

CITY POWER / Riders to MTA: Staff the Token Booths

by Tina Y. Chan.

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THE TRANSIT AUTHORITY'S startling announcement that it is planning to phase out token booth clerks and rely more on MetroCard machines has sparked an outpouring of community outrage.

The public's desperate outcry for better transit service has produced the beginning of the broadest coalition that the MTA has ever seen. This coalition hopes to find a way to make the MTA accountable and responsive to the riders' needs, instead of its frustrating public hearings that go nowhere and a dysfunctional MTA board that rubber-stamps all its proposals. People want to get their voices heard. They want the authority to do what it preaches: "MTA.Going your way."

According to the Transport Workers Union, the MTA has amassed a large budget surplus from increased ridership, but instead of making service better, Transit is cutting back. Worst of all, the decisions that affect riders' safety, such as closing these token booths, were made without community or riders' input. Other service cuts or modifications, such as the termination of the G train at Court Square and the re-routing of the F train did go through the public hearing process, but the riders' suggestions were utterly dismissed and the reason given was the "lack of rolling stocks (trains)." One couldn't help but ask, "Where is the money?"

In December, 2000, the MTA board of directors approved a budget that called for reducing personnel by 235 people in the stations department, with a total saving of \$6.5 million per year. The token- clerk reductions would involve 102 booths at 95 out of 468 stations citywide. MTA plans to take the clerks completely out of these booths in the next two years. The 24-hour stations would use the clerks as customer service representatives to interact with the public, keep an eye on the stations, offer assistance and not be chained to a booth, so they could be available on mezzanines and platforms. The other booth personnel would be reassigned.

The plan seemed fine on the surface, but the MTA ignored that the riders much prefer having a stationary booth to rely on because then they know they can find a clerk, especially during an emergency when minutes can mean the difference between life and death.

A senior transit advocacy group is very troubled over the security implications of the booth closures. Many seniors travel on the subways at night and off-peak hours, and they are fearful of being alone. To them, the TA's advice to call 911 to summon help is useless. What is one to do in case of sudden illness, for example? The seniors worry that this cutback is the beginning of the end of all token booths-and they perceive that as a diminution of their quality of life. The TA plans to implement a special-fare MetroCard providing discounts and free transfers, but seniors tend not to trust the machines, the same reason they don't frequent the ATMs.

Safety is a serious concern. The Queens elderly are encouraged to use the subway underpasses to avoid the potentially fatal traffic on Queens Boulevard. But many seniors would rather cross the boulevard than go into an unattended subway station.

The vague way the MTA has handled these closings-announcing that it will begin shutting part-time booths and reducing hours at others across the city starting in September without providing specifics-is quite revealing and possibly in violation of the law.

According to section 1205(5) of the New York State Public Authorities Law, "any complete or partial closing of a passenger station within the city of New York, or any means of public access to such facility, except for purposes of repair or renovation or in case of emergency shall be accomplished only if approved by resolution of the authority adopted by no less than a majority of the whole number of members of the authority then in office, and only after a public hearing."

The MTA has responded that the stations are not being partially closed because MetroCard machines allow people access to the station. But the machines break down and they can never do what people do: provide large amounts of change, correct MetroCard errors, give travel information, warn riders of service interruptions and help during emergencies.

Councilwoman Kathryn Freed (D-Manhattan) has introduced a resolution calling for the council to hold public hearings on the public-safety impact of the scheduled closings and exactly what the Transit Authority has planned. The MTA's decision is final. But, at any monthly board meeting, it could vote to restore the token booths. It should. Our safety is on the line.

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