

Statement of Howard H. Roberts, Jr.
President, MTA New York City Transit
Before the Transportation Committee Of the
New York City Council
January 10, 2008

Good morning, Chairman Liu and members of the Transportation Committee. I am Howard Roberts Jr, President of MTA New York City Transit, and I am delighted to be here today to discuss with you the Rider Report Card initiative I implemented this past summer.

When I returned to NYC Transit as its President last April, one of my first goals was to begin a process to transform this organization into one that is customer driven. Towards that end, I designed and implemented the Rider Report Card initiative so that we could learn first hand both what our customers thought of the services we were providing and what attributes of service our customers felt were most in need of improvement.

As you are aware, beginning with canvassing our 7 line riders last July, and continuing through December 2007 when we completed surveys on our other 21 subway lines, we asked our subway riders to grade 21 specific areas of service from an A (Excellent) to an F (Unsatisfactory). Among the areas riders graded were car and station cleanliness, safety, security, quality of announcements, and the courtesy and helpfulness of front line customer service staff. Riders were also asked to assign an overall grade for their line's service. Finally, riders were asked to rank, from a list of 21 service attributes, the top three improvements they would like to see made to their line.

Rider Report Cards were distributed by NYC Transit for several days during morning rush hours on each subway line at every station along the line. Designed in a mailer format, completed forms could be returned to us at no cost to customers. Additionally, the Rider Report Card was available in 13 languages, for customers to complete on the MTA website. As compiled, results of each line's Report Card were posted on the MTA's website.

We distributed more than 800,000 Report Cards and received over 141, 000 responses. These responses, and the overall grades assigned to each subway line, clearly indicated that there is much room for improvement. In addition to providing a benchmark by which to determine increments of improvement going forward, the Report Card data pointed to three top system-wide improvement priorities: reasonable wait time for trains, adequate room on board at rush hour, and minimal delays during trips.

Our customers' priorities must be our priorities, and to the extent that resources allow, they are where we have begun focusing our attention. Thus, for example, in response to both our 7 and L customers telling us that "adequate room on board at rush hours" was their top priority, we were able, in December, to add 10 round trips to the 7 line weekday service. At the same time, we were able to substantially improve L line service with the addition of 23 round trips on weekdays, 30 roundtrips on Saturdays and 34 round trips on Sundays. While we were happy to be able to respond in these instances to our customers' top priority, the extent to which we have been able to provide additional service remains constrained by several factors such as track, fleet and crew availability, as well as signaling capacity. And this is just one example of how we have responded to what our riders have told us via the Rider Report Card.

By their responses to the Rider Report Card, our customers clearly told us their priorities. Subsequent annual Rider Report Cards will allow us to assess how well we are responding to these concerns. Based upon the results of these initial Rider Report Cards, it is clear to me that in order to score better on subsequent report cards, we need to do our business differently. Thus, I believe that my plan for a reorganized Department of Subways, which began with a pilot on the 7 and L lines last month, will provide the accountability that is necessary to yield measurable improvements in service.

In December, I appointed two veteran Department of Subways professionals to newly created posts of Line General Manager: one for the 7 line and one for the L line. These two lines were selected for the pilot because of the fact that they do not intersect with other subway lines, thereby allowing these Line General Managers total control over their portion of the system. As line General Managers, these individuals will be responsible for virtually all elements of the day-to-day operations on both of these lines, overseeing everything from service delivery to station cleanliness. This approach - first instituted by our Department of Buses under my direction in the early eighties - will decentralize the decision-making process by moving responsibility out to the field, where managers will be expected to take a hands-on approach to subway operations. With the initial Rider Report Card serving as a benchmark, a second Rider Report Card survey will be conducted on these two lines in early 2008, to determine the increments of improvement made by these Line General Managers and their staff.

This pilot, which is fully funded, will help to determine the resources necessary to roll it out to other lines. It is planned that once this program is fully operational, each line will have a General Manager and groups of lines will have Group General Managers.

Having customers tell you what they think of the service you are providing might be a new approach for New York City Transit, but it is a tried and true method of setting priorities and targeting resources. When Citibank began using a similar approach in the late sixties as a way to improve the branch banking services they offered, the initial average grade their service received was a D plus. And although it took twenty years to get there, by the eighties, their branch banking services received an average grade of B. While a slow process, seeking customer direction allowed them to focus their resources and attention on the issues that mattered most to their customers. It is my intention that our Rider Report Card initiative guide the way towards similar positive movement, with incremental improvements realized in relatively short order.

