June 8, 2020

Senator Kirsten Gillibrand
780 Third Avenue, Suite 2601
New York, New York 10017

Dear Senator Gillibrand,

We write to you today on behalf of the millions of riders of the MTA: commuters, students, visitors, the workers and residents of NYC, Long Island, and the counties served by Metro-North. 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 New York City went on pause in March 2020, ridership on the MTA fell to record lows, with approximately 93% fewer riders than normal. Due to the parameters of the pause, the vast majority of the riders who continued to rely on the MTA were essential workers, a majority of them women, and a vast majority of them people of color. They were nurses, home health aides, janitors, security guards, grocery workers, transit workers, and many other essential workers upon whom we are dependent upon to carry out key functions of our civil society. Even at its lowest ridership, as many as 900,000 riders per day were still relying on the MTA to get to work. This is as many people as make up the entire city of Austin, Texas. The MTA did not buckle; even under these extraordinary circumstances, they continued to move our state’s and region’s heroes on a daily basis and to keep our state’s essential services functioning, allowing the rest of us to shelter in place safely.

The MTA is the nation’s largest transit system. 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, tolls, and tax revenues due to coronavirus have totalled an estimated $1 billion per month. The MTA will likely need over $10 billion in federal aid to continue service through fiscal year 2021. We are grateful and appreciative of your championing of the CARES Act to begin to respond to this issue. The $3.9 billion dollars 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 upon which it relied short-changed large urban transit systems by favoring small systems over large ones. While the MTA moves 38% of the nation’s public transit users and NYC was disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus, the MTA received 15% of the CARES Act transit funds as apportioned by the formulas. 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 MTA is now faced with the new costs of cleaning and virus-proofing their system while still keeping their entire transit system moving, even with a greatly diminished passenger load. They are tasked with this while enduring tremendous losses of farebox and toll revenues: more support is needed as the city and region open back up. We already see ridership numbers moving up to approximately 1.4 million a day on buses and subways alone (not counting LIRR and Metro-North ridership, which are also slowly increasing). Beginning today, Monday, June 8, with the Phase 1 re-opening for NYC going into effect, the City expects ridership to increase between 400,000 and 800,000 riders this week alone. The MTA will require another $3.9 billion in federal funding to finish up the year 2020, and anticipates needing a total of $10.4 billion through 2021.

To underscore just how critical funding is for our transit systems, Tri-State Transportation Campaign surveyed both 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”). Our survey reflects the severe dropoff in transit use under “the pause,” with just 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 New York. Our riders—your constituents—have spoken clearly, and they want to see you prioritize additional funds for the MTA.

Sincerely,

Nick Sifuentes
Executive Director
Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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