



TRAVIS ROUSE

# Downturn Express

Say goodbye to the W and Z trains. Say farewell to buses on weekends. Say hello to the \$100 MetroCard. The MTA's proposed Doomsday Budget is a straphanger's worst nightmare — but it's also a rare chance to put our whole transportation system back on track.

**N**O NAME CARRIES MORE WEIGHT IN THE world of New York City transit than Dick Ravitch. When Ravitch took the MTA's helm in 1982, he inherited a system on the verge of collapse. A quarter of the entire subway fleet was out of service. Trains broke down 20 times more frequently than they do today. The daily headlines were a litany of track fires and trainloads of passengers stranded beneath the city. Ravitch held elected officials to account for the system's state, and with charisma, moxie and gamesmanship managed to cobble together \$16 billion over the next decade to stem the tide and bring transit back from the brink. His financial base made up of the fare box, tolls and more than a dozen dedicated taxes has underpinned the MTA for a generation.

Unfortunately, it wasn't long before the lessons were unlearned. Costly system expansion, which Ravitch sought to limit until the existing system was in good repair, began again in earnest after 2005. And borrowing, once disciplined, spun out of control. Starved by the Paraki administration and the Republicans in the State Senate, the MTA paid for nearly a decade of capital projects on borrowed money, making it the fifth-largest debtor in the United States. Now, the debt is coming due. Tax revenues from business, real estate and gasoline are drying up. The old funding formula is breaking down, and leaders in Albany have until early April to set the books in order or face the crippling service cuts and fare hikes.

But in the current crisis lies the promise of reform—not only to stop the slide of transit, but to turn New York City's car-first transportation system on its head.

## Ravitch Sets the Stage

In the wake of Albany's failure to pass congestion pricing in April 2008, Governor Paterson called on Dick Ravitch to close MTA's \$1.2 billion operating deficit and the \$17 billion shortfall in the \$30 billion rebuilding program. Ravitch was charged with considering a range of alternatives to prevent the system's backslide to the 1970s. The appointed commission met over six months and delivered its report in November.

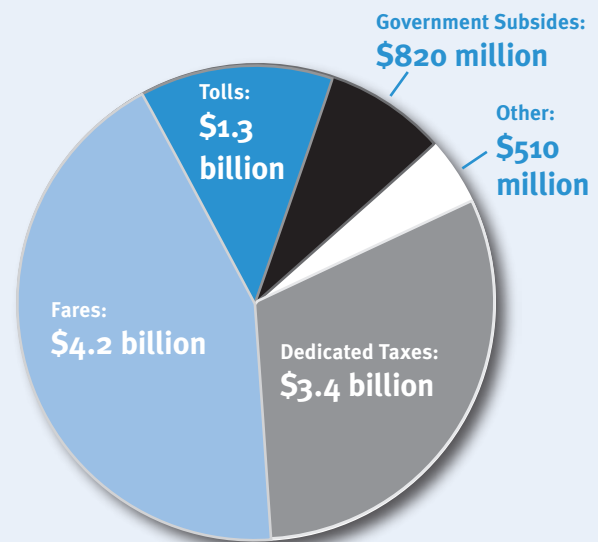
The Ravitch plan balances the MTA's budget with an "everybody pays" approach spread across straphangers, drivers and business. The plan proposes a "mobility tax" that would charge employers across the region \$.33 per \$100 of payroll. This new tax is expected to raise \$1.5 billion annually. The mobility tax will reduce the burden of debt service on the MTA's operating budget and, with a special first-year program, can provide enough funding to reduce the MTA's immediate proposed fare hike from 23% to 8%. While Ravitch does call on riders to pay more, his plan also recommends a regular and affordable schedule of fare increases. This is not to say Ravitch lets drivers off the hook. In what has become the most controversial part of the plan, Ravitch made a renewed call for cashless tolling on the East River and Harlem River bridges to net another \$600 million.

