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M.T.A. Restricts Information on Scares That Delay Travelers

By RANDY KENNEDY

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority said yesterday that it had decided to limit the amount of information it releases about subway and other transit delays caused by anthrax scares or reports of suspicious bags.

The authority's officials said they had adopted the restrictive new policy, which began this week, because they were concerned that giving out detailed information about terrorism fears that turned out to be unfounded — a smudge of powdered sugar that caused an hourlong subway delay, for example — could serve to discourage passengers from reporting suspicious things they see.

"Our first concern is the safety of the passengers," said Tom Kelly, the authority's chief spokesman. "And we don't want someone out there to see something and feel stupid about telling the police about it because they've read that all of these other things have turned out to be nothing, sugar from a powdered doughnut or Ajax or something like that."

Over the last two weeks, as anthrax cases have been confirmed in New York, New Jersey, Florida and Washington, there have been dozens of incidents in which frightened subway and commuter train passengers in the metropolitan region have reported seeing white powder or unattended boxes or bags. Those reports have brought whole subway lines to a halt during the rush hours, causing extensive delays.

The reports, which officials say are becoming an almost daily occurrence, have all ended with police investigations that have found no cause for alarm. Or in some cases, there has been evidence of hoaxes meant to prey on fears and cause chaos in the subway.

But officials said that was no reason to be less vigilant about the possibility of a real threat in the subway or on the authority's buses, commuter trains, tunnels or bridges. So after a series of discussions among senior officials, the authority decided to change its policy on releasing all of the information it has on delays and other incidents.

They said the new restrictions — which have so far prompted only minor complaints from news organizations — are similar to ones that have long been applied to some police cases, in which information reported in the news could jeopardize investigations. But it is the first time that spokesmen for the transit agency could remember such restrictions being applied to delays and other transit incidents.

Now, the authority will not specify the exact length of time a train line is out of service, for example. It will also not describe an incident in much more detail than to say that it was caused by a police investigation or by a "suspicious substance" or a "suspicious package."

"If I'm asked if it's sugar or salt or is it from a jelly doughnut or is it Ajax, then I'm not going to go into that information because I don't feel that people necessarily have to know that," Mr. Kelly said. "They will know that their train was delayed because of a police action, or whatever."

Mr. Kelly said, "I can assure you that if we found anthrax or whatever kind of threat at Grand Central or Penn Station or anywhere, that is going to be reported immediately to the public."

The secondary intention of the policy, the officials said, is to limit information that might give pranksters ideas. In that same vein, it is to try to discourage news coverage of pranks that may inadvertently encourage others.

"We learned in the early 1980's with graffiti that what a lot of these guys wanted was the validation of seeing what they did covered in the media," said Al O'Leary, the chief spokesman for New York City Transit, which runs the subways and city buses and is part of the transportation authority.

Mr. O'Leary, who was the spokesman for the old Transit Police Department for nine years and before that for the Sanitation Department, said that his instincts and those of his colleagues were always to err on the side of divulging more information, especially because the transit agency is public, supported by tax dollars and fares.

"We're not trying to be the secret police here," he said. "We believe in the public's right to know. But we feel that this is the right thing to do, so we're going to take a stand on it."

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