

1978

Tunnel Vision, Too

Ross Sandler

New York Law School, ross.sandler@nyls.edu

David Schoenbrod

New York Law School, david.schoenbrod@nyls.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/fac_other_pubs

Recommended Citation

New York Times (Op Ed), at 18 (April 14, 1978)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at DigitalCommons@NYLS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Other Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@NYLS.

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, APRIL 14, 1978

Tunnel Vision, Too

By Ross Sandler
and David Schoenbrod

So the 50-cent transit fare has been "saved" again. But what about the transit system? Governor Carey and Harold L. Fisher, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority chairman, whom he appoints, have once again focused on postponing a fare increase without a whisper about the reality of transit finances.

Years of bad management have undermined transit service, ruined its equipment, driven away riders and increased the fare. This spiral will continue until someone accepts the responsibility for transit finances and management.

To "save" the fare, politicians have made the Transit Authority defer so much repair and replacement of equipment that it would cost \$1 billion annually for a decade to catch up, according to official estimates.

With only \$140 million available annually for such rehabilitation, transit officials estimate that twice as much is required to upgrade decaying signal and power systems and do other work essential for safety and reliability.

And \$200 million more for each of five years is needed to bring conditions encountered by bus and subway passengers up to reasonable standards. We make this tentative estimate in the absence of any official, financially feasible program. We have in mind more buses, renovating most subway stations, and rebuilding the older subway cars to provide air-conditioning, reduced noise, functioning doors and graffiti-resistant paint. Cleaner, brighter conditions, and television surveillance cameras, would also make the subways safer.

The state estimated in January that in 1978-79 there would be, without a wage increase, an operating deficit of \$51.2 million. This deficit would require a five-cent fare increase or extreme reductions in service or maintenance. The recent wage settlement adds \$49 million in annual operating costs to be met by increased subsidies. But where will the money come from to cover the original projected \$51.2 million deficit?

When faced with transit money needs, past governors have said they would get the money from Washington next year. This year, however, Congress will divide up Federal transit funds for the foreseeable future. Yet Governor Carey has so far failed to lay the groundwork for success.

First, he has not personally joined in the Washington legislative battle in which he could make a difference. The Carter Administration proposes no real dollar increase in national transit funding and no relief from the discrimination against the seven largest transit cities. The Transit Authority, serving almost 30 percent of the nation's transit riders, would get only 11 percent of the fare subsidies. Capital funds would go largely for new rail systems, not rehabilitation.

The Congressional transit subcommittee chairmen, Representative James J. Howard and Senator Harrison A. Williams Jr., both New Jersey Democrats, seek a better deal for the older rail systems, but Governor Carey's spokesman initially applauded the Carter bill.

Second, the state has not informed New York's Congressional delegation of bottom-line money needs. The lack of any realistic financial plan for transit confirms the view that New York State does not know what it's doing.

Third, the Governor has not shown Congress that the state has stretched its own resources. While Governor Carey plans a \$700 million state-tax cut, state transit aid has failed to keep pace with inflation and is allocated on an anti-city formula.

The Governor has not said whether he will get the new money for the transit wage settlement from the state budget or Washington. Neither has he responded to a state advisory panel that has recommended four transit-financing mechanisms. Nor has he granted Mayor Koch's request to trade in Westway for almost a billion dollars in transit-rehabilitation funds. Instead, the Governor prefers to spend this available transportation money largely on a landfill while he hides a staggering shortfall in transit-rehabilitation funds. Lacking a program or priority for transit funding, he cannot expect to shift the burden to Congress, which is tired of being dubbed the big spender.

M.T.A. Chairman Fisher said recently that riders would stick with his system regardless of the fare or service because auto drivers are "rubber-oriented" and other people are transit riders. By putting transit riders down as mindless, he lets himself off the hook for the inadequate transit conditions that force people into cars, despite the highest car operating costs and slowest traffic speeds in the country, and helps to push other people and their jobs out of the city.

Owning up to the consequences of transit deterioration and the system's financial needs is the first step. The system is a state system, but the Governor would like to go to the voters in November as the savior of the fare, and let the transit managers take the rap on service. That is a formula for electoral success and transit ruin.

Ross Sandler and David Schoenbrod are staff attorneys for the Natural Resources Defense Council, a public-interest law firm.