

# MAKING TRACKS

Vol. 6, No. 3

Newsletter of the Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

Summer 2000

## MTA Response to M8 Crosstown Bus Ridership Gain: Service Cuts

By George Haikalis

The M8 crosstown bus, following the route of VCTC's proposed crosstown trolley, is about to see another round of service cuts. Beginning early in 2001, midday and afternoon peak bus headways will be cut from 10-minute intervals to 12-minute intervals. Trips per hour will decline by 17%. Most passengers will have to wait longer, or may choose to walk or take a taxi. These service cuts result from a strict application of MTA's local bus service guidelines. Yet bus ridership has grown substantially in the past several years. In 1999, average weekday ridership on the M8 increased by 19% compared to 1998. The M8 bus route outpaced the citywide average gain in local bus ridership of 8%. Why the contradiction—ridership gains matched with service cuts?

### Fare Innovations Increase Ridership

Beginning in July 1997, after years of decline, bus ridership in New York City experienced a surprising turnaround. This was due to MTA's innovative pricing of its new MetroCard, allowing free bus-subway transfers and unlimited rides. Most large transit systems in the U.S. and Europe had long adopted these innovations, but New York's budget-minded transit officials resisted, fearing large financial losses. The transit riders' loss, in terms of time and inconvenience resulting from transfers, was the operator's gain, in terms of revenue.

While only 15% of New York City's subway riders used a bus to complete their journeys, thanks to the city's very dense subway network, the projected revenue loss from eliminating the double fare was still substantial. Since the nickel fare was first raised in 1948, New York had only experienced one type of fare change—an increase. To estimate revenue losses resulting from the elimination of double fares, MTA used the same "elasticity" that it had observed with fare increases and applied it in reverse. This is the economist's term for the percent change in ridership that occurs with a percent change in fare. Surprised transit officials discovered that the ridership response to fare cuts was far more robust, with ridership growing at higher rates than projected and revenue losses becoming more modest.

### Higher Fares ... Less Service

For years fare increases caused substantial ridership losses. Declines were much more severe for the bus system than for the subway system. The subways are focused on carrying workers to

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## Newark City Subway: Last Chance to Ride the PCC's

By George Haikalis

The last regularly scheduled PCC "streamlined" 1930s design streetcars will operate in the Newark City Subway in early May 2001. These classic cars, maintained in excellent condition for fifty years by NJ Transit, were once the backbone of many streetcar systems in the U.S. Brooklyn had a fleet of 100 of them.

### Designed by Committee

With the collapse of the U.S. economy in the 1930s during the Great Depression, coupled with the development of improved urban

roadways subsidized by the government, the nation's privately-owned street railway systems were in serious trouble. New streetcar designs were needed that would reduce cost and improve the appeal of public transport in cities. The presidents of many of the largest streetcar companies formed a "committee" to pool their talents and come up with an attractive new standardized streetcar design that could be economically produced in large quantities. Unlike most designs created by committees, this one was a great success. The Presidents Conference Committee (PCC) streetcar became the industry standard, helping to preserve street railway operations in many cities that might otherwise have abandoned



- Frank Miklos  
Newark NJ's streamlined PCC trolleys will soon be retired from revenue service. They will be replaced by a new fleet of low floor light rail vehicles similar to those now operating on the NJ Transit waterfront Hudson-Bergen line.

them.

### PCCs Could Sweep You Off Your Feet

The PCC streetcar was lightweight and speedy. Its legendary acceleration and braking capability, if not used carefully, could literally sweep passengers off their feet. The streamlined design, not really necessary to reduce air resistance in normal operations, gave the cars a very modern and upbeat appearance, breathing new life into an industry that was victimized by the automobile manufacturers' well-crafted marketing efforts. Streetcars became "fun" to ride and were as stylish as the rakish new Chevys and Plymouths that were pouring off of Detroit's assembly lines.

But private streetcar companies could not compete indefinitely with subsidized highways and, after WW II, loans to veterans to build new homes in the suburbs. Until public ownership of transit operations became acceptable in the late 1960s, private streetcar companies were forced to cut corners. Few companies could afford to renew tracks in streets that had now become clogged with motor vehicles. Even firms that bought the new PCCs found that they could not break even. Newark's fleet of PCC's actually came from

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On the Back: Letters to the Editor

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the Manhattan Business District, where alternatives are more limited. Bus riders have more dispersed travel patterns, and are more vulnerable to diversion to autos or to for-hire vehicles.

