

# **MUSTERING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR TRANSIT INVESTMENT IN THE NEW YORK AREA**

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## Abstract

Transit systems survive and prosper only with continual investment for system maintenance and expansion. To build public support for an ambitious program of system upgrades and expansions, a coalition of New York City-area civic, business, labor and environmental organizations embarked on promoting a sound and well-financed Capital Program for 2000-04 for the New York City area's Metropolitan Transportation Authority. This paper describes the coalition's public education and outreach campaign which was comprised of market research and implementation of an advertising campaign including a critical web-based component. The paper also describes the eventual decisions made by the MTA and the State and assesses the effectiveness of the outreach campaign.

The market research showed that the ad campaign should focus on relieving area residents' daily experience of crowding, congestion and stress. Ads worked best when they showed immediate, intuitive solutions to daily problems with transit service. Respondents were most likely to take action when they felt that goals stated in the ads were realistic and desirable, that decision-makers would hear their voice, that they would be acting as part of a group and that action was urgent.

The ad campaign was effective in building support for key capital projects. Ads were most effective when reinforced by leafleting in subway stations. The campaign was less successful in developing support on the thorny issue of finding new financing for transit investments. The web-based component generated thousands of emails to public officials in support of the campaign.

Key words: transit, investment, New York, advertising.

7,048 words

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Transit systems, because they make extensive use of civil infrastructure and vehicles, are dependent on capital investment to build and expand services, improve technology, and maintain existing assets. Sustained and reliable funding is essential to properly maintain these investments. However, these investments must also compete with many other priorities in the public policy arena, including spending on social programs, other infrastructure priorities like schools, crime fighting, debt reduction, and tax cuts.

Recognizing this competition, a group of New York City-area civic, business, labor, environmental, and transportation user groups formed the Empire State Transportation Alliance (ESTA) to promote transit and highway investment.<sup>1</sup> ESTA's first priority was a campaign to promote the development of a sound and well-financed five-year (2000-2004) capital program for the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the parent agency for the New York City subway and bus system, as well as the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North Commuter Railroad.

ESTA organized its campaign around three tasks:

1. **Public Outreach and Education:** The three objectives of this task were to better understand the public's existing concerns about transit and transportation, to identify the most effective ways to communicate the need for increased investment, and to motivate members of the public to take action to influence the key decision makers on the MTA Board and in the State Legislature.
2. **Development of Investment Priorities:** These included new technologies like compressed natural gas buses and computerized train control, East Side Access (connecting the Long Island Rail Road to Grand Central Terminal) and a full-length Second Avenue subway.
3. **Promotion of a Sustainable Financial Plan:** ESTA recognized early on that this would be a contentious issue, particularly when the discussion turned to new taxes or fees. The financial debate was carried on within a political climate that generally favored reduced taxes and government spending, and in which other public policy priorities like education, public safety, and healthcare all competed with transportation for funding.

This paper describes the efforts completed under Task 1: Public Education and Outreach. This task covered research conducted to develop the advertising campaign, the implementation of the advertising campaign including a critical web-based component, and the eventual decisions made by the MTA and the State Legislature regarding the 2000-2004 MTA Capital Program.

ESTA's campaign illustrates several lessons of interest to transit advocates in other metropolitan areas. First, the experience shows how market research can be used effectively to formulate a campaign to build public support for transit funding. Second, principles and messages developed from this research are potentially applicable to other campaigns to build public support. Third, this experience led transit advocates to build an ongoing web site that promises to lay the foundation for long-term efforts to activate the public in support of the vital but often unsexy topic of transit investment.

## II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Three objectives were set out for the market research:

1. Identify the public's most important concerns regarding public transit throughout the New York region.

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<sup>1</sup> ESTA's members include the NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign, Citizens Union, League of Conservation Voters, Tri-State Transportation Campaign, Regional Plan Association, NY State AFL-CIO, 100 Black Men, General Contractors Association of New York, Real Estate Board of New York, New York Building Congress and the Transport Workers Union.

2. Identify themes and messages that would build public support for transportation infrastructure investments.
3. Test and refine specific advertisements that would motivate members of the public to take action in support of the campaign.

The research focused on New York area residents who had shown a proclivity toward involvement in civic affairs, based on voting behavior, community and political activity. This group was expected to be the audience most likely to respond to the ESTA campaign. Both transit riders and auto users were included in the research, as were New York City and suburban residents.

