



Testimony of Danny Pearlstein, Policy & Communications Director
Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Transportation
January 26, 2021

Good afternoon chairs Comrie, Paulin, Kennedy, and Magnarelli and committee members. Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Danny Pearlstein. I am the Policy & Communications Director for the Riders Alliance, New York City's grassroots organization of public transit riders. The past year has been an incomparably difficult one for public transit. Ridership plummeted like never before. Frontline transit workers have endured a catastrophic loss of life. Public transit faces the worst fiscal crisis in its history.

Yet transit is also having a unique moment. The federal government, led by Brooklyn's own rider and now US Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer has stepped forward with unprecedented billions of dollars in aid to keep trains and buses running. Even the cash-strapped City of New York has accelerated its program of bus priority on busy streets. And, for the first time in more than a decade, riders successfully beat back a proposed fare hike. Transit is at a turning point. Riders need your support more than ever.

Governor Cuomo postponed the fare hike but did not cancel it nor provide an indication of what circumstances would prompt him to raise the fare. Riders need reassurance that fares will not rise as long as New York endures the after effects of the pandemic. With the MTA projecting that ridership will not return to 80% of early 2020 levels until 2024, any fare hike should also wait at least several more years. A fare hike in the near future would fall overwhelmingly on essential workers and New Yorkers with no access to cars. It would be profoundly regressive, unjust and counterproductive to the drive to bring more riders back to transit, without which New

York will not recover. **Riders need the legislature's support to fill the MTA's budget gap with new, progressive revenue raisers like the Invest In Our New York Act, not a fare hike.**

Governor Cuomo's executive budget projects a billion dollar drop in MTA dedicated state tax and funding this year but doesn't explain where the missing billion comes from. Are tax receipts down by a billion dollars? Is the governor raiding a billion dollars from the MTA for other priorities? Is it some combination of the two? Regardless, legislators need clarity before adopting a budget. The alternative is to negotiate in the dark. If the governor refuses to disclose the source of the gap, the legislature should respond with a budget that maximizes progressive new sources of revenue for the MTA. **In the event of a raid, the transit fare serves as a backdoor regressive state tax on transit riders, at this time are overwhelmingly essential workers and people without cars, almost all of whom are non-white New Yorkers.**

Governor Cuomo stopped 24/7 subway service last spring. Tens of thousands of essential workers with punishing overnight commutes are suffering. So are their family members, colleagues, and the New Yorkers they serve. Public transit is safe from COVID because New Yorkers overwhelmingly protect each other by wearing masks. The governor's pricey regime of enhanced cleaning amounts to hygiene theater and robs New Yorkers of an essential public service when people need it most. The legitimate safety concerns of transit workers should be resolved by addressing the roots of homelessness and mental health crises in our public spaces and enabling workers to do their jobs safely together in pairs or in groups. New York will not come back as a City that Never Sleeps without a subway that stays awake all night long. The longer the system is closed to riders overnight -- though the trains keep moving -- the harder life becomes for essential workers and the more distant our full and equitable recovery from COVID. **Riders urge that you demand the governor reopen the subway upon budget adoption.**