EDITORIAL

Fare hike can take a hike for now

As the Metropolitan Transportation Authority begins a series of town-hall hearings this week to sell its proposed fare hikes to the public, it faces an uphill battle convincing riders, politicians and transportation advocates that this is a good time for such a move.

The MTA—which is projected to run a budget deficit of $1.3 billion for 2008, growing to $2.2 billion in 2010—has proposed raising base fares next year from $2 to $2.25. The hikes, scheduled to begin in February, would raise about $320 million. Additional hikes in 2010 would bring the total raised to about $560 million.

But a broad spectrum of critics say alternative sources of funding should be pursued before there is a fare increase.

More than 45 legislators and several civic groups signed onto a letter on Oct. 24, pleading with MTA head Elliot "Lee" Sander to hold off on a fare hike until Albany votes on a budget in April.

On Monday, hours before the MTA's first public hearing on the proposed fare hikes, State Senator Tom Duane and other elected officials held a press conference, introducing legislation to obtain nearly $700 million in city and state funds to plug the hole in the MTA's operating budget. And in a report issued earlier this year, New York City Comptroller William Thompson, Jr. identified $728 million in new revenue to close the MTA's budget gap for one year and narrow it in the next, staving off a fare hike for the time being.

Meanwhile, implementing a fare increase while Mayor Bloomberg's congestion-pricing proposal hangs in the balance also seems misguided. The 17-member commission charged with studying the proposal will make its recommendation by Jan. 31, after which it goes to the City Council and then to the State Legislature, who must consider the plan by March 31. If it is approved, New York will reap $354 million in federal Transportation Department funds to begin implementing the project, and the MTA's long-term capital project shortfall could end, with perhaps as much as $30 billion in additional revenue from congestion tolls over the next 20 years.

The connection between the mayor's plan and the MTA's budget woes was made even clearer by the agency itself in a report issued in early October, wherein it outlined a $767 million expanded-subway-service scenario for the No. 1 and C, E and F lines to accommodate extra riders who are expected to jettison their automobiles under Bloomberg's congestion-pricing plan. As the mayor correctly pointed out, the report was a tacit acknowledgment that as the plan moves people from cars onto mass transit, it will generate a lot more revenue for the MTA, which would also receive $184 million in federal funds for the expansion project itself.

All of which underlines the idea that mass transit needs federal, state and city funding—not fare increases—and that the most innovative and progressive proposal out there remains congestion pricing.

Sander has received high marks from transportation advocates for making his agency's budget more transparent, staying focused on major construction projects, and being more connected and responsive to riders. But implementing a regressive fare increase that will pose a hardship on millions of mass-transit riders is hardly the answer at this point in time, with so many alternatives beginning to emerge, and just as Sander begins to rework the bloated bureaucracy he inherited. If anything, a fare increase now would only stymie any innovation that might otherwise be in the making at the MTA.

Letters policy

Chelsea Now welcomes letters to The Editor. They must include the writer's full name, a phone number for confirmation purposes only, and any affiliation that relates directly to the letter's subject matter. Letters should be less than 300 words. We reserve the right to edit letters for space, clarity, civility or libel reasons. Letters should be e-mailed to news@ChelseaNow.com or can be mailed to 145 Sixth Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10013.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Vigilant on Hudson Yards

To the Editor:

Thank you to Chelsea Now for its editorial and continued coverage of the Hudson Yards development process. As the editorial correctly points out, the sheer size of the proposed project will leave an enormous impact upon the West Side.

With the massive upzoning of the Hudson Yards and West Chelsea in 2005, Hell's Kitchen and Chelsea are experiencing a tremendous amount of new construction, and all the traffic, environmental and air quality impacts, and burdens upon infrastructure this brings. The Hudson Yards rezoning alone created the capacity for 24 million square feet of new office development, 13,500 units of housing (most of which will be luxury), 1 million square feet of retail space, and 2 million square feet of hotel space—more than most American cities have in their entire downtowns. Add to this the nearly 6 million square feet of space which current plans slate for the western Hudson Yards, bids for which are now being reviewed by City and State officials, and you have an ongoing enormous transformation of our neighborhoods—and not for the better, I would argue.

