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Press Release

September 14, 2020

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TRANSCRIPT: MTA Long Island Rail Road President Eng Appears Live on LI News Radio

MTA Long Island Rail Road President Phil Eng appeared live on 103.9FM's LI News Radio with Jay Oliver to discuss mask fines and enforcement, the MTA's dire financial situation and new technology on the LIRR's TrainTime app.

A transcript of the interview appears below.

Jay Oliver: Got to wear your mask unless you want to cough up cash starting today within the parameters of transportation—with us to talk about that and lots more is the president of Long Island Rail Road, you know him well, his name is Philip Eng. Nice enough to give us a couple of minutes here on a Monday morning. Sir, great to have you as always. So, you know, a \$50 fine, why not? I mean, we've been at this a long time already as far as wearing the masks, and everything else that's going to cost commuters if they do not comply. Good to have you aboard here.

Phil Eng: Good morning Jay and thank you for giving me a few minutes of your time and your listeners time. Absolutely. The fine is the last resort, none of us want to issue a \$50 fine, or any fine for that matter, to our riders. But I am pleased to say that there is really strong compliance of mask usage on the railroad. The few that are choosing not to, this would be a last resort for us. But really, this is about showing courtesy. This is really about protecting others and it's really a very simple task of wearing a face covering, to just give people that peace of mind that everyone deserves during these unprecedented times day, Jay.

Oliver: Yeah well listen from what we read 90% of ridership wears the masks, you want to make sure everybody's doing. Philip how does it work? Because if, I mean, are masks going to be handed out before the fines are actually issued? That was done in the past, where, if you know, came on the train without a mask they'd have a little bit of a supply there. How does that work in that regard, sir?

Eng: Well, we still continue to hand out masks at ticket windows, in our stations, managers are riding the train. This morning Chairman Foye and myself, we were in Jamaica handing out masks just before I joined you for this call and I'll be back on the trains right after we're done handing out masks again later today. So, we are in full force with ensuring that anyone that wants to, can wear one and we'll be providing them. And at the same time, if you're wearing one, we'll provide a spare. We're trying to make this as easy as possible for everyone Jay. And that goes hand in hand with the sanitizer that we're offering at stations. That goes with the daily disinfecting of our trains. This is about giving people that peace of mind as I mentioned. You know, the railroad has actually been a very safe place. I'm proud to say that since we've flattened the curve, our workforce has been staying safe. The riders, the passengers, and our workers are showing that you can be in the system and not contract the virus.

Oliver: No question. President of the railroad Philip Eng with us couple of minutes, so as that is concerned, you mentioned ridership, you know, we have the indoor dining opening up somewhat within the confines of the city. You got more people as we head into fall season now, riding, where are we at with the numbers right now, Phil? We know that it was low to begin with, as was expected, but there's a gradual elevation. Where are we at right now as far as overall ridership on the LIRR?

Eng: That's correct. We continue to see gradual growth. Last week, we actually hit 28% during the week of our normal ridership, and on the weekend, we hit 55% of our normal ridership. So we are seeing people become more comfortable. I know as the roads get more congested people will choose to opt to use the railroad, and I just want them to be assured that the system is safe. What people don't realize is our train ventilation systems actually recirculate fresh air 12 times an hour. And that's not even including the, when the doors open and closed. So it's continuously pumping fresh air into the train and pulling out the air from within. So it's a continuous cycle, but 12 times an hour, it's fully recycled, fresh air.

Oliver: I'll tell you this much, I love this new technology I read about. Where you can actually get on your phone, right, it's an app and it'll let you know the cars that are inundated with people, so you don't have to go in that particular car. I think it's great, I really do. I wish I had that when I was taking those trains. You know, sometimes you'd walk on a car back in the day and be 8 million people there waiting as the doors open, you don't want that. But obviously we live in different times right now. Tell the folks a little bit about this new technology now that will direct you to a car that is somewhat unoccupied.

Eng: Well Jay, last week we launched first in the world, first transit system that we're aware of, that has the ability to allow people to plan their trips in advance. Pat Foye had challenged us early during the pandemic to come up with a reservation system or something comparable, and we really do think we have something better. If you're, say, someone coming back to work now for the first time and you want to consider the railroad you can actually take a look at the train schedules in advance,

at your home, on your phone, on your iPad, on any tablet, and look up the trains and you could see the symbols that will show whether or not those trains are historically over the last seven days have been carrying little ridership, medium ridership or heavy ridership, and then you can adjust your travel time to find the best train that has the least riders to give you the best chance to spread out. Particularly again, if it's your first time coming back to the railroad system. And then the day of, we now have 100% of our fleet where you could be standing on the platform, whether you're in our diesel territory or electric territory, 100% of our fleet. As that train is approaching, you could see where you are, which train you'll be in front of, which car that you'll be in front of. And you can see the car by car loading and you could position yourself in advance and get on a train with less people as well. So not only can you pre-plan your trip, you can day of know where you can stand and find the most space. Again, it's a little peace of mind for our riders. They deserve it. Something that we have been working on before the pandemic but absolutely invaluable now, and as ridership comes back will be even more valuable.

