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Community Headlines

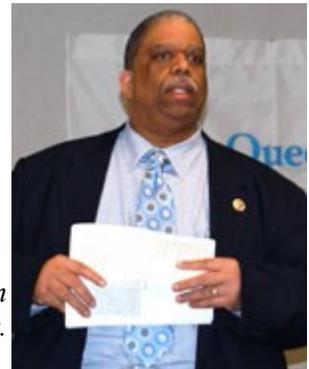
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Sander at QCC

story and photos by Sam Goldman



MTA President Lee Sander (at right) speaks to members of the Queens Civic Congress on Monday, Feb. 4 about the MTA's Five-Year Capital Plan, as QCC President Corey Bearak listens on.



City Council Member Leroy Comrie (at left) speaks out against congestion pricing at the QCC's meeting.

The Queens Civic Congress, at their meeting on Monday, Feb. 4, pushed an alternative proposal to MTA President Lee Sander, who was in attendance to discuss the MTA's next Five-Year Capital Plan.

The QCC's plan calls for the restoration of the commuter tax, which was repealed in 1999. The tax would charge those who work in New York City but reside elsewhere. QCC President Corey Bearak claimed that reinstating the tax would bring \$1.8 billion into city coffers.

To make the plan more "politically palatable," Bearak offered to allow New York's suburban communities to keep their share of the tax revenues, while the city would keep revenues from commuters in surrounding states.

Sander noted that "regardless of where congestion pricing goes or does not go with the legislature, what is foremost to me is that the legislature and the governor provide the finding to maintain a program of normal replacement and a state of good repair [at the MTA], and on top of that, find \$5 to \$10 billion to modernize the system."

City Council Member Leroy Comrie also spoke out against the plan at the QCC meeting, calling it "horrible for Queens."

"I honestly don't think that [proponents of the plan] are going to get the revenue they expect," he said, lamenting that "they are focused on this plan, they are fixated on it, they don't want to come off it."

He told the crowd that he is working with fellow Council Member Lewis Fidler of Brooklyn on a counter-proposal.

The Five-Year Capital plan

“We expect Queens to grow significantly in the next 25 years,” he noted, citing that by 2030, the borough’s population will increase by 25 percent.

Right now, 1.1 million Queens residents use MTA services daily.

Sander relayed an agenda of bettering workforce development and labor relations, integrating the MTA’s different divisions, improving customer service, using environmentally friendly buses and solar power, and making capital improvements.

Sander noted that the MTA is formulating a “30-year vision” not unlike the city’s PlaNYC 2030. He urged attendees to look at the big picture. “We live or die as a region as a whole,” he said.

A big project in the new capital plan, Sander said, was “East Side Access”—bringing the Long Island Rail Road into Grand Central Station through Sunnyside.

Sander said that “24 trains an hour” would emanate from Grand Central through Sunnyside, “which will give the Long Island Rail Road the capacity to increase service in Queens.”

Sander would later note that the increasing cost of construction materials will raise the cost of building a new Sunnyside station, adding that he would know more “in about three months.”

“We’re looking to see how we can reduce some costs” at Sunnyside and at the downtown Manhattan Fulton Street terminal.

The other thing the MTA seeks funding for is a “third track” that would allow Queens residents to commute to Nassau and Suffolk counties for work. He noted that a recent look at trains from Jamaica out to Nassau County during the morning rush hour found the trains cars “packed.”

“I was shocked,” Sander said.

Sander also noted that the MTA seeks to move to Communications-Based Train Control (CBTC for short), which he claimed would be able to add one or two trains per hour on an MTA track. Currently, train tracks can carry 24 to 25 trains per hour.

He noted that CBTC would give the MTA the ability to increase capacity along the Queens Boulevard train lines.

Right now, Sander said, the MTA uses a system so outdated that replacement parts for the system can no longer be found and must be made in-house.

Lastly, Sander said that “if I had my druthers,” he would expand the proposed Second Avenue Subway tunnel (which would lengthen the Q train line) past its current Phase 1 ending point at 96th Street in Manhattan.

QCC member Edwin Westley asked Sander about the possibility of reactivating unused LIRR stations in Queens, specifically in Elmhurst.

“We are looking at the entire Long Island Rail Road network,” he said. “In terms of the unused rail lines, I have not yet seen the recommendation from my head of planning.”

“There is a great deal of political sensitivity with some of these lines, so if you really think that they are the answer, there’s a whole conservation that has to occur with that,” he told Westley, adding later that he worried about “community acceptance” of any plan.

“I certainly am open and willing to entertain suggestions about” reactivating LIRR stations, he added.

Westley then asked the possibility of a Rockaway ferry to Manhattan. Sander noted that the MTA does not run ferry services, but again added that he would “open” to any proposal “that the community could get behind and support.”

Richard Hellenbrecht, from Queens Community Board 13, asked Sander about the progress of the proposed Bus Rapid Transit project in Laurelton. Sander did not have the information on hand, but he assured Hellenbrecht that “I do believe very strongly in the concept of BRT.”

Patricia Dolan of the Kew Gardens Hills Civic Association asked Sander what the MTA is doing to prevent flooding problems from knocking out the Queens Boulevard line.

“Basically, this has been a situation that’s been longstanding,” he told her, adding that the MTA and the Municipal Art Society are designing elevated vent gates that are designed to limit the flow of water from the ground into the subways.

Bob Friedrich, president of Glen Oaks Village, asked Sander to investigate the possibility of pricing Long Island Rail Road stations in portions of Queens east of the New York City Transit system at the same price as NYCT trains.

“As far as we’re concerned, a train is a train,” he said. “Why can’t we bring subway-priced train service to the trains in our community that doesn’t have what you call a subway but the Long Island Rail Road?”

“I would love to reduce the fares on our system and provide more service,” Sander told him, but added that “practically, what I’m looking at is \$6 billion worth of deficits over the next four years, and looking for the legislature to provide another \$5 or \$10 billion dollars in congestion pricing.”

“Proposal that would reduce revenue,” he told Friedrich, “are a little problematic.”

At odds over Rockaway line

The idea of reactivating the Rockaway LIRR line provoked differing reactions from two Queens communities.

The Glendale Civic Association's Kathy Masi asked Sander about that possibility, noting that it was something her group's members would not support.

"I have not seen any active proposals to do that," Sander said, though he did keep open the possibility of examining the line at a later date.

Rockaway resident Lew Simon, on the other hand, pleaded with Sander to use the line not for LIRR service but instead for a NYCT shuttle train line.

"We have pushing since 1997" for the Rockaway train, he told Sander. "We have the worst abomination of transportation in our community."

"This is a desperate need," Simon said. "This could be one-seat, one-ride into Manhattan."

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