

For Immediate Release: February 10, 2015

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Testimony
of
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and
John Lyons, President/ Business Agent, Amalgamated Transit Union Local No. 1179; and
Chair, ATU Legislative Conference Board.
To The
City Council Committee on Transportation, Council Member Ydanis Rodriguez, Chair
February 10, 2015, 12:45 p.m.

Thank you for this opportunity to address this committee and comment on the Int. No. 211 which calls for a plan for bus rapid transit, commonly known by its acronym, "BRT." I am Mark Henry, President and Business Agent for Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local No. 1056. Local 1056 represents drivers and mechanics who work for MTA New York City Transit's Queens Bus Division. And I am John Lyons, President/ Business Agent, Amalgamated Transit Union Local No. 1179; and Chair, ATU Legislative Conference Board. ATU 1179 represents bus operators, mechanics and supervisors who work from the Far Rockaway and JFK Depots of the MTA Bus division (former Green Bus lines). As such, Locals 1056 and 1179 comment on the need to look both at our experience with the implementation of BRT to date and the broader issue of continuing shortfalls in transit and transportation planning.

Certainly the introduction of Int. No. 211 and this hearing demonstrate a recognition that investments in transportation infrastructure remains critical to our economy. At almost every opportunity discussing public transit, the ATU emphasizes that smartly investing in public transportation keys growth in the economy and job creation. Real estate and economic development interests recognized this when they supported extending the "7" Line from Times Square to the Far West Side and the Javits center or the LIRR east side access project.



*Representing all hourly rated Employees of the
Queens Division, Who safely Operate and
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*Serving the communities of Queens, Manhattan,
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No doubt the sponsors of the legislation seek to encourage smart investments that support bus service improvements can realize improvements and growth sooner than those aforementioned and similar mega-projects. That's certainly the essence of BRT. We have roads; we have buses; why not explore building routes that cost much less, get in operation sooner and serves the public?

ATU continues to be at the forefront on advocating investments involving bus service; our comments – including at state and city legislative hearings – on the MTA capital plan emphasizes that investing in more buses offers immediately relief.

Public transit, especially our buses, not only provides commuters with a way to go to and from work, it offers a vital link to the outside world for seniors, young people, people with disabilities, and people without cars.

For many New Yorkers public transit serves as the lifeline to shop, go to the doctor, attend worship services, visit family members, and do many of the things that enrich their lives. Working Families need safe, equitable and efficient transportation. In Queens, more often than not, that means buses.

Rather than limit a plan to BRT, which the City and MTA market as SBS- Select Bus Service, ATU strongly recommends an overall surface transportation plan that address overall bus service.

Any drive for BRT must not distract from the very apparent need to bolster local bus service, address congestion that hinders local, limited and express service and build new terminals where none exist in transit hubs such as downtown Flushing.

An overall plan would look at needs beyond BRT that also improve service.

The MTA still needs to restore service curtailed since 2010.

Why not expand bus service to operate 24 hours?

Introduce express bus service in Southeast Queens at the level that exists in Northeast Queens.

The current SBS schemes appears to ignore how introducing BRT from Rockaway to Brooklyn or Manhattan or Bronx, and Queens to Lower Manhattan, would spur economic and job growth.

The congestion and related issues that plague downtown Flushing cry for a Hub Bus terminus that Member of Congress Grace Meng had proposed a few years ago (at our impetus). The Flushing Area continues to have an ever increasing ridership as development increases throughout Flushing. We need the leadership from transit and transportation planners.

We must also bolster the Casey Stengel Depot (a NYCT Queens Bus Division Depot that serves Flushing communities) against flooding risks (We recall the urgent movement of buses there to “higher ground” in advance of Sandy.)

