

# The Region's Agenda

Regional Plan Association • New York • New Jersey • Connecticut

## TRANSIT NOW: TWO ISSUES FOR NEW YORK

Two intersecting issues, each of which will shape New York's transit system for many years, are likely to come to a head this fall.

In late September, the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) is expected to vote on a new five-year Capital Program, a document that will describe the capital projects the MTA recommends to be funded and built in the 2000-2004 period. The Capital Program will then pass on to the Capital Program Review Board, which must unanimously agree to its contents. This four member Board is comprised of representatives of the Governor, the Mayor, the State Senate and the State Assembly.

Past Capital Programs were derived from a Capital Needs Assessment, intended to show the investments the MTA believes are needed. Having an updated MTA Capital Needs Assessment is particularly important this year. Because of the substantial growth in ridership, the exclusive focus of previous Capital Programs on the State of Good Repair (SOGR) of MTA facilities must now be broadened to include major system expansion and system improvements. Moreover, the State Legislature is likely to need to provide additional funds if the MTA Capital Program is to meet any realistic program of system needs. A Capital Needs Assessment would make the task of obtaining that funding considerably easier by providing a detailed justification of needed investments.

Unfortunately, the MTA has offered no information to date on its Capital Program preparations. To fill this vacuum, RPA, in partnership with the Empire State Transportation Alliance, a coalition of business, labor, civic, environmental, rider and academic organizations, and which RPA co-chairs, has prepared an independent Capital Needs Assessment of MTA facilities. ESTA is releasing this Assessment in early September to initiate the public discussion on the scope and content of the MTA's Capital Program. The first portion of this Region's Agenda is devoted to a summary of this Assessment.<sup>1</sup>

The second issue revolves around the long discussed and the long delayed Second Avenue Subway. Almost four years ago, the MTA began a study known as Manhattan East Side Alternatives (MESA) to address transit problems on the East Side, including the absence of access to the subway and overcrowding on the one East Side subway, the Lexington Avenue line. This August the MTA issued its draft report with hearings scheduled for the early fall.

For some time, the MTA has made it clear that this study was rejecting a full-length Second Avenue subway, and would only propose at most, an Upper East Side subway stub. Even the MTA's analysis confirms this subway line as inadequate. Consequently, last January, RPA released its plan for **MetroLink**<sup>2</sup>, a new subway system linking employment centers with the residents of the throughout the City and the metropolitan area. **MetroLink** was the subject of RPA's Region's Agenda last February. The second part of this current Region's Agenda summarizes RPA's position on the MESA report, which will be expanded upon in our formal comments to the MTA.<sup>3</sup>

### AN ASSESSMENT OF THE MTA'S CAPITAL NEEDS

In October, 1999, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) must submit a new five-year Capital Program for the years 2000 to 2004 to a Capital Program Review Board of state and city officials. The next Capital Program must continue the work of past Capital Programs designed to return MTA facilities to a state of good repair (SOGR). But the next Capital Program must also include funds for the first major subway and commuter rail expansion since the 1930s. Subway and bus ridership has surged to their highest levels in a

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### THE SECOND AVENUE SUBWAY: THE MTA'S INADEQUATE PROPOSAL

In August 1999, after four years of study, the MTA released its Manhattan East Side Alternatives (MESA) Major Investment Study/Draft Environmental Impact Statement (MIS/DEIS). The original purpose of MESA was to find solutions to a host of transit problems on Manhattan's East Side. The results in the MTA's eyes came down to just one subway alternative – build a three mile "stub" from 125<sup>th</sup> Street to 63<sup>rd</sup> Street,

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generation, packing many subway lines and buses with riders and straining to the breaking point a mass transit system that has significantly shrunk since 1940. Our transit network was designed to serve a 1930s New York—not the metropolis of today.

The capital needs for the MTA fall in three major categories: SOGR, which must continue with the same strong commitment of the last 17 years; upgrades in areas needing special attention; and system expansion—to respond to the recent growth in ridership and the economy—and to prepare for future economic growth.

The Capital Needs Assessment estimates that over the next 20 years, \$68 billion is needed by the MTA. Of this amount, \$18 billion is needed in the next five years. As shown in the accompanying table, the Assessment has identified \$10.4 billion as the five-year investment level needed to continue progress towards SOGR, and \$3.9 billion over five years to expand the bus fleet and convert them to compressed natural gas buses, upgrade the subway signals, passenger information, and subway stations.

