



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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From the “Dept. of Bad Ideas”

I am convinced that somewhere there exists a dingy, grey room, tucked away in the bowels of a huge Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) office building, hidden from any sunlight, deprived of any fresh air, pipes incessantly dripping and smelling of mold and mildew, with the words “Dept. of Bad Ideas” carefully stenciled onto its glass door. There, the excuse-ridden agency hatches the illogical follies that are to be foisted upon sensible taxpayers and hapless commuters. Among the classics that have sprung from the brain trust located there:

Charging Long Island Railroad (LIRR) commuters \$10 to refund tickets that actually cost less than the refund fee itself (incredibly, this still stands despite my petitions for common sense).

Calling for the now-infamous MTA Payroll Tax which selectively taxed only downstate businesses whether their employees used mass transit or not, costing Long Island’s struggling economy about \$229 million per year (we repealed most of it and await an appellate court decision confirming that it was unconstitutional to begin with).

Holding billions in unrented, vacant real estate while yet again raising fares on overextended straphangers.

The list goes on and on.

Lest these ideas feel lonely, they're now trumpeting yet another that is so illogical that, if adopted, certainly belongs in their top goofs of all time: displacing LIRR trains at Penn Station for Metro-North trains. That would mean by 2016, four railroads – LIRR, NJ Transit, Amtrak and now Metro-North - would share the tracks and platforms with Metro-North adding an “estimated” ten trains per hour. I can just hear the collective sighs of those who regularly brave Penn as it is now and trust me, I sympathize with you. Why would the powers that be at the MTA want to make it worse?

But Thomas Prendergast, the newly-nominated Executive Director of the MTA has already gone on record as supporting the idea and essentially sticking it to us Islanders. He reminds the more than 300,000 daily LIRR commuters, that “...we are a regional agency and we need to make sure we're doing everything across the region to provide benefits to the people.” (In case you don't recognize canned statements prepared by out-of-touch PR bureaucrats - that was one.)

I see where this came from. Soon, the Long Island Railroad will have East Side Access into Grand Central station, so there should be room, right? Wrong. I'd love for someone involved – anyone really – to just try to remember why we're spending billions of dollars to carve through millions of tons of bedrock under the East River. It was because Penn was overwhelmingly recognized as being much too crowded - and I might add – nobody could find any room on tracks leading into Grand Central for the LIRR. Are they now suggesting that taxpayers and commuters foot a bill that will eventually top out at \$18 billion only to see the problem we attempted to alleviate made worse?

It's nonsense. The whole point of the East Side Access Project was to create a terminal under Grand Central Station that would increase ridership on the LIRR, accessing central Manhattan without affecting Penn. In fact, Metro North went undisturbed by the LIRR move to Grand Central because the LIRR was forced to create its own space, literally carving out a cavern for its own terminal.

What's worse, we're promised lots of detailed "studies" that will do nothing more than enrich high-priced consultants on the taxpayer's dime. No expensive commissions are needed to understand simple mathematics. If overcrowding and congestion are relieved by eliminating trains and passengers then the inverse must be true: adding trains and passengers will cause overcrowding. It's pretty simple really and it insults the intelligence of the average commuter to propose an intentionally wasteful campaign of commissions, and studies, and public relations to convince us otherwise.

Let's remember that the whole point of mass transit is to encourage commuters to leave their cars at home. When the commute by rail becomes too difficult, the short-term consequence is more cars on roads and already congested bridges. The long-term consequence, however, is for inconvenienced families to finally throw up their hands and move to greener pastures.

While I understand the MTA is a regional effort that must accommodate various needs, I can't help but notice that it's always Long Island that bears the brunt for the benefit of others. This time, it's commuters from Connecticut. I wonder if Mr. Prendergast is aware that since 1974, Long Island Railroad fares have increased by as much as 660%, leaving us paying about 200% more than NYC commuters? For all the talk of a "regional" rail system, it's telling how commuters, taxpayers, and businesses in our corner of the region have time and again been left holding the tab.

I have an old and wise friend who says, "You can't squeeze blood from a turnip." Maybe somebody should go down to the MTA's "Dept. of Bad Ideas" and tell them Long Island will no longer be the turnip.