If there were ever a set of circumstances that could break the political paralysis surrounding East River bridge tolls, this is it. There is near-universal consensus among elected officials that the MTA's doomsday scenario must be averted, and an equal measure of agreement—even from congestion pricing's detractors—that drivers will have to bear their share of the burden. Competing plans like that of NYC Comptroller Bill Thompson, which levies new weight-based fees

on vehicle registrations, or that of the labor leader Ted Kheel, which utilizes variable rate toll and transit fares to plug the gap, all hinge on the principle that drivers need to pay into the transit system.

The belief that drivers should contribute to transit has its origins with the MTA's founding under Mayor John Lindsay, when Robert Moses's flush Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority was linked with the perpetually cash-strapped Transit Authority. It was reinforced under Ravitch, when a portion of the gas tax was added to the transit funding formula. But the recent push for congestion pricing

## MTA Operating Revenue 2008



Source: MTA

showed just how ideologically remote New York City drivers have become from their transit-taking neighbors. The long-held argument that drivers' mobility depends on 9 million people taking transit instead of using private cars fell flat, and in the end it was the belief that drivers, already afflicted by then-record gas prices, shouldn't have to pay up for a transit system they themselves do not personally use, that prevailed.

## The Campaign Ahead

T.A. supports the Ravitch, Thompson and Kheel plans as well as others that link transit and driving more closely together. In addition to bringing traffic relief as drivers respond to cost incentives and switch to transit, this approach means a more equitable and ethical mobility solution that finally starts to address the environmental, social and economic costs of driving in New York City.

T.A. has already distinguished itself as one of the leading voices on public transit in NYC as an early proponent of bus rapid transit, a champion of the 2005 Transportation Bond Act and the foremost advocate for congestion pricing. Now, just eight months after pricing stalled in Albany, T.A. is once again in the throes of a major legisla-



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tive push to keep the region's transit system affordable and accessible to all New Yorkers. This time the playing field is different, however. The battle has bypassed City Hall entirely, cutting out most of T.A.'s legislative allies on transportation issues. The Mayor's team is out of the picture.

But the first round of hearings and legislative meetings suggest that legislators may prove more receptive this time around. Imminent fare hikes and service cuts have created a sense of urgency and the rhetoric has been more thoughtful than the usual MTA-bashing. So where will T.A. push this time around?

Unlike allies such as the General Contractors Association and Transit Workers Union, T.A. lacks political clout in Albany. Nor does T.A. make political donations or possess the financial resources that bigger organizations with deeper pockets are capable of mustering. T.A.'s value comes from its 7,000 members, 20,000 *StreetBeat* subscribers and nearly 2,000 volunteers—and the readiness with which they take action when needed. During the congestion pricing campaign, T.A. members often accounted for half the audience at major public hearings, and generated thousands of letters, phone calls and e-mails that made an impact on legislators.

This time around, T.A. is turning to those same strengths. The cover of this issue of *Reclaim* will become the template for a set of advertisements on phone booths and in community newspapers across the five boroughs. Coupled with organizing efforts in subway stations,

bus terminals and on city sidewalks, T.A. will generate an avalanche of correspondence from constituents that will give legislators a reason to act. And by positioning these efforts within coalitions like the Campaign for New York's Future and the Empire State Transportation Alliance, the impact will be multiplied many times over.

The crisis at hand is about more than transit riders. It affects everyone who uses New York City streets every day. A recent NYC DOT report credited improved MTA service for completely absorbing almost all the growth in our transportation system between 2003 and 2007. Despite thousands more New Yorkers on the move, traffic congestion and car use have remained unchanged.

Now consider the battles that unfold every time a parking space or traffic lane is converted into a wider sidewalk or bike lane: how much more difficult would reform be if the ranks of New York City's drivers swelled with hundreds of thousands crowded out or priced out of the public transit system?

Fewer cars, less congested streets and a more equitable transportation system are the stakes in the current debate. If T.A. can win passage of an MTA financing plan that includes a major contribution from drivers, it will put New York City on a new course for a transit-first ethic. And that means more room—both political and physical—to reclaim streets for the non-driving majority. □