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TRANSCRIPT: MTA Chairman Foye Appears on WBAI Driving Forces

MTA Chairman and CEO Patrick J. Foye appeared on WBAI's Driving Forces with Jeff Simmons to discuss the plan to fine riders who refuse to wear masks on public transit, as well as the agency's dire financial situation and potential paths forward.

A transcript of the interview appears below.

Jeff Simmons: There was some news today about a new rule that is going to take effect starting next week, for anyone who's not wearing a mask when they're taking public transit. So to discuss that and much more, I've got on the line Pat Foye, who's the Chairman and CEO of the MTA, where he has overseen the agency's day-to-day management since April of last year. And if you're not familiar with his name, he previously served as the President of the MTA for two years, and before that led the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, from 2011 to 2017. So today, I invited him on the show to discuss not only the news of the day, but also how dire the fiscal portrait of the MTA. So Mr. Foye, welcome to WBAI.

Patrick J. Foye: Jeff, thank you for inviting me.

Simmons: So I want to start with the news that developed today, the announcement about a new rule in which police are going to enforce when people don't wear masks on mass transit. Can you talk a little about that?

Foye: Let me start with this, Jeff. The law of the state in New York as a result of one of Governor Cuomo's executive orders is that to ride on mass transit, customers have to wear a mask. The good news is that customers are following that directive which is in the interests of minimizing health risks to them, their fellow commuters and our employees. On buses, and we've done physical counts, physical surveys on MTA buses, New York City transit buses, 96% of our customers are wearing masks, on subways 91%, on Metro-North and Long Island Rail Road, well over 90%. Public health officials around the world agree that the single most important thing you can do to protect your health and that of other customers and our employees is to wear a mask. The MTA has no interest in issuing summonses or collecting fines. This is not a revenue fix. We hope to issue as few summonses as possible. The goal is to get already high levels of mask wearing and mask compliance to even higher levels to minimize public health risks from the pandemic, from the virus to our customers and our employees.

Simmons: And you are preaching to the choir when it comes to me, because as I talked about on this show, many episodes, is the importance of wearing a mask not just on mass transit, but when you are going outside, when you're going to be around other people, when you're visiting establishments. So it's going to be interesting to see how this shakes out and you already have as you pointed out, a very high percentage of people who are wearing masks on the subways, so thank you. The reason I wanted to have you on was, you had a piece in The New York Times last week with the TWU President John Samuelson that outlined the dire situation, in which you said the subways are facing a five alarm fire. Let me let me put it bluntly, how bad is the MTA's financial situation as a result of the pandemic?

Foye: It is awful, it is unprecedented. And just to put it in context, the effects on MTA ridership, subways, buses, Metro-North, the Long Island Rail Road, is orders of magnitude worse than the effects of the Great Depression in the 1930s. It's had such an adverse effect on our ridership, and I'll just give your listeners a couple of statistics. At the height of the pandemic, in the worst days of the pandemic in New York City, subway ridership was down 95%. It's recovering from that level, yesterday September 9, ridership on the subways was down 73%, but we carried 1,000,006 passengers and we carried about a million passengers on buses yesterday. In the worst days of the Great Depression in the 1930s, subway and buses, it was bus and streetcars back then, we don't have streetcars anymore, but were down about 15-16%. The levels of declines in ridership, and ridership is important because we get half our revenues at the MTA from our customers in terms of subway and bus and commuter rail fares and tolls, and the other half from a package of subsidies that the state legislators put in places. Orders of magnitude worse than the worst days of the depression.

Simmons: So then what will it take to recover?