As bus ridership fell and deficits remained high transit operators were pressured to cut service to reduce operating cost. But service cuts reduced the attractiveness of bus travel and resulted in further losses in ridership, sending the bus system into a hopeless downward spiral. Bus ridership on NYC Transit buses reached an all time low in 1996 with 492 million annual rides, after nearly five decades of monotonous fare increases and service cuts.

#### Service "Guidelines" Regiment Service Cuts

Until 1986, when MTA adopted local bus service guidelines, reductions in service were haphazardly devised. The new guidelines were intended to allocate bus service more equitably with higher volume routes enjoying more frequent service. The guidelines were patterned after those in use in Chicago and Philadelphia. To make the guidelines acceptable to the MTA Board when they were first adopted, they were scaled in such a manner that when applied, route by route, the guidelines would result in the same total size of the bus fleet, without any immediate shrinkage. While the new guidelines may have allocated the existing bus fleet more efficiently, they did not provide a rational means for determining the amount of bus service the city really needed—to provide mobility for its citizens, to promote economic development or to discourage car use. Instead, once in place the guidelines provided the MTA with an orderly means of cutting service, as fare increases reduced ridership. The results have been catastrophic.

#### Service Guidelines—A One-Way Street

The substantial growth in ridership that MTA has experienced, resulting from its pricing innovations, should have been matched by similar increases in bus service, if the guidelines had been applied rigorously. While MTA had to increase peak hour bus service on the busiest routes to handle "crush" loads, it chose not to apply its guidelines rigorously to increase off-peak evening and weekend service to match ridership gains. In some cases service levels may have already "exceeded" guidelines, where bus service had not been shrunk fast enough in the recent past. But overall, even as annual bus ridership reached 666 million in 1999, a growth over 35% in four years, bus service grew by less than half that amount.

The overriding goals of the Mayor and Governor have been to reduce transit operating subsidies from city and state budgets. Higher loads per bus-mile may suggest improved operating efficiency. But when the net cost to the city is fully calculated, including the losses due to greater motor vehicle congestion and its accompanying pollution and traffic deaths and injuries resulting from this paucity of bus service, the balance sheet may appear far different.

MTA estimates that its 17% cut in midday and evening p service on the M8 bus will produce an annual operating cost saving of \$120,000. Based on ridership counts, some 2,400 persons per day will have to wait an extra minute, on the average. Annually this

translates into 10,330 wasted person hours waiting for buses. But experience has shown that people value waiting time at twice riding time. Thus MTA is making service decisions evaluating customers' time as worth only \$5.86 per hour. This is far below the typical wage of transit users and a poor basis for making operating decisions.

Apparently MTA's devaluation of the worth of its riders' travel time has spread to the subways. In January 2001, MTA decided to abruptly close the northbound 8th Street subway station of the N and R, along with the Prince Street, 23rd Street and 28th Street stations to proceed more rapidly on its cosmetic improvements, presumably saving construction cost. But the full-time closing greatly inconvenienced large number of riders, when compared to the more customary closing of stations for similar work only late at night and on weekends. A total of 56,000 weekday riders were affected at the four stations with 17,200 at the busy 8th Street station alone. MTA made no effort to estimate the travel time lost, or the inconvenience suffered, by its riders. Nor did it reveal an estimate of the construction cost savings, so that a comparison could have been made.

#### A call to action

The Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition calls on elected officials to request that MTA re-examine its local bus service guidelines, adopted fifteen years ago. While the M8 bus line follows the route of our proposed cross-town trolley, and therefore is of special interest to us, the anomaly of a 17% service cut on this route in the face of a 19% growth in ridership highlights just how inappropriate these MTA guidelines have become. Throughout the city, MTA short-changes its riders in terms of service

by using guidelines that do not reflect the importance of local bus service to our city. If our elected officials and business leaders would only try riding the bus once in a while they would know what their decisions impose on all of us. □



- Frank Miklos  
A whole fleet of refurbished PCC cars is now operating on San Francisco's F line, linking the Castro district with Fisherman's Wharf. Each car sports a different livery replicating those once used by transit companies that operated PCCs. But soon there will be no need to cross the country to ride PCCs. The Brooklyn Historic Railway has purchased PCCs that once ran in Boston and Cleveland. For more information about this light rail operation, located on the Brooklyn waterfront at Red Hook, call 718-941-3160.

Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition is proud,  
for the 6th year, to sponsor the  
**Astor Place Festival**

Saturday, May 12, 2001  
11am to 6pm

Astor Place between  
Broadway and Lafayette St. in  
Greenwich Village, NYC

**Subway:** #6 to Astor Pl., N or R to 8th St.

**Bus:** #1, #2, #3, #5, #6, #101, #102, #103 and #8 (crosstown) all stop  
within a block of Astor Place

Please stop by our booth at the festival to learn more about  
light rail transit and our proposal for 8th St.

### Ride Light Rail Transit—Now Only Eight Minutes From the Village

NJ Transit extended its waterfront light rail transit line to Newport Mall in Jersey City, just in time for the holiday shopping season last November. Now Village residents can reach an operating light rail line in only eight minutes by taking PATH from Christopher Street to Pavonia-Newport. A great excuse for an excursion! The quiet, smooth-riding light rail vehicles gliding through the streets of Jersey City provide a real world example of what VCTC's hopes to accomplish in the Village.

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the Twin Cities (Minneapolis-St. Paul), where they were only a few years old when that system converted to buses.

#### Newark's Mighty Trolley System Shrinks to One Route

Newark's transit system, one of the largest in the nation, was run by the electric utility company—Public Service. In the late 1920s, to reduce streetcar congestion on its downtown the City of Newark constructed a streetcar subway in the bed of a little-used canal. Surface lines ramped down into the subway several locations. The 4.3 mile "City Subway" route was entirely grade separated, about a third of it underground, and the remainder alongside Newark's famous Branch Brook Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted who created New York City's Central Park. Shortly after WWII, Public Service decided to exit from its elaborate street railway network, rather than modernize it. However, the City Subway was too valuable an asset and city officials pressed for its preservation.

Public Service was able to purchase an almost new fleet of PCC cars from the Twin Cities transit operator and placed them into service in 1953, replacing all of its remaining fleet of aging streetcars. The new PCCs were ideal for the subway, showcasing their high acceleration on their own separate right of way. The downtown terminal for the subway was under Penn Station, Newark—a pioneering multimodal railroad, rapid transit, streetcar and bus facility. Though built to handle a host of streetcar routes serving Newark and surrounding communities, it became the terminal for Public Service's sole remaining streetcar line. The extra track space was converted to an "interim" maintenance facility, where a dedicated crew of employees kept the freshly acquired PCCs in top shape. Thanks to their attention, the streetcars have fifty years. NJ Transit, which acquired Public Service's bus and street-

car operations in 1980, reconditioned the PCCs, allowing them to continue well past the typical 35 year life span of rail transit cars.

#### New Life for City Subway, but Farewell to its PCCs

With the development of its Hudson-Bergen light rail line (see MAKING TRACKS, Winter 2000) NJ Transit decided to replace the venerable PCCs with modern, low floor light rail cars, identical to the cars the agency was purchasing for its new line. NJ Transit is extending the City Subway about a mile and a half to the west, to a new shop facility in Bloomfield. Two new stations are being constructed. When this work is completed the PCCs will be given a much-deserved rest. But they remain in serviceable condition and they will almost certainly find new homes as "vintage" in New Jersey or elsewhere. San Francisco maintains a fleet of carefully restored PCCs for use on its popular Market Street/Fishermen's Wharf line. VCTC advocates using new low-floor light rail vehicles in regular service on its proposed 8th Street crosstown trolley line. Curb height low floor cars will be easier for regular to board and will be especially attractive for wheelchair users and parents with strollers. But an occasional PCC tourist car rolling down 8th Street will turn a lot of heads and be most welcome.

Don't miss the last opportunity to ride PCC cars in regular service. Thirty minutes by PATH from the Village. As we go to press, May 15, 2001 is the projected last day of PCC service, could change. Call NJ Transit at 973-491-9400 to find out for sure. □

### The Tracks of New York - No. 1, Metropolitan Street Railway - 1907

Originally published by the Electric Railroaders' Association in 1973, this splendid volume includes six full pages of track plans showing Manhattan's streetcar network in 1907, carhouse and yard plans, a description of each of the forty-seven routes then in operation, a brief history of the system and numerous photographs. A must for anyone interested in the history of the city or in light rail, past or future. A bargain at \$7.50, copies are available to our readers for a limited time only at \$6.50, postpaid. Send check or money order payable to VCTC, PO Box 409, New York, NY 10014.

