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M.T.A.'s Threat Drops Some Jaws

By STEWART AIN

THE Metropolitan Transportation Authority's announcement that it may eliminate the Oyster Bay, West Hempstead and Greenport branches of the Long Island Rail Road to save money has left riders incredulous.

"It's absurd," said David Durso of Glen Cove as he stood on the platform at Pennsylvania Station last week, waiting for the 5:33. "It would be a hardship for most if not all of us. It's not fair because the Oyster Bay line and the others on the list are the weak sisters of the whole system. They don't have express-line tracks, and the trains are often late."

Richard Silber of West Hempstead said simply: "It would be a disaster."

"A lot of people moved to West Hempstead knowing that there are essentially four train stations within the West Hempstead community -- West Hempstead, Hempstead Gardens, Lakeview and Malverne," he added. "Now they all would be closed. It would be a huge inconvenience for people. I'd have to leave my house 15 or 20 minutes earlier and spend \$4 every day to park at the Lynbrook station. And I probably wouldn't get a seat at Lynbrook, so I'd be paying more and getting less for the service. On the train we ride now, we get a seat."

Brian Dolan, a spokesman for the railroad, said the elimination of the three branches would be a "drastic step we would hope we would not have to implement." He said the move was being considered because of a projected \$1.3 billion budget shortfall that the transportation authority, the railroad's parent, is facing in 2006.

Tom Kelly, a spokesman for the authority, said that the proposal to eliminate the three branches would be implemented only if the authority was unable to close its budget gap by other means. He noted that the authority's projected \$540 million deficit in 2005 had been reduced in recent months to \$400 million because of increased revenues from gasoline and real estate taxes.

"By the end of the year it could be reduced to \$100 million, which agency-wide there are any number of ways to handle," he said.

This reduction, however, would not affect the proposed 5 percent railroad fare increase, Mr. Kelly said. If approved by the authority's board in December, the increase would take effect in the first quarter next year.

On the proposal to close the three branches, Mr. Dolan said the board, at its July 29 meeting, had authorized conducting environmental impact statements, which would have to be completed before any shutdown occurs.

The Oyster Bay branch serves Oyster Bay, Locust Valley, Glen Cove, Sea Cliff, Glen Head, Greenvale, Roslyn, Albertson and East Williston, a total station-to-station distance of 14.3 miles. It is used by 6,000 riders each weekday.

The West Hempstead branch serves West Hempstead, Hempstead Gardens, Lakeview, Malverne and Westwood, a distance of 4.6 miles. It is used by 3,000 riders each weekday.

The Greenport branch, the third line that may be eliminated, serves Greenport, Southold, Mattituck, Riverhead, Yaphank and Medford, a distance of 45.8 miles. It is used by 200 riders each weekday.

Mr. Dolan said the elimination of these lines would save the transportation authority \$11.2 million a year. If the lines are shut down, he said the tracks would be pulled up and sold as salvage. He did not know how much that would bring in.

"This demonstrates the depth of the problem the M.T.A. is facing," Mr. Dolan said. "The picture could improve with increased ridership, if we receive increased revenues from the state, or if new funding streams are identified."

But Chris Cavaliere, the president of the Roslyn Heights Civic Association, said he saw the authority's announcement as a "ploy to get more money" from the state.

"They couldn't possibly discontinue the service," he said as he sat on the 4:54 at Penn Station on his daily commute home. "It would be a huge burden on the community to do such a thing. We pay a lot of money, and we've ridden a horrendous line for many years with old trains. Now that they have upgraded with double-deckers, I can't imagine them actually ending it."

Mr. Cavaliere said that if the branch were eliminated, commuters would flock to other branches, and he questioned whether they could handle the increased volume. "A lot of the lines are so full that people rarely get a seat," he said.

Mary Ann Holzkamp, the mayor of Glen Cove, said she had already "reached out to some local politicians so that we can work together to make sure this doesn't happen."

"We want to nip it in the bud," she said, adding that the elimination of rail service in Glen Cove would be "devastating to the city."

Mayor Holzkamp said she was convinced that more people would ride the train if the Oyster Bay branch offered more frequent service. "By closing this line they would be putting more cars on the road as people drive to other stations or perhaps to the city, which is what we are trying to get away from," she said.

Joshua Y. Horton, Southold's town supervisor, said that discontinuing rail service on the North Fork "would be a grave mistake." But he noted that service on the Greenport branch is so infrequent that when he takes the train to Manhattan, he often drives to the Ronkonkoma station, on the main line. "The only train from Greenport on a weekday leaves virtually before sunup," Mr. Horton said.

David Kapell, the mayor of Greenport, said that eliminating the Greenport branch would be "shortsighted in terms of the strategic value that Greenport has had and may continue to have."

Mr. Kapell said that the rail link to Greenport -- if it were combined with ferry service to New London, Conn., which has an Amtrak station -- could serve as a shortcut to Boston for Suffolk residents. As it is, they have to go to Penn Station to catch a northbound Amtrak train.