

# The New York Times

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## Don't Fight the Fare Increase

All New York City transit riders stand to lose if the New York Urban League and the Strap-hangers Campaign win their lawsuit challenging the 20 percent increase in subway and bus fares.

The groups claim the fare increase violates civil rights laws because a majority of transit riders are black and Hispanic. (On Wednesday, a Federal judge agreed and blocked the \$1.50 fare, but the next day a Federal appeals court decided the increase could take place on Sunday, and said it would take up the issue again on Tuesday.)

Instead of taking aim at the fare increase, the two groups should have challenged Gov. George Pataki's decision to reduce state support for the city's mass transit system in the first place. Their lawsuit provides the political and legal rationale for the M.T.A. to allow the return of filthy subway stations, broken-down cars and poorly maintained signals and tracks.

Overturing the \$1.50 fare would merely speed up the cutbacks in maintenance and service already under way in 1995 and 1996, the city and state are cutting almost \$500 million from the Transit Authority's operating budget.

The subway system, which carries more than a billion riders a year, is a success story of state and local government. Capital improvements, financed since the early 1980's in part by a regional corporate surcharge and sales tax, have made a difference: the stations are more comfortable and the trains more reliable than they have been in decades.

Besides jeopardizing good mass transit in the city, the suit, which claims that city riders are hit harder than more affluent suburban rail passengers, endangers the region's entire commuter rail system.

The battle obscures the economic interdependence between New York City and the surrounding area. New York depends on suburban workers; half of those who commute to Manhattan use commuter railroads. Last year, there were 61 million riders on Metro North, 74 million on the Long Island Rail Road, and 60 million on PATH trains linking New York and New Jersey. Many of these commuters also use the subway.

New York City cannot afford a separatist transit policy that fails to recognize how dependent we are on these workers. And unlike city dwellers who have no real alternative to the subway, suburbanites have a choice when confronted with increased commuter fares. Higher costs might lead them to drive into Manhattan rather than take the train, aggravating congestion and pollution. Or they might even be more inclined to seek jobs in nearby suburbs.

Moreover, the Long Island Rail Road doesn't just serve suburbanites. Seven percent of its

passengers are from Queens, since it is the only direct rail link to midtown Manhattan from some Queens neighborhoods.

Cities, just like nations, need to offer attractive incentives to companies. Subsidies that are higher for suburban commuters than for city transit riders are the political price that New York City pays for state investment in the M.T.A.

Higher fares may be painful, but unreliable buses and subways are a disaster as anyone who spent endless hours waiting for ill-lighted, un-air-conditioned trains in the 1970's well knows: The city should seek financing from the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which already supports the PATH system, and reallocate surplus money from bridge and tunnel tolls. State support for New York City's subways and buses requires suburban allies, not enemies.

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