climate law and federal directives together demand a positive vision where more New Yorkers, particularly in disadvantaged communities, can choose to take more trips by public transit, walking and biking. Now, a new statewide transportation policy should be put in place to help rural, suburban and urban New York alike survive and thrive as we repair the past, meet today's needs and confront future challenges.

For too long, our Department of Transportation has built more and wider roads, only to find more drivers stuck in more traffic with more severe consequences for neighbors. As a result, our communities are fractured by highways; our streets are unsafe for kids, seniors and anyone outside a multiton vehicle; and most New Yorkers have been left dependent on a road network that doesn't deliver on its promise and isolates as much as it connects us.

U.S. infrastructure law, the product of a sharply divided and aggressively lobbied Congress, offers billions of dollars for surface transportation. New York could continue spending billions of dollars on highway projects that repeat and compound past mistakes. But a growing national trend in progressive states instead enacts robust laws to cut carbon emissions from transportation and invest in a broad spectrum of mobility options that provide better access for everyone. By joining this movement, New York can realign our infrastructure spending with our values, remedy past wrongs, revitalize our communities and free New Yorkers to seek and seize more opportunities.

Thank you.