



State Senate & State Assembly Joint Public Hearing: Senate Standing Committee on Transportation; Senate Standing Committee on Corporations; Assembly Standing Committee on Corporations, Commissions, and Authorities

Public Testimony: Impact of COVID-19 on the Metropolitan Transportation Authority

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Thank you, Senator Comrie, Senator Kennedy, Assembly Member Paulin, and your colleagues for the opportunity to testify before you today, and for holding this oversight hearing of the MTA. We are very glad to see the Legislature's continued engagement in its oversight of the authority, and we appreciate being able to address you today. I am Nick Sifuentes, Executive Director of Tri-State Transportation Campaign, a 27-year-old organization dedicated to improving people's lives by expanding their access to transit and clean transportation options in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

For years, Tri-State has called for increased funding to improve subways, buses, and commuter rail. The time for that call has never been more apt, the need never greater, the urgency never clearer.

You have heard from the MTA and other esteemed panelists about the crisis that is unfolding for our subways, buses, and commuter rail as a result of the pandemic. As you know, the MTA needs a massive capital infusion from the federal government to meet its current operational needs, which have only grown more acute and expensive as COVID-19 requires additional sanitation and safety measures for riders and employees.

If the federal government fails to provide this relief money, the MTA will cease to exist as we know it—and so too will New York City: the sheer physical impossibility of just [nearly one million](#) more daily commuters fighting to get to their jobs in private automobiles would bring the region to an utter standstill. Traffic crawls at just over 4mph in midtown Manhattan, and that pre-pandemic gridlock already cost the New York economy [\\$20 billion a year](#), according to a study by the influential Partnership for New York City. Imagine the economic damage a failed transit network would wreak.

While we all wait on tenterhooks for the federal government to move forward on transit funding as part of a potential broader stimulus package, the state can take proactive steps to ensure that their contributions to transit are maintained even in the wake of a decreased state budget. Moving forward, the MTA will require reliable, steady streams of funding to allow it to continue to face coronavirus and bring riders back to the system. We must preserve existing state funding levels and not double down on federal inaction by leaving the MTA without



promised cashflow from the many sources of revenue that the state provides. Additional cutbacks will leave the authority in an even worse position than it is already in currently; the state cannot abet the federal government in abdicating its duty to provide a crucial public service to millions.

This is especially true when you look at who the millions currently served by transit comprise: essential workers, the people who—at great risk to themselves and their families—relied on the city’s buses and trains to get them to and from jobs in hospitals, clinics, warehouses, grocery stores, pharmacies, restaurants, and other crucial services New Yorkers relied on while we all sheltered in place. They bore the brunt of this virus when it was at its most mysterious and most deadly. Many of them paid the ultimate price. At the bare minimum, we owe it to them and their families to provide high-quality service to and from their jobs and homes. And, to the MTA, I would add that if deeper service cuts become necessary, you continue to prioritize preservation of service in the communities that need it most and act transparently to inform riders and the general public about where cuts are happening, why they’re happening, and when riders can expect a restoration of service.

And the communities that need it most are those that are reliant on the bus. Throughout the pandemic and for the first time in history, New York City buses have consistently reported higher ridership numbers than the subway. A primary reason is that essential workers make up 30 percent of all bus riders. The NYC Department of Transportation plans to add 20 miles of bus priority improvements to the city’s streets; Tri-State’s analysis shows that these improvements will benefit an estimated 750,000 riders across the city, many of them in neighborhoods which Census data reveals are home to high numbers of essential workers. We call on the city to move forward quickly on these lanes as part of a comprehensive and long-overdue plan to prepare our city for the return of commuters post-COVID, and we call on state legislators to support these new bus improvements in your districts. Your essential workers need them.

Part of the urgency to deploy new bus priority lanes in New York City is to anticipate and prepare for the surge in car traffic. In order to manage that expected surge and help restore funding to the authority, we need the state, from the governor to the legislature to riders, to advocate for congestion pricing. Currently stalled at the federal level, much like transit funding writ large, congestion pricing would help raise desperately-needed money for bus and subway operations while also helping reduce car traffic that will choke Manhattan. If we cannot move forward on congestion pricing and soon, we will exacerbate the post-COVID economic crisis that looms ahead of New York City.

We must confront that crisis. New York is the engine of the economy of the Northeast, and indeed of the nation: our GDP is larger than Canada’s, and we are the one region of the country actually poised to reopen successfully, thanks to our collective efforts to combat COVID-19. But that reopening will be fraught with new challenges if we do not ensure the continued

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functioning of our transit system. The success of our city, our region, and our country rely on a fully-funded MTA, both at the state and federal levels. We know what we have to do; let's get to work.