

# Toll Reform Should be on Albany's Agenda

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Days after Governor Andrew Cuomo bemoaned New York City's high cost of living, the governor's appointees to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) increased the city's cost of living.

Since I didn't see it covered elsewhere, let me lay out the timeline between the governor's progressive agenda, and the reality of the governor's appointees' actions. I should note that some of the MTA's current board members were appointed by governors other than the incumbent.

"The governor today [Jan. 18] proposed raising the statewide minimum wage—again—to \$10.50 by the end of 2016. Additionally, because New York City has one of the highest costs of living in the world, the governor proposed raising the city's minimum wage to \$11.50," stated a gubernatorial news release.

New York City's minimum wage workers may realize a boost in their paycheck next year, but the MTA's new ticket prices, which were approved by the agency's board of directors on Jan. 22, take effect next month. The base per trip subway and bus fare is rising in March 2015 to \$2.75 from \$2.50. The base per trip subway and bus fare was increased in March 2013 to \$2.50 from \$2.25 so, during the Cuomo administration's four-plus years, the base per trip cost of a subway or bus ride has grown by 22 percent.

To put it another way, the MTA's latest subway and bus fare hike works out to a \$10 monthly increase (50 cents a day more for a round-trip ticket, times 20 work days), requiring a minimum wage employee who relies on mass transit to work an additional hour each month to pay for their commute. Meanwhile, the purchasers of a monthly Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) ticket into Penn Station will see their LIRR commutation bill rise by \$10 a month, to \$252 from \$242 in western Nassau (zone 4), and by \$11 a month, to \$287 from \$276 in eastern Nassau (zone 7). The MTA news release after the board's vote said its LIRR rate

hike constituted a four percent increase over the fare which had been in place since 2013.

Mass transit is essential to the region's economic health, whether you access the system regularly, or not. Yes, the MTA's customers pay about half of the 'real' cost of mass transit when buying a ticket, with the balance of the MTA's revenue coming from the MTA's downstate payroll and mortgage recording taxes, and its taxi cab and car rental fees, among other sources.

The MTA would be a primary beneficiary—in the form of more riders, and additional revenue—were tolls to be placed on the currently toll-free East River crossings, a plan favored by Move NY, an advocacy group. A June 2014 Quinnipiac University poll of city residents found that 71 percent of them opposed the placement of tolls on the toll-free East River crossings into, and out of, Manhattan. That number dropped dramatically, however, to 49 percent, when survey respondents were asked if they'd be open to the idea if it came in exchange for toll fee reductions on the bridges between the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island.

“Our proposed toll reform is a simple one,” Move NY's website states. “First, every driver crossing a major bridge or entering a tunnel should pay a toll, just like everyone else. Second, we should set toll rates according to two criteria, charging more in those parts of the city where there is generally the heaviest congestion and plentiful transit alternatives, and less where there isn't.”

The state legislature must explore ways to prevent the Cuomo administration's MTA board appointees from making the cost of living any higher than it needs to be for New York City's minimum wage workers, and everyone else. Move NY offers a compelling place to start.