

MTA Gets an Earful

TA's Safety Study Will Take Longer Than Some Want

By Michael Moss
STAFF WRITER

Three months after the fatal Union Square subway crash, the Transit Authority has decided to spend \$1.6 million and 12 months to study its lack of control over runaway trains — despite pressure from safety officials to take "immediate action."

The TA today also plans to ask the board of its parent agency, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, to award the study contract to an outside consultant.

The TA acknowledges having enough staff for the work, but doing so "is not recommended because independent analysis and objectivity would be lost," the TA wrote in its presentation to the board.

Union leaders criticized the move, calling it a waste of straphanger money, while state safety officials questioned the study's duration.

"It sure wouldn't take a year to study our recommendation," said Edward Plasberg, executive director of the state Transportation Safety Board.

Though its final report is still pending, the safety board on Sept. 16 urged the TA to take "immediate action" to install certain track safety devices in the wake of the Aug. 28 Union Square crash that killed five people and injured hundreds.

Investigations into the crash continue, but there is general agreement that the motorman on the train, Robert Ray, lost control by speeding through a dangerous track switch.

Plasberg's board is urging the TA to install an additional tripping device to slow speeding trains before they pass through particularly vul-

nerable areas throughout the subway system where tracks cross.

After the accident, the TA began forcing trains to halt and phone ahead before switching tracks, but only at Union Square. Operations at an estimated 700 to 900 other similar switches systemwide remain unaltered.

TA President Alan Kiepper in an October letter to Plasberg said he was "reviewing a number of alternatives."

Agency sources said the TA is negotiating with the Toronto Transit Commission in Canada to perform the study, if it is approved by the MTA board.

"The logic there is that you want an independent view," TA spokesman Bob Previdi said of the decision to use an outside consultant.

But Louis G. Albano, a licensed engineer with experience in track safety who is now president of the Civil Service Technical Guild, Local 375 of AFSCME District 37, refers to such outside consulting as "CYA — cover your ass. If a consultant does it and screws up, you blame the consultant and don't get in trouble."

"We have the expertise and the credibility to do this in-house," Albano said. "This is a waste of \$1.5 million."

But Plasberg said he wouldn't necessarily oppose the use of an outside consultant, adding that the Toronto agency had a reputation for conducting high quality probes.

A draft report would be due from the consultant four months after the contract begins. The final consultant report is to include recommendations and associated cost estimates.

By Wendell Jamieson
STAFF WRITER

Politicians, activists and irate bus and subway riders crowded Queens Borough Hall last night and angrily took turns at the microphone for the first of five public hearings on the Transit Authority's proposed 25-cent fare hike.

Metropolitan Transportation Authority board members, who must approve any fare hikes, listened as speakers called the Jan. 1 fare hike a tax hike and said it would do more damage than good.

"This 25-cent per ride fare increase for every bus and subway token might cost the Transit Authority 10 percent of its customers," said state Sen. Leonard Stavisky (D-Queens), the second of 50 scheduled speakers at the hearing.

"Reject this fare increase before more families lose all interest in living in New York City," Stavisky implored board members, to the cheers of about 300 people who packed Borough Hall's sweltering central jury room.

"Every time you need money, you just raise the fare," Steven Bachrach, a 31-year-old computer programmer from Middle Village, told the board.

The Transit Authority announced last week that it needs the increase — the largest in its 87-year history — to cover a projected \$263-million deficit for next year. The MTA estimates that the increase will cost the average rider about \$125 a year.

But in Queens, where many riders use a combination of bus and subways to get to work, the hike could hit commuters twice as hard.

"For many of our residents in two-fare zones, the bite is even bigger at \$250 per year," said Queens Borough President Claire Shulman, adding that ridership has dropped 8 percent in the last two years.

"Boost the fare by 25 cents and you are writing a prescription for disaster," Shulman said.

The potential cost for Queens subway and bus riders may have been responsible for last night's large turnout.

But MTA Chairman Peter E. Stangl said that despite the public outcry, a fare hike is almost certainly in the TA's future, but how much it may be is not clear.

"I know there is a lot of concern from the governor and other elected officials about the \$1.40 fare," Stangl said during a break in the hearing.