While my remarks thus far have been about the Rider Report Card initiative undertaken on all subway lines, the committee should be aware that a similar effort is underway to solicit our bus customers' views on bus service. Thus, in November, we canvassed all our express bus customers. That data is currently being analyzed. Later this spring we will roll out a Bus Rider Report Card on all local bus routes. Like the data we've collected from our subway customers, the Bus Rider Report Card results will allow us to assess customer priorities and to target our attention and resources to those service issues of greatest concern.

As I think you can glean from my remarks, the Rider Report Card effort is a serious endeavor. We want to know what our customers think is important because it is to them whom we answer. Annual Rider Report Cards, and the information they impart, will allow us to focus our efforts, target our resources and measure our performance.

Having explained why we have begun annual Rider Report Cards and what I believe their value is, I am now happy to answer any questions the Committee might have.

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Statement of PCAC Chair William K. Guild On NYC Transit's Rider Report Card Initiative

Committee on Transportation
Council of the City of New York

January 10, 2008
10:00 a.m.
14th Floor Hearing Room
250 Broadway, NY

Good morning. I am William K. Guild, Chair of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA and I want to thank you for the opportunity to comment on New York City Transit's Rider Report Card initiative.

Let me begin by saying that PCAC supports *any* effort to gather feedback from Transit riders and to address identified problems. It is always good to have as much information as possible. However, we have some reservations about the ultimate effectiveness of the current Rider Report Card program.

Our first concern is with process. PCAC and the Transit Riders Council are legislatively mandated advisory bodies representing riders. While we were given the opportunity to review the draft survey instrument, the NYC Transit Riders Council was not invited to participate in the planning or execution of the surveys, the analysis of responses, or devising solutions to issues which were identified. This "top down" approach, with lack of input from those affected, is uncomfortable at best.

Second, the methodology used does not lend itself to unbiased results. Respondents are a self-selecting universe; and those most motivated to fill out a survey instrument are those with complaints. Distribution of these surveys in the atmosphere of a proposed fare increase may have fueled some riders' feelings of dissatisfaction. There is nothing to prevent a REALLY frustrated straphanger from filling out multiple report cards. Tabulations of results may be seriously skewed by repeat voters and other irregularities. When the Transit Riders Council asked NYC Transit about statistical analysis, we were told that there would no adjustment or control for "ballot stuffing."

Third, the letter grades given for line performance are essentially meaningless, as there is neither a grading standard nor a "curve." In addition, we had questioned inclusion of such categories as "pretty good" and "not so good" as too vague and suggested reducing the choices to "Good", "Satisfactory" and "Unsatisfactory." These choices are clearly understood and are quite adequate for a general trend analysis. An abbreviated choice selection might also entice more riders to respond.

Our final observations relate to the actions taken to date in response to rider concerns: Specifically, increasing service on the 7 line during "shoulder" hours; and creating line managers for the 7 and L subway routes.

We believe that increasing service frequency before and after rush hour "peaks," into the so-called "shoulder" periods, is an excellent initiative for lines such as the 7 which are operating at maximum frequency during the "peak of the peak"; and we intend to monitor the results carefully. Adding runs using existing equipment can increase passenger capacity without requiring a fleet expansion, though additional crew time will be required. If riders in significant numbers elect to travel a bit earlier or later to take advantage of the extra elbow room, this could be a model for other overcrowded lines now operating at maximum frequency during the "peak of the peak." Since the crews needed to provide such additional service on the shoulders will cost money, however, funding must be made available to utilize the existing infrastructure more fully and efficiently.

On the other hand, restructuring responsibility for line performance by the creation of line managers appears very problematic to us. It is hard to see significant benefits to passengers on what must remain a tightly integrated system, with multiple "lines" sharing tracks and operating through complex interlockings. Further, as pilot programs, these lines will most likely receive priority resources, perhaps producing some service improvements which may be very difficult to replicate across other lines.

In sum, apart from the proposal to increase service frequency during "shoulder" periods, we are generally skeptical about the benefits of the current Rider Report Card initiative. We see too many flaws that are likely to outweigh its usefulness, rendering the program little more than a "PR" campaign. We encourage NYC Transit to continue to seek ways to obtain rider opinions, however, and hope that, in the future, PCAC and the Transit Riders Council will be able to contribute in a meaningful way to such efforts.