

ALL ABOARD

LIRR embraces lessons learned from #SummerOfHell



A Long Island Rail Road train enters Jamaica station. MTA chairman Joe Lhota says what the railroad learned this summer “will continue for a long time — no — forever.”

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Clearer communication, plentiful transportation options and good fortune helped make the Long Island Rail Road’s feared “summer of hell” far less of a nightmare than many riders expected, commuters and experts said.

With the LIRR expected to return to normal service Tuesday, after Amtrak’s eight-week infrastructure repair project at Penn Station, observers said it is imperative for the MTA and Amtrak to learn lessons from their summer successes — and use them to improve railroad service year-round.

“I think we now have a heightened awareness about the importance of having improved levels of service,” said Mitchell Moss, director of the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management at New York University.

“Sometimes a good crisis is what you need to mobilize people.”

While Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, who predicted commuters would face the “summer of hell,” has attributed the LIRR’s success this summer to “extraordinary” measures taken, including creating new ferry and express bus routes to and from Manhattan, some riders and experts said the little things made the biggest difference: better information provided by the LIRR, extra trains to reduce crowding, and some commuters staying off the rails altogether.

Some commuters have expressed concern that, before long, the LIRR will revert to its pre-summer performance, which was plagued by major rush-hour service disruptions and hazy communication with customers.

“Ain’t going to happen,” Metropolitan Transportation Authority chairman Joe Lhota said

in an interview. “I appreciate the skepticism on the part of our customers, but I want to assure them that we’re in a new normal. And what we experienced in July and August is going to continue for a long time — no — forever.”

Here’s a look at some of the measures taken to ease the summer commute. Some worked. Some didn’t. And some might be back in the future.

Bracing for emergencies

With three to five of Penn Station’s 21 tracks out of service for most of the summer at the nation’s busiest rail hub, any additional, unexpected reductions in capacity could have been disastrous. So both Amtrak and the LIRR positioned extra personnel and equipment — including “rescue” locomotives to tow away disabled trains — in key locations throughout the summer.

Amtrak chief engineer Gery Williams said “having extra manpower and equipment on hand to handle contingencies” was among “a lot of good lessons” learned by Amtrak over the summer.

MTA Board member Mitchell Pally of Stony Brook agreed that the “tremendous expenditure” the agency made in having extra personnel on hand helped the agency respond more quickly to incidents as they arose. The MTA has said it will have spent \$4.7 million in additional “support staff” costs this summer.

“Those are obviously expenditures that are short term now. Should they be long term? Should we budget them for a longer period of time? That’s another thing we’re going to have to look at.”

Lhota said the MTA plans to keep using pre-positioned response crews and equip-

ment, both for the LIRR and the subway system, as well as customer service “ambassadors” at key station platforms.

New ideas, fewer trains

With the Penn Station repairs forcing the LIRR to reduce morning service to the station by 12 percent, and evening service from there by 18 percent, the railroad had to find ways to carry as many passengers as they usually do with fewer trains.

The LIRR accomplished that goal in some creative ways, including by adding some trains during what it called “the shoulders” of the rush hours — just before and just after peak travel times — and by adding cars to some trains.

Lhota said the MTA would consider making such schedule changes permanent if the demand is there.

Diverting riders from Penn

The MTA has said morning ridership into Penn Station fell by about 13 percent this summer — with most of those riders choosing to commute instead to alternative New York City destinations, including Atlantic Terminal in Brooklyn and Hunterspoint Avenue in Queens. The LIRR added trains to both those stations to accommodate the additional demand, but service will return to normal levels Tuesday.

“The question is, are those people, who don’t now go to Penn, going to turn around now and go back the way they used to go. Or are they now going to think, ‘You know what? Atlantic Terminal is not so bad. I can get to where I need to get to,’” Pally said. “I think it’s going to depend, to a large degree . . . on how much they’ve learned, how much their transportation situation changes. And the railroad is going to have to change with them.”

Lhota said adding service to the alternative NYC stations is “something we will look at,” but noted that Hunterspoint Avenue was never designed to carry the 6,000 daily customers it did over the summer — twice the usual average.