Davila said that about 80 people have signed up to speak at Monday's Manhattan hearing on the fare hike. That hearing will be held at 2 p.m. at One Police Plaza.

CITY BRIEFS

TA Worker Files Suit

A transit worker filed a federal lawsuit yesterday against his union and the Transit Authority asking the court to halt the random drug testing of employees begun on Nov. 12.

Tim Schermerhorn's suit in U.S. District Court in Manhattan was filed on behalf of the members of Transport Workers Union of America Local 100 against the union, union President Sonny Hall and the TA.

Schermerhorn charged them with violating union rules by starting the testing without members' votes, because drug and alcohol tests are covered by collective bargaining.

A hearing is set for Tuesday. Jared Lebow, a TA spokesman, would not comment on the lawsuit, and union officials could not be reached yesterday. — M.P. McQueen

New Prez for NYU

L. Jay Oliva, who joined New York University as a night school history teacher nearly 32 years ago, was formally installed yesterday as NYU's 14th president.

Oliva, 57, became the first person in the university's 160-year history to rise from faculty ranks to the presidency.

— William Douglas

Sidewalk Repair Plan

The city's troubled \$22 million-a-year sidewalk repair program might be better managed if the city, not homeowners, foot the bills, a top Department of Transportation official said yesterday.

But Michael Weiss, DOT's chief of staff, told a state assembly hearing that placing repairs within the agency's capital program might mean higher property taxes.

Still, Weiss said the idea of shifting responsibility to the city was worth considering to eliminate some of the problems and abuses of the program. — Chapin Wright

Probe Into Suicide

Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center officials are conducting an internal investigation into the apparent suicide of an 18-year-old psychiatric patient, a hospital spokeswoman said yesterday.

Santiago Flores of the Bronx jumped Wednesday at 11:36 p.m. from a 10th-floor window of the pediatric wing, police said.

Police spokesman Officer Scott Bloch said the death has been determined a suicide, but that an investigation has not been concluded. — Mark Lowery

Abandoned Tot Case

A Brooklyn man was arrested yesterday for allegedly abandoning his 3-week-old son in the hallway of his Bedford-Stuyvesant apartment building.

Police said Ronald Williams, 45, tried to strangle the boy's mother, Gail Parnell, Tuesday and then forced her out of their apartment. He then left the baby on the steps of 1215 Bedford Ave, where neighbors found him. He was in good condition at Woodhull Hospital yesterday.

Williams was charged with endangering the welfare of a child and third-degree assault. — David Kocieniewski

INS-Case Probe Urged

Staten Island Borough President Guy Molinari yesterday called for a Justice Department probe into the prosecution of former immigration agent Joseph Occhipinti.

Occhipinti was sentenced to prison last month, after he was convicted of conducting illegal raids. He is appealing the conviction. — M.P. McQueen

U.S. Probes 'Yuppie Mobster'

REUTER

Federal prosecutors said yesterday that so-called "yuppie mobster" Michael Franzese, who was arrested on a parole violation last week, is suspected of fraud in a \$550-million attempt to buy Cannon Films last year.

Franzese, 40, who appeared in Brooklyn Federal Court in a stylish white shirt, faded jeans and moccasins, has been accused of carrying out at least three real estate frauds in Los Angeles, writing bad checks, and lying to federal prosecutors about his net worth.

Prosecutors said Franzese tried to buy the film company, which specialized in action movies, some time last year and that the deal is among those in an ongoing fraud investigation.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph McCann said the

probe included other allegations that Franzese used collateral that did not belong to him in some transactions.

The Los Angeles district attorney's office issued a warrant for Franzese's arrest. He was being held in Brooklyn pending a bail hearing on the parole violation, for which he faces five years in prison. The hearing was postponed until today.

Franzese, a reputed Cosa Nostra captain, was sentenced in May 1989 to a five-year term of probation after pleading guilty to conspiring to defraud the IRS. He had previously served three years in prison on a 1986 racketeering conspiracy conviction in Brooklyn.

He promised to pay \$14 million in fines from the earlier conviction but so far federal authorities have seen little of the money.