The research project entailed ten focus groups, two groups for each of the following five segments:

- NYC transit users
- NYC auto users
- NYC politically-active residents (could be either transit or auto users)
- Suburban rail commuters and
- Suburban car-oriented residents

The focus group discussions were divided into two parts:

- The first part elicited respondents' views, attitudes and feelings regarding their communities (e.g., crime, education, environment, jobs) with the objective of understanding motivating concerns, how transportation issues relate to these concerns and the types of transportation improvements that are important to participants.
- The second part of the focus groups obtained participants' reactions to mock-ups of advertisements and other forms of media. Participants were probed for their overall understanding and impression of the message, the extent of its emotional impact, its credibility and whether the respondents would feel motivated toward supporting the campaign. The study also sought to identify the most effective instruments to activate their support.

During the course of the research, ad mock-ups were revised and refined based on initial feedback so that materials tested in the latter groups reflected early results. Revisions focused on refining taglines and identification of the advertisements' sponsors.

### **III. RESEARCH RESULTS**

#### **A. Feelings about New York and Transportation**

##### *1. View of New York*

During recruitment, participants were asked to bring to the focus group three pictures illustrating good things about living in the New York area and three pictures illustrating problems with living in the New York area. Participants were asked at the start of the group discussion to share their pictures and describe the feelings they associated with the pictures. The objective of this exercise was to identify deep-seated, broadly-shared emotional keys that could serve as the basis for ESTA campaign messages.

Cultural attractions, variety of food and restaurants and presence of pre-eminent professional sports teams were the most-often mentioned "good things" about New York. These aspects of New York evoke feelings of abundance ("we have everything in New York"), pride and specialness ("New York is Number One,") and exhilaration and happiness (New York is full of stimulating choices packed together). Another popular positive attribute of New York—the availability of open space—evoked feelings of relaxation, freedom and a break from the monotony of a concrete and crowd-filled city.

Congestion, crime, pollution, crowding and transit were the most frequently mentioned problems with living in the New York area. Predictably, these aspects of the city conjured feelings of stress and tension; respondents said these problems drive them "crazy" and make them feel "drained," "uptight," "aggravated," "frustrated," "bent in a knot," trapped and out of control.

The feelings experienced by participants are dynamically inter-related. The core of New York's attractiveness to area residents is the feelings of pride, specialness and privilege from the abundance of cultural, culinary, athletic and other attractions. To gain these feelings, however, respondents must endure the stress, tension and feelings of loss of control from congestion, traffic, crowds, erratic transit service and the threat of crime. Respondents find relief from these stresses in the parks, beaches and other outdoor quiet spots. But while open space truly provides relief from the strains of city life, it also takes respondents away from most of the attractive elements of the city. The ideal antidote is to reduce the stress, tension and feelings of being trapped. The importance of this antidote is seen in respondents' descriptions of an ideal New York, which emphasized making New York less crowded, less stressful, less noisy and safer.

## *2. View of Mass Transit System in the New York Area*

Using projective techniques, focus group participants were solicited for their feelings about New York's transit system and what improvements would produce an "ideal" transit system.

Respondents had a wide range of feelings about bus, subway and commuter rail service. They looked favorably on the comprehensiveness and convenience of a sprawling system that allows one to go seemingly anywhere. Some felt the system is "clear and easy" to navigate. But other respondents saw transit as a complicated, chaotic system involving delays and loss of control for the passenger. Erratic schedules, confusing tangle of lines and chaotic conditions created the feeling of loss of control among respondents.

Different respondent segments tended to vary in their emphases. Transit and commuter rail users had a more positive mix of feelings. For example, New York City residents who regularly use the transit system expressed a mix of associations from chaotic and erratic to smooth and well-connected. Auto-oriented city residents emphasized chaotic and erratic aspects of the service. Suburban residents who only occasionally come into New York City described the transit system as chaotic and messy.

Metro-North and Long Island commuters gave sharply different descriptions of the two railroads. Metro-North commuters described Metro-North as predictable, orderly, well-organized, smooth, steady, pleasant and relaxing, although sometimes winding in its route and suffering occasional delays. By contrast, Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) commuters made little distinction between LIRR service problems and bus and subway problems—both the LIRR and the bus and subway network were described as unreliable and dirty. Both sets of commuters predominately described the bus and subway system as messy, unpredictable and slow.