The development of the Hudson Railyards must address all of the issues mentioned in the editorial—affordable housing, open space, preservation of the High Line, and space for local cultural organizations. But it must also address how our neighborhoods will cope with this ever-increasing influx of cars, people, businesses, stores and housing for the ultra-wealthy. We are still fighting to get even a small percentage of affordable housing mandated in the development of the western railyards, but keep in mind that in the 1960's and '70s, developments on platforms over railyards and railway and highway cuts in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Upper Manhattan were 100 percent affordable and created thousands of units of low-cost housing.

The editorial was right to say that the public must stay vigilant and speak up as this process moves from the MTA to the City Planning Commission and the City Council. So many of us fought to ensure that we did not get a stadium on this site because of the negative impact it would have on our neighborhoods. We have to remain just as vigilant and vocal with this latest plan.

Andrew Berman

Act on illegal hotels bill

To The editor:

Re "Plugging the hole on illegal hotels" (editorial, Oct. 5):

Thank you for your editorial about illegal hotels in residential buildings.

You are absolutely right that it is a growing issue in our neighborhood, and that our community suffers when long-term tenants are replaced by tourists who can pay more. We are quickly losing affordable housing in Manhattan, and every time an apartment is converted into a hotel room, it makes it that much more difficult for real New Yorkers to find a decent place to live.

The Illegal Hotels Working Group, composed of community groups and our local elected officials, has identified positive steps we can take to combat the problem. Specifically, we need to increase fines on illegal conversions so that building owners incur real penalties if they kick out tenants and rent their apartments as hotel rooms, and we need to strengthen laws that prohibit any variety of hotel (including overnight hotels and extended-stay business hotels) in residential buildings.

City Councilmember Gale Brewer introduced a bill that would remedy the out-of-date and ineffective fines that are currently on the books. That bill already has the support of 11 of her colleagues, including Councilmembers Gerson, Mendez and Garodnick from our neighborhood, and is waiting for a hearing before the City Council housing committee.

The illegal hotels problem is a complicated one, and it does take time to put together an effective government response. But Council Member Brewer's bill, increasing fines on landlords who operate illegal hotels, is a straightforward piece of legislation that the Council can take up right now. Quick action on that bill would be a valuable first step in the larger fight to shut down illegal hotels and return those apartments to real long-term tenants.

John Raskin

Act before it's too late

The state of Tabasco, Mexico, is in dire straits right now. More than 70 percent of the land in this smallish state is underwater. About half of the 1.6 million people are homeless. Clean drinking water is a primary need to prevent epidemic disease, and skin infections are rampant, as thousands of injured people had to wade for miles in neck-deep water to high ground. The state's only big city, Villahermosa, is partly above water.

Tabasco, which borders on Chiapas, is a tropical plain that usually gets about 200 inches of rain a year. The people mainly grew bananas and other fruits, cacao beans to make cocoa and chocolate, and raised some cattle, until oil was discovered along the coast of the Gulf of Campeche. Mexico's oil industry was nationalized for decades, so oil profits did not help most local rural people, who are descendants of various Mayan groups.

This flooding disaster is, proportionally, at least as devastating as was Hurricane Katrina to the U.S. population, or the Asian tsunami to Southeast Asia and to Somalia in Africa. There are other parallels, such as the traditional tendency within Mexico for national officials and much of the Northern and capital-district population to disdain, neglect, and exploit Southern populations.

To learn how to send money quickly to aid the people of the flooded state of Tabasco, Mexico, call the Press Office of the Mexican Consulate at 212-217-6433. (Their special system to help New York metropolitan-area people send money directly was not yet in place at press time.)

Kathy Casey

MIKHAELA REID