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## **Becoming “Transit Independent” on the East End**

Recent MTA tax assessment increases levied on East End Businesses, followed by an announcement that LIRR rail service in our region is likely to be reduced or even eliminated, has East End elected officials speaking out with one opposing voice. The time has come for us to leave the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and establish our own Regional Transit Authority (RTA) to meet the public transit needs of the East End Towns. The goal would be to gain what might be called “transit independence” for our region; the ability to make our own decisions about how our transit dollars are spent and to define, develop and operate our own transit services.

Are our local politicians tilting at windmills or is it possible the goal of transit independence is reachable? Five Town Rural Transit, Inc., a citizen-based transit advocacy group formed in 2004 and made up entirely of East End residents, believes the answer is unequivocally yes. In the past five years, 5TRT and the Towns have defined a new level of coordinated rail & bus transit service for our region known as the East End Shuttle. And last year this concept was validated in a study conducted for us by the prestigious US/DOT Volpe National Transportation Systems Center (Volpe). According to the Volpe analysis, a slightly modified version of the “Shuttle” concept would be technically feasible and it would cost less to develop than 5TRT originally projected.

5TRT also revealed that East End taxpayers already send over \$60 million per year to the MTA in various tax assessments, without receiving a commensurate level of rail service. In fact, the lion’s share is actually used for transit in New York City, not on the East End. Further, the Suffolk County bus services we receive are funded out of County tax dollars. Inexplicably the MTA makes no contribution to bus services in Suffolk County, even though they do in Nassau County and New York City. This County bus service costs East End taxpayers another \$3-4 million per year. In this case, at least, we do receive services, although they are in need of improvement and not coordinated with rail.

Could our tax dollars be better spent? Again, the answer is yes. According to Volpe, the entire East End Shuttle concept could operate for less than what we currently pay the MTA each year for the LIRR limited service we receive!

So, the questions of whether we could define and operate a better East End transit service and where the operating dollars would come from have largely been answered. We have a feasible new transit concept and we are already paying for it. The problem is we are not receiving it. Why is that so?

For reasons that are hard to comprehend because of our rural nature, the East End is in the jurisdiction of two New York City based organizations that collectively control our public transit situation. They are the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council (NYMTC) and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). NYMTC is a metropolitan planning organization (MPO). It is the gatekeeper for federal funding of transportation projects in its jurisdiction, as mandated by federal law. The MTA, in contrast, develops and operates the transit services in its jurisdiction, including the limited Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) service on the East End. As you might surmise, these two organizations are dominated by “urban” transit interests and needs; few funding dollars or transit services are focused on the “rural” needs of the East End. We represent only 2% of their metropolitan service population area and we receive far less than 1% of their investments. Simply stated, we have no clout.

In order to become transit independent, the East End needs to leave the jurisdiction of these two unresponsive agencies and form our own counterparts. This is not as far-fetched as it may seem. And there are precedents. For example, the Cape Cod region was granted MPO status by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and then established the Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority (CCRTA) in order to develop and operate its own transit services. The East End could take the following approach:

First, through what we believe would be a New York State DOT approval process, we could establish a Rural Planning Organization (RPO) to legally replace our current status as an insignificant part of NYMTC. Let’s call it the Peconic Transit Commission (PTC), and it would be comprised entirely of East End elected officials, employers and residents. The PTC would become the new gatekeeper for funding transit projects on the East End.

Second, we would then form our own Regional Transit Authority (RTA) to legally replace the MTA. Our NYS legislators Fred Thiele, Marc Alessi and Ken La Valle have collectively filed legislation to establish the Peconic Bay Regional Transportation Authority (PBRTA) for this very purpose. The PBRTA would eventually become responsible for developing and operating the East End Shuttle.

Establishing our own East End RPO and RTA would make the East End transit independent, but it would not be insure better services. We will also have to work very hard though our U.S. Representative Tim Bishop to acquire the needed one-time federal development funds to establish a new system. Receiving funding for transit is a highly competitive process in Washington. But the time is now.