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The Public Ought to Know: No thanks to the MTA this Thanksgiving Day

By Corey Bearak

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As you read this, after a Thanksgiving get-together, we usually focus on good things. At this time, when we give thanks, some columnists will expound on do-gooders who certainly merit our thanks. As the colder weather continues to predominate, I prefer to focus on those who fleece the public.

The MTA is a good place to start. After all the fare and toll hikes, service cuts and general disdain shown to the riding public, bus and subway workers shout out for reform. Nothing appears in the offing, either. MTA Chairman Peter Kalikow made it clear that his board will raise fares and tolls and cut out token booths. His remarks make the MTA formal vote next month the final event in a series of shams, including hearings that made it difficult for riders in parts of four boroughs to raise their voices.

Government must always be about sunlight, inclusion and the truth. The process that led to the next month's awaited fait accompli suggested some folks in government strayed a bit. We need a public outcry of sorts to get them back in line.

The first problem involves the rationale for any fare increases. The whole idea of public mass transit is that government subsidizes its operation. Otherwise we can sell it to private operators. The fare box was never intended to pay more than a fraction of the cost of a ride. More importantly, the fare box was never meant to cover the cost of projects or borrowing to pay for projects like the Second Avenue Subway, East Side Access, a new bus garage or new buses and subway cars.

MTA debt payments account for the bulk of its deficit. The use of the fare box to cover this and other costs from a bloated staff to its troubled Wall Street headquarters boggles the mind. Many officials support transit projects the MTA expects to support in part from the fare and toll increases. The MTA just opts not to explicitly make the connection.

The state Legislature needs to review the process to appoint board members. The current process fails to insure independent board members unafraid to call out the Governor, the Legislature, or City Hall on how each seeks to fund mass transit.

New Yorkers expect more of their public officials, rather than condemning the MTA in the same way the former mayor would beat up on those with whom he disagreed. Solutions. Answers. That's what we the people want. New Yorkers need more than beating up on a board that includes four of the mayor's appointees. Propose solutions.

The Regional Plan Association mobility tax certainly seems worthy of discussion as a way to address MTA funding needs. The legislature can tie its implementation to management and fiscal reforms at MTA; and they can do a better job on that than was done with the reporting required under the Safe Streets, Safe City plan that increased our police force in the 1990s but failed to require the NYPD to meet precinct staffing targets.

In reality, a dedicated commuter tax and the mobility tax should raise enough in annual funds to address service needs, future deficits and fund some new requirements. The Regional Plan Association estimates it could raise \$820 million. As a regional tax, its re-imposition could gain the political support needed because most suburbanites depend on more than their railroads to get to work in midtown or downtown.

The new commuter tax injects some flexibility. It should allow the MTA to refinance current debt and use the commuter tax to pay it off and then evolve the tax to keep fares down and some pay-as-you-go capital long term. This approach also requires the MTA to apply higher than forecast revenues from dedicated transit taxes, including the Mortgage Recording Tax to pay-as-you-go projects or debt reduction.

The restored commuter tax does not negate the need for the federal and state governments to more fairly allocate funds for mass transit. A midsummer column raised this need. And City Hall must do more than just speak out.

The problems involve more than the Metropolitan Transportation Authority can fix and probably requires the engagement of the Port Authority. The boroughs presidents can use their strategic planning powers - collectively - to influence regional solutions. The county executives in Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester will not shun an opportunity to be part of an effort to provide a fix.

Happy Thanksgiving.

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