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Post-campaign, will Cuomo get serious about public transportation?

BY KATHARINE JOSE

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The Metropolitan Transit Authority probably gets its fair share of vitriol from New Yorkers, and then some. It's an easy target: a massive bureaucracy run by an unelected board whose structure, funding and operations are not particularly well-understood by people who don't deal with transportation policy for a living. Also, most people don't like commuting.



Does Andrew Cuomo have a plan for the M.T.A.? Photo courtesy Cuomo 2010.

All of which makes the M.T.A. a particularly inviting issue during campaign season, when candidates, who will inevitably have to answer questions about it, must find something to say that isn't too nuanced and conveys a politically appropriate level of anger, but makes a limited number of promises about actually changing things, because the fact is the M.T.A. is, at least, functioning.

This explains why no one seems to have much of an idea about what our next governor will do with public transportation.

THE [POLICY PAPERS](#) THE CUOMO CAMPAIGN released over the last few months acknowledge that the M.T.A. has already cut staff and management and asked for [higher fares](#) that will close the [\\$900 million budget gap](#); they suggest, uncontroversially, addressing programs that are out of control. As for the capital plan, which is in even worse shape than the operating budget, Andrew Cuomo says the M.T.A. has to look for more sources of revenue, and that those sources should be private ones if possible.

Transportation types, though optimistic, are not quite sure what that will mean, really.

"He hasn't really had to say much," said Neysa Pranger, director of public affairs at the [Regional Planning Association](#), which hopes that Cuomo will not follow the lead of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who recently [said his state would not go forward](#) with Access to the Region's Core (A.R.C.), a project that would have made a tunnel under the Hudson, vastly increasing the strained capacity of New Jersey Transit and expanding Penn Station.



"I don't think that Andrew is that drastic or dramatic," Pranger said. "I think he'll maintain support for critical investment projects. I don't know how much expansion will be put on the books going forward, but I get a sense he has a fundamental understanding of the need for [East Side Access](#) —particularly now that A.R.C. is dead, actually." (East Side Access is a plan for several new tunnels under the East River that would, among other things, give the

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"I think he understands good repair, normal replacement—all of that stuff that has his father kind of lived through with the M.T.A. in the '80s and early '90s—that you really need to make that investment," Pranger said. "And certainly he was around during those times too, so it's not like he doesn't really get that."

"He's grown up in New York, he has to have a sense of transportation," Robert Paaswell, director emeritus of the University Transportation Research Center, said. But beyond that: "I'm not sure. I think there's enough generality so that basically nobody can address the specifics yet; [that] would be probably the best way to put it. He's a very good politician."

Kate Slevin, executive director of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, was encouraged by "Cleaner, Greener NY," a policy paper the Cuomo campaign released last week.

"I would say that's encouraging," she said. "He certainly understands smart growth, and some of the difference between a reliable mass transit system and safe walking and biking routes and more livable communities. But I think we'll have to wait and see some of the details of how those policies will be implemented."

SOME OF THE THINGS CUOMO SAID OUT LOUD during the campaign indicated that he had no intention of addressing transit in a substantive way until after he was safely in office.

He said the M.T.A. has two sets of books. He said it needed "more efficiency, more effectiveness, better management." It will have, he said, new sources of revenue—but not congestion pricing, a controversial plan that would levy automobiles traveling to high-traffic areas and use the money to fund increased public transportation, and not more money from the state—and fiscal discipline.

The M.T.A. has "no leadership," he said during the seven-way gubernatorial debate. "Nobody's in charge."

Each of these statements was exquisitely tailored to angry voters; and each was almost risible in terms of constructiveness and accuracy.

First, the M.T.A. does not in any sense have two sets of books now. (Cuomo's statement set off a small fire in the transportation blogging crowd.) That phrase, coined by former state comptroller Alan Hevesi, was at one point based on a true story.

What happened is this: In 2002, the M.T.A. moved some money around in a way that gave the appearance of a large deficit. The deficit was then used by the authority as an argument in favor of raising fares.

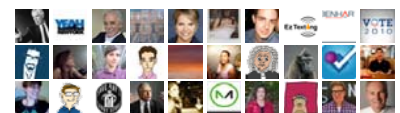
"What they were doing is some financial sleight of hand," Pranger said. "It was not technically wrong of them to do—*technically*—but it was the fact that they didn't tell anyone about it, and, in fact, used it to make the case for increasing the fare."

Part of why the M.T.A. could do it was that its accounting did not have to be transparent. That has drastically changed as a result—the M.T.A. must now release a preliminary budget in July, and updated one in November before passing it in December; a three-year financial plan is also required.

Cuomo's other charge, the one about the M.T.A. having no leadership, was just surprising coming from Cuomo, because there is someone in charge at the M.T.A., and he's been pretty good at his job.

"It's an unfair accusation that the agency doesn't have a good head," Pranger said.

"To a certain degree, it kind of makes me wonder how well they're paying attention, because there's really been some unprecedented movement at the M.T.A. in terms of consolidating back office functions," she said.



