



**Testimony of Kate Slevin, Tri-State Transportation Campaign  
Ravitch Commission hearing, September 15, 2008**

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Kate Slevin, executive director of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, a regional policy watchdog organization working for a more balanced transportation network in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

The Ravitch Commission's task to secure the MTA's financial future is certainly not a simple one, but it is one that is paramount to the success of our region. Our transit network is the backbone of our economy; its revitalization from the 1970s is one of the great urban revitalization stories of our time. Without its recovery, the economic and population growth NYC has seen over the past few decades would not be possible. More recently, our transit network has helped us weather the impacts of \$4 gallon gas prices and a struggling housing market and economy. National Public Radio, along with organizations like CEOS for Cities, have found that houses near transit have retained their values during the recent housing fiasco far better than their exurban counterparts far from transit and downtown centers.

There is no question that the MTA is facing a dire financial situation. Debt payments are consuming more and more of the agency's operating budget, while day to day costs for capital projects and ridership numbers increase and the revenues that support the system plummet.

We believe we must find a sustainable and reliable source of funding so our 100 year old transit network can be maintained and be expanded to keep pace with booming ridership. If we don't financially support our system, we threaten the future of our city and region to maintain competitive for business and livable for residents. It is worth noting that while we are having these conversations, pushing transit project timelines back and struggling with how to fund our system, other world class cities are building rapid bus lines throughout the city and in London's case, implementing things like congestion pricing to pay for them. Even in less world renowned cities like Denver, Colorado residents have recently voted to tax themselves to build new rail lines. In order to maintain our place as a world leader, we have to make the tough choices necessary to maintain and expand our transportation network.

We believe congestion pricing is one of these tough choices and we ask that you include it in your recommendations. Since the Tri-State Transportation Campaign was founded in the early nineties, we have strongly supported congestion pricing as a method to fund our transit network, reduce traffic, and improve health and livability. Now, with the MTA's

financial problems, high gas prices, and booming transit ridership and construction costs, there are even more reasons to support it.

Last year, in response to cries that congestion pricing would hurt the middle and working classes, the Tri-State Campaign and Pratt Center for Community Development crunched Census numbers and found that low and moderate income communities actually have the most to gain and the least to lose from congestion pricing's implementation. Beyond congestion pricing, our findings also prove that the lower and middle classes will be hurt the most by transit fare increases because they overwhelmingly rely on transit system to get around.

Consider these statistics: in Brooklyn, the average income of households with a car is twice that of households without a car, and 57% of household don't own a vehicle. In the Bronx and Queens, the average income of households with a car is about \$30,000 dollars more than households without a car. In fact, 62% of Bronx households and nearly 40% of Queens households do not even own a car. In Staten Island, the average income of households with a vehicle is almost \$75,000, in those without a vehicle it is less than \$30,000.

The numbers prove that strategies to keep transit fares affordable will help lower and middle income people deal with the escalating costs of living in the New York region. Though transit riders should pay a portion of running the system, transit riders in NYC Transit, Metro-North, and LIRR already pay more than their fare share of operating costs, as my colleagues have discussed today.

This mean others sources of MTA revenue, especially city and state aid, must increase. A recent Independent Budget Office report found that city and state contributions have remained relatively stagnant for over a decade as agency's costs have increased. We understand all budgets are tight right now, but an infusion of government support into our transit network could help jumpstart the economy, provides jobs during a rough economic time, and preclude the dire long-term impacts of allowing our transit system to fall to pieces.

One smaller, more specific financial problem that has plagued the MTA for some time is the agency's annual battle with the state and Nassau County's over who will pay for Long Island Bus. Establishing a new funding agreement for the system could offer cost savings while allowing the suburban bus network to keep pace with rising demand. More broadly, this could be one of the changes that enables us to move towards a regional bus rapid transit network that incorporates NYC Transit, Long Island Bus, and Westchester's Bee Line bus. Such a regional rapid bus network could be a relatively affordable method of expanding our transit network and should be amongst the goals of the MTA over the next 10 years.

I would be remiss to not mention the MTA's credibility. Though things have improved under Lee Sander's leadership, the MTA is still facing a tremendous credibility with the public. Many of us testifying today spent the better part of last year attempting to win support congestion pricing's approval. During meetings with elected officials, it became

clear that most did not trust the agency and were skeptical of giving it any additional money.

In other words, we believe that in the agency needs a serious credibility boost before anyone will be willing to give it the billions of dollars it needs to maintain and expand our system. Therefore, we hope that the Commission recommends a list of reforms for the agency such as an Independent Public Authorities Oversight Office, as the Straphanger's Campaign has suggested. Other relatively simple things like publicly connecting with riders and appointing board members who ride and care about the system could also help improve the MTA's public face.

Finally, we must stress the following point: whatever recommendations come out of this commission are useless without strong leadership and action from the Mayor Bloomberg, Governor Paterson, the City Council and the State Legislature. Over the past few years, we have seen very few elected officials really show they care about our transit network and the people that ride it. Mayor Bloomberg announced congestion pricing, but has since refused to give the MTA more funding. Elected officials have largely been silent as the MTA pushed forward a \$2.7 billion cut from its current capital program due to skyrocketing construction costs. These cuts are region and include specific things like Croton-Harmon/Peekskill station improvements, Grand Central Terminal rehabilitation work, station rehabilitations in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan. On Long Island, the LIRR has said that projects like a third track on the Main Line are likely to fall out of the MTA's next capital program. The project is critical for the Island, but have any elected officials stood up for the project? No. This back-seat attitude will have to change if we are going to secure transportation dollars necessary to avoid large service cut backs and fare increases.

Going forward, as the environmental consequences of our car dependent lifestyles become increasingly clear and our region's population and transit ridership continue to boom, our transit network will become even more important than it is today. We hope the Ravitch Commission and our city and state leaders will help set our transportation network on the right course toward this greener future. Thank you.

It's worth noting the tremendous increases in ridership we have seen -- subway annual ridership is up 13% between 2003 and 2007, and up another 4.8% between the first half of 2007 and first half of 2008. LIRR up 3.2% from first half of this year over first half of last year. LIRR up 8.5% between 2004 and 2007. MNR up 14% between 2004 and 2007. First six months of this year up 4%.