

### A checklist for the new MTA chief: Our transit system needs a visionary and advocate

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Wednesday, October 19th 2011, 4:00 AM

So you've been named chairman of the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#), putting you in charge of the biggest transit system in the Western Hemisphere. What do you do now? Here are some steps the new MTA chairman should take as soon as possible:

Hang out with your customers. First impressions are powerful, especially since many riders see MTA leadership as detached. A series of open meetings throughout the city will counteract that stereotype. You'll be surprised by how informed riders are - and how many good ideas they have.

Be a vocal advocate for transit. Yes, it's a tough economy and many in government will be urging you to do more with less. That's a fancy way of telling you to squeeze more cash out of consumers, who now pay 66% of subway and bus operating costs, the highest farebox burden of any transit agency in the nation - near double the national average. New Yorkers need a champion who'll push for sensible policies such as congestion charges or tolls on free bridges entering [Manhattan](#) - or at the very least, maintaining the controversial regional payroll mobility tax.

End raids on already dedicated transit funds. You should urge [Gov. Cuomo](#) to sign a bill that passed the Legislature making it far harder to raid taxpayer funds that were supposed to go to trains, buses and other transit. Despite the promised dedication of funds to transit, the MTA has lost \$260 million in such raids over the past three years. The MTA says former [Gov. David Paterson](#)'s raid in 2009 triggered massive service cuts, including the loss of 36 bus routes and 570 bus stops.

Try to slash the massive borrowing called for in the MTA's proposed 2012-14 rebuilding plan. Under the plan, some \$7 billion would be borrowed without sufficient resources to pay the money back. Some 17% of the MTA's current budget is interest payments on repair bonds. The new borrowing would raise debt service by more than \$500 million a year for decades, threatening the ability to keep fares affordable and service up to par.

Improve communications with the transit unions. With major labor contracts set to expire in mid-January, this won't be easy. But no one's been well served by the heated rhetoric of recent years. The [Transport Workers Union](#) and other labor organizations represent tens of thousands of men and women who make daily service possible - and they're also key to making the MTA more efficient.

Keep improving security. After transit attacks in [Moscow](#), [Tokyo](#), [Madrid](#), [Mumbai](#) and [London](#), riders deserve to know every reasonable step is being taken to keep them safe. A state controller's audit found the MTA's capital security program was "months if not years behind

schedule."

Build on successful service improvements. New subway countdown clocks are a great addition. Expand them. Follow through on plans to make it possible to track the location of buses on cell phones. And keep collaborating with the city on faster, more reliable Select Bus Service. It's been a hit in the [Bronx](#) and Manhattan.

Promote greater transparency of the MTA. Fair or unfair, the agency's got a lot to prove to a skeptical public. Start by making your monthly reports more easily searchable and release databases on delays and complaints.

That's a big agenda, I know. And there's more thing. It's a small thing, but it will mean a lot to many riders. Bring back poetry on the trains. For years, programs like Poetry in Motion added a little beauty and enlightenment to the daily commute; the program stopped this year to make room for self-promoting MTA ads. Restore it.

To channel [Robert Frost](#): Two tracks diverge underground. Take the one less traveled by. That will make all the difference.

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