



EDITORIAL: ROCKLAND TRANSIT AT A CROSSROADS AS RIDERS RAISE CONCERNS AND COUNTY REVIEWS FUTURE OF BUS SYSTEM



FOR DECADES, THE TRANSPORT OF ROCKLAND HAS BEEN THE BACKBONE OF LOCAL PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION IN ROCKLAND COUNTY, MOVING RESIDENTS ACROSS TOWNS, CONNECTING COMMUTERS TO RAIL LINES, AND PROVIDING ESSENTIAL MOBILITY FOR THOSE WITHOUT CARS.

THE TRANSPORT OF ROCKLAND BEGAN IN THE 1970S AS A MODEST COUNTY TRANSIT SYSTEM DESIGNED TO MEET BASIC LOCAL TRAVEL NEEDS AS ROCKLAND TRANSITIONED FROM A QUIETER SUBURBAN REGION INTO A MORE DENSELY POPULATED COMMUTER COUNTY. OVER TIME, ROUTES EXPANDED TO SERVE GROWING COMMUNITIES SUCH AS NYACK, SPRING VALLEY, NEW CITY, AND HAVERSTRAW, BECOMING A DAILY NECESSITY FOR WORKERS, STUDENTS, SENIORS, AND FAMILIES ACROSS THE COUNTY. TODAY, MANY RIDERS SAY THE SYSTEM STILL PLAYS AN ESSENTIAL ROLE—BUT ALSO SAY IT IS SHOWING SIGNS OF STRAIN.

IN CONVERSATIONS ACROSS THE COUNTY, PASSENGERS DESCRIBE DELAYS, OVERCROWDING, AND INCONSISTENT CONDITIONS BOTH AT BUS STOPS AND INSIDE VEHICLES. SOME SAY BUS STOPS IN CERTAIN AREAS APPEAR

NEGLECTED, WITH LITTER ACCUMULATING AND LIMITED UPKEEP. INSIDE BUSES, RIDERS REPORT THAT CONDITIONS CAN WORSEN AS THE DAY GOES ON, ESPECIALLY WHEN SERVICE IS RUNNING BEHIND SCHEDULE OR VEHICLES ARE CYCLING CONTINUOUSLY WITH LIMITED TIME BETWEEN TRIPS.

ONE RIDER SAID, "YOU DON'T ALWAYS KNOW IF THE BUS IS COMING OR IF YOU JUST MISSED IT. IT MAKES PLANNING YOUR DAY REALLY DIFFICULT." ANOTHER ADDED, "WHEN IT FINALLY COMES, IT'S ALREADY PACKED, AND YOU'RE JUST TRYING TO GET ON HOWEVER YOU CAN."

OVERCROWDING IS ANOTHER FREQUENT CONCERN. RIDERS SAY THAT WHEN BUSES ARE DELAYED OR MISSED ENTIRELY, THE NEXT SCHEDULED RUN CAN BECOME HEAVILY PACKED, SOMETIMES BEYOND COMFORTABLE CAPACITY, FORCING PASSENGERS TO STAND OR WAIT FOR LATER SERVICE. WHAT BEGINS AS A SINGLE DISRUPTION CAN RIPPLE ACROSS THE ENTIRE DAY'S SCHEDULE.

PASSENGERS ALSO POINT TO OPERATIONAL PRESSURE, INCLUDING DRIVER SHORTAGES AND TIGHT SCHEDULING DEMANDS. DRIVERS ARE OFTEN REQUIRED TO MAINTAIN STRICT TIMETABLES WHILE MANAGING FULL BUSES, LEAVING LIMITED OPPORTUNITY TO ADDRESS CLEANLINESS OR ONBOARD BEHAVIOR DURING TRIPS. WITHIN THAT ENVIRONMENT, SOME RIDERS REPORT DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR SUCH AS LOUD MUSIC WITHOUT HEADPHONES, VAPING, AND OCCASIONAL ALCOHOL USE. WHILE THESE ACTIONS ARE PROHIBITED UNDER TRANSIT RULES, ENFORCEMENT IS OFTEN LIMITED IN REAL TIME, SINCE DRIVERS MUST FOCUS ON SAFELY OPERATING THE VEHICLE AND MAINTAINING SCHEDULES.

AT THE SAME TIME, MANY PASSENGERS SAY THEIR CONCERNS ARE INCREASINGLY BEING SHARED BEYOND THE BUS ITSELF. COMPLAINTS ABOUT DELAYS, CLEANLINESS, AND RELIABILITY ARE NOW FREQUENTLY POSTED ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND COMMUNITY FORUMS, WHERE RIDERS COMPARE EXPERIENCES AND DOCUMENT DAILY CONDITIONS. AS ONE COMMUTER PUT IT, "IT'S NOT JUST ONE COMPLAINT—YOU SEE THE SAME ISSUES COMING UP OVER AND OVER ONLINE."

