



MTA Press Releases

[Select Language](#) ▼

Press Release

May 12, 2020

[MTA Headquarters](#)

IMMEDIATE

ICYMI: TRANSCRIPT: MTA Chairman and CEO Patrick J. Foye Appears on The Wall Street Journal's The Journal Podcast

MTA Chairman and CEO Patrick J. Foye appeared on The Wall Street Journal's *The Journal* Podcast with Kate Linebaugh, to discuss the MTA's ongoing response to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

A transcript of the interview appears below.

Kate Linebaugh: Have you ever driven a subway car?

Patrick J. Foye: I have never driven a subway car.

Linebaugh: Have you wanted to?

Foye: Look, I grew up in Queens, New York, riding the 7 train. So, the 7 is elevated for most of it, and 74th Street and Roosevelt Avenue was my station. It went to what was then Shea Stadium and you could stand in the front and watch the tracks curve, so like every young boy in New York City at the time – the answer is hell, yes.

Linebaugh: Seems like you could take advantage of that in your current position.

Foye: I am not trained or certified or skilled enough.

Linebaugh: So can you describe how you think New York City's public transit system will look three months from now?

Foye: Look, I think three months from now there will likely be, more people riding it than there are today but, significantly fewer people riding it than rode it in January or historically.

Linebaugh: I am just trying to get a picture of how you see, say, the subways, looking in three months from now. Like literally when you walk onto a train platform what are we going to see?

Foye: I think you are going to see, everybody, every employee and every passenger having a mask or a bandana or a scarf or a facial covering. I think that's de rigueur and I think there will be great social pressure in every context including transit to wear your mask. I think it's likely that the cars and the stations will have been disinfected the evening before, the night before, so I think there will be the smell of bleach or the application of antimicrobial products. I think there will be less density on the cars. I think there is likely to be indications on the floor of the subway car as to enter here and leave here, in this area there ought to be no more than X passengers. I think it's likely that in this time period we will have expanded [the] initiative – we started probably four to five weeks ago, maybe a little bit longer, called the "temperature brigade." We have a total workforce of call it 70,000. We've been been taking temperatures at facilities, subways, buses, Metro-North, a Long Island Rail Road, Bridges and Tunnels, as well – we have taken temperatures of about 18,000 employees. and employees have welcomed it – we have had in that group about 46 employees who have been directed to go home because they had a fever above 100.4. I think that's likely to continue. There will also be, and there are today protective provisions, devices, and policies in place to protect our employees – our passengers on buses, Metro-North, Long Island Rail Road. For instance, we instituted rear-door boarding on our local buses to minimize contact between bus operators and passengers. We have eliminated cash on subways, buses, Metro-North, and Long Island Rail Road have the elimination of cash. And I think the elimination of cash frankly not only in transit, but across the country and across society I think this is a trend that is going to accelerate even further.

Linebaugh: Yeah, I am just curious going back to the subway example, you could take it to buses too, but, how are you going to enforce the social distancing measures on public transit?

Foye: Well look, I think agencies around the world have done things like metering. I think there ought to be consideration of reserving a space at least for some period of time on a subway of bus using for instance the technology that we are all familiar with that TicketMaster uses. Second, there will be staff to assist with that. Thirdly, is I do think the experiences of the pandemic are going to be with New Yorkers, Americans and others around the world for a long period of time and I think that the not wearing a mask or crowding in any context – whether it's on a boardwalk on the beach or Fifth Avenue, or on a bus or subway car, is going to be looked at as anti-social and unacceptable behavior. So I think New Yorkers regulating themselves is going to be part of life going forward and it's going to be a combination of those things.

Linebaugh: Are you working with the business community to sort of rethink work hours to avoid rush hour so we're not kind of elbow to elbow on the

subway?

Foye: The answer is yes. And actually if you go back to the 1918 pandemic, staggered hours were something that were put in place by New York City and the State at the time. I think it's an easy way; it's a common sense way to do that. My sense is talking with employers, large and small, I think that will be welcomed. Obviously no decision has been made on that and I am certain that Governor Cuomo will weigh in on that. I am not going to preempt the Governor, but I think that is one thing. I think that employers will continue to encourage many of their employees who can to work remotely. I think that experiment has worked well. I think common sense steps like that will continue to modulate and moderate increases in ridership.

BREAK FOR COMMERCIAL

Linebaugh: Last week the New York subway did something it has never done before. It shut down its 24/7 service to make time between 1 and 5 a.m. to thoroughly clean cars.

Foye: In doing that, we were aware and looked at Seoul, London and Shenzhen had done – where either night time service was either scaled back or stopped for cleaning and disinfecting reasons, which is one of the primary reasons that we are doing this. And that is a very tough decision. New York is the city that never sleeps – it's a 24/7 place. The subways have always been 24/7, same thing with bus service. And making that decision was really a hard one.

Linebaugh: And do you think that you will reopen night time service?

