

January 25, 2009

In the shivery, freezing night air of January 21st, I drove to the MTA public hearing on fare increases and service cuts that were being held in the Village of Garden City. Like wayfarers on a well-traveled road, MTA/LIRR hearings have become a daily pilgrimage for village board members.

If the weather was cold outside, it was downright balmy when compared to the arctic blast I felt upon entering the Grand Ballroom of the opulent Garden City Hotel. Even though I had arrived nearly an hour after the scheduled starting time, the hearing had only just commenced and walking toward the ballroom I could distinctly hear Trustee Jim Rhatigan's strong, orotund voice penetrating the masonry walls as if it were tissue paper.

At the door, the MTA police checked me for concealed weapons before allowing me in. Though this was obviously standard procedure, I let my imagination take flight with the delicious satisfaction that they found me so menacing. Upon entering the spacious ballroom, I scarcely discerned a single smile as the room took upon the singular expression of a concentrated, collective frown.

Jim Rhatigan had concluded his remarks as the first speaker and I was called to the podium with such abruptness that there was no time to remove my overcoat or review my notes hastily prepared scarcely a half-hour earlier. Quickly scanning the audience, I could see that the full brass of the MTA/LIRR was in attendance and some were on the dais imperiously presiding over the hearing. I tried to make my remarks briskly and without fanfare as to conform to the 3- minute time limit allotted to each speaker.

The full text of my testimony can be found elsewhere in this publication but, in short, I demanded that before they close the ticket office in Floral Park, cut services and raise fares they must forego their errors and misguided policies of the past. Work rule changes, downsizing of staff, streamlining operations, a thorough reexamination of all contracts with outside companies and consultants as well as tougher negotiations with the unions will reduce operation costs and avoid their proposed unpleasantries.

I stated that the inefficiencies that resulted in a \$1.2 billion deficit could have only happened in a subsidized environment. Reflecting that LIRR President, Helena Williams, has shelved the third track I urged that they use the \$202 million slated for this mega-project to finance operations rather than punishing us with fare increases and reducing service by closing ticket stations.

Trustee Jim Rhatigan asked the MTA board to correct the inequity of a peak one-way traveler who has to pay a 36% premium over an off peak one way traveler. Jim also pointed out that this difference is even greater in that the purchase of a peak ten trip ticket has a 60% premium over an off peak ten trip ticket which translates in traditional east to west morning commuters subsidizing those known as "reverse commuters."

Trustee Rhatigan also commented on the proposal to eliminate service to Belmont Park on racing days other than the “Belmont Stakes” day. Since the New York Racing Authority (NYRA) is currently endeavoring to reinvigorate its operations it would only be, Jim rightly noted, counterproductive to undercut these efforts.

Finally, Jim criticized the proposal to increase the standard fare on LI Bus from \$2.00 to \$3.50 and the coupling of this proposal with the directive that LI Bus would no longer honor “Unlimited Use Metro Cards”. The upshot would be that a Nassau commuter traveling from home to Manhattan would face a more than 300% increase to their monthly cost of commutation.

Next to testify on behalf of our village was Trustee Tom Tweedy, who has served as liaison to our Third Track Task Force. Trustee Tweedy observed that the MTA/LIRR has over 6,000 employees, yet only a few of these thousands of public servants have positions who actually serve the public, but among those who do so most conspicuously are ticket office personnel. These employees should be among the last positions eliminated instead of the first. Moreover, the MTA/LIRR could eliminate positions in its headquarters in either Jamaica or Madison Avenue without effecting service to its customers.

The Floral Park Station, Tom continued, serves not only Floral Park but also commuters from the communities of South Floral Park, Bellerose and the Queens commuters coming from neighborhoods north of the Nassau County border. Tom also stated that since Floral Park is the last manned station on the Hempstead line, elimination of this ticket office would mean that only the terminus stations of Hempstead, Jamaica, Brooklyn and Penn would be the only stations with ticket agents.

