

## EDITORIAL

# MTA is off the rails, again

After 50 years, it's time for a new conductor. Let's give Cuomo a turn at driving the train.

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

**M**TA Announces Historic Restructuring," bellowed the news release. It claimed the "most sweeping changes in the Authority's 37 year history" would improve the Metropolitan Transportation Authority by merging the Long Island and Metro-North railroads and establishing a more corporate and efficient culture.

The year was 2002. A Newsday editorial applauded the plan, but emphasized the need for new revenue streams.

While parts of then-chairman Peter Kalikow's plan — like combining Long Island Bus and two separate bus divisions that handled the boroughs and creating one entity to handle capital projects — went forward, some bolder ideas, and its goals of streamlining and saving money, never came to fruition.

It's important to remember the context: It wasn't until the 1960s, when Gov. Nelson Rockefeller decided the state should buy the LIRR, and later combine it with other public transit pieces, that the concept of an overarching authority called the MTA was born.

Now, more than 50 years later, re-imagining the MTA is in vogue again. The current governor wants to fix Rockefeller's model by restructuring the nation's largest public transit system. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo says if he has total control of the MTA he can be held accountable for it. Well, nothing else has worked. The authority is in perpetual crisis, a dysfunctional, bloated mess in need of leadership and massive reorganization. Just look at big projects like the Long Island Rail Road's East Side Access connection to Grand Central Terminal, now delayed by more than a decade, at a cost \$7 billion more than expected.

What's more, even as the MTA kept growing, service worsened. In 2002, the MTA had about 62,000 employees. Now, it has nearly 73,000 — nearly equivalent to Cisco or Nike.

The MTA's mismanagement, financial troubles, decrepit infrastructure and

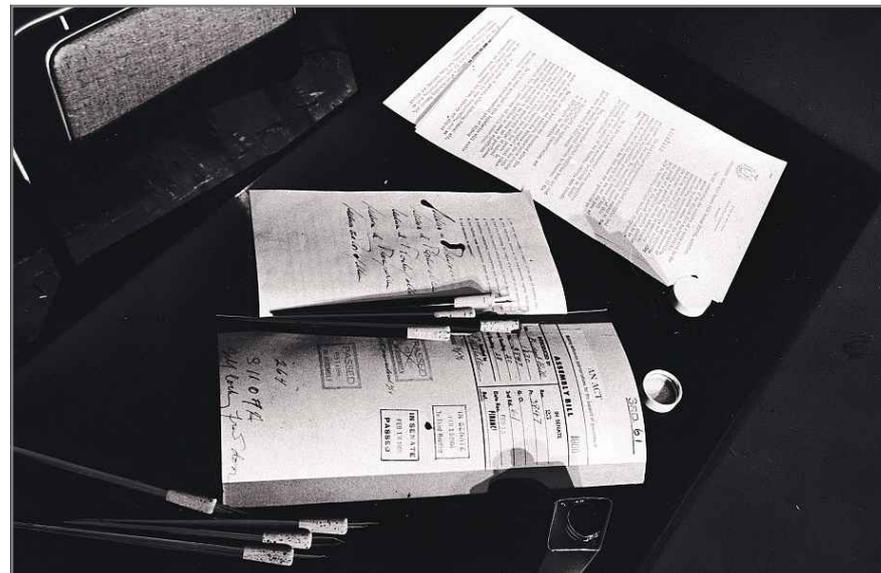


### BIRTHING A BEHEMOTH:

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority was created on March 1, 1968, under Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, right, to run mass transportation in 12 counties, including New York City. Above, a headline from March 31, 1967, on a bill for the governor's plan. Below, a bill signed by Rockefeller on May 1, 1967, to set up a referendum on a \$2.5 billion transportation bond issue as part of the overall state program to improve road, transit and aviation infrastructure.



NEWSDAY / JIMICHAEL DOMBROSKI



NEWSDAY / DICK KRAUS

inability to get out of its own way have far-reaching consequences, especially for riders. Delays become the norm and service disruptions routine even as fare hikes continue — including one up for a vote this week. The MTA is moribund and small changes won't fix anything. While there are capable new leaders now at the LIRR, Metro-North and New York City Transit, they're dependent on middle-management teams stuck in how things have always been done, or tied in knots by union rules that won't allow for meaningful reform.

So Cuomo, as he starts a third term, proposes in his budget to restructure

the MTA with sweeping changes to give him direct control, and accountability. He is asking the State Legislature for power to appoint a majority of the MTA board members, for the ability to hire and fire, and for the only veto of the MTA capital budget.

The governor now selects the MTA chair (a position vacant since Joe Lhota's departure last year) and controls six of 17 board seats. But a lack of clarity in the chain of command often allows him, and all who touch the MTA, to shirk responsibility.

Take the city subway L train fiasco. After three years of planning for a

15-month shutdown on the busy line connecting Williamsburg to 14th Street, Cuomo emerged with a new plan for East River tunnel repairs that won't close it. The last-minute rollout caused an uproar, raised safety questions and led usurped board members to quickly object. But rethinking the closure and challenging the transportation-industrial complex to think differently showed the need for decisive leadership and innovation. If this approach had been brought to East Side Access in the late 1990s, Long Islanders would be riding into Grand Central right now.

Putting New York's governor in complete charge could make the difference. But let's separate Cuomo's skill set when it comes to busting heads from the institutional role. Change in control must come with checks on that gubernatorial power. Right now, the MTA Capital Program Review Board allows the State Senate majority leader, speaker of the Assembly and governor to veto the capital budget; the New York City mayor can veto spending on New York City Transit. A new system might be better. But if it dissolves, alternative voices for the suburbs and the city must be in place. Any change Cuomo makes must serve MTA riders well even when there's a governor with different interests at heart.

Remaking the MTA requires not only bureaucratic changes, but a culture shift that forces everyone, from unions to higher and middle management, to cut the fat and find new operational paths, from procurement to construction to running the trains. And it's worth finding ways for the LIRR and Metro-North to meld some functions and find efficiencies. The consequences of an actual merger between the two commuter rails must be evaluated.

Finally, the need for new revenue is just as critical as it was in 2002. A congestion-pricing plan to toll travel into Manhattan's central business district must move forward, but with more details, particularly in terms of what it would mean for the suburbs.

When the MTA was created in 1968 after Rockefeller hoped to bring together money-losing transit entities with more-profitable bridges and tunnels, it was controversial master builder Robert Moses who warned of the proposal's unwieldiness, calling it "grotesque" and "absurd." On the MTA, at least, he was ahead of his time.