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state. Cuomo [plans to consolidate](#) some of the thousands of local government entities in the state to make them more efficient and less expensive; Walder has taken the authority's numerous departments—a legacy of the fact that the agency was formed from a number of different agencies—and folded it into one. Cuomo wants to avoid more spending; [Walder has found \\$500 million](#) dollars in recurring savings, despite budget cuts imposed by Albany.

"Absolutely, it's very good leadership," Paaswell said, citing Walder's qualifications for the monumentally unpleasant task at hand. (He spent a long time in the New York City transit system, played an important role in the successful overhaul of London's system, and worked for McKinsey & Co.)

Slevin said her organization, which has been critical of the M.T.A. on many occasions, thought the negative comments about the M.T.A. leadership were gratuitous, in part because Walder came in to a difficult situation and has been able to [implement better technology](#) anyway, like countdown clocks on subway platforms and non-stop tolls on the Henry Hudson bridge, which Tri-State had been asking for for years.

"I think that you expect one thing during the election season, but then once the candidate actually gets elected things start to change," she said. "The governor actually has to start figuring out how to address the grave financial difficulties."

Cuomo's press office, presumably busy with the switch from campaign to gubernatorial-transition mode, did not respond to requests for information for this article.



PART OF THE PROBLEM IS THE FUNDAMENTAL disconnect between the M.T.A. and the public, and according to Paaswell, also the media. Not a lot of people know how it works, but everybody knows what it is and how much it annoys them.

For example, when state legislators get up in front of their constituents and to talk about the evils of the M.T.A., indignant about higher fares and service cuts, it often goes unmentioned that the M.T.A. is dependent for not a small part of its funding upon the state legislature. Or that, when faced with a massive budget crisis last year, the members of that legislature [diverted \\$143 million](#) that was dedicated to the M.T.A., passing along their managerial shortcomings, as it were, to commuters.

"There's a fundamental problem with how the M.T.A. is viewed by the state," Pranger said. "When they're in flush times, the agency gets starved by the state because they think they can kind of go it on their own; during times of financial distress the agency's looked at as kind of a source of funds, basically. So, either way, the M.T.A. gets itself in trouble with regard to Albany. The state has used the agency as a piggy bank."

Another example: the ["two sets of books" idea](#) is now a candidate mainstay, despite the fact that the charge was overturned by an appellate court, and the authority no longer operates in the same way.

"The media sort of forgets that the M.T.A. has a major job in New York, and that's to provide eight million trips a day, and to do it safely," Paaswell said. "They think of it as this massive organization that's in need of some kind of reform. And if I were to ask people the question, which I do because I'm a professor, 'What do you mean by that? And what kind of reform?' They're sort of chanting what the politicians say."

"You have an organization that's fairly healthy," he said. "It provides amazing transportation service every day. The city could not exist without a healthy M.T.A."

Restructuring will be needed, he said, but because of changing circumstances that are much bigger than the agency itself.

"It's beginning to show signs of strain, because the budget's been cut dramatically and we're having reductions in service," Paaswell said. "I think the governor's going to have to recognize that the M.T.A. was designed to solve specific problems back in the '70s, and it's done it fairly well, but it's reached the point where it can no longer afford the programs that it needs to have in place based on the funding sources that it was originally thought to have, so he has to deal with that—he has to deal with the [question], What should an M.T.A. look like? Do we need this incredibly complex organization?"

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO GET AN IDEA OF WHAT WILL HAPPEN to the M.T.A. in the near future until Cuomo

decides, or announces, whether he will keep Walder on, and if not, who the replacement will be.

Historically, governors have almost always filled the highest post at the M.T.A. with their own appointees, but Walder only arrived in last year and he's in the middle of all kinds of structural changes.

The transportation advocates I talked to want him to stay.

"Hopefully [Cuomo] will keep him around, because he's proved himself to be an outstanding executive there," Pranger said. "And it's actually hard—there's a limited supply of people that actually have intimate knowledge of the New York transit system, transportation in general, finance, and management. Jay happens to have all of those things. I think it would be a real mistake to get rid of him because there's only so many people that would even qualify for the job—and then so many people who would actually do it."

Asked whether Cuomo will keep Walder, Slevin, whose [organization sent a letter](#) to candidates for governor asking that Walder be kept on, said, "I hope so."

Paaswell thinks the chances that Cuomo will keep him are "very good."

"Because you talk to people, and who's on the horizon?" he asked. "Actually, the irony is, you won't find somebody with that array of talents willing to work as cheaply as Jay does."

The other variable in predicting the future of the M.T.A., regardless of who's left in charge of cleaning up the mess, is that Cuomo will have governing priorities, and it's not at all clear that the M.T.A. will be one of them.

"I think you know, there's so much on his plate that I'm not sure what philosophy, if any, he has," Paaswell said of Cuomo's ideas about transportation. "His priorities obviously have to start with understanding the budget, and bending the legislature to his will."

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