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**Opposition to the MTA's Disparate Treatment of Paratransit Riders
in its Provision of Services**

Statement by Assembly Member Micah Z. Kellner
Before the Metropolitan Transportation Authority Board
May 11, 2009

Thank you to all the members of the Board for the opportunity to provide these comments today. As you are well aware, last fall a proposed fare schedule was conceived by this Board that would have meant that Access-A-Ride customers were charged double the regular single-ride fare. In Albany, I advocated that any bailout ensure that paratransit fares not be increased beyond the base fare. When the MTA began operating Access-A-Ride in 1993, during the Dinkins Administration, this agency signed a written agreement with the City of New York promising never to raise the fare above what they charged regular mass transit users. I am pleased that in the final negotiations, the MTA decided to honor this agreement and treat the paratransit fare equally. Trust me; I will hold you to it.

To ensure that people with disabilities and the frail elderly are never again faced with a discriminatory fare measure, Senator Tom Duane and I have introduced legislation (A.6489/S.2933) prohibiting any New York State transportation agency from charging a higher fare for paratransit services. This bill remains a high priority for me and the Senator.

The reason for my comments today is related to this overall issue of the disparate treatment of Access-A-Ride consumers.

There are close to 100,000 registered Access-A-Ride users who take millions of trips each year. The strict qualifications for registered status means that these are all people with severe disabilities or very frail seniors. People with disabilities are already at an economic disadvantage. 64% of Access-A-Ride users have a household income that is less than 250% of federal poverty; and 2002 Census data tells us that of people aged 25 to 64, 26% of those with a severe disability live below the poverty line, compared to 8% of the general population.

Despite these hardships, the MTA does not provide the same cost-savings options to its Access-A-Ride customers that it affords to the general public who are able to ride the buses and subways. Regular users are able to purchase MetroCards and are given the options of buying pre-loaded cards with bonus values, daily passes, weekly passes, and monthly passes. These bulk buying options save our non-disabled transit riding public hundreds of dollars each year and are designed to provide residents of New York City with a better deal than tourists. The 100,000 Access-A-Ride customers that are registered with the MTA are most definitely not tourists.

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The provision of the MetroCard itself is a service that is also denied to Access-A-Ride users. Unlike any other type of transit rider, Access-A-Ride users are required to pay for their fare in cash and with exact change. This is extremely burdensome. Particularly now that the fare is going up to \$2.25, the requirement that Access-A-Ride users have exact change is all the more troubling.

There is no good reason that I can see why the same technology that is used on our buses and in subway passenger stations cannot be applied to Access-A-Ride vehicles. I am confident that if the MTA is willing to make this issue a priority, a solution can be found, and quickly.

It is time to end the practice of treating people with disabilities and the frail elderly differently. Maintaining a difference in delivery of services puts our more vulnerable citizens at a disadvantage that discourages the use of their only real transportation option. Now that the authority's budget has been finalized, the MTA should make providing Access-A-Ride users with the same payment options as other users a priority.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments today.