Respondents were asked to describe what would constitute an ideal mass transit system for them. Responses focused on aspects of the immediate experience of using the buses, subways and commuter rail lines. The most frequent mentions concerned on-time performance, cleanliness, more room/getting a seat, information about train routes and delays and air conditioning (the groups took place in the midst of several heat waves). Also mentioned were faster, smoother rides; more service; lower fares; better protection; and a less stressful experience. The personal value to New Yorkers of these improvements was illustrated by two participant comments:

- "If there aren't any rats, that means there isn't any food around, debris laying around for them to eat. Therefore it's cleaner and it makes you feel better as a person."
- "If you know in advance that it's going to be delayed for 20 minutes or half an hour, you have the choice of going upstairs and getting a cab, getting a bus, walking or whatever. You have a choice rather than just standing there like a fool waiting for a train that's not going to come."

## *3. Awareness of the MTA Capital Program and Funding Issues*

Respondents had a general sense that the state and/or city governments are involved with operating and funding the transit system. Virtually all respondents either knew or recognized the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) name when someone mentioned it. At the same time, respondents tended not to be sure how the MTA fits into the governmental structure.

Some respondents volunteered that making improvements to the system depends on funding. They attributed control of funding to either politicians or the MTA. Asked directly about funding sources, only a few respondents identified

the Legislature as the main funding decision-maker. Other suggestions were the City and Federal governments. A few respondents expected that improvements could be paid for using a surplus that was experienced at the time. Others expected that major funding for large transit improvements would be subject to a referendum vote. Most participants, however, readily accepted that the Legislature and Governor are responsible for funding decisions when this idea was put forth to them.

Awareness of the MTA Capital Program was low. Most respondents had never heard of the MTA Capital Program and were unsure of what constitutes a Capital Program. A few respondents, often based on their business experience, inferred from the word “capital” the idea of large projects with long-term value. Once suggested to participants, however, the idea that the Capital Program contains projects such as new subway cars, buses and other equipment was readily understood and accepted. After initially being put off by unfamiliar terminology, the groups warmed to the subject when explained in these terms.

#### *4. Response to “News Article”*

Participants were shown a “news article” drafted by the project team describing announcement of the ESTA group’s proposed MTA Capital Program. The article highlighted an overall price tag of \$19 billion over five years, itemized key projects and described obstacles to funding. Participants were asked to read the article, circle the parts of the article they personally found most important, and answer a short questionnaire about priorities and costs.

Respondents focused on the value of individual projects. Respondents most frequently highlighted projects that would reduce delay, alleviate crowding, and communicate real-time train and bus arrival information. They also highlighted CNG-fueled buses to reduce use of diesel fuel and improve air quality.

Respondents believed that the \$19 billion price tag would represent money well spent. Given three ways to describe the plan, large majorities of every group chose, “The plan is expensive but worthwhile considering the benefits.” One or two respondents in each group felt that “The plan is too expensive to consider, whatever benefits may be achieved.” Very few felt that “the plan is inexpensive considering the benefits.” Notably, responses were similar for transit, commuter rail and auto groups.

## **B. Testing of Advertising Concepts**

### *1. Advertising Concepts*

Each group of participants was shown six to eight printed display advertising concepts. As the concepts evolved a total of one dozen advertising concepts were tested using fully-developed mock-ups. Each mock-up included a picture and headline; supporting text; call to action; and information about the campaign sponsors.

Respondents completed a one-page motivating response questionnaire for each concept to measure viewer emotional rapport, understanding, positive impression, reinforcement and activation. After discussing likes and dislikes of each concept, two projective techniques were used to explore the effectiveness of the concepts. First, respondents were asked to imagine that they were the head of ESTA and had the job of choosing which concepts to use in the campaign. The exercise helped respondents go beyond mere likes and dislikes and to think in-depth about which concept would best activate the viewers. Groups in the second week of research were also asked to imagine two persons like themselves, one of whom saw the advertising and took action and the other of whom did not, and then suggest explanations for the different responses.

The most effective concepts depicted subway crowding, highway congestion and bus bunching. Participants chose these three concepts when asked which advertisements they would select as head of the sponsoring group.<sup>2</sup> On the motivational response questionnaire these concepts scored high on:

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<sup>2</sup> Responses differed noticeably among the different consumer segments. Subway crowding was most effective among subway users, for example. A depiction of bus bunching using elephants in a herd was effective among city residents but drew blank stares from Long Island auto users. “They’re comparing mass transit to a farm?” asked one Long Islander.