Almost \$4 billion is needed in new rail transit capacity over the next five years to end chaotic levels of overcrowding and provide the transportation capacity needed to accommodate future economic growth. Two billion dollars of this total is needed to begin building **MetroLink**, RPA's proposed new regional subway system. **MetroLink** includes a full length Second Avenue subway running from Co-op City to Brooklyn's Atlantic Terminal, with connections to bring new subway service to the Lower East Side, Co-op City, and the underserved Central Bronx corridor, and southeastern Queens. **MetroLink** would dramatically shorten travel times and eliminate transfers for much of Brooklyn and Queens. **MetroLink** would also provide high speed connections for Long Island, Westchester County and Connecti-

cut commuters to Lower Manhattan, and a superb one-seat ride to JFK from Grand Central Terminal, Wall Street and Downtown Brooklyn.

The Assessment proposes that \$1.5 billion be allocated for East Side Access, a project to connect the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) to Grand Central Terminal. This long time RPA priority would benefit tens of thousands of Long Islanders. But **MetroLink** must be done concurrently and completed at the same time. Why? Once the LIRR is connected to Grand Central Terminal, it will add 6,000 riders in the peak morning hour to the Lexington Avenue subway line (the Lex), turning conditions from intolerable to impossible. The only way to prevent these negative impacts from compromising East Side Access is to solve the overcrowding on the Lex at the same time. Only a full-length Second Avenue Subway, preferably as part of an overall **MetroLink** program can do that.

The Assessment also recommends proceeding with construction of third track projects for both Metro North and the Long Island Railroad, to make it possible to reach suburban jobs by rail and to expand capacity for travel in both the "reverse" and Manhattan-bound directions. The Assessment also recommends proceeding to detailed planning for other future new capacity initiatives, such as a improved access to LaGuardia Airport, new tran-

sit services to the far West Side of Manhattan (for which there are at least three proposals), restoration of rail commuter service to underserved Rockland County, and added trans-Hudson rail capacity. To advance these efforts over the next five years, \$400 million is needed.

The Assessment has also identified three components of MTA facilities where improvement beyond SOGR is badly needed. The first is the bus fleet. Current bus overcrowding and the public clamor for new bus services will require adding 400 buses to the MTA bus fleet over the next five years. And since the environmental and operational advantages of clean fuel compressed natural gas buses (CNG) can no longer be seriously disputed, the needs assessment recommends a "no new diesels" policy. As a diesel bus reaches the end of its useful life, it would be replaced with a natural gas bus. This will also require funds to convert current bus depots to natural gas operations. A five-year need of \$1.24 billion is identified for these bus upgrades.

Second, the MTA needs to accelerate its transition from the use of traditional block signals to communications based train control (CBTC), which would speed trains and make them safer and more reliable. Other technological advances need to be made such as in passenger informa-

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**TABLE 1: MTA FIVE- AND TWENTY-YEAR CAPITAL NEEDS**

CATEGORY	5 YEAR NEEDS (\$B)	20 YEAR NEEDS (\$B)
State of Good Repair/ Normal Replacement		
NYCT	6.6	19.8
LIRR	2.4	7.4
Metro North	1.4	4.3
<b>SOGR SubTotal</b>	<b>10.4</b>	<b>31.4</b>
Clean Fuel Buses	1.2	3.6
Signals & Communications	1.1	6.6
Stations	1.6	5.9
System Expansion	3.9	20.1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>18.2</b>	<b>67.7</b>

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where the subway would veer off to the West Side onto existing tracks. A second alternative added a light rail line on the Lower East Side, which has stimulated little interest and much opposition. At an early stage the study rejected any subway line that continued south of 63<sup>rd</sup> Street, such as RPA's **MetroLink** proposal. This rejection has come amidst swelling public desire for a Second Avenue subway. This guarantees that the issue will be very much alive during the coming capital program debate.

The MESA study limited its objectives to relief of overcrowding on the Lexington Avenue line (the Lex) and to reduce walking distances to transit for East Siders, ignoring the mobility needs of the daily users of the Lex who live in The Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn and the Hudson Valley. And because the MESA stub would attract relatively few riders, it does a poor job of meeting even these two limited objectives. This is best demonstrated in the MESA report itself. MESA lists the top twenty origin-destination markets on the Lexington Avenue line. MESA's north stub would not serve the top seven markets at all, and provides only marginal benefits over current service for just five of the twenty markets. In sharp contrast, RPA's **MetroLink** proposal would benefit all of the markets, and in the five cases where MESA would be an improvement, **MetroLink** performs markedly better.

The MESA stub would only attract East Siders destined for the West Side, and therefore not relieve the Lexington Avenue line significantly. Upper East Siders and Bronx riders transferring at 125<sup>th</sup> Street for trips to East Midtown would have little reason to use it, and Upper East Siders would continue to walk long distances to Lexington Avenue to board the subway. Others who today avoid the long walk by using buses, taxis or vans would continue to do so.

The MESA report shows that the

stub would increase total subway use by only 810 subway riders a day in the East Manhattan study area—only 0.13 percent! And it would remove a paltry 213 auto riders and 88 taxi riders a day from East Side streets.

