

# Council Rips MTA Over Public Safety

By GINGER ADAMS OTIS

Members of Transport Workers' Union Local 100 turned out in force March 29 for a joint City Council hearing on safety issues and first responder access to the city's subway system. Council Members cast a critical eye on New York City Transit's moves toward automation—including unstaffed entrances and the use of computer-run subway cars manned by only one person.

NYC Transit's Director of Government and Community Relations Lois Tendler spent several hours fielding questions from Council Members in a room packed with onlookers sporting blue t-shirts emblazoned with the letters "TWU."

### Candor Applauded

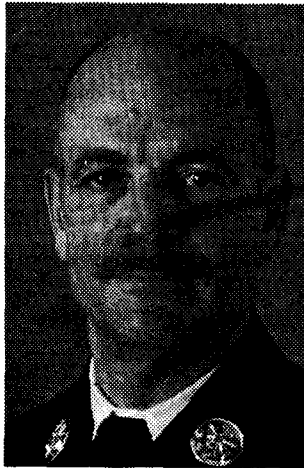
Ms. Tendler was flanked by Fire Department Chief of Operations Salvatore Cassano and NYPD Assistant Chief Henry Cronin, commanding officer of the Transit Bureau, both of whom also offered testimony.

The chiefs got a muted round of applause from the crowd for their responses to a question posed by Council Member Hiram Monserrate: "Do you believe that these automated sites compromise public safety at all?"

"Any restriction that you do ... yes," said Chief Cronin.

"I would agree," said Chief Cassano. "Any restriction will lessen [safety]."

Local 100 President Roger Toussaint put it even more bluntly. He told the City



**SALVATORE CASSANO: Doubts about change.**

Council that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's automated High Entry and Exit Turnstiles (HEETs) were disasters waiting to happen.

"In a crowded subway system, there is a danger more palpable than any threats of biological and chemical agents, and more threatening than fire," he said. "This is mass panic. We need exits that permit a crowd to pass rapidly with minimal danger of people getting trampled underfoot and exits jamming."

### Money Matters

NYC Transit, beset by debt and lack of funding for the upkeep of the 100-year-old subway system, has been moving toward automation incrementally since the

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mid-1990s, according to Ms. Tendler's statements. Council Member John Liu, chair of the Transportation Committee, repeatedly stated that he didn't begrudge the agency's wanting to implement cheaper and more efficient measures. However, he stressed, it was incumbent upon NYC Transit to consider public safety before it set up new procedures. "Before you started looking to automate the entrances and exits," asked Mr. Liu, "did you meet with the Fire or Police Department, or any city agencies, to discuss how it would impact public safety?"

### No Consultation

Ms. Tendler responded that she had not been at the agency at that time, but that she was "sure" such conversations took place. Mr. Liu then asked Chief Cassano if the FDNY had been invited to discuss public safety before automation was brought into the system. Chief Cassano said he thought it had "been mentioned" at one meeting, and Chief Cronin said his agency had not been consulted at all.

Mr. Toussaint made a lengthy statement about his concerns for worker and passenger safety, saying that management's "fascination" with technology and disregard for personnel did not bode well for straphangers. "Transit Workers are not first responders for the simple reason that we are already there when a situation emerges. We are in many cases the on-site responders who must deal with a situation and summon aid before uniformed emergency personnel can arrive," he noted.

He then went on to criticize NYC Transit's plans to close 164 token booths and deploy agents to roam around the platform. "In

# Rips MTA for Disregarding Subway Safety



**ROGER TOUSSAINT: A dangerous course.**



**JOHN LIU: Questions lack of training.**



**PETER F. VALLONE JR.: Too much left to chance.**

some high-crime areas there are booths where, as a matter of policy, Station Agents on night tours do not come out of the booths for breaks because this is deemed too dangerous," he said. "Six such booths are slated for closing. In [those locations], the booths will now be shuttered and dismantled. And will Station Agents be expected now to roam these same stations? Or will that section be deserted, and passengers left to fend for themselves?"

## Preaching to Choir

Council Members listened to Mr. Toussaint's testimony closely, but most of them had the air of someone who does not need to be convinced. Council Member Liu has doggedly pushed the MTA for information on subway accessibility since taking office. He brought up German Cabrera, who was shot and killed at the IRT 18th St. subway station last month, several times.

"The police, responding to an emergency call, went to the wrong entry," he said, addressing his comments to Ms. Tendler. "A man was

shot and critically wounded and was dying inside on the platform. An agent called for help. An agent told them over the intercom how to access the emergency gates. In the end they took a Metro-Card from a passenger to get inside. Does this sound like the proper training and procedures have been put in place? Does it sound like removing agents is a good idea?"

## Can Patch Holes

Ms. Tendler defended the automated HEET turnstiles, saying that in normal circumstances they work fine. She added that with the proper training, police officers would know to push the emergency intercom button to talk to an agent at Command Control when they needed to get buzzed through a gate. Medical, fire and other emergency equipment would not pass through a HEET turnstile, she acknowledged, but said that an agent would always be available at Command Control.

"How do people know where these buttons are?" asked Council Member Peter F. Vallone Jr. "I've never seen

one anywhere. I've never even seen a sign saying 'Emergency Button here.' What public outreach has been done on this?" He later outlined a nightmare scenario for Ms. Tendler that he said was all too easily envisioned: "Three hundred people running down a small track trying to find a small button that they hope to God is working."

Mr. Vallone then asked Chief Cassano if he knew of any other place where people needed to get permission to flee in an emergency. "Isn't this set up a violation of some kind?" Mr. Vallone pressed. "Isn't it against the law?"

## Too Much to Assume

Ms. Tendler reiterated that an agent would be available to open up exit gates, but Mr. Vallone wasn't buying it. "That's assuming the agent hasn't been taken out, that's assuming the communication chain is still working, that's assuming there's a first responder unit available to come and help if people are stuck," he retorted. "That's assuming an awful lot."

Patrolmen's Benevolent

Association President Patrick J. Lynch attended the hearing and came out strongly against over-dependence on automation to the detriment of public safety. Removing the extra set of "eyes and ears" when police numbers were already down only made it harder during emergencies, he warned.

Chiefs Cronin and Cassano said the same thing regarding the use of remote-controlled trains on the L line through Canarsie. NYC Transit has plans to remove Train Conductors and run the trains with only an Operator, even though both Chiefs said that having two trained people on board is better for handling emergencies.

## Not Sure on Response

Chief Cassano, speaking to this newspaper after his testimony, said the remote-controlled trains were "very new" to the FDNY and the department was still "figuring things out." When asked how the FDNY would handle an emergency if the sole Operator on a train was incapacitated, Chief Cassano simply shook his head. "I don't know," he said finally. "Would we bring in another train alongside, would we try to get in the tubes? We just don't know. This is all new to us."

Mr. Toussaint, a former Track Worker himself, said that even old hands are frightened by some of the subway tubes, particularly the 26 lines that go under the Harlem and East Rivers. "I can't imagine what [the tunnels] are like for passengers suddenly evacuated from the train under emergency conditions," said Mr. Toussaint, a sentiment that would apply to untrained firefighters and police personnel as well. "To have anything less than a full crew aboard these trains is unconscionable—yet that is precisely what the Transit Authority is proposing."