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Give Mike Bloomberg the trains, too

Wednesday, July 23rd 2008, 7:15 PM

With the disclosure of a \$1.3 billion deficit at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the politicians charged with running a safe, effective and affordable mass transit system are taking their places onstage, the better to act out that familiar, disgraceful public farce: the Fare Hike Follies.

You know how it goes. First there's a lot of fancy footwork and buck-passing among the politicians, not one of whom is clearly in charge or accountable to the public. Then they sock it to riders at the farebox, even as the most aggravating failures of the system remain firmly in place, including late trains, filthy stations, public address systems that spout gobbledegook and scarce public rest rooms.

It's high time that we, the people - the riders and taxpayers who fund and use the system - demand better. We need to consider seemingly "radical" ideas, like having the city take over operation of the subways, or making the whole system free of charge.

That might sound crazy, but there's nothing nuttier, or more depressing, than the drama the MTA is about to force on 5 million daily riders.

The curtain went up on act one Wednesday, with MTA Chairman Elliot Sander breaking earlier promises to spare riders a fare increase until 2010. He now says he needs an 8% increase in fares and bridge tolls - along with a \$600 million injection from the state's coffers - to close the gap.

Gov. Paterson says he won't approve money until the agency gives assurances it has cleaned up its notoriously sketchy bookkeeping. Mayor Bloomberg is vowing not to even consider increasing the city's skimpy contribution of 5% of the MTA's \$10 billion budget unless the MTA trims its workforce and finds other places to save money internally.

And despite the urgent need to raise money, all the pols have agreed to do little or nothing until December, when a special commission headed by ex-MTA Chairman Richard Ravitch is set to issue - get this - a special report on ways to cure the agency's perennial budget shortfalls.

Notice how nobody seems to want individual public responsibility for the agency's funding or performance? That's because some MTA board members get named by the governor, some by the mayor and a bunch by suburban county executives. No elected official's career rises or falls on the performance of the trains.

The cure for that entrenched culture of mediocrity and blame-shifting is to repeat what New York did with schools seven years ago: replace an obscure gang of politically wired appointees with mayoral control so that everyone knows where the buck stops.

We should hold a referendum on whether to give the mayor and City Council a sizable majority of seats on the MTA board, with a requirement that some of those seats be occupied by regular straphangers.

New York also should give serious consideration to a proposal by lawyer Theodore Kheel that would substantially boost parking, taxi and driving charges in Manhattan - and use the money to make the entire subway system free.

The resulting explosion in travel by millions of people - with more money in their pockets because of the zero fare - would stimulate the economy and generate tax revenue that could be used to pay for the subways.

There are other great revenue-raising proposals out there. City Councilman Eric Gioia of Queens is calling on the MTA to sell or lease its headquarters to raise an estimated \$200 million. And the agency would reap a windfall by making a deal with computer and telecommunications companies to provide service underground.

No idea, however strange it might seem, should be off the table. The alternative - squeezing riders and still not raising enough to fix the system properly - is an old, tired show we've watched all our lives.

And the ending stinks.

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smeyer418
 6:48:40 AM Jul 24, 2008
 Its time the City was given responsibility for everything inside the city not just schools and trains. It includes the streets too. The ESDC that you seem so fond of, is State not City controlled, so logically you should also support City control of projects within NY City...
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ruff333
 8:37:17 AM Jul 24, 2008
 And remember the residents of Nassau,Suffolk, Rockland,Westchester and Orange County pay 0.25% MTA tax on their bills. If the city is given control of the trains I want my 0.25% that I am taxed on purchases within these five counties back. If I do not use the trains nor do they benefit the five counties above, why should we subsidize them
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MichaelO
 9:42:57 AM Jul 24, 2008
 That's the whole point of the MTA. Before the MTA, had the Transit Authority running subways. Even though the TA was a public corporation it was primarily responsible to and funded by the City of New York. When they had the subway strikes in the 60's, it was the Mayor who had to impasses and who got the heat when the public was dissatisfied. The MTA was created to take the heat away from NYC's elected officials by diffusing responsibility to an "independent" board.
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rustschak
 11:33:14 AM Jul 25, 2008
 Interesting ideas. I've sometimes joked that the city should take back the TA and all the others (remember MABSTOA, SIRTQA, et al?) in the name of greater accountability. The MTA dsyfunction is part and parcel of the rest of the state public-authority mess. Many oxes to be gored in the process; but perhaps a simpler method would be to make the MTA chairman and board elected, not appointed; with the affected counties the only ones eligible to vote. It would be a wonderful trial baloon for the rest of the state authorities that hold city interests in such a hammerlock, and a first step to devolve some of the misplaced power that Albany holds.
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webviking6
 3:09:07 PM Jul 25, 2008
 I'm not sure that putting the MTA under mayoral control is such a good idea as the MTA extends beyond NYC's limits, but there does need to be some public answerability. Elect board members instead of appoint them? Elect an MTA Czar? I don't like the idea of eliminating fares either, especially with twin punch in the face of increasing parking, taxi and driving taxes in Manhattan, you'd completely bury MTA. But at nearly \$10 billion a year MTA has a budget larger than most US states. There's something rotten in the MTA's tunnels, or more likely, penthouses. Someone needs to clean up the mess.
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einnor111
 5:54:36 PM Jul 25, 2008
 Why they need 445 lawyers and 435 people in public relations is just crazy. I don't think cut each department in half would kill any one but the people let go. Also selling their Madison ave building and allowing companies to run fiber lines in the tunnels could increase income without raising fares. As the MTA burns Billionaireberg is out of town calling for his congestion tax and a tax on indians cigarette sales. Billionaireberg has bigger fish to fry than worry about a transit system he let fall apart. The whole country is waiting.
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