



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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No thanks, I'll swim...

After eight years as a mayor and these past eight months as a New York senator, I thought no instance of financial inefficiency could shock me anymore. I was wrong. This past week the Port Authority proposed fee hikes so extraordinary, so out of touch, that they took my breath away.

Citing the need for more revenue, the Port Authority proposed increasing tolls on Hudson River crossings: the George Washington Bridge, the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels. For E-Z Pass drivers entering New York from New Jersey, they urge increasing tolls from \$8 to \$12. Those unfortunate drivers paying cash would be slapped with a \$7 increase, making their trip rise from \$8 to \$15. Not satisfied with punishing just those in automobiles, the Port Authority has also suggested increasing

a single-fare PATH ticket from \$1.75 to \$2.75 and a monthly PATH card from \$54 a month to \$89 a month, a 65 percent increase. It was enough to make you want to swim across.

Thank goodness Governor Cuomo and New Jersey Governor Christie declared the proposal a non-starter, but it did emphatically illustrate an ongoing problem. The fact that can no longer be ignored is that New York has gargantuan authorities that operate as quasi-government agencies with little oversight. They collect billions of dollars and yet are perpetually broke.

Sound familiar? It should. Here on Long Island we pay some of the highest commuter rail rates in the nation with increases almost as common as breakdowns and yet the former administration instituted a payroll tax to bail out the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to the tune of well over \$1 billion. While commuters continue to pay escalating fares, everyone from schools to hospitals to non-profits have to subsidize the MTA. To make matters worse, in 2010, the MTA's payroll increased by \$71 million despite the fact that its workforce was reduced by over 850 employees. The numbers never add up.

I don't know where it ends but I can tell you where we should start. Jay Walder, head of the MTA has announced his departure and Port Authority Director Christopher Ward is rumored to be mulling over the same. Now is the perfect time for Governor Cuomo to finally change the culture of failure that pervades these agencies, starting from the top down. There are always experienced candidates that understand the systems and what it takes to overhaul them, but they are often overlooked for political insiders. Let's hope the Governor continues to show his independence and breaks that custom, giving whomever is selected the political carte blanche to clean house.

You may recall that week after week in this column, I urge you to stay informed and to stay involved. This is why. The bottom line is that old habits die hard. When the political dust settles, many think it's back to business as usual. It's vital that we keep the leadership of the MTA and Port Authority front and center in the news and in Albany. An affordable mass transit system is a key to our economy. It is one of the singular greatest factors to getting New York back on track. Get involved and voice your concerns or we may all just be swimming across that river soon enough.