

## Deficit Drives New Transit Chief's Agenda

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*When Governor Christie took office earlier this year, he appointed James Weinstein to be executive director of New Jersey Transit.*

*Mr. Weinstein has been involved with transportation in New Jersey since 1982. He handled media relations for the transition of Conrail's commuter lines to New Jersey Transit; later he was director of communication and chief of staff for the New Jersey Department of Transportation, and served under both former Gov. Tom Kean and former Gov. Christine Whitman. Mr. Weinstein held the cabinet position of transportation commissioner under Governor Whitman.*

*Mr. Weinstein took the reins of the New Jersey Transit system in January 2010. He immediately faced a major challenge: a budget shortfall of nearly \$300 million, which he says was created by a combination of reduced ridership system-wide, increased costs associated with fuel and other materials, and the fact that the previous fiscal year's budget had included \$150 million in federal stimulus money that was no longer available for 2010.*

*In a phone interview, Mr. Weinstein addressed the service cuts and fare increases being proposed to fill the budgetary hole, and how he collects and uses data about commuters in the South Mountain region:*

Q. What was your first reaction upon learning that you'd be facing a \$300 million budget shortfall?

A. We learned of the shortfall during the transition. At that point it was \$200 million. There's been a subsequent drop-off in ridership of four percent over the year, which translates to about \$60 to \$70 million in lost revenue from ticket sales. That passenger loss is due directly to the state of the economy and the level of unemployment — there are fewer people riding the buses and trains to work.

Q. Tell me about the service and fare changes, and the upcoming public meetings.

A. We've put a fare proposal out there, for a 25 percent increase in the fares, the limitations of some discounts, like off-peak round-trip and 10-trip bus tickets, as well as service reductions. We're looking for people's input. When you put these things forward, you think you've thought them through, and you have as well as you can, but invariably you hear things at these hearings that weren't appropriately addressed or were overlooked. Those are the kinds of things we're looking for. We don't pretend to be

perfect, and we want to hear from people from their perspective. We have 12 hearings that we're going to hold at various locations around the state. At each hearing, a transcript will be taken, people will identify themselves and that transcript will be consolidated into a report to our board of directors.

We've got 725 different fares in our system, some 200,000-plus variations of those fares; it's not inconceivable that there's some customer who's going to be faced with a 70 percent increase and it fell through the cracks. And we need to evaluate that, if that wasn't our intent. We understand that there are almost a million trips a day on the system. People rely on it; they rely on it to get to work and get home; they rely on it for leisure time; they rely on it to conduct their lives. We're in an unfortunate situation where we've got a budget hole to fill.

Q. What are the most likely changes a commuter from the South Mountain region can expect in his or her daily commute?

A. There have been some train cancellations. Basically on every line that we run, there have been two trains canceled. In the Maplewood-South Orange area, you'll see longer headways between trains in the off-peak. Midtown Direct service will stay pretty much as is. On the bus side, you'll see longer headway times — instead of waiting for 20 minutes for a bus, you may have to wait for 25. We've tried to spread the service reduction, which is about 4 percent (the amount the ridership is off). We've tried to spread it around the system so no one area suffers a disproportionate burden.

Q. How do you gather rider demographics and data for places like Maplewood and South Orange?

A. We get it in two ways. In specific areas, we get direct information from elected officials, from representatives of those communities. Anytime someone from Maplewood, South Orange or any other area contacts us by phone or e-mail, we get their contact information so we can get back to them. When we get back, we ask them to participate in ongoing periodic surveys, conducted electronically. In the public hearings, people will identify themselves and tell us what they think about the fare increases and service adjustments. On a more scientific basis, as part of our planning efforts we'll get information using a real scientific survey. That doesn't tend to get down to the community level — it's usually county and regional. And our employees are interacting daily with folks from communities throughout the state.

Q. How do you use that information to benefit riders in an individual town or region?

A. We're constantly looking at schedules and service. When we get customer input where they say a bus or train at this time would be helpful, if we're able to do it, we do it. Sometimes you're constrained by the laws of physics — there is a limited number of train slots. It's one of the most complex rail lines in the world — just trying to get the number of people who go into New York every day in from the Raritan Valley and New Jersey coast line. And it all converges in the Northeast Corridor, all of that, and Amtrak service.

But we listen to people. We'll hear from people, but also legislators, elected officials. The village president of South Orange is regularly in touch with our people here. It's not very scientific, but we do respond to what our customers tell us.

Q. What's the most frequent complaint you hear from commuters?

A. You hear if we're not on time. And with the weather we've experienced the last [several weeks], we've had a difficult time with on-time performance. That upsets people. We're looking at that, saying, "What could we have done better, and what are the things that are out of our control?"

Q. What is your broad vision for New Jersey Transit in the next several years?

A. First of all, once the economy sort of comes back, if New Jersey is going to continue to be economically vibrant and vital, New Jersey Transit is going to have to be a driver of that vibrancy. On the bus side, on the rail side, we need to be talking about transit-hub development, ways to get people more mobile. Mobility has been at the essence of New Jersey's economy success from the beginning. New Jersey is a main vein for the entire northeast, and the quality of its entire transportation system is essential.

We'll add services and look at new ways to use modes in different parts of the system, but I think it's important that all of the modes are better connected and work better together, so it's not train riders versus bus riders versus people at Newark International Airport versus drivers. It's very clear that in a place like New Jersey, with one of the most heavily used transport systems in the country, when one part of it doesn't work, it all breaks down. I think we need to work hard to make sure that we're all working closely together, that we all recognize that we're all tied together, and we'll succeed best when we work together.