### Trolley Slide Show Available

VCTC would be happy to present a slide show to any organization about trolleys in general as well as our proposal for a crosstown light rail transit line through the Village. Please call George Haikalas at 212-475-3394 for more information.

Check here if we should use the address label on other side. Please correct it as necessary.

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Your membership fee and tax deductible contribution will help VCTC advance the cause of clean, safe, and reliable surface transportation in the Village. Please send your payment, payable to "VCTC", with this form to the address at right. Summer/2000

Annual VCTC Membership Fee: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

(circle choice and fill in amount at right)

Individual:	\$10	Senior:	\$ 5
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Supporting:	\$50	Business:	\$25
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## Letters to the editor

I was saddened to learn of Richard Duffy's death. (*MAKING TRACKS*, Spring 2000) His newsletter was a truly extraordinary diadem of light rail and transportation knowledge. He was a fine and civic minded person and worked to make the world better.

John Kaehny  
Executive Director, Transportation Alternatives

A trolley sounds like a good thing to have on 8th Street, but I hope you know that it would have to be accessible to people with disabilities who use wheelchairs and scooters. We need to get places, too. Is there such a thing as an accessible trolley?

Jean Ryan  
Board Member, Disabled in Action

## VCTC's President Replies to Jean Ryan:

Absolutely! Modern, low floor light rail vehicles have floors the same height as the boarding platforms, roughly sidewalk level. Persons in wheelchairs and scooters, parents with small children in strollers or people who have difficulty climbing stairs find it far easier to board these vehicles than conventional transit buses. Easier boarding means better, faster service for everyone, attracting riders away from cars and taxis. Fewer cars make it easier to cross our busy streets—especially for wheelchair users. Since pedestrians outnumber cars by more than five to one on this corridor, lined with small retail establishments catering to residents and visitors, VCTC's proposal includes a suggestion that the crosstown trolley route be closed to motor vehicular traffic. As demonstrated by auto-free light rail streets elsewhere in the U.S. and overseas, access for persons whose disabilities require movement by motor vehicle as well as for emergency vehicles can be accommodated.

— **George Haikalis**

Dear Reader,

This issue of *MAKING TRACKS* discusses the inconceivable. With an average weekday increase in ridership of 19% in 1999, why is MTA reducing service on the M8 bus in early 2001? Read how the corridor of our proposed crosstown trolley is about to endure another round of bus service cuts. In 1953 Newark, NJ's electric utility company purchased almost new PCC cars for its streetcar network. These streetcars, created "by committee", have lasted almost 50 years—and are about to be retired. Read about the history of the PCC and streetcars in Newark, NJ.

Michael Goodman, *Editor*

### Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

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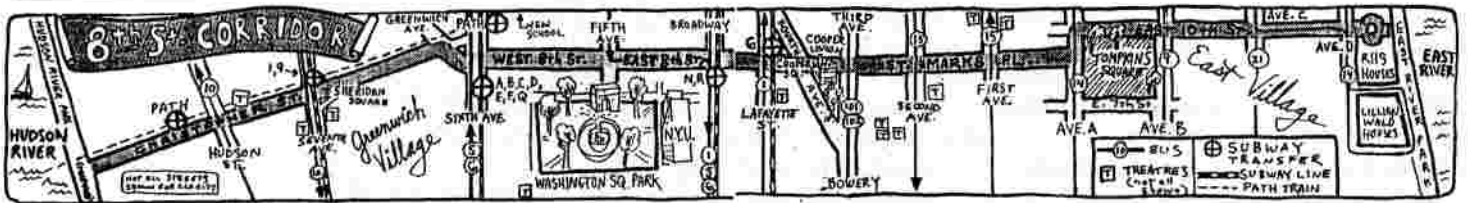
*MAKING TRACKS*

Editor - Michael Goodman

Map Illustration - Wayne Fields

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The Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition (VCTC) has been organized by a group of neighborhood residents to develop plans and community support for a river-to-river light-rail trolley line linking the East Village, West Village and Greenwich Village.



# VCTC

## Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

*Making tracks through the Village*

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