- respondent identification (“The message was talking to people like me”)
- creating a positive total impression (“It all seems to flow naturally together in my mind”)
- image reinforcement (“The message strengthens my impression of the need for improving mass transit”)
- activation measures (“As I saw the advertisement, I thought about taking an action to support this campaign” and “The message made me curious, and I wanted to learn more about the issue”).

Two concepts were nearly as effective: a depiction of a subway platform with an electronic sign showing the next train arrival times, and a picture of the Washington, DC metro as a depiction of the ideal that New York could strive for. The latter concept put forth the idea that as a world-class city, New York deserves a world-class transit system. The contrast with Washington’s system made respondents feel envious and jealous since they felt that New York does not currently have as good a subway system.

Concepts that were not effective included mock-ups suggesting that problems with the transit system could cost the city job growth, an appeal for spending to make the subway more accessible to disabled persons, and a mock-up depicting Roman ruins as the likely consequence of neglecting the transit system. Respondents (none of whom were disabled) did not identify with any of these advertisements. Interestingly, while job growth often sells elected officials on transit improvements, participants objected to the premise that slow or unreliable commutes cost the region jobs. Participants felt that companies leave the city because of high taxes and the high cost of doing business. Participants pointed out that the economy has done well even with the current transit service. In addition, further growth would make the city even more crowded, an undesirable outcome from their vantage point.

## *2. Reasons for Effectiveness*

Response to the concepts suggested three keys to how well advertising reached and motivated respondents to join the ESTA campaign.

**a) Showing groups and crowds in the visuals.** Images of groups and crowds were very powerful. The concepts that showed people crowded in the subway, bumper to bumper traffic and even a group of elephants were received very positively. Images of crowds strengthened respondents’ sense of shared experience. Many respondents commented that these images depicted the reality they experience everyday. Images of groups also validate respondents’ frustrations with crowding, congestion and sense of chaos that they expressed in their pictures about New York and descriptions of the transit system. Having their feelings validated led respondents to rank the subway crowding and bus bunching concepts as among their most-liked advertisements.

**b) Focusing on daily problems with transit service.** Messages that focus on solving specific problems with subway, bus and rail service were much more effective than messages that attempted to tie in other issues such as economic growth. Reducing crowding and congestion and improving comfort and reliability were powerful messages that relate broadly to everyday experiences. These daily problems were raised at the beginning of each focus group before any references were made to transit issues. Messages about these problems address very salient, tangible needs.

**c) Showing immediate, intuitive solutions.** A third key to effectiveness was showing a realistic path to better transit service. Concepts that presented simple, intuitive solutions were received very well. For example, adding subway service would clearly relieve overcrowding. On the other hand, some participants asked for clarification on supporting text asserting that “new technology” would “help prevent ‘bus bunching’ and help keep buses on schedule.” It was less than intuitive to some respondents how technology would solve the problem.

## *3. Motivating Action*

A critical challenge for the ESTA campaign was to motivate New Yorkers to act in support of ESTA transit-funding proposals. This is a difficult task. Advertising for consumer products and services achieve activation most readily when the service or product involves strong consumer desires—satisfying the urge to eat well, look good or be liked. Transit improvements do generate great interest; focus group participants were excited about the topic. But customer

involvement is mitigated by the fact that “better transit” cannot be purchased directly. The challenge was to build on the inherent interest in transit to create a sense of the urgency of action and efficacy of individual involvement.

Activation issues were explored in several points in the focus group discussions. Asked about taking action on various problems with living in New York, many respondents recounted efforts to address issues such as local zoning regulations, landlord problems and rent control expiration. Throughout the discussions there were vigorous discussions about the value of becoming involved for desirable causes. Many participants attested that one’s actions can make a difference and be personally satisfying while others expressed strong doubts. Participants on both sides of this discussion scrutinized claims on their time and energy.

Several basic questions influenced whether participants respond to a given problem. These concerns can be grouped into the following five questions.

**a) Is the goal realistic and desirable?** Participants took heart from past successes which provided a feeling that the next effort can achieve its goals. Previous experience also tempers expectations; participants know that accomplishing change in New York is usually a long, difficult, time-consuming process of uncertain outcome. This knowledge protects them from creating rosy expectations that would surely end in disappointment.