Lhota also noted that the LIRR intends to increase service to Brooklyn as part of its East Side Access plan to link to Grand Central Terminal by 2022. Scheduled service to Brooklyn will be replaced by “scoot” shuttles that will run back and forth from Jamaica every 7½ minutes during rush hours.

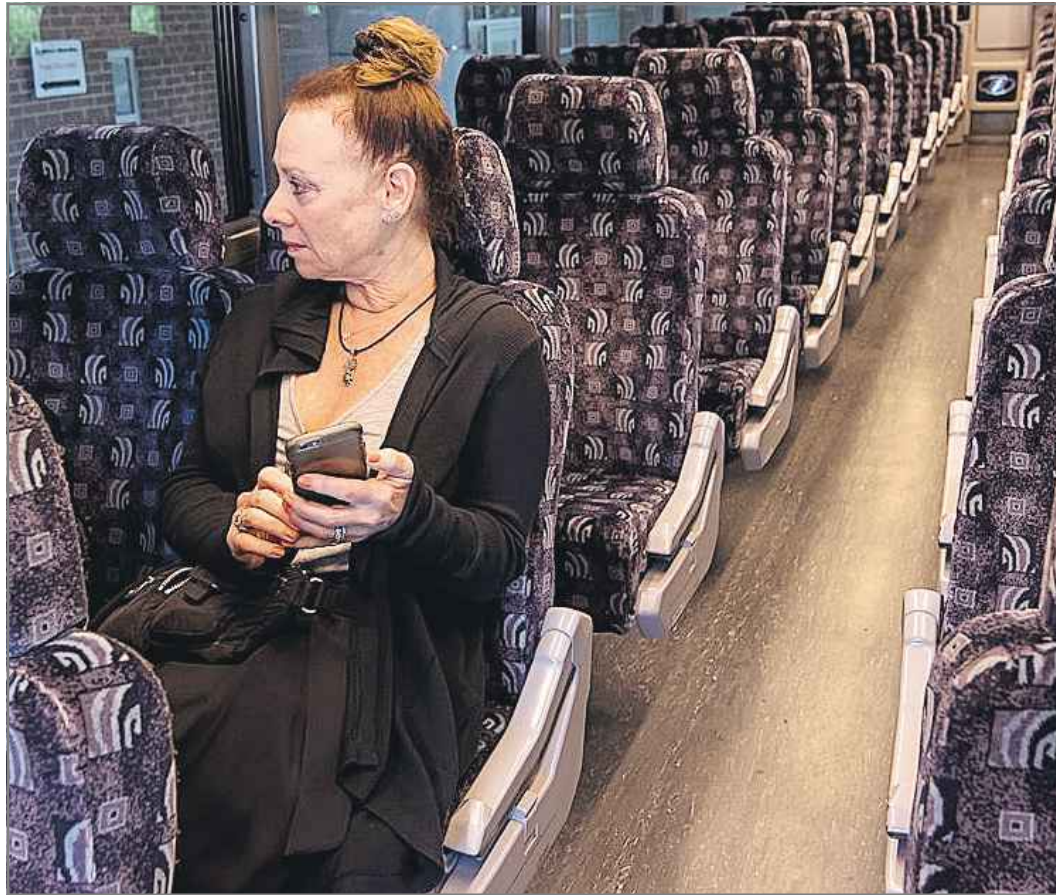
Ferries, express buses

Among the most expensive, but least successful, aspects of the MTA’s mitigation plan this summer was the creation of new ferry and express bus routes between Manhattan and Long Island.

The routes were meant to provide additional options to commuters and alleviate crowding on trains, but were sparsely used. Combined, the bus and ferry plan cost the MTA \$18.5 million.

The MTA cut back on the services throughout the summer — reducing the number of park-and-ride locations for the buses and, later, the frequency of departure. A ferry route to and from Long Island City was eliminated in early August.

“I think what we learned is that New Jersey is a bus culture and New York isn’t,” Moss said. “NJ Transit can live on buses, Long Island commuters can’t.”



A lone passenger on a bus to Penn Station. The combined bus and ferry plan cost the MTA \$18.5 million.

