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Bill to protect MTA coffers from repeated government raids worth signing

BY PETE DONOHUE
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER
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Subway and bus riders were robbed in 2009 when Gov. David Paterson and the state Legislature took \$160 million of transit funds to plug a state budget gap, triggering the deepest service cuts in decades.

It happened again last year when the state grabbed a smaller but still staggering sum of MTA money - \$100 million.

Now three dozen bus routes and 570 bus stops no longer exist. The W and Z subway lines are gone - and hundreds of cleaners, mechanics and token booth clerks were ushered out the door with pink slips.

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Straphangers campaign senior attorney Gene Russianoff. > (Kevin Hagen for News)

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There's no guarantee the state won't raid Metropolitan Transportation Authority coffers again, but if Gov. Cuomo signs a bill that the state Legislature passed this year, it at least would be tougher.

Under the "lockbox" bill, future transit funds couldn't be raided until the Legislature or governor prepared an impact statement describing some of the likely outcomes of depriving the MTA of the revenue.

Essentially, lawmakers would have to own up to what they're doing in a more public way and specify some of the pain that will result. They couldn't hide behind the MTA, which by design provides political cover when news is grim.

An authority not fully claimed by state or city, the MTA takes most - if not all - of the public blame for cost-cutting moves like the elimination of bus routes and layoffs.

That's because the law that established the MTA requires it to hold public hearings and take votes before enacting significant service changes and any fare or toll hikes.

If the bill becomes law, it wouldn't be so easy to hide behind the big, bad MTA after picking its pocket. "I think the Legislature and governor would have to think twice before raiding the MTA," said Gene Russianoff of transit advocacy group the Straphangers Campaign.

"The Legislature is always going to have the power to appropriate money from these transit accounts. You can't prevent that from happening, but this is the next best thing."

The Straphangers Campaign and more than 40 other civic organizations, labor groups and construction industry associations have sent a letter urging Cuomo to sign the bill.

The bill is the governor's first big transit test and how he handles it will affect millions of passengers like Toni-Khadijah James, 47, of Red Hook, Brooklyn.

A community organizer with the Red Hook Initiative, James relies on buses to get around. Last year's transit cuts included changes to the B61 route. The result: longer waits and more crowded buses, he said. At certain points on the B61, "It's standing-room only," James said.

He said the bus driver tells riders, "'You have to step in as well as you can,' but a lot of times people can't move because it's filled to capacity. You have to wait for the next bus and hope you can get on that one."

The situation has worsened since the closing of the Smith/Ninth St. station for rehabilitation. "It's bananas," James said.

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