June 8, 2020

Senator Richard Blumenthal
706 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC, 20510

Dear Senator Blumenthal,

We write to you today on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of commuters, visitors, students, workers, and residents of Connecticut who ride Metro-North and the connecting systems of the MTA. Today we released the results of a survey of over one thousand public transit users, many of whom are your constituents, and their answers constitute a call to action for further federal support of public transit. We call on you to honor the needs of your constituents, especially those essential workers who have relied on transit during the worst of the pandemic and support federal funding for transit in the HEROES Act.

Since our region went on pause in March 2020, ridership on Metro-North fell to record lows, with approximately 98% fewer riders on the system than normal. Due to the parameters of the pause, the vast majority of the riders who continued to rely on Metro-North and other transit systems in Connecticut were essential workers. They were nurses, home health aides, janitors, security guards, grocery workers, transit operators, and many other essential workers whom we all are dependent upon to carry out key functions of our civil society. Even at its lowest ridership, thousands of workers relied on Metro-North every day. Throughout this crisis, public transit authorities did not buckle; even under these extraordinary circumstances, they continued to move our state’s and region’s heroes on a daily basis, thereby keeping our state’s essential services functioning and allowing the rest of us to shelter in place safely.

The MTA is the nation’s largest transit system and the Metro-North rail system is a critical component of its success. We owe it to our states’ riders and our essential workforce, many of whom lack employer-provided health care or sick leave and yet still risk their lives to provide needed services, to keep the transit they rely on functional and affordable.

Meanwhile, the MTA faces by far the greatest fiscal crisis of its history. Decreases in fares, toll road income, and tax revenues due to the coronavirus pandemic are in the billions of dollars. We are grateful and appreciative of your championing of the CARES Act. The $3.9 billion that the MTA received was critically important in the early days of the crisis to keep our region’s transit from collapsing. Unfortunately, the national formulas it relied upon short-changed large urban transit systems by
favoring small systems over large ones. To be sure, these were critical funds that forestalled the worst, but it is clear the system will require more, and soon, to survive. The agency will likely need billions of dollars more in federal aid to continue service in our state and region through fiscal year 2021.

Given the tremendous losses in farebox and toll revenues, the need to keep the bulk of the transit system moving even with a greatly diminished passenger load, and the costs of cleaning and virus-proofing Metro-North and the whole MTA system, more funds are needed as our state and region ramp up. We already see ridership increasing as more people are returning to work locally and regionally. As re-opening for the region goes into effect throughout the month of June, more Connecticut residents will resume commuting in their local jurisdictions, across the state, and regionally. We call on you to bring more transit funds home to our state’s workers and riders in the next round of COVID-19 related funding. Please support and prioritize transit funds in the next stimulus/relief bill, including $3.9 billion dollars for the MTA in 2020.

To underscore just how critical funding is for our transit systems, we surveyed riders actively using their local systems as well as riders who are currently non-active (people who normally ride transit but are not currently using it due to the “pause”). Approximately 10% of our respondents are users of Metro-North. Our survey reflects the severe dropoff in transit use, with under ten percent of the more than 1,000 respondents reporting that they were actively taking transit during the pandemic. Among these riders, who are primarily essential workers, the most common intervention requested was for more public transit service to allow for greater physical distancing. Our survey results also show that the vast majority of non-active riders expect to return to transit if agencies take the right precautions, with only eight percent of respondents reporting that they would not return to transit or would only return in the case of a vaccine. That means that transit agencies need operations funding now to safeguard transit for the 92% of non-active riders who want to return to our trains and buses.

Public transit is a necessary service that deserves federal support, and transit aid has to be non-negotiable in the next COVID-related funding bill that comes before you. Our state and our region depend on public transit, and the nation’s recovery depends on the recovery of Connecticut and the tri-state area. Our riders—your constituents—have spoken clearly, and they want to see you prioritize additional funds for the MTA, Metro-North, and Connecticut’s public transit authorities.

Sincerely,

Nick Sifuentes
Executive Director
Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Felicia Park-Rogers
Director of Regional Infrastructure
Tri-State Transportation Campaign