**b) Will decision-makers hear my voice?** Will my actions be effective? Will I be contacting the right decision-makers in the right way? In contemplating taking action on transit funding or other issues, participants frequently worried that letters, postcards or e-mail would be ignored. Many participants felt that officials do not read their mail and can even simply turn off their e-mail server if the volume becomes heavy.

**c) Do I feel part of a group that gains power by acting in concert?** Participants universally recognized that influencing major governmental actions requires group action. Participants felt that it is common sense that people have more impact if they work together. Thus, participants were more likely to act if they felt part of a group. The promise of joining with others gave participants feelings of strength, power and unity. At the same time, individuals must be able to see how their individual action is an important part of the group’s activity. One needs a sense that one’s individual action matters. As discussed below, this sense is built on familiarity and identification with the group.

**d) Why act now?** There needs to be a sense of the timeliness and urgency for acting now. Urgency comes partly from the timing of external events—an upcoming vote, for example. One’s immediate experiences also contribute to the decision to act.

**e) How will my participation be personally satisfying?** Personal rewards from taking action can help offset the fact that achieving substantive goals is uncertain and will require patience. A chief personal reward is being part of a group. Many respondents enjoy joining with others to build a community taking joint action. They achieve a feeling of unity and energy from being part of the group’s efforts.

#### *4. Activation*

Several “taglines” and “calls to action” were tested to identify the most effective versions that would motivate viewers to support the ESTA campaign.

Initial taglines urged viewers to call elected officials. Focus group participants felt that this text clearly stated specific actions but hesitated to think they would call the officials listed. The phrase “You can make it happen” and the idea of their picking up the phone to call these officials made respondents feel alone and exposed. Participants were unsure who they would reach on the phone—other than being sure they would not speak with the governor or legislative leaders named in the ad copy—or what effect their call would have. Rather than make phone calls by themselves, participants expressed the desire to be acting as part of a group.

Another issue raised was the need for immediacy; why call now instead of next week or next month?

Revised text created a greater sense of timeliness by stating that a vote would occur “between now and Labor Day.”<sup>3</sup> “Help them make the right decision” engendered a greater feeling of group action among respondents. Listing the campaign’s phone number and web site gave respondents a safe way to take an exploratory step and find out more information. Most respondents in these two groups said they have Internet access and would be interested in visiting the web site. A few expressed interest in calling the phone number.

#### *5. Campaign Sponsorship.*

An essential ingredient of the advertising message was identification of the sponsors. Respondents looked at the list of sponsoring organizations to understand the purpose and motivations of the people behind the message and to decide whether they want to join the group.

Respondents gained their strongest impression of the campaign when they were familiar with organizations on the list and felt the organization represented the respondent’s interests. Identification with individual organizations had a “halo” effect on the entire campaign. Respondents who recognized several agreeable organizations gained a particularly favorable impression.

The NYPIRG Stragglers Campaign—a 20-year-old transit rider advocacy group—evoked almost universal recognition and approval. Most participants recognized Stragglers as a group fighting on behalf of ordinary people like themselves. The NY State AFL-CIO was an important positive for a number of respondents who either belonged to a union or had close relatives as union members. The League of Conservation Voters (an influential environmental organization) appealed to a number of respondents as well.

Sometimes, organizations seemed to have a self-interested reason to help sponsor the campaign—e.g., the New York Building Congress (which represents the engineering and construction community in New York) and Real Estate Board. Some felt the AFL-CIO was equally self-interested. Some respondents accepted self-interest as a valid motivation while for others it created distance between respondents and the campaign.

Three attributes of sponsorship clearly strengthened response to the campaign:

- A clear identity. Who is the sponsor? Do I know any of the groups in the coalition?
- Credibility and trustworthiness. Why are the sponsor(s) putting on this campaign? What are their motivations? Do they have my interests at heart? Do they have a vested interest? If so, what are they? Am I comfortable with them?
- Similarity and familiarity to the audience. Are the folks behind the campaign people like me? Would I feel comfortable as part of this group?

#### *6. Avenues for Response*

Many respondents wanted an easy, quick way to contact elected officials in support of the ESTA campaign. Various suggestions included postcards, setting up tables in the subway and e-mail.

