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There's a Silver Lining in the Transit Cuts

Don't let the proposed MTA budget cuts deceive you. Sometimes budget cuts can improve services, not weaken them, by creating opportunities for privatization and competition, especially in the mass transit industry. The New York City Transit Authority has announced that, among other economy measures, it will reduce bus service on weekends and at night, discontinue the money-losing express buses in all boroughs but Staten Island, and close the Dean Street station on the Franklin Avenue Shuttle in Brooklyn.

In the coming weeks, City Council members and their constituents will plead for the restoration of these cuts, arguing that senior citizens will be isolated from their families and physicians, that workers won't be able to get home at night, and even that racism is at the root of the failure to improve the Franklin Avenue Shuttle that connects the Brooklyn communities of Crown Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Let's first recognize that the era of massive public investment in the region's mass transit system is over, or at least on hold. The MTA has rebuilt much of the city's subway system and rejuvenated Metro-North; but now it is facing a crisis. It can no longer be responsible for delivering the full range of bus and subway service that New Yorkers have grown accustomed to. And the proposed cutbacks by the TA highlight the tough times that lie ahead. Choices must be made so that we maintain and improve the subway system the infrastructure that serves over 3.5 million passengers a day while letting jitneys, private bus companies and vans take over bus routes that have too few riders to justify deep and continuing public subsidies.

Cities around the country have learned to rely on private contractors to provide transit service at off-peak times, rather than rely on large, costly public buses, as a recent study by CUNY's Institute for Transportation Systems has documented. For example, Phoenix, Ariz., contracts with a private taxi service for Sunday transit service and Ann Arbor, Mich., has contracted for late-night taxis rather than relying on buses. In New York City, we are too eager to outlaw private vans rather than let them emerge as an industry that can supplement our mass transit system.

Minibuses equipped with telephones could respond to calls from passengers and would be able to make stops closer to their riders' homes. Such private entrepreneurs are more likely to find a way to cultivate the bus market than the MTA, which is too willing to respond to political pressures and therefore operates empty buses in both affluent and low-income communities. For example, the M30 bus route runs cross-town from Sotheby's on 72d Street and York Avenue to Fifth Avenue down to the Hard Rock Cafe on 57th Street, then over to Eighth Avenue, where it turns around and returns to the East Side. It costs \$7,600 to run the M30 on an average weekday

while it generates less than \$2,000 in revenue serving fewer than 1,600 paying passengers per day.

Of course, an increase in the number of taxi medallions, as Mayor Giuliani has proposed, should be included in any efforts to expand the role of the private sector in the city's transportation system. The taxi industry has successfully resisted any increase in the number of medallions, no matter who has been mayor. But perhaps we can phase in new taxis as we phase out underused bus routes.

New York needs a first-rate mass transit system, but that does not mean that government should do it all. What would happen if the 10,000 passengers that use the Franklin Avenue Shuttle had a legal van service as an affordable alternative? Ten thousand passengers may be small potatoes for the MTA, but they could help generate a community-based industry and keep money in local hands. Rather than resist the budget cuts, let's try to use them as a lever to build a nimble system of vans and jitneys based on entrepreneurial know-how. The proposed budget cuts may actually be a way to breathe new life into our transit system.

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