Foye: Absolutely. It's only a question of when. Governor Cuomo has said that when the pandemic subsides and we all are obviously rooting for that sooner rather than later an ridership returns, New York will be a 24/7 city once again.

Linebaugh: When do you see ridership levels getting back to normal?

Foye: I don't want to overstate it but, I think as the spread of the virus continues to be reduced and the other metrics that the Governor is looking at come down – I think those will be reflected in ridership. I think it will take a while. I don't know how long that is precisely.

Linebaugh: There was a report in the *Washington Post* today where the D.C. metro system doesn't expect normal levels until March 2021.

Foye: I'm not going to pick a week or a month. I don't know and I think frankly I'd be making it up and I am not going to do that.

Linebaugh: So reduced ridership for a prolonged period means you are going to have a lot less revenue coming in – what will this mean for your finances?

Foye: Well look the answer is, you're right. So we are a \$17 billion revenue company. Our revenue comes from fundamentally two sources – fare and toll revenue. Both of those sources have declined precipitously, obviously, with subway ridership for instance down for instance 91, 92% you could image what that's done to our revenues. The other thing I will note is in addition to the precipitous revenue declines, our expenses are up because of the disinfecting. The first COVID-19 case in New York State, I believe, was March 1 or 2. We began disinfecting our stations and rolling stock on March 3. We also had a sufficient inventory of personal protective equipment and you know at this point we have distributed to our work force, since March 1, about 1.6 million masks, and nearly 4 million pairs of gloves, 1 million-point-six disinfecting wipes, etc. And we've got sufficient inventories of personal protective equipment to continue to distribute it to our employees across the entire operation as long as this pandemic continues.

Linebaugh: Over 100 MTA workers have died from COVID – when you look back do you regret not having required mask wearing for MTA workers sooner than you did?

Foye: Look, first, the number is 116 of our colleagues have succumbed to the virus. Those colleagues who passed away are – performed heroically. We mourn and grieve the loss of every one of them and the impact it's had on their family and friends. Our Board last month unanimously approved a substantial family benefit for every one of those employees. The thing I regret is that the CDC didn't change its advice on the wearing of masks earlier. We made a decision to-- despite the fact the CDC and the World Health Organization were still advising against the wearing of masks-- to abandon that advice. The CDC changed their position at least a couple of weeks later. Their position was not an irrational one. You know, look, New York unfortunately – New York City and New York State is the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States and frankly given the numbers in the world, and the loss of our colleagues and the fact that so many have been infected, I myself am one, although I had a very mild case, as did a number of people here at the senior leadership of the MTA. I am actually donating plasma. I've got antibodies and I'm donating plasma next Saturday in a clinical trial and I hope that my plasma donation can help some transit worker who is still struggling with the virus. And I think every step of the way, we have made decisions that advance protecting public safety and public health and I feel comfortable with that as does the entire organization. That despite the loss of life we have done everything we could to minimize the risk to our customers and employees.

Linebaugh: You say that MTA workers have acted heroically in keeping the system going through this pandemic. We spoke to a bus driver, Jermaine Foreman, who said that MTA workers deserve hazard pay. What are your thoughts about that?

Foye: Well, on hazard pay, like Governor Cuomo, I support hazard pay as does Senator Schumer, the minority leader of the Senate. That ought to be a federal responsibility and we totally support federal funding for hazard pay. So I agree with our colleague, the bus driver, that hazard pay ought to be included in the federal program.

Linebaugh: So you survived COVID, you said you had a mild case, you are donating plasma. Do you feel like that experience has informed how you are treating workers and worker safety and approaching what the subway will look like going forward?

Foye: The answer is yes. Look, COVID has touched so many lives here at the MTA, in New York City, in New York State, throughout the entire country. I also want to tell you that my youngest daughter is an emergency room nurse at Northwell – the largest health system in New York—she has been on the frontlines, and so many people in New York have a family member or friend who is a police officer or firefighter or transit worker. So this is personal and also success on transit in New York and elsewhere is going to be determined by millions of people and tens of thousand of our employees making decisions that it is safe to travel on transit. And we are committed to delivering on that and making sure that they have the assurance. Look, I ride the

subway and the Long Island Rail Road regularly. Everybody here at the MTA does, as do family members and friends. And we all, as a result, have an appropriate vested interest in making sure we get this right.

Linebaugh: And at the start of this interview you talked about being a boy on the subway going to Citi Field and I think we all have that memory of getting on the subway and going to a ball game. When are we going to be able to do that again?

Foye: Well look, I can't predict when major league baseball is going to return. I am a big baseball fan. By the way, I am so old that when I took the subway it was to Shea Stadium, not Citi Field. I believe there will be baseball later in the year and I think people will take subways to Yankee games and to Citi Field this baseball season.

Linebaugh: Mr. Foye, thank you so much for your time today.

Foye: Thank you.