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Press Release

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IMMEDIATE

MTA Announces Chair and Members Of Train Speed and Safety Task Force To End Unnecessary Slowdowns Across the MTA System

Task Force, Chaired by Former F.A.A. Administrator Jane Garvey, Will Examine Current Speed Restrictions and Help Address, Systemwide, Miscalibrated Signal Timers that Cause Subway and Railroad Train Operators to Slow Down

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) today announced the chair and members of a new task force to safely address longstanding and unnecessary train slowdowns across the system. The task force, which will be chaired by former Administrator of the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration Jane Garvey, will review the posted civil speed restrictions, improperly calibrated signal timers, and overall operations to ensure trains do not continue to operate slower than safety and best practice dictates.

The Train Speed and Safety Task Force will examine the problem of train slowdowns across the NYC Subway, Metro-North and LIRR systems, and review efficient and safe operating speeds in an effort to optimize both speed and capacity. This will coordinate with the respective unions, Save Safe Seconds Transit effort, and PTC efforts at LIRR and Metro North.

Governor Cuomo, after discussions with labor union leaders, suggested the MTA convene the task force and address these speed-related problems, including restrictions and signal timer accuracy, in order to make improvements to the system.

In addition to Chair Garvey, members of the task force will include:

- Dominick Servedio; Executive Chairman, STV
- Robert Lauby; former Chief Safety Officer, Federal Railroad Administration
- Veronique Hakim; Managing Director, MTA
- Thomas Quigley; General Counsel, MTA
- Andy Byford; President, New York City Transit
- Pat Warren; Chief Safety Officer, MTA
- Chief Operating Officer, MTA (to be hired)
- Tony Utano; President, TWU Local 100

The task force will examine two related issues. First, what is the safe, efficient operating speed for trains in the system. The current speed limits were set over decades in an ad hoc manner and over time the train design and track geometry has changed. Second, the union representing train operators believes that timed signal timers are miscalibrated, causing operators to be wrongfully penalized and thus they operate trains below posted speed limits. The MTA has known that a number of signal timers are in fact miscalibrated.

The MTA has been aware of these issues and NYCT started a speed review on portions of the system. However, according to John Samuelsen and Tony Utano from the TWU, train operators will not increase the actual speed of trains until they are sure that signals are recalibrated so that operators are not unfairly penalized. This new resolution will address the entire system and the operators concern in a comprehensive manner.

MTA Managing Director Veronique Hakim said: "I'm enthusiastic about this Task Force, that together with additional engineering resources and national safety experts, will provide guidance on how to improve our customers' daily experiences. Better service is what the new MTA is about."

TWU Local 100 President Tony Utano said: "Our Train Operators want to get riders to their destinations as quickly as possible while maintaining safety. We look forward to sharing our front-line expertise with the other members of the task force with the goal of improving the system for both riders and workers."

History Of Speed Limits And Timer Signals In The New York City Subway System

The NYC subway system was built more than 100 years ago and early on in its existence, in order to provide for safe operations, various measures were put in place to ensure that trains were not going faster than the conditions they could handle. These measures ensure sufficient stopping distance for the braking capacity to a train ahead. They also provide for safe operation at switching points, on curves and grades, and when approaching a train stopped in a station.

One simple measure was placing “civil speed restrictions” – essentially just speed limits and signs, just like the ones drivers see on highways and roads – at various locations that require reduced speeds throughout the system. Many of these limits date back 50 years. The speed limits were designed to consider the operating characteristics of the trains that were in service at the time as well as track geometry.

Another measure involved the use of “timer signals” – signals connected to timing devices set to trip a train’s emergency brakes if the train passes at a higher speed than allowed. This fail-safe system ensures safety by stopping a train if it goes too fast at a fixed point.

Over the decades, car design and track geometry have improved, allowing cars to maintain stability and safe operation at higher speeds, but the speed limits were not changed to reflect these advancements in safety and comfort. Meanwhile, timer signals continued to be installed throughout the subway system, with an uptick after two fatal crashes in the 1990s – one at Union Square and one on the Williamsburg Bridge. A significant number of these signals throughout the system are miscalibrated. This causes train operators to operate at slower speeds than they were actually intended.