



State Senate & State Assembly Joint Budget Hearing on Transportation

Public Testimony: Metropolitan Transportation Authority Finances and Organization

Jaqi Cohen, Director of Climate and Equity Policy
Tri-State Transportation Campaign
September 29, 2021

Thank you to Senator Comrie, Senator Kennedy, and esteemed colleagues for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Jaqi Cohen. I am the Director of Climate and Equity Policy for Tri-State Transportation Campaign, a 28-year-old advocacy and policy organization fighting for sustainable mobility in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

After surviving an unprecedented pandemic, a major change in executive leadership, and multiple storms that wreaked havoc on our transit system, right now is a critical time for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. It is an exciting moment for the future of New York's vital public transportation system, but one that requires the MTA to pave a new direction by seizing the opportunities of the moment and going far beyond the status quo. The MTA's handling of billions of dollars of new federal funding, whether the federal infrastructure bill passes, as well as implementation of the nation's first ever congestion pricing plan, will determine the success of the authority and vibrancy of our regional transportation for years to come.

Increasing transparency within the state's largest public authority is mission critical for charting a new course at the MTA. The public must know how the MTA is spending the billions of dollars it received from COVID-19 relief aid, and in the future, from the infrastructure bill in Congress and additional funding opportunities. Increased transparency should include better, more detailed, and more frequent reporting of how the authority spends its money.

An influx of money from the federal government and from NYC's congestion pricing program will allow the MTA to reconfigure transit service to meet the needs of the post-COVID world and the 21st century. This means building a more climate-resilient rail and bus network. The MTA must come forward with its plans for protecting the system

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



against floods and other natural disasters that have increased in frequency and intensity, turning once-a-century storms into once-a-decade weather events¹. As we now know, not only does coastal flooding threaten our region's transportation infrastructure, but flash flooding in elevated areas poses an enormous threat to flooding the system as well. Recent analysis by our colleagues at the Regional Plan Association finds that over one-fifth of all subway station entrances in New York City could be impacted by severe storms.² It has never been more important for the MTA to prioritize resiliency projects that mitigate the extreme impacts of climate change

New York City's transit system was not designed with climate change in mind, but by daylighting the MTA's planning process, we can better ensure that the imminent threat of climate change will guide planning efforts for the next 25-to-50 years. A resiliency dashboard that details the MTA's plans, spending, and progress on resiliency projects would help the public better understand what is being done to protect New York City's most valuable public infrastructure from further damage and flooding and will help keep the MTA accountable for following through on these commitments.

We are encouraged by the Biden Administration's commitment to investment in transit, which will undoubtedly lead to new and unprecedented funding opportunities that the MTA so desperately needs to bring its infrastructure into the 21st century. The US Department of Transportation is preparing a competitive grant process that will make billions of dollars available to transit agencies across the country. We hope that the MTA is preparing to seize this opportunity by greatly increasing capacity to their grant staff.

Between fighting climate change and reinvigorating our regional economy, public transportation continues to be an essential service provided to all New Yorkers. We look forward to what this legislature will accomplish to make transit and the entire transportation network cleaner, safer, more resilient and more efficient for everyone. Thank you.

¹ <https://www.pnas.org/content/114/45/11861>

² <https://rpa.org/latest/lab/flooding-stormwater-in-new-york-city-subway>