The MESA stub would not solve crowding on the Lex, nor at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street station, which would still exceed MTA's own crowding guidelines. Added to the prospective woes of the Lex rider is the future connection from the Long Island Rail Road to Grand Central Terminal. Known as East Side Access (ESA), this worthy project would nonetheless add 6,000 people to the Lex at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, aggravating conditions there. Even before ESA, and with the MESA stub, the MTA characterizes conditions at that station as "severe." Thus MESA, by leaving the Lex overcrowded, jeopardizes support for the LIRR ESA project. The two projects, ESA and a full Second Avenue subway, must be completed in tandem. As a stand-alone project ESA will make subway conditions worse. But built together, ESA and **MetroLink** benefits are immense.

Some would argue that MESA is a first step—a down payment that does not preclude expanding the stub at a later date. But the MTA has given no indication that they have a larger future plan. Moreover, MESA's construction impacts would likely cause major community opposition, jeopardizing it further. Why should Upper East Siders put up with years of construction for a project whose benefits are so skimpy? If the MESA stub were to be the only project the MTA puts forward, there is an excellent chance that nothing will ever be built under Second Avenue.

The MTA has ignored Governor Pataki's request to study **MetroLink**. They have given no weight to the groundswell of support that has developed for a full-length subway—one that accomplishes so much more than MESA. The full-length subway has been endorsed by many public officials, including Manhattan Borough President Fields, Bronx Bor-

ough President Ferrer, Congresswoman Maloney, State Senator Goodman, State Senator Connor, State Assembly Majority Leader Silver, State Assemblywoman Nolan, City Councilman Miller, and Public Advocate Green, most whom have also supported RPA's **MetroLink** proposal.

There is still time for positive action by the MTA. RPA has requested that the MTA revise the Final EIS that will follow the current report to fully study **MetroLink**. The Empire State Transportation Alliance's Capital Needs Assessment proposes that the MTA place \$ 2 billion in the upcoming five-year Capital Program to make certain that **MetroLink** is under construction before the last year of the five year plan, and on a schedule that completes ESA and **MetroLink** simultaneously. •

To learn more about RPA's **MetroLink** proposal, send an e-mail to Jeff Zupan, Senior Fellow of Transportation at [jeff@rpa.org](mailto:jeff@rpa.org), or Steve Weber, Senior Transportation Planner at [weber@rpa.org](mailto:weber@rpa.org). Or, visit our website at [www.rpa.org](http://www.rpa.org).

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The MTA public hearing on MESA is to be held on September 15, 1999. October 8, 1999 is the closing date for submission of comments on the Major Investment Study/Draft Environmental Impact Statement (MIS/DEIS).

### NOTES FROM BOX ON PAGE 1

<sup>1</sup> See [www.rpa.org](http://www.rpa.org) for full *Capital Needs Assessment* report.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.rpa.org](http://www.rpa.org) for full **MetroLink** report.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.rpa.org](http://www.rpa.org) for a full critique of the MESA study.

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### ABOUT RPA

*For more than 75 years, Regional Plan Association has been the nation's most influential independent regional planning organization. Since 1922, RPA has worked to improve the quality of life in the 31-county New York-New Jersey-Connecticut metropolitan area by creating long-term comprehensive plans and promoting their implementation across political boundaries. On the basis of rigorous professional study, RPA recommends policy initiatives and physical and human infrastructure investments and involves the public in considering and shaping its future. RPA takes positions on major current public policy issues and works constructively and cooperatively on a non-partisan basis with public and private sector interests to advance its agenda.*

## MTA CAPITAL NEEDS

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tion systems, through the installation of variable message signs to inform bus and subway riders of next arrival times, trip alternatives, and system disruptions that will affect them. The Assessment has identified a five-year funding need of \$1.1 billion for these programs.

Third, there is the matter of station rehabilitation and modernization. This program is far behind schedule and has a very mixed performance record. The Assessment indicates that the first priority in the next five years should be major productivity reforms in the current station program. These changes should move beyond surface cosmetics to focus on structural redesign to improve entrances, access, platform conditions, and connections with transfer lines; improved climate control; increased community involvement in station design and project development; and incentive contract-

ing and other reforms in design, procurement and project management. The need for station modernization for the next five year is about \$1.6 billion.

The Assessment has identified \$18.4 billion in MTA capital needs for the next five years. Ideally, all should be funded. If this amount is not made available, the Capital Program will have to set priorities, making some tough choices. Fortunately, at a time of economic prosperity and government surpluses, and with the many billions in dedicated funding that the MTA starts with, reaching a target that will insure a major investment in new capacity is realistic. •

ESTA and RPA will continue to actively pursue both issues. For the most up-to-date information, visit the RPA website. To learn what you can do, check our website at [www.rpa.org](http://www.rpa.org).

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