INSTITUTE FOR RATIONAL URBAN MOBILITY, INC.

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Hon. Nancy Shevell Blakeman
Chair, MTA Capital Construction, Planning and Real Estate Committee
347 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10017

cc other members of committee:

Andrew Albert
Barry Feinstein
James Harding, Jr.
Susan Kupferman
Mark Lebow
David Mack
Susan Metzger
James Sedore
Carl Wortendyke

Dear Ms. Blakeman:

Thank you for requesting that MTA Capital Construction Company President Mysore Nagaraja review the Delcan Corporation's technical study of the Upper Level Loop Alternative and make a presentation at your committee meeting. I'm sure you would agree that this review would have been more productive and even-handed if representatives of Delcan -- a well-regarded Canadian engineering firm -- had been present to defend their analysis and respond to Mr. Nagaraja's comments.

The Institute for Rational Urban Mobility, Inc. (IRUM) is a New York City-based not-for-profit corporation concerned with advancing cost-effective measures to reduce motor vehicle use in dense urban area. IRUM has long supported plans to bring LIRR trains directly to Manhattan's East Side as a means of improving the attractiveness of the region's transit system and making it more competitive with the auto for travel to the core. Nearly half of LIRR commuters now arriving at Penn Station would save an average of about 15 minutes per trip if they had direct train service to Grand Central. Unfortunately, MTA's plan for a Deep Cavern station, some 150 feet below Park Avenue, greatly diminishes the attractiveness of this facility, adding three to four minutes per trip compared to the Upper Level Loop Alternative, as calculated in the Delcan study. Mr. Nagaraja failed to mention this in his review of the Delcan study.

Mr. Nagaraja cited several concerns about the Upper Level Loop Alternative. Shown below are some of the key concerns, and responses based on the findings of the Delcan study.

1. The plan could only accommodate 12 trains per hour, not the 24 trains per hour that could be handled by the Deep Cavern plan.

The Delcan study found that that the Upper Level Loop Alternative had a capacity of 24 trains per hour in the morning peak and 18 trains per hour in the evening peak. MTA's analysis of its Deep Cavern station, shown in the project's Final Environmental Impact Statement, did not include an estimate of evening peak hour capacity. Mr. Nagaraja's estimate of a much lower capacity is based on his claim that trains could not operate around the upper level loop at speeds greater than 4 mph. Delcan calculated the speed at 12 mph. Delcan's calculation was based on standard railway engineering practice developed over the past 150 years, which takes into account passenger comfort and safety factors. Mr. Nagaraja offered no technical analysis to support his claim.

2. The Upper Level Loop Plan cannot provide reliable service because of its "single point of failure".

The 63rd Street tunnel Lower Deck has only two tracks available for LIRR service – one for westbound trains heading toward Manhattan and one for eastbound trains heading toward Queens. Should a train stall in the tunnels, very serious delays would occur regardless of the design of the Manhattan terminal. MTA has not made a comparison of the reliability of its eight track Deep Cavern station with the five track station connecting to the Upper Level Loop studied by Delcan. Such a comparison would almost certainly show that the Upper Level Loop Alternative, which has fewer switches than the Deep Cavern Plan and does not require a change in direction, would have far fewer points of failure.

3. Metro-North operations would be severely impacted by the construction and operation of the Upper Level Loop Alternative

Delcan was assisted it its railway operations analysis by Michael Schabus, owner and operator of several private commuter railways in the UK. They carefully studied the current Metro-North operating plan and suggested measures that would minimize adverse impacts. At the meeting neither Mr. Nagaraja, nor Metro-North President Peter Cannito, identified specific impacts that were not addressed in the Delcan study nor did they take exception to any of the operating measures proposed by Delcan and Schabus. With 46 platform tracks, Grand Central Terminal is the world's largest rail station. Its utilization level is well below railway stations at key locations in Europe, and certainly far below LIRR experience at Penn Station.

4. The alignment of the Upper Level Loop Alternative places it in conflict with the Lexington Avenue express tracks and the 60th Street tunnel tracks.

Delcan based its analysis on key findings of MTA's Major Investment Study (MIS) that analyzed a Lower Level Alternative. The alignment and clearance problems cited by Mr. Nagaraja were fully addressed in this earlier MTA study which was conducted by MTA consultant STV.

5. The Deep Cavern station is no further below the surface than the Lexington Avenue station on the 63rd Street line, served by the F line.

Delcan fully addressed the fire safety issues associated with the Upper Level Loop Alternative. A similar analysis is not available for the Deep Cavern plan. Delcan estimated the travel time savings of the Upper Level station compared with the Deep Cavern. Anyone who has used the F train station is familiar with the inconvenience associated with a deep cavern station. In the case of the Lexington Avenue F train stop, this is a relatively minor station with few travelers descending from the street. A deep cavern terminal for the LIRR will mean that all travelers will have to face this nuisance. The security risks associated with this station are far greater than with Upper Level Loop station. No serious discussion of the fire safety issues associated with the deep cavern station has been made public.

6. Cost will be substantially higher than those projected by Delcan

Delcan made a careful analysis of the cost elements identified in the Deep Cavern plan and estimated the likely cost of its plan based on MTA costs. The Upper Level Loop Alternative requires far less excavation, far fewer escalators and elevators and many fewer track elements. If anything, Delcan's estimate of saving $1.2 billion in construction cost may be conservative. A truly reliable estimate of costs of each alternative could only be done by a knowledgeable third party with construction experience in the New York area.

7. Procedural changes needed to advance the Upper Level Loop Alternative will delay completion of the four to five years.

MTA has made numerous changes in its LIRR East Side Access plan since the Record of Decision on its Final Environmental Impact Statement was issued, most notable the addition of the 50th Street Vent Building and its subsequent redesign to meet community objections. Since the Upper Level Loop Alternative has fewer adverse impacts modifications to the environmental analysis can be advanced quickly. Subsurface easements for the Upper Level Loop Alternative are very similar to those negotiated by MTA in the MIS phase of the study. Delcan estimated that the far simpler Upper Level Loop Alternative would cut three years off construction time.

In closing, it is important to note that the increased responsibilities of board members of authorities operating in New York State, discussed at the outset of yesterday's meeting, make it imperative that MTA board members do a careful job of reviewing credible alternatives. This is especially important when considering the LIRR East Side Access project, which is by far MTA's largest capital investment. By not inviting Delcan to respond to Mr. Nagaraja's critique of its work, the committee has done a profound disserve to taxpayers, riders and a well-respected engineering firm.

Sincerely,

George Haikalis
President

cc: members of the Permanent Citizens' Committee to the MTA