Oliver: Of course. I tell you, like I said, I wish I had that back in the day, Philip, when I was riding those trains. That is a great piece of technology to come into play. Now maybe not a question to you, but maybe to Mr. Foye. You had a deal structured last week between management, MTA largest unions, staving off layoffs, hundreds of folks through the end of the year. It's going to require, I guess, some employees working from home to accept the pay cut thing. I think it's 10%, but, you know, listen, we know that the MTA needs money. During this pandemic, the loss of revenue and everything else, but you look at the agreement between the TCU -- the Transportation Communication Union--they represent about 2,500 workers; that would include hundreds, by the way, of the Long Island Rail Road, MTA as well. But an interesting arrangement there last week.

Eng: Well absolutely and our workforce, just like the rest across the MTA, have been heroes throughout this. And just like any other business, we found ways to reinvent how we do work and telecommuting is part of that business. We found ways where certain employees with certain tasks can work at home and that's something to stop the spread as well. So this deal here during this fiscal crisis that we have allows the TCU members to work at home, it allows them a little job security during these fiscal times. But it's sort of a win-win for everybody. And, you know, it's a testament to the MTA and TCU for working together on this because we're all trying to be a little more innovative as we fight through the, this year. The feds really do need to step up, without federal assistance there's no pot of funds that can then pull the MTA out of this hole, and we're not going to do it on the backs of our customers. It's just no feasible way of doing that. Absolutely we need the federal government to step up, Jay.

Oliver: We will make sure we salvage that soundbite sir, as far as not putting it on the backs of, of the commuter. Let's hope that certainly comes to fruition. Last one, Philip, you know, I was reading a few weeks ago, where there are some new concerns over measures put in place by the MTA during the pandemic to protect its workers; that would include employees of the railroad. There's some frustration regarding the adequate face masks and other safety equipment. Are you, where do you stand on that right now? Are you happy with what you seeing here? Are you concerned? We're coming into flu season and everything else, hopefully we don't get another round of this stuff. Where are we at as far as the equipment?

Eng: Well currently we are well positioned with PPE. We have sufficient N95 masks for those jobs that require that high level of face covering. We have sufficient surgical and cloth coverings as well. Hand sanitizers, hand wipes, disinfecting for our trains and stations, we recently acquired electrostatic sprayers which will take our train cars disinfecting to another level. So we are in great shape. With regards to the employees, you know, early on in the pandemic Jay, there were a lot of question marks that all of us are learning and I made it a point myself to visit facilities, talk to the employees directly and answer questions. And I was upfront with them with things that we knew, and things that we were still learning and hearing their concerns that we can adjust and make sure that we address them as we went. Because again, I wanted the workforce to feel as comfortable in their daily job. Nobody wants to take this home to their families and certainly I was not looking to hide any facts. We just wanted to be upfront and right upfront we had PPE as soon as we were able to procure it all. And again, the workforce is staying safe, staying well. We've been able to turn the tide on the number of positives in our workforce, and over the last three, four weeks, we've not seen positives the way we've saw in the beginning.

Oliver: Question about it. And, you know, speaking of the ridership before, just came to my mindset that there could be some cuts regarding some of the stations. I read that a while ago. Is that still in play? Could we see the elimination of service on one or more branches, talking about low ridership, places like Greenport maybe out in Suffolk County, Oyster Bay, West Hempstead towards the west. Where we at with that one?

Eng: Well Jay, we're still counting on the federal government to step up and not only support our needs to the end of this year, but through 2021. All of those potential service cuts are still being reviewed, still being discussed. That's the last thing that we want to do. Nothing is in the immediate horizon with regards to that, but all of that has to be considered as we look forward if the fiscal climate doesn't change, and the federal government doesn't step up, Jay.

Oliver: Talking about \$12 billion ladies and gentlemen, that was the latest number I read. They need an infusion of cash in such a big way and here to keep us apprised at all times is the president of the LIRR, does a great job, his name is Philip Eng. Sir, we'll talk to you next time. You stay healthy, stay well.

Eng: You too and to your listeners as well. Thank you.

Oliver: Thank you, Philip. Good stuff. And, folks, what you need to know really for today is they are going to be issuing the fines, okay. So don't take it for granted. Somebody will hand you a mask. If that's not in play, it's a \$50 fine and that's all there is to it. Wear the mask, very simple process. And I love the technology, really, back in the day, how many times, right, you walk in a train there's a zillion people there. Now they have an app to tell you which cars have less occupancy. That's fantastic stuff.

