

August 16, 2010

Unsafe, Unreliable, Illegal Commuter Vans
Offer No Alternative To Bus Service

To the editor:

So-called commuter vans, unreliable, often unsafe and many more times than not operating illegally, fail to offer straphangers a true alternative to bus service cuts by the MTA. The best solution remains the restoration of service cuts; the MTA needs but \$8,014,000 to restore its Queens lines. That's why Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1056, representatives of the NYCTA Bus Division of Queens NY, remain vehemently opposed to any authorization of commuter vans to replace discontinued bus routes. Vans offer no solution to the long or short term problems facing public transportation here in NYC and in particular the borough of Queens. Queens needs more lines and many of the lines cut need to be re-engineered. As an example, rather than cut the Q79, the MTA ought to have heeded the recommendation of the public and their elected officials who long advocated the line's extension to the main line of the LIRR in the Village of Floral Park; in fact the MTA did acknowledge its soundness but the Pataki administration thwarted this plan as part of a political play.

Instead the MTA exploits the current economical crisis and its self-inflicted budget woes as a means to gain concessions from our members, all the while using the riding public as pawns. ATU 1056 has remained steadfast against the MTA's scheme to take back the benefits gained through decades of sacrifice, hard work and bargaining. What the MTA seeks as "givebacks" represent nothing given to us by the good graces of the MTA, the hardworking men and women who service the public as drivers and mechanics of the buses earned these benefits which they accepted in lieu of higher wages.

The MTA opts to use the public as a pawn in discussions over wages while it continues to fail – refuse might be the better word – to exercise their many options to avert service cuts. This refusal demonstrates their true intent.



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Let's take a hard look at the real record.

Today, we face the systematic mismanagement, a lack of foresight and a fundamental misunderstanding by a public authority – the MTA – of its responsibilities to provide equal service to all of its citizens, not just those who can rely solely on subways or rail.

Options include the use of \$130 million in stimulus money allocated by the Federal Government; the “pay-as -you-go” millions given by the City Council; and the several other options offered by the State legislature which would have directed hundreds of millions of dollars for the agency.

Incomprehensibly and unacceptably, MTA chairman Jay Walder continually states that if given these monies he would not use them to restore service but to reduce its own self-inflicted capital budget gap.

Those who advocate the unsafe, unreliable and often illegal vans, including some misguided Queens politicians who have for some reason bought into the Mayor 'dollar van' concept, unintendedly act as enablers of the MTA screw-the-public approach to transit. They fail to recognize or remain ignorant of how the commuter van industry continues to operate inherently unregulated, unreliably and unsafe with no guidelines. Don't take my word as gospel; travel to any location outside Manhattan, where thousands of these vehicles operate around the law; see it for yourself. The vans operate out of control and beyond reasonable enforcement. They fail to provide the safe professional trained and certified service the public gets when they ride NYCTA bused operated and maintained in Queens (and Staten Island) by the ATU (TWU Local 100 members serve Brooklyn, Manhattan and The Bronx).

Equally as important, these vans provide no access or service to the majority of the riding public. These vans offer no accessibility to the disabled – a requirement and obligation for NYCTA buses. Vans negate the million of dollar in subsidies budgeted to restore school passes as vans deny FREE Metrocard access to students and seniors alike unless they pay full fare. These vans not only recreate the two-fare zone – an unfair tax Queens residents suffered for decades, but impose two fare bus zones as riders can not get free transfers from vans to buses or vice-versa. Moreover, until City Hall's latest van scheme, these same vans were considered illegal, unsafe and continuously issued summons by the NYPD.

Public transportation is NOT a luxury. It is the MTA's responsibility to provide a service, equally to all its citizens. Therefore the only reasonable action to be taken towards this misguided notion is to abandon the idea of commuter vans and for our elected officials to force the MTA to excise its options and restore the bus service to the people.

Sincerely,

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