



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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Slowly but Surely

Back in February of 2011, I met Susan, a resident of New Hyde Park, who shared with me yet another of those Long Island Railroad stories that can drive sane people mad.

Just a few weeks before, Susan had decided to avoid the snow-covered roads and purchased two one-way tickets at the New Hyde Park railroad station. She didn't use the return fare since she was able to get a ride home. When she tried to refund the ticket, she was shocked to learn MTA policy called for a \$10 processing fee regardless of the ticket's price. That was more than her \$7.25 ticket. Imagine a refund fee more costly than the actual product itself!

When I looked into it, I discovered that under the previous Albany leadership in 2010, the MTA snuck in some other onerous LIRR policies to make up for revenue shortfalls in addition to fare hikes and service cuts. Originally, you had six months to return any unused ticket and there was no fee for doing so. Under these changes, one-way and round-trip tickets were no longer valid after two weeks; you had only 30 days to return them for a refund, and it cost you \$10 under any circumstances.

In fact, when Susan asked what she should do with her now worthless LIRR ticket, she was told that she could either give it away, sell it, or throw it out. Of course the first two options were only available if done within two weeks of purchasing the ticket – otherwise she, and any of us, would be left only with option three.

To say I was annoyed is to put it mildly. Why void the ticket after 14 days? New York City Subway Metrocards are valid for a year, and even then a balance can be transferred to a new card with no fee. Why a different set of rules for Long Island? Once again, we have to battle the MTA's false perception that Long Islanders have deep pockets and that we don't notice when they're picked.

I found the new rules to be exploitive so I made a bit of a ruckus. I introduced a bill (S.3778), which passed in the Senate that would force the MTA to issue a full reimbursement for unused tickets and gives you six months from the date of the purchase to return them. Yet, even with the support of Assemblywoman Schimel, it couldn't move in the Assembly, where I think sometimes they share the perception that Long Island has deep pockets.

Unfortunately, I had to accept that I couldn't accomplish it in my first term, and that after a hopeful re-election, I could get it back onto the drawing board.

But, to my surprise, after two years of challenging the MTA and LIRR to change their policy, they called me last week to announce that starting September 24, ticket validity would be extended from two weeks to two months, with the refund period for those tickets going from one month to two. They will also be restoring some of the prior service cuts and are working on an app that lets you download tickets to your smart-phone.

Is it everything we wanted? No. We have yet to regain our original refund and validity policies but it is incremental progress and for that we applaud them. Together with service restorations that we won back this year, I think it demonstrates that even the MTA can be made to see the light. Now, if we could just get them to reverse the \$10 fee. I guess I'll be back

at the drawing board.