

Citizens Union
Common Cause/NY
New York Civil Liberties Union
New York State League of Women Voters
NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign
Regional Plan Association
Reinvent Albany
Transportation Alternatives
Tri-State Transportation Campaign
Women's City Club of New York

June 11, 2012

Joseph Lhota
Chairman and CEO
Metropolitan Transportation Authority
347 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10017

Re: Recommendations for Increasing the MTA's transparency

Dear Chairman Lhota:

Our groups write to thank you and the MTA for the steps you have taken to increase agency transparency – and to recommend further measures to increase the public's confidence and trust in the agency.

The MTA – and the riding public – have benefitted greatly from the MTA's past and current transparency initiatives. These include online posting of fiscal, budget and board briefing materials; making trip data easily available; actively encouraging application developers to create trip planning tools for smart phone and Internet users; live streaming and archiving its Board meetings; putting its Transparency section on the website's main navigation; and the Capital Program Dashboard.

We encourage you to apply this same approach of openness and innovation to other transparency efforts. By “transparency,” we mean making it as easy as possible for the public to understand what the MTA is doing, what it is planning to do, how it spends money, and how it intends to spend money.

Greater transparency provides valuable benefits to the public and to the MTA. Greater transparency will help address unwarranted and erroneous criticism of the MTA. It will also increase organizational efficiency – and reduce costs by improving the flow of information and eliminating archaic business practices.

In this spirit, we offer the following transparency initiatives for consideration, following up a June 2011 letter we sent your predecessor:

1. Put New Data Bases Online. The MTA should make data bases listed below available online, and as downloadable files in an open digital format and updated as data as received by the MTA. The files should be available via API to encourage their use as analytic tools:

- **Transit Alerts:** The available digital archive of real-time "transit alerts" sent by email or text by the MTA to alert riders with information on specific delays;
- **Incidents:** The available digital archive of complaints and incidents (without personal identification);
- **Diversions:** Upcoming and real-time weekend service diversion information;
- **Clocks:** The ability to see the subway countdown clock information online;
- **Lost and Found:** The number of items found and claimed losses (without identification) in the MTA New York City Transit "lost and found" database; and
- **Polls:** Existing an ongoing rider opinion polls and surveys about quality of service.
- **PES:** While some performance measures are available on MTA State, the entire Passenger Environment Survey should be available as data on the developers resource page.

2. Make fiscal and budget documents and Committee books downloadable in CSV Format. (And, for frequently updated and very large files, available via API.) The MTA produces numerous important financial documents, from its preliminary financial plans to its monthly budget watch. It's to the MTA's credit that so many documents are posted online. Unfortunately, many of these documents are only available in a pdf format, in which they are saved as an image. In this form, documents are not easily findable from the Internet, cannot be searched, and cannot be used by the public.

It is clear that the copious tables and charts in MTA fiscal documents are created using some form of spreadsheet or database. It is very simple to put these tables online in a CSV format, and the MTA has numerous technologists who can do so very quickly and cheaply. Numerous state and city agencies provide fiscal or contractual data online that can be downloaded in a CSV format, including the city and state comptrollers, NYC's Open Data site.

3. Keep a complete electronically accessible archive of these documents. Currently Board and Committee materials are taken off the website after a few months. Anyone looking for earlier material must visit MTA offices after seeking permission to view the hardcopy documents. In addition, some material distributed to members at Committee meetings is never available on the website.

4. Include all (or many) pre-2009 projects in the Capital Program Dashboard. We applaud the MTA's online "dashboard" to help the public be better informed of the status of critical capital projects. But the dashboard is incomplete, tracking the current 2010 through 2014 projects, but only select projects that began during the 2005 through 2009 capital program and none before. It should include at least all ongoing projects, not just those starting in recent years. Indeed, a good argument can be made for including completed projects to give the public a fuller picture of the overall repairs to the transit system.

5. Publish an annual directory of the MTA's computerized data. It would be very helpful to developers and the riding public for the MTA to publish a directory with computerized information produced or maintained by its agencies and which is required by law to be publicly accessible. Such a directory could include specific descriptions of the contents, format and methods of accessing such information, and the name, title, office address, and office telephone number of the official in each agency responsible for receiving inquires about such information.

6. Actively use e-mail and text messaging notices to inform the public of MTA projects and activities. For example, your mega-project pages, such as for the Second Avenue Subway, 7 Line Extension, and East Side Access tell visitors who want updates: "As an interested member of the public, you can check out this website for updates, join our mailing list, call the Second Avenue Subway Hotline, send us an e-mail, and attend public meetings." We recommend that you allow the public to receive email or text notifications of the MTA activities they are most interested in. Many government agencies are using notification services to ensure specific stakeholder groups are kept well informed about issues that concern them.

7. Consider further changes to mta.info homepage content and layout, such as making it easier to submit suggestions or complaints. Leading government websites include comment forms on every page of their websites. Public feedback from such forms help agencies to continuously improve their sites and the information they make available.

Finally, we urge you to appoint a "Director of Transparency" or functional equivalent to ensure there is an official at MTA advancing, coordinating and overseeing MTA transparency initiatives. Both the MTA and its riders would benefit from the continuity and sustained focus.

We appreciate the MTA's consideration of our suggestions and will call to arrange for a meeting with your staff.

Sincerely,

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