However, the bus and ferry experiment provided valuable input for some transportation providers. Glen Cove Deputy Mayor Barbara Peebles said the city is still “absolutely determined” to set up permanent ferry service to and from Manhattan by no later than January 2019. Despite the modest daily ridership of 50 passengers per boat, Peebles said, the summer ferry was “an extreme success” that taught the city important lessons about scheduling and demand.

And, despite scarce interest in the MTA’s summer express bus routes, a spokesman for the Nassau Inter-County Express, or NICE Bus, said the agency is still researching the potential for express bus service between Long Island and Manhattan. He said NICE did not draw any clear conclusions from the MTA’s summer experiment.

Ways to ease congestion

Part of the MTA’s strategy this summer was to use fare and toll discounts to encourage some travel patterns and avoid others. That included providing discounts of up to 25 percent for travel to and from Atlantic Terminal and Hunterspoint Avenue, and reducing tolls by 50 percent for trucks during overnight hours to re-

duce daytime traffic congestion on roadways. The truck discount will not continue, officials said.

“Whatever they did, it worked,” said Robert Sinclair Jr., spokesman for the American Automobile Association’s Northeast chapter, which has pushed for ways to reduce truck traffic. “That really is an excellent innovation.”

Kings Park commuter Krista Briggs, whose summer on the LIRR went “better than expected,” credited the fare discounts with helping to alleviate pressure on Penn Station, through which some 600,000 people travel daily.

“If they were wise, I think they would keep maybe not those discounts per se, but I think there should be reduced fares,” Briggs said.

Lhota, however, identified the fare discounts as one aspect of the MTA’s summer plan that would definitely not continue, saying the agency is “not in the financial situation” to keep them. The MTA estimates it is losing \$28 million in fare and toll revenue this summer because of the discounts.

MTA Board member Pally said that while the summer discounts may not return, the MTA should look for ways to use fares as an incentive for

travel patterns. The agency is already considering a plan to reduce LIRR fares for some stations, including those in Southeast Queens, where there are few other transit options. Pally has also proposed discounts for some LIRR trips within Long Island, similar to the LIRR’s CityTicket for weekend travel within New York City.

Better information

Some commuters said the relatively smooth summer commute was less about what the MTA did and more about what it said.

Clear and consistent information provided by the MTA to commuters in the weeks leading up to and throughout the summer helped customers plan ahead and take the steps necessary to minimize disruptions, including traveling earlier or later than usual, using alternative stations or working from home.

“I think, definitely, just communicating for once,” said Ronkonkoma commuter Rosemary Valente. “It wasn’t like you were in the middle of a situation and then they were saying, ‘You could do this.’ They put it out so early. They prepared you and left it up to you.”

Lhota agreed that improved communication, with cus-

tomers and within the MTA, was a big part of the agency’s summer performance. He’s already announced plans to continue regularly staffing its “war room” after the summer. The emergency operations center, where representatives from the authority’s various agencies communicate with each other, was activated specifically for the Penn Station service outages this summer.

“Communications with our customers is very, very important,” Lhota said. “And what we did by coordinating quickly on decisionmaking was also to communicate it with all our customers right away.”

Lhota said the improved communications strategy has already been extended to the subways, where the MTA is moving away from “canned messages” and instead providing meaningful information to riders.

Holidays help

Some observers said that a lot of the LIRR’s success this summer had less to do with planning than with good timing and good fortune.

Amtrak’s summer repairs coincided with vacation season, meaning there were fewer riders on the rails during peak periods. Although the LIRR often carries more riders during July and August than any other month, the extra demand is mostly leisure travelers during off-peak hours.

“This is the particular time of year that they could get that done,” said Sinclair, noting that a sizable number of regular commuters are out of town during summer months. “If they tried doing something similar during Christmas and New Year’s or something like that, that would be a rough time to do it.”

Amtrak has also noted that taking Penn Station’s most problematic tracks out of service for repairs during the summer also reduced the possibility of infrastructure-related problems at Penn Station.

Kyle Strober, executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island, a business and planning group, said the LIRR also benefited from “a summer with virtually no severe storms and heat waves” that are known to snarl train service.

“But winter is coming, as well as hurricane season,” Strober said. “New management and completed repairs will be put to the test over the next six months.”