

Queens residents must look closely at bus takeover

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I followed events leading up to the April 29 “term sheet” outlining the plans to transfer express and local bus service provided by private bus operators under franchises granted by the city to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority with much self-interest.



I often found it convenient to commute to City Hall on Queens Surface’s express QM-1A from 188th Street. The private lines also provide local service. The shift from private buses operating under a city-granted franchise to the MTA running all buses providing express and local service is a process that demands our attention.

Some who regularly ride the private express and local lines appear placated by the announcement of the MTA takeover. They appear satisfied that “their” bus will run after current city franchise agreements with private operators expire on June 30. But one of the conditions of the private bus takeover is the creation of a regional bus company, a plan many civics fear will trigger cuts to service in Queens.

The planned MTA takeover and MTA actions concerning bus service require that these bus riders and all residents pay greater attention.

After Queens Civic Congress President Sean Walsh and I met with Ed Watt, secretary-treasurer of the Transport Workers Union Local 100, Sean invited Ed to address the May 17 Queens Civic Congress meeting. Ed’s union represents subway workers, bus operators and workers in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Manhattan and the workers who drive and repair private buses operated by Queens Surface, Jamaica Bus and Triborough Coach in Queens, as well as New York Bus and Liberty Bus, which service the Bronx.

The Amalgamated Transit Union Local No. 1056 represents MTA bus operators and workers at its bus garages in Queens. ATU Local 1179 represents Green Bus workers. ATU Local 1181 represents Command Bus.

Ed, a bus driver, said Queens is underserved by its surface transit. No argument here, as regular readers may recall last summer’s column recommending a borough-wide effort to gain better bus service.

Ed's local proposed to save the MTA \$300 million using contract negotiations, including service enhancements to increase bus ridership.

The QCC platform recommends a study to determine if an MTA takeover of private bus lines makes sense. It also urges the city Department of Transportation, which oversees the private lines and the MTA, to review existing bus routes to improve service. The platform also called for public review of any route changes — the best we get today is some notice.

Sometimes the notice leaves riders stranded, waiting for buses that no longer run. That happened in southeast Queens when the MTA extended the Q27 farther south on Springfield Boulevard but coupled the change with the elimination of Q83 service north to the Queens Village Long Island Rail Road station. The change also resulted in fewer overall bus trips — a savings.

The local example demonstrates the need to look warily at MTA regional reorganization plans. With fewer than about nine days left in the state legislative session last year, MTA honchos foisted a bill exceeding 200 pages that included plans to combine the suburban bus authorities and the MTA New York City Transit buses under one umbrella.

With about nine weeks left this year, the MTA has come back with a smaller bill to create an "MTA Regional Bus Company." The term sheet signed by Deputy Mayor Marc Shaw for the city and by Executive Director Katie Lapp for the MTA indicates that the "transfer (of the private lines to the MTA) requires (this) state legislative action."

In essence, the MTA agreed to assume responsibility for the city's private lines as part of a scheme to get the state Legislature to hurriedly pass a regional bus structure that it failed to make a case for. Sean made clear that civic leaders view that plan with skepticism.

Can you imagine the changes the MTA, which already favors the suburbs with its policies, might foist on us if it combines bus operations? Maybe they'll cut out the Q43 along Hillside Avenue and replace it with the N22 from Mineola. Imagine getting a seat. Might the Q36 face a similar fate?

Before the Queens Civic Congress meeting, QCC Treasurer and Transportation Chairman Jim Trent heard from three Amalgamated Transit Union members: Daneek Miller, recording secretary; Tony Breaux, vice president; and Luis Alzate, financial secretary/treasurer.

Daneek also moderated last Thursday's forum on the MTA takeover of the private lines sponsored by the Queens County Line Democratic Association. The Transport Workers Union's Rodney Bailey, Local 1179 President John Longo and 1056 President Kenneth Broderick, Council Transportation Committee chair John Liu (D-Flushing) and Finance Committee Chair David Weprin (D-Hollis) participated.

Union workers expressed concern that there would be service cuts and that workers would lose their jobs in the process. Weprin and Liu committed to opposing cuts in services or to any plan that may cause cuts to service.

This bus takeover requires more forums, more discussion and much public education. City Hall, the governor and the MTA prefer our simple acquiescence; they want us to think a change in operators portends no change in service. Under the term sheet, the city and MTA commit to "the same service standards," not service levels.

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