Foye: So look, I want to first acknowledge and applaud the work of Senator Schumer and Speaker Pelosi in terms of the CARES Act, which was passed earlier in the year by the Congress. What the MTA needs to get through the rest of 2020 and 2021, Jeff, is \$12 billion of additional federal aid because of the effects the pandemic has caused our operations. At the beginning of the year at the MTA, we expected in 2020 to have a surplus of about \$80 million. The pandemic has wiped that out and eliminated literally billions of dollars of revenue. And what we need, and the House has been incredibly supportive of this, in the Congress, and Senator Schumer, the leader of the Democratic Party of the United States Senate has as well, but the Republican leadership of the Senate is holding up additional aid for the MTA and for that matter, for the state of New York and the city of New York. And really, we're in a dire situation, we're in a one in a 100 year fiscal tsunami and if we don't get the support that I just described, we're going to have to make draconian cuts to service on subways and buses and commuter rails. Just the sizes for your listeners, up to a 40% reduction in subway and bus service, up to a 50% reduction on our Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North, including layoffs of 8,500 of our colleagues.

Simmons: And what's so stunning about that is who gets impacted by that. I have a car, I've been able to get around, and tomorrow actually is my first day in six months getting back on the subway and I'm happy to. But you know, when you think of who gets impacted by this, this could affect quite a

number of people who rely on the subways, including many of our essential workers.

Foye: That's correct. So Jeff, if you're returning to the subway, as probably a lot of your listeners are as well, here's what you're going to see. One is, we've surveyed our customers, 70% have never seen subway cars or subway stations as clean as they are. The reason for that is since the pandemic began, literally in the first couple of days of the pandemic, we began a regime of not cleaning but disinfecting subway cars, subway stations, buses, Metro-North and Long Island Rail Road stations and cars multiple times a day. We're disinfecting them, obviously that comes at a significant cost, and that's one of the many reasons we need federal support. But stations are being disinfected, subway cars are being disinfected and our customers are noticing. Again, 70% of them say they've never seen the stations, or subway stations and cars as clean as they are, that'll be your experience tomorrow. The other thing that we've done beginning on May 6, was to close the subways, first time in over 110 year history of the subways, to close them from 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. to allow the subway stations and cars to be disinfected multiple times a day that helps substantially the TWU forces to be able to do that work, but it also allowed the city's Department of Homeless Services, the MTA Police, the NYPD to get services to the to the homeless. At 1 a.m., everybody's got to leave the subway unless you're wearing a New York City Transit uniform or a police uniform, and it's allowed the unsheltered to get medical and mental health services but also shelter. And that has been a good thing for those individuals without shelter and for our customers.

Simmons: And we've got just a few minutes left, so when you think about potential service cuts and layoffs, what are the broader implications?

Foye: That's an excellent question, here's the reality. The New York City economy and the regional economy depends on the services provided by the MTA. In normal times, the subways would carry five and a half million passengers on a normal average day pre-pandemic, 2.1 million riders on the buses. The economy of New York is dependent on a healthy, thriving MTA. The service reductions and the layoffs that I described a minute ago are things that no one at the MTA wants to contemplate or implement. But in the event of a failure of the Republican leadership in the United States Senate to address these issues and get the MTA funding, these are steps that we will be forced to take. And that would have a devastating impact on employment, on job creation, and on the recovery of the New York City and New York State regional economy.

Simmons: And given what you just said, my final question then is, what's the message you want to send to Washington, not just the President, but to our congressional representatives right now about the urgency of these needs?

Foye: Well I think we've got to be clear about our focus. The New York congressional delegation and the Senate Democrats, led by Senator Schumer, have been supportive of the MTA at every step of the way. It is disappointing today to hear that the Republican Senate, the United States Senate, was not able to take action on an additional COVID relief bill. And the message is that it is in the interests of New York City, New York State, but also the national economy, because the New York City and New York State region accounts for approximately 10% of national GDP. It's in the national interest that the MTA get this funding to be able to continue subway, bus and commuter rail service in the levels that will be required to create jobs to put people to work and to make sure that the New York City and New York State regional economic recovery is not thwarted or stunted by a lack of funding.

Simmons: With that, Pat Foye, Chairman and CEO of the MTA, I would like to thank you so much for being here on WBAI today.

Foye: Thanks Jeff, thanks for having me.