BEYOND TRANSPORTATION, SOME RESIDENTS ARE ALSO RAISING BROADER QUESTIONS ABOUT INFRASTRUCTURE AND PUBLIC INVESTMENT ACROSS ROCKLAND COUNTY. THEY NOTE THAT DESPITE BEING ONE OF THE HIGHER-TAXED COUNTIES IN THE HUDSON VALLEY, VISIBLE INFRASTRUCTURE—FROM ROADS TO PUBLIC FACILITIES AND TRANSIT STOPS—DOES NOT ALWAYS APPEAR TO REFLECT THE LEVEL OF TAXPAYER FUNDING COLLECTED.

A LOCAL OFFICIAL FAMILIAR WITH COUNTY OPERATIONS SAID, “TRANSPORTATION IS A CORE PUBLIC SERVICE, AND WE RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIABILITY AND RIDER EXPERIENCE.” THE OFFICIAL ADDED, “THE COUNTY CONTINUES TO EVALUATE SERVICE PERFORMANCE AND CONTRACT REQUIREMENTS AS PART OF ONGOING IMPROVEMENTS.”

ANOTHER COUNTY-LEVEL TRANSPORTATION STATEMENT NOTED, “PUBLIC TRANSIT SYSTEMS OPERATE WITHIN STAFFING AND RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS, AND ADJUSTMENTS ARE MADE PERIODICALLY TO MAINTAIN SERVICE.”

WHEN COMPARED WITH NEIGHBORING COUNTIES, THE DIFFERENCES ARE CLEAR. WESTCHESTER’S BEE-LINE SYSTEM IS LARGER AND GENERALLY SEEN AS MORE CONSISTENT, WHILE PUTNAM OPERATES A SMALLER, COMMUTER-FOCUSED SYSTEM WITH LIMITED COVERAGE. ROCKLAND SITS IN THE MIDDLE IN SIZE, BUT MANY RIDERS SAY IT PRODUCES A HIGHER LEVEL OF VISIBLE COMPLAINTS RELATIVE TO ITS SCALE AND FUNDING COMPARED WITH OTHER HUDSON VALLEY TRANSIT SYSTEMS.

DESPITE CONCERNS, THE SYSTEM REMAINS ESSENTIAL FOR THOUSANDS OF RESIDENTS WHO DEPEND ON IT DAILY FOR WORK, SCHOOL, MEDICAL APPOINTMENTS, AND ESSENTIAL TRAVEL.

AT THE SAME TIME, ROCKLAND COUNTY IS NOW ENTERING A MAJOR TRANSITION PERIOD. A NEW BIDDING PROCESS IS UNDERWAY TO DETERMINE WHO WILL OPERATE AND MANAGE THE BUS SYSTEM MOVING FORWARD. THE CURRENT CONTRACT REMAINS IN PLACE WHILE PROPOSALS ARE REVIEWED, WITH OFFICIALS EXPECTED TO EVALUATE BIDDERS BASED ON PERFORMANCE, RELIABILITY, STAFFING, AND OVERALL SERVICE QUALITY.

FOR MANY RESIDENTS, THIS MOMENT HIGHLIGHTS A LARGER QUESTION ABOUT PRIORITIES. TRANSPORTATION, THEY SAY, IS NOT AN ABSTRACT POLICY ISSUE, BUT A DAILY NECESSITY THAT DIRECTLY AFFECTS QUALITY OF LIFE ACROSS THE COUNTY. AS ONE RIDER SUMMARIZED IT, “THIS ISN’T ABOUT POLITICS—IT’S ABOUT WHETHER PEOPLE CAN GET WHERE THEY NEED TO GO.

WITH LOCAL ELECTIONS APPROACHING, SOME RESIDENTS ALSO SAY THEY HOPE CANDIDATES WILL PLACE GREATER FOCUS ON EVERYDAY INFRASTRUCTURE AND PUBLIC SERVICE ISSUES, INCLUDING TRANSPORTATION, ROAD MAINTENANCE, AND OTHER CORE COUNTY SERVICES THAT AFFECT WORKING FAMILIES AND SENIORS.

FOR MANY PASSENGERS, THE CONCERN IS NOT A SINGLE ISSUE, BUT THE ACCUMULATION OF MANY SMALL ONES—DELAYS, CROWDING, MAINTENANCE GAPS, AND INCONSISTENT ENFORCEMENT—THAT TOGETHER DEFINE THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF PUBLIC TRANSIT IN ROCKLAND COUNTY TODAY.

