New York as a Cough-In

By Ross Sandler and David Schoenbrod

The plan seeks to decrease private-vehicle use and to increase use of alternative modes of transportation, especially mass transit.

A key element—tolls on the free Harlem and East River bridges—was explicitly intended to raise funds for mass transit while also serving as an incentive not to use cars.

The toll plan would, if fully carried out, ultimately raise $175-million for mass-transit subsidies—about $40 million more than the 15-cent fare increase.

The city and state agreed to have tolls fully operational by last Jan. 1. But Mayor Beame and Governor Carey refused to act and, as a result, they are in violation of Federal law. A suit is now pending in Federal district court to hold the Mayor and Governor in violation of their toll responsibilities.

The plan also suggested other revenue measures, among them parking taxes of $180 million. Again the Mayor and Governor have not acted.

Raising the fare is not necessary. Charging bridge tolls is only one of several options to raise funds for mass transit, including the option of increased direct state subsidies through a regional transportation tax.

Mayor Beame and Governor Carey chose instead to tax the transit rider directly, the most regressive revenue measure available. The poor will suffer economically more immediately from the choice, but rich and poor alike shall together suffer the health effects.

The decision on the transit fare came without forewarning and without public debate. It could and should have been made with full consideration of its widespread implications. The Mayor and Governor chose instead to seize a political opportunity to raise fares under the cloak of the city's fiscal crisis. To suggest that their choice was necessary is not true, and, even worse, allows the Governor and Mayor to avoid responsibility by hiding behind a smokescreen.

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

By Ross Sandler and David Schoenbrod

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority board should increase the fare to 50 cents rather than cut essential service and maintenance from the subway and bus budget, as it now plans. Governor Carey promised the money needed to hold the fare at 50 cents until Jan. 1, 1982, but his lack of performance means that passengers will encounter less reliable service and dirtier subways in the months ahead — and a fare increase to 70 cents in 1980 or 1981. Riders will end up paying more for worse service unless the board exercises its independent authority to stop the political filmm slur.

Officials traditionally promise to save the fare but duck the less-popular question of how to raise the money by urging Congress to pay. The inevitable deficits are hidden by cutting service and maintenance until it's politically opportune to declare a huge fare increase, such as the 42 percent hike in 1976 and the 44 percent hike in 1975. This is the worst kind of fare policy for family budgets and maintenance of transit service.

Past M.T.A. boards, appointed by the Governor, have cooperated in this sham despite their statutory duty to safeguard the system. Board meetings were short, sweet and unanimous. Now, however, with new faces on the board, disagreements and budget problems have begun to come out. But the board has far to go.

The board recently acknowledged a $10 million gap for the fiscal year that started July 1. But the gap in the funding needed for decent service is actually closer to $70 million. The M.T.A.'s budget cuts out $13.3 million in bus runs, bus cleaning and summer subway service although the city recommended more service to relieve overcrowding even before the gasoline crunch.

The budget also omits $9.2 million needed to wash subway cars more often than every seven weeks and continue periodic repainting of stations and elevated structures.

Most serious of all, the budget denies the transit engineers' request for a $47.8 million program to overhaul subway cars every 100,000 miles that was "temporarily" stopped several years ago. Failure to do routine maintenance will mean fewer cars to carry people and more trains that get stuck in the tunnels.

The gap will worsen when the labor contract expires next March. The projected inflation in wages and other costs means that the deficit will increase to about $225 million in the year beginning July 1, 1980, and go higher still the next year. By contrast, the flap over the weekend half-fare involved only $10 million in annual savings.

Fulfilling the Governor's promise to hold the fare until 1982 requires an extraordinary effort, but state officials have done little except call for Congress to pay. The Governor also relies on Washington to fund 89 percent of the $500 million capital program to repair the damage done by inadequate maintenance in the past. For over a year, he has taken personal credit for getting that money, but has yet to produce a Federal dollar.

With its obvious economic problems, the M.T.A. board can follow through on its call for decent transit and fiscal integrity only by taking actions that will be unpopular with the Governor and can at best win grudging acceptance from the public.

First, it should immediately present the Governor with the bill for his promise. The M.T.A.'s fiscal plans now understate maintenance needs and ignore the inevitable wage increase.

Second, if the money is not forthcoming, the board should begin to increase the fare in small steps, with inflation, to fund adequate maintenance and service.

Third, the board should work to keep down the total cost of the new labor contract by seeking substantial improvements in work rules.

Fourth, the board must press for a permanent state revenue measure to fund its operating and capital deficits. No M.T.A. board has ever dared to take such initiatives, but all of them are necessary and today is a time of

Ross Sandler and David Schoenbrod are staff attorneys for the Natural Resources Defense Council.
Tunnel Vision, Too

By Ross Sandler and David Schoenbrod

So the 50-cent 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 the financial condition.

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 $260 million more for each of the 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 fare increase, an operating deficit of $31.2 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 $31.2 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 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 chairman, 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 out-of-city formula.

The Governor has not said whether he will get 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 be wise 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 New York Resources Defense Council, a public-interest law firm.
Congress Must Spell Out Where the Burdens of Clean Air...