A significant majority of focus group participants had Internet access. They wanted to be able to visit a web site for more information and guidance on taking action. Visiting a web site gives them an opportunity to anonymously find out more information about the group’s plans and objectives and determine whether they truly supported the effort.

Once determining they wanted to support the campaign, many respondents wanted to be able to quickly contact public officials by e-mail. The convenience and speed of e-mail was very attractive.

A web site also offered the opportunity for respondents to feel part of a group effort, see how their actions were supported by others, obtain updates about the campaign and the status of transit proposals. Some would be happy to receive updates by e-mail while others wanted to preserve their privacy.

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<sup>3</sup> The groups were held in July, 1999.

Some respondents, on the other hand, wanted to write a letter in their own words. They wanted to express themselves personally and felt a personal letter would have more impact.

#### **IV. THE CAMPAIGN**

ESTA released its Capital Needs Assessment calling for \$18.2 billion in investments over five years in early September, 1999 with a press conference that was covered by the four major newspapers, radio and television news. The release was preceded by a set of briefings to major state and local elected officials. These officials agreed on most of the priorities identified, though several expressed concern about the costs. At about the same time about two dozen elected officials announce their support for the Second Avenue subway.

In late September, the MTA released its draft Five Year Capital Program that proposed \$16.5 billion in transit investments. The MTA proposal included several ESTA priorities, including major investments in capital maintenance, signals and communications, and connecting the Long Island Rail Road to Manhattan's East Side. However, it fell short on clean-fuel buses, purchases of subway cars to support higher levels of service to reduce crowding, and the extent of plans for a Second Avenue subway.

After MTA Board approval, the Capital Program was submitted to the Capital Program Review Board (CPRB), a four-person board, with representatives from the Governor, Assembly, State Senate, and the New York City Mayor. Each of the representatives can veto the Capital Program and send it back to the MTA. Though for different reasons, in late December 1999 the Assembly and Senate representatives vetoed the Capital Program. These vetoes were actually regarded as pro formas, since by that time there was a general recognition that highway and transit funding would be addressed together with the state budget in the Spring of 2000.

##### **A. Advertising**

One of the challenges facing the campaign was deciding when to launch the advertising effort.

Under New York State law, the MTA was required to submit a five-year capital plan on October 1, 1999 to the state legislature, governor and mayor, a deadline that the agency met. However, there is no deadline in law for the legislature or its representatives to act on the plan.

Past MTA capital plans were approved well after submission. Many experts predicted that the MTA plan would not be taken up by the legislature and governor until late in 2000, perhaps after the legislative elections in November. The campaign originally assumed eight or more months to build public support and awareness through in-the-subways advertising, a parallel campaign targeted at Internet users, and free media coverage of the issue.

However, in late 1999, the groups decided to start their ad campaign by April 2000, preparing for the possibility that the Speaker of the New York State Assembly would tie the issue of constructing a full-length Second Avenue subway to passage of the state budget. Here too, timing remained unclear: Although the New York State Constitution requires passage of a state budget by April 1, that deadline had not been met in many years; in 1999, the state budget did not pass until August.

Expecting the key decisions on the Capital Program to come in the spring, ESTA decided to launch its advertising campaign on April 1. Two ads were chosen. One ad depicted a crowded subway car and said: "With livestock it's called animal cruelty. With people it's called a morning commute." The copy addressed issues of subway overcrowding with shorter-term improvements to train signals and purchase of additional subway cars, and with a full-length Second Avenue subway. (See Figure 1.)

The second ad showed a picture of Washington's modern Metro system and read, "It's modern. It's reliable. Unfortunately, it's not in New York." The ad went on in smaller copy: "New York may be the world's greatest city. But our mass transit system isn't keeping up with the technology used in cities like Washington, San Francisco and Paris. We deserve better." In both ads, riders were urged to visit a new web site to voice support for transit.

In late January 2000, two ESTA members, Regional Plan Association (RPA) and the NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign, submitted the advertisements to the contractor that manages the MTA's advertising market. The

contractor replied that the advertisements were not acceptable and would not be posted. Inquiries to MTA management confirmed that this decision was made at the highest levels. The MTA defended its action, citing regulations adopted by the agency in September 1997 that allowed it to limit ads that are “directly adverse to the commercial or administrative interests of the MTA.” In the agency’s view, the ads countered the millions of dollars the MTA had spent to attract riders and improve its image with the riding public. Agency representatives felt the ad could cost the agency riders.

