



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

## From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

JACK M. MARTINS April 23, 2012

| ISSUE: **MTA (METROPOLITAN TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY)**

### **The Signs of Spring**

As sure as the swallows return to Capistrano, you know it must be spring in New York City when the mayoral candidates declare war on the suburbs. No sooner did we repeal the onerous MTA payroll tax than candidate, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, trotted out his plan for a new and improved commuter tax. I know, I know, it's not really new. Multiple candidates in every mayoral race suggest it, but Mr. Stringer gets the prize for being the first this year. It's a sharp political move for them when you think about it: advocate for a tax on those who can't vote for (or against) you anyway.

If you're unfamiliar with this flawed policy, allow me to fill you in. The commuter tax was in place since 1966. If you didn't live in the five boroughs but traveled into the city for work, the city conveniently took a percentage of your salary for the privilege. It was finally repealed in 1999 and ever since, mayoral candidates of every stripe have tried to resurrect it, pandering to the age-old instinct, "let the other guy pay for it." Imagine such misguided policy here on Long island, taxing those who live in the boroughs but shop at Roosevelt Field, on the Miracle Mile, or at Costco, or Target or any of our "big box" stores that they so strenuously object to allowing in the city? It's a ridiculous penalty to impose on the very people whose

dollars are fueling your local economy, and yet this is what Mr. Stringer has embraced.

What's different about Mr. Stringer's proposal is that the revenue from the proposed tax wouldn't go to fill the city's coffers as in years past, but would yet again subsidize the MTA and feed its gargantuan appetite. Yet nowhere does Mr. Stringer suggest or even remotely hint that New York City residents should share the burden – not a fee, not a tax, not even a fare increase. That wouldn't be politically expedient. In his view, the burden should be borne by the people that use the system the least. Of the 2.3 billion MTA riders annually, less than 300 million are LIRR or Metro North riders with the balance being subway riders. As it stands, if I were to travel into Penn Station on the Long Island Railroad at peak hours from Mineola, I would pay \$10 for a one-time fare. In contrast, a \$2.50 subway fare will allow a rider the ability to travel endlessly, literally hundreds of miles of subway track, not to mention free transfers to the bus system. So I hardly agree with Mr. Stringer's assessment that suburban commuters are draining MTA resources.

That leads me to the most important point. The fairly regular, frantic calls to save a perpetually drowning MTA are usually overblown. They insisted the MTA would never survive without the payroll tax, yet we've repealed most of it and have somehow managed to keep the MTA supported, even fully funding a multibillion dollar capital campaign for major construction projects. The MTA needs large doses of accountability and transparency as to how its nearly \$13 billion annual budget is meted out before it can ask us to join it on the long road back to credibility. I trust that under the leadership of new MTA-chief Joe Lhotta, we may have taken our first few steps on that road.

If and when Mr. Stringer's calls for a commuter tax are brought to Albany for our consideration, the response, I assure you, will be a clear, unequivocal "no."

In any case, I hope you and your families enjoy the superb weather and that the beautiful signs of spring sweep away Mr. Stringer's more unpleasant ones.