Trustee Tweedy strongly criticized the area of the ADA elevator access to all the platforms that are clearly antiquated and not in compliance. Moreover, Tom concluded, the Floral Park Station is in serious need of rehabilitation and compares poorly to Seaford, Rockville Centre or Long Beach, all of which have been updated and made more customer friendly.

That summarizes the testimony of the village board. We consider the removal of our ticket office not only as radical surgery without the benefit of an anesthetic but something that creates a deformity rather than removing one. Most importantly our presence, frequently noted by residents of other communities, sends a message to the MTA/LIRR that Floral Park will not stand passively by in the face of policies detrimental to our community nor will we be blindly shuffled along as if we are on a “Bataan Death March.”

Martyrdom is not for us; we will continue to be forceful, marshal the facts and fight the fight. To be too good and sweet natured against these impersonal forces is to unilaterally disarm oneself. A tiger, after all, won't turn into a kitten by stroking it and Floral Park is too big and important to become a petting zoo.

The Federal Stimulus and Local Communities

I received a memorandum from the “New York Conference of Mayors” (NYCOM) updating me on New York’s efforts to prepare for a federal stimulus package and how local governments can work with the state in this undertaking. As much as \$550 billion in proposed stimulus funding would be distributed through existing federal-state-local programs supposedly targeting infrastructure and development projects --- both state and local --- that will have the greatest and most immediate impact.

Many, like NYC, are salivating over the prospect. Why wouldn’t they be? If you take out the effect of big surplus leftovers from Wall Street’s boom years, N.Y.C. will spend \$4.3 billion more than it is taking in this fiscal year. I’ve seen projections that their deficit will easily exceed the percentage of the early 70s fiscal crisis when the city had to humiliatingly give up its own budget to outside administrators because when it came to keeping their financial house in order they were notorious home wreckers.

The black arts of politics give me the sneaking suspicion that these stimulus packages may well turn into lobbying free for alls helping special interests and various constituencies more than they do the economy. Public works programs, just because it deals with a faltering infrastructure, should not be exempt from a cost benefit analysis. Not that I have not favored liquidity injections ever since the massive amounts of excess credit that the Feds and then others created led to this deplorable financial collapse. But assets cannot be artificially preserved forever and somewhere down the line prices have to be allowed to fall down to market levels or you just prolong the market crisis. That’s just simple economics. So while all this largesse of capital infusion could conceivably give birth to recovery it will most probably do so at the cost of more bubbles.

In times of prolonged and chronic deflation government deficits is a necessary and powerful resource in the short term; but once this is prolonged indefinitely it becomes an instrument of economic malfeasance. In the short run we need to prevent financial meltdown but in the long run recovery depends on increased productivity and job creation. Progress, I’m convinced, could be made on this front by eliminating the payroll tax which has to be the most regressive anti-job tax ever invented, eliminate the corporate tax (corporations don’t pay them they just pass them on) and reduce the capital gains tax. Under this kind of investment stimulus package corporate credit markets, stock markets and foreign investors investing in the market will be immediate and furious, providing that the insecurities plaguing the market are tamed by responsible involvement and oversight that creates stability.

Finally, President Obama has a unique and marvelous opportunity to restructure popular entitlement programs that if left unchecked, will ultimately lead to economic Hara Kari. Because of his popularity and unimpeachable liberal credentials, President Obama will have the political capital and ideological stripes to deal boldly with our bankrupt social security system and an increasingly sclerotic health care system in a way his predecessor could not. Just as President Bill Clinton could enact welfare reform in a way his predecessor couldn’t and President Nixon could visit China in a way that would have

been unthinkable for his predecessor, President Obama could tackle the corruptions in these systems without being branded a heartless reformer.

The time for reform is indeed now, for if not now, when? What happens in Washington will affect New York and ultimately trickle down to our own village. If things can't be top down driven then let it be driven upward from down below. That is why I'm writing NYCOM to urge them to follow the prescriptions I outlined above for nothing less than the financial health of our communities and our future are at stake. Pain is unavoidable but let us take the less painful course by doing the right thing for our future, our children and our country.