Since useful life continues to remain an issue, it places even greater importance on state of the art depots. The Far Rockaway (MTA Bus) Depot replacement/ rehabilitation remains priority for a facility still at risk to storms; bus operators and maintainers still work from trailers rather than appropriate locker facilities. [No plans exist to get this facility that was closed from Oct 2012-Feb 2013 up to pre-Sandy capacity; five new lifts built to service buses based there got “appropriated” when MTA built permanent office space for bus management there; roof work supposed to start July 2013, remains in limbo for 13 months with no clear start date. The lack of post Sandy improvements at Far Rockaway also inhibits the MTA's ability to provide service needed for the peninsula; this facility maintains limited ability to store or repair buses; instead MTA Bus currently uses its JFK depot in Jamaica on the mainland for the bulk of repair work.]

Local 1056 long advocated that the MTA modernize and expand its (NYCT Queens Bus Division) Jamaica Depot. The current depot functions at only 70% of the capacity needed to provide consistent and adequate bus service. While the MTA finally and recently acquired the land required for the project, the capital plan must accelerate this project to help the neighborhoods of Southeast Queens; at the Council hearing the MTA promised to disclose those details.

The modernization and redesign of the 165st Street Bus Terminal across from the Jamaica Main Library will offer the many commuters who use this terminus a safe and accessible facility; the MTA plan does not address this infrastructure need.

Investing in bus infrastructure also empowers the MTA to focus on better use of its bus lines to serve intra-borough needs – the essence of BRT – rather than just funneling riders to subways and rail. As you may not be aware Queens can be a two fare zone if the MTA fails to make Metro Cards available to more vendors in the neighborhoods as residents often still pay two fares to commute about Queens or to New York City.

The MTA must continue to add service in areas of Queens that desperately need the mobility that public transit affords taxpaying New Yorkers. Two Center for Urban Future reports evidence the need to expand public transit options needs for residents in Queens, Brooklyn and Far Rockaway. The MTA also needs to reconsider plans to deploy more “articulated” buses.

ATU recommends improving the legislation modeling on the City Charter's planning provisions. In the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure – ULURP – and community boards the Charter recognizes the crucial utility of public input and review. It also invests in the Borough Presidents responsibility to develop Strategic Policy Statements.

Transportation planning in Queens – and throughout the City – certainly requires a strategic look.

A planning approach, whether it be borough hall task forces or DOT/MTA driven planning group, can bring the aforementioned players, the bus operator unions, the riding public, community groups and our elected leaders together and press for the fixes, and more importantly, improvements. This can't happen too soon. See how recasting Int. No. 211 to plan for local, limited, express and BRT services makes the most sense.

And let us not forget that some things can be done almost immediately. The MTA must deploy more buses to meet service needs during rush hours; this includes starting some buses further along a route to allow more riders get a timely ride. Including this obvious path to improvement in transit plan puts the needed pressure on the MTA.

Looking at the Woodhaven/ Cross Bay SBS corridor, as an example, the planning to date falls short in several regards. The greatest need remains how best to enhance local service along the Woodhaven/ Cross Bay Corridor. Thus any bus study should not start with SBS but with the need to improve bus service. In fact the SBS scheme would decrease the local service that requires enhancement. Further, a review of bus service along the corridor indicates few rides go the entire route end to end. In fact, the overwhelming number of rides involve getting on and off at points in between.

The Flushing Jamaica scheme raises a host of issue that get better introduced as part of an overall bus plan for Queens. The duplication of service apparent in many SBS schemes should not be entertained. Providing a seat on a bus will always trump arriving five minutes faster to a destination.

Dedicated bus lanes, as currently is done in another borough, and off-bus fare collection – two hallmarks of SBS – might make sense for introduction beyond SBS schemes.

Int. No. 211 stands for piecemeal does not work; improving it to more broadly induce better bus service best serves the needs of New York.

ATU Locals 1056 and 1179 will continue to advocate a better scheduled service for Queens and so should these committees and the Council as a whole. Thank you for this opportunity to share the views of ATU and advocacy for the communities we serve. We welcome and look forward to be part of further discussions concerning this legislation and the paramount need to improve local, limited and BRT service.