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The Streets Won't Be Safe If They're Empty

As any New Yorker who has ever walked down a deserted street, waited alone at a bus stop, or ridden on an empty subway car knows, it's the presence of other people, in large numbers, that creates a sense of safety - even more than the presence of cops. Both Dinkins and Giuliani, otherwise so different, have shared the belief that more police mean less crime; as a result, they have been willing to cut almost every other municipal service in order to hire more cops. If the new mayor's plan to disinvest in our mass transit system is adopted, it may well result in more police on the beat, but fewer people on the subways and streets.

Simply put, the best way to fight crime (other than adopting Sir Robert Peel's policy of swift and sure punishment) is to make it easy to move around the city quickly - so that people can get to work, go shopping, attend athletic events - and return home in the evening. Ever since Bobby Wagner issued his agenda-setting report in 1978, "A New Direction in Transit," rebuilding the city's roads, bridges and subways has been considered a critical element in improving our quality of life.

In 1986 the MTA launched a capital program to finance new subway cars, tracks, signaling systems and automated turnstiles. Funds from the Municipal Assistance Corporation were to be used to help the city pay for its share of the transit infrastructure. The MTA's program to modernize those dark, urine-stained caverns (otherwise known as subway stations) is now in jeopardy. The Giuliani administration may well kill the subway station improvement program as well as the purchase of 1,300 new buses with its plan to defer spending \$250 million. Following \$500 million in cuts by the previous administration, our municipal government is undermining Bobby Wagner's greatest legacy as chairman of the City Planning Commission.

Despite the fact that more than 4.5 million people use the city's subways and buses every work day, and that more than 400,000 children rely on free transit passes, not one member of the City Council has displayed genuine passion for mass transit or seems to recognize that more than half the city's households do not have automobiles.

Unlike the arts, health care or the death penalty, mass transit is not a glamorous issue. And mass-transit consumers are too numerous, diverse and geographically dispersed to organize as an effective lobbying force (unlike the yellow taxicab drivers who frequently block downtown traffic as a way to express their concerns). Although more people ride the subways than live in Los Angeles, the media mostly ignore them unless they break down or are the scene of a high-profile crime.

If the subways and buses aren't safe, efficient and clean, the economy of this city cannot thrive.

There isn't enough space on city streets and highways to accommodate the cars, cabs and bicycles needed to move our enormous workforce. Without a reliable mass transit system, many firms would leave. Nannies wouldn't be able to get to their jobs, only Bronx residents and suburbanites would attend Yankee games, half-a-million kids would have to find a new way to get to school, and only the office buildings near commuter railroads would be filled.

Investing in mass transit involves more than improving our subways and buses; it is the best way to invest in the capacity of this city to sustain jobs and urban activity. As Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan (D-Queens) has stated: "The transit system is New York's largest single economic development tool." Most important, one cop works only eight hours and 35 minutes a day for 200 days a year. Our mass transit system runs 24 hours a day, every day. It's a better buy for the buck.

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