



**OFFICE OF THE NEW YORK CITY
COMPTROLLER**

TESTIMONY BY

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NEW YORK CITY COMPTROLLER

**Before the
Senate Committee on Transportation and
the Senate Committee on Corporations, Authorities and
Commissions**

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Testimony of William C. Thompson, Jr.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today, Chairman Malave Dilan and Chairman Perkins.

We all know that this City can't survive without good subways, buses, and commuter rails. When transit funds are cut and the infrastructure isn't maintained, our economy and our quality of life are at risk. In the 1970s, businesses and residents fled in part because of decades-long disinvestment in New York City's subways.

No one wants a return to those dark days. But that will be our future if we don't fund the MTA's capital program and find cash to keep trains and buses running and affordable.

Today, my office released a comprehensive way for New Yorkers to see just what would happen if money doesn't come through for our transit system. Riders who go to www.comptroller.nyc.gov can find out just what's in store for their neighborhood and the subway lines and bus routes they ride regularly.

The maps and charts we have created make a powerful case for funding transit. They show the 300-plus cuts the MTA promises to make on subways and buses if its March 25th funding deadline passes without action from the State Legislature.

These cuts would be devastating to all mass transit users. Schoolchildren, senior citizens, and workers—anyone who takes transit, at virtually any time of day—would encounter longer rides and more crowding.

These cuts jeopardize the safety of New Yorkers. If the subways lose 211 station agents, there would be many fewer transit employees available in an emergency to call police or EMS. This puts schoolchildren and everyone else who ride the trains in greater jeopardy.

Longer waits for trains and buses also make riders more vulnerable, especially at night. Instead of 20-minute waits for trains from 2-5 a.m., trains would arrive only every half hour.

Along with these service cuts, the proposed fare hike would perhaps hurt working families the most, with a single ride costing as much as \$2.50 and a monthly pass as much as \$104. Riders would be asked to pay more while getting less, and these hikes would hit them at a time when many New Yorkers are struggling just to make ends meet.

I am particularly outraged by the MTA's proposal to raise Access-A-Ride fares to as high as \$10 for a round-trip. And I'm surprised that Mayor Bloomberg has yet to assert his right under the contract the City has with the MTA—which my office uncovered—to reject this proposal.

The cuts and fare hikes would cause more congestion on city streets. More people are likely to drive or take car services, especially if service is cut, which will make the roads more crowded.

We can stop this and fund the rebuilding program as well. But it will take leadership.

The Ravitch Commission's December report calls on all those who benefit, directly or indirectly, from a healthy transit system to pay a share of transit costs. That includes asking drivers to pitch in: imagine what traffic would be like without our vast transit system.

I agree with this approach, but I do not believe the Commission achieved fairness with its proposal to toll the East River and Harlem River bridges. Tolls are inequitable and would burden Brooklyn, Bronx, and Queens residents disproportionately.

Research shows that 60 percent of the proposed Ravitch bridge tolls would be paid by Brooklyn and Queens residents, even though these residents make only 36 percent of car trips into Manhattan's Central Business District.

Some working people, especially those who own small businesses, would end up paying a disproportionate amount for tolls. Many of the city's small businesses—food suppliers, plumbers, painters—are in Brooklyn, Queens, or the Bronx. They are vital for the economic diversity of the city. But tolls would significantly burden these businesses, many of which are already struggling.

Bridge tolls would also burden City residents disproportionately. Because of inequitable State and MTA funding formulas, City transit does not get its fair share of transit dollars, as I showed in my August 2007 report, "Putting the Brakes on the Subway and Bus Fare." Bridge tolls would increase this disparity.

My proposal for a weight-based vehicle registration fee spreads the burden to support transit much more fairly across the entire region. Every dollar would go to transit. It has the potential to add \$1 billion to the MTA's coffers. The fee would also promote the use of lighter, less polluting vehicles, fostering energy independence and mitigating global warming.

The details are simple. For vehicles weighing 2,300 pounds or less, drivers would pay an additional \$100 annually. For larger vehicles, drivers would pay \$100 plus a 9-cent charge for every pound of curb weight over 2,300.

My proposal could be phased in, so that those who use particularly heavy vehicles might be able to make different purchasing decisions for their next vehicles. By making these choices, drivers would benefit the environment. Businesses would be able to deduct the registration fees from their taxes.

While drivers would still end up paying, the vehicle registration fee proposal would apply to vehicles registered across the entire 12-county MTA region. In other words, Queens and Westchester residents alike—all of whom benefit from an efficient and affordable transit system—would contribute toward its operation and maintenance.

These are the toughest economic times any of us here have ever faced. But we cannot let our regional transit system deteriorate or the recovery will be slower and harder. I look forward to working with you over the next weeks as this crucial decision is made.