RPA and Straphangers sued the MTA on the grounds that this decision was a violation of the groups’ First Amendment rights to free speech. They were represented by the American Civil Liberties Union. The MTA’s rejection gave the groups a golden opportunity to stage a media event around the lawsuit and attract attention to the issue as it was coming to a head in Albany. The MTA eventually relented and the advertisements were posted in 40 percent of the subway cars in the system.

## **B. Web Site**

With the findings of the focus groups in mind, a web site was constructed with an easy-to-remember name: [bettertransit.org](http://bettertransit.org). The site was designed to provide concise and lively information on the need for funds to repair and expand transit. It also provided simple ways for visitors to the web site to take action. These included sending an email to elected officials, providing the names and emails of friends, colleagues and family to contact, and becoming “virtual volunteers” who could get more involved, such as providing us with “list serves” of groups to contact. Visitors could send a pre-prepared e-mail or alter it to reflect their views.

The site sought to be both informative and appealing. For example, on its list of reasons for visitors to the web site to help, it very concisely presented some of the views reflected in the focus groups: “easier trips, a chance for a seat, your blood pressure, the city’s future.” Relevant articles and documents were included for visitors to the web site who wanted more in-depth information. There were also options to learn about the groups sponsoring the ads, as well as how the privacy of visitors to the site would be protected.

The message of the ads was reinforced by 80,000 leaflets handed out in subway stations by Straphangers Campaign staff and volunteers in April and May. The leaflets bore the same image of crowding as on the “livestock ad” and prominently featured the web site address. (The leaflets also listed non-electronic ways to reach key officials, such as their telephone and fax numbers and addresses.)

The [bettertransit.org](http://bettertransit.org) site received 68,000 “hits” between March and mid June. Of these, approximately 10,000 were individual users (most users generated several “hits”). More than one-third of the visitors to the web site sent an e-mail letter to public officials— an impressive “click through” rate, illustrating the clarity and effectiveness of the site design.

As of June 2000, there were 3,300 individuals on the resulting e-mail list who could be contacted with followup messages. Straphangers sent two broadcast e-mails to the list in April about major developments on the MTA capital program. The site itself was revised three times between March and early May. A current version of the site urges visitors to the web site to contact the Governor to express their desire that the promises in the approved plan become reality. (See [www.bettertransit.org](http://www.bettertransit.org).)

## **V. ADOPTION OF THE CAPITAL PROGRAM**

In early May, the MTA and the legislature agreed on a revised five-year \$17.1 billion Capital Program.<sup>4</sup> The program included \$13 billion dollars to fund essential “state of good repair” projects; investments in clean-fuel buses; a modest expansion of the subway and bus fleet; and \$3 billion for the first serious system expansions in more than 60 years. The expansions included a \$1 billion start on a full-length Second Avenue Subway; \$1.5 billion to complete nearly 40% of a link between the Long Island Rail Road and Grand Central Terminal; and \$645 for the off-airport part of constructing a subway connection to LaGuardia Airport.

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<sup>4</sup> The Capital Program was officially \$18.1 billion with \$1 billion going to MTA Bridges and Tunnels.

The Legislature and Governor also agreed to a \$3.8 billion Transportation Bond Act, with \$1.6 billion going to the MTA, \$1.9 billion going to highway and bridge projects, and \$300 million going to a variety of upstate transportation projects. The State's general revenues would secure these bonds. Despite this new source of funding, fiscal watchdogs and many transit advocates were seriously concerned about the financial stability of the Capital Program because of its heavy reliance on fare-backed debt.

## **VI. CONCLUSIONS**

The following lessons can be drawn from this round of advocacy for transit capital investment.

- The focus groups were consistent with most expectations about the public's transit priorities, though they indicated a greater than expected concern about continuing to maintain the existing system.
- The ESTA campaign was much more successful in building support for capital projects than it was in developing support for new financing for those investments.
- Timing and initial objections to the advertisements produced unexpected delays in carrying out the campaign.
- New Yorkers are well connected to the Internet and a web-based campaign can effectively activate the population and influence key decision-makers.
- The subway advertisements were most effective when reinforced by leafleting in subway stations.

