NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

Transit System Faces Tough Test

IN THE SUBWAYS

Ray Sánchez

Gene Russianoff has been a thorn in the side of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority for more than two decades, New York's most prominent advocate for better mass transit and lower fares.

So it was surprising to hear Russianoff heaping praise on the mass transit system during Tuesday's MTA board meeting.

"I was the only public speaker and I did what I thought was the right thing to do," Russianoff said yesterday. "I thanked them for their blood, sweat and tears over the last two weeks to keep the system moving."

But, in a time of crisis, the true test for a transit system already bursting at the seams will begin today with the implementation of dramatic traffic restrictions in Manhattan.

For the first time since the 1980 transit strike, single-occupant passenger vehicles are being barred in Manhattan. The new ban affects vehicles on most bridges and tunnels entering midtown and lower Manhattan weekdays from 6 a.m. to noon. The hope is the restrictions will help ease traffic that has snarled midtown and lower Manhattan since the Sept. 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.

So there was Russianoff, attorney for the Straphangers Campaign, several *former city Transportation Department* commissioners, members of Transportation Alternatives and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign yesterday at a gridlocked midtown intersection to show their support for the new measures.

"The subways are crowded to begin with, this will make them even more crowded," Russianoff said. "But like many things in the city now, we all have to do our part. Traffic on city streets is insane."

At a time when everyone is desperately looking for a way out of mourning, they spoke in the new language of the disaster. But normalcy is incompatible with security.

"This is about allowing people time to adjust to what is going to be a new era in New York City," said John Kaehny, executive director of Transportation Alternatives, a group that advocates "bicycling, walking and environmentally sensible transportation."

Gene Russianoff

Russianoff said, "There are many thousands of people now who put American flags on their cars to show their concerns about the future of the city and the country. Now they need to put a passenger in their cars to show they're doing their part to keep the city moving. It is a fair sacrifice."

So will subway and bus service improve enough to handle the extra load? That cannot be taken for granted. The masters of the subway have not done nearly enough to handle the extra hundreds of thousands of riders a day produced by MetroCard discounts.

"We'll run as much subway and bus service as possible while renewing our call for businesses to stagger work hours," said Al O'Leary, New York City Transit spokesman. "That's to take advantage of available capacity before and after the rush hour."

But *NYC Transit "asks for the continued patience of our customers, who have been wonderfully understanding during these difficult times,"* O'Leary said.

Translation: It will get worse before it gets better. "Transit ridership has reached its highest levels since the late 1960s," Russianoff said. "There are 1 million more subway and bus riders on an average weekday today than there were four years ago. Subway ridership is up 29 percent over the last five years matched only by about an 11 percent increase in service."

While there are more subway riders, there are also more motor vehicles than ever entering Manhattan, more than a million a day during the week. Downtown had been choking on traffic for years, and political leaders did precious little to discourage people from driving into Manhattan.

For decades, groups such as Transportation Alternatives have pushed for stern anti-car measures like tolls on the East River bridges and express bus lanes in and out of Manhattan. Finally, government is listening.

"To have to realize it through a tragedy is sad," Kaehny said.

"To be honest," Russianoff said, "none of us feels very comfortable pushing our agenda on the bones and blood of all the people who died."

The day the Trade Center towers came tumbling down, Russianoff was in his lower Manhattan office just three blocks away.

"The subways are a symbol of the city's resilience," he said. "I left the World Trade Center area that day, walked uptown and met my wife and took the 7 train to our home and our family."

NEWSDAY, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2001

CITY_21MC100_01183029 4

NYC-WTC_000230627