

No-conductor trains set for L line in June

SUBWAY TRAINS without conductors will start running on the L line in June, a transit official said yesterday — the first time a launch date has been announced for the controversial move.

Testifying at a City Council hearing, Kevin O'Connell, the Transit Authority's chief transportation officer for subways, said solo motormen will be in charge of operating the trains — and opening and closing doors.

A TA spokesman later said the change is aimed at increasing productivity and saving money.

While O'Connell said motormen can do both functions safely, members of the Council's transportation committee, and the transit workers union, strongly disagreed.

Councilman Lewis Fidler (D-Brooklyn) and other elected officials said a two-person crew is necessary to lead riders to safety in emergencies such as derailments and track fires.

"By removing people from the trains, you are increasing the level of danger," Fidler said.

But O'Connell said motormen have been running trains alone since 1996 without problems. It's now done on six lines and shuttles, but unlike on the L line, all the trains have fewer than eight cars.

In emergencies, TA personnel race to the scene, as do police and firefighters, O'Connell said.

"When these things happen, we're never short of people to assist our customers," he said.

Elliott Sclar, a Columbia University professor of urban planning, said a TA study found no L-line evacuations were conducted between January 1996 and January 2004. It could be necessary someday, it noted, and a motorman might have to evacuate a train before another employee arrives.

The motorman would have to retrieve evacuation equipment and inspect the emergency exit.

"The delay could result in passenger panic and self-evacuation," the report says, according to Sclar.

Council members also raised concerns about plans to have L trains guided by computers this summer, with motormen standing at the helms to override the system and run trains manually if necessary.

Transit officials said the complex system will be thoroughly tested and safe before being put into full operation in July. Its benefits include more frequent trains as part of a major signal system upgrade, they said.

Beverly Dolinsky, executive director of the New York City Transit Riders Council, was a lone voice in support of the Communication Based Train Control and One Person Train Operation programs. Staff reductions through attrition will make the cash-starved agency more productive, she said.

A veteran TA watchdog, Dolinsky also said: "I can say unequivocally that Transit will not install or operate a system that is not 100% safe."

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