ESTA's campaign was substantially successful at building support among key decision-makers for capital priorities like clean fuel buses and a Second Avenue subway. There was much less support for making the tough financial decisions that observers think these projects will eventually demand. In part this may have been due to ESTA's reluctance to propose new funding sources. There was a concern during the early stages of the campaign that such proposals would steal media attention from the capital priorities and that new taxes might become a lightning rod for opposition. In addition, the coalition was not able to reach any kind of internal consensus on the best sources or instruments for additional funding. This is a question that will return if the current financing scheme does not survive the duration of the capital program.

It is difficult to gauge the impact of the ad campaign and web site separately from other advocacy and political strategies but the campaign clearly generated a substantial public response. It resulted in widespread media coverage of the not-sexy topic of transit capital repairs, as well as supportive editorials in the city's major newspapers. The ads and news stories about the ads were seen by hundreds of thousands of riders, generating a "buzz" about the MTA's capital program. At least ten thousand individuals visited the site, with a third of them taking action. This response infers that there is a greater awareness of the need for repairing, expanding and investing in the transit system—and that this awareness can be tapped in the future.

The original game plan of the groups assumed a longer timetable for building support and awareness, with the state not taking up the MTA capital program until the fall of 2000. Instead, the campaign was condensed into less than six weeks. This did not permit the ESTA coalition to increase public awareness and steadily build up the intensity of participation through the web site. For example, the short time frame also did not allow ESTA to take additional actions beyond sending e-mail letters.

## **VI. EPILOGUE**

In the November 2000 elections, voters defeated the Bond Act by a narrow 51% to 49% margin. New York City voters supported the Bond Act by a 72%-28% margin, while suburban voters supported it by a 55%-45% margin. It should be noted that more than half of all those who voted for a presidential candidate failed to cast a vote on the Bond Act. The drop off was highest in the City (68%), but it also exceeded 50% in the suburbs and 45% upstate. This dropoff was likely a

consequence of the focus on the Presidential election and a hotly contested Senate race. A more active campaign, including electioneering at polling sites might have increased the number of votes cast.

Fiscal conservatives opposed the bond act because it would further balloon the state's already sky-high debt. Support from the Governor and Mayor was lukewarm and unenergetic. Many in the transportation community felt that it relied too heavily on debt and future fare increases without enough money from state and city operating funds and was unspecific on what projects would be funded. Nevertheless, most of the ESTA member organizations endorsed the Bond Act and campaigned for its passage. Civic organizations like the Straphangers Campaign and Regional Plan Association appeared on several television discussions about the Bond Act, participated in campaign events, and briefed editorial boards for all of the major downstate newspapers. Contractors and the construction trades made contributions to a campaign fund that bought commercials in the upstate media markets, which were perceived as having the highest number of swing voters.

What happens in the wake of the Bond Act's defeat is unclear. The vote automatically reopened the MTA capital program. The Bond Act's defeat gives Albany the opportunity to improve the financing plan. But seeing what will emerge – a better plan or even less “real” money – awaits further Legislative action. In the wake of the Bond Act defeat, the groups belonging to ESTA began to reassess how best to achieve their original goals—ensuring adequate investment in the region's transportation system. ESTA members interpreted the strong support that the Bond Act received in the City and suburbs as an endorsement for increased transportation investment.

In future efforts, the groups will have the benefit of the lessons learned during this round of activity. One of the most promising set of lessons concern the web site, from how to attract visitors to the art of writing effective e-mail alerts. Many of these are being incorporated into NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign restructuring its web site, which can be found at [www.straphangers.org](http://www.straphangers.org). The heart of the group's approach is to make the site rider-oriented and offer a range of benefits to visitors that appeal to rider self-interest with features like “how to lower your fare” and exactly who to contact to get responses to complaints. Riders can subscribe to a free service where they receive automatically weekly e-mails of planned service diversions for their particular line. The site is “interactive”—visitors are able to participate in opinion polls; make entries in a “rider diary” for each subway line, and read answers to questions from the riding public. The site also has information riders want, such as train schedules, as well as games and contests.

Like [bettertransit.org](http://bettertransit.org), the new Straphangers Campaign web site is being “marketed” with in-the-subways ads. In addition, there are ads on Internet carriers. In the first month of its operation, the revamped web site received 40,000 individual visits and 135,000 hits; the Straphangers Campaign now has a data base of 8,000 e-mails, likely the single largest “mailing list” in the United States of individuals interested in improving transit.



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