by Bruce Schaller
Thursday, August 18, 2005 12:00 AM

Where do the Democratic candidates stand on transportation issues?

Although transportation is a critical part of every New Yorker's daily life, only two of the candidates running in the September 13 Democratic mayoral primary have announced positions on the major issues.

Miller

Council Speaker Gifford Miller centers his transportation agenda on giving first priority to continued restoration of the subway system. In a May 12 speech , the most comprehensive address on transportation issues of any candidate, Miller declared that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's two-decade program to bring the subway system to a state of good repair is "stalling." Miller charged that the MTA cut the five-year construction budget for the subway and bus system by $5 billion, resulting in delays for "already underfunded items such as communications and signals systems, power stations, ventilation plants and passenger stations."

Miller called for repairing and modernizing the system before spending money on new subway or commuter rail lines. He says that funding should be funneled to the repair program from expansion projects and new taxes. He would give priority to extension of the #7 line to the West Side and the Second Avenue subway project in preference to the commuter rail project that would send Long Island Rail Road trains to Grand Central Terminal. Miller also called for reinstatement of the commuter tax, once paid by suburban residents who work in the city but repealed in the late 1990s in an Albany political deal. Miller asserts that the mayor should "stop accepting defeat" on a commuter tax and proposed a graduated tax.

Another source of new revenue in Miller's plan is to obtain full value on the West Side rail yards. Miller opposed the Jets/Olympic stadium plan and now opposes the new MTA plan to build a new headquarters on the site and thus generate funds by selling the MTA's valuable Midtown office building.

The Council Speaker has also addressed transit security issues in the wake of the London subway bombing, advocated improved rapid bus services, and proposed an expanded ferry system.

In response to a question in the August 16 candidate debate, Miller opposed tolls on the East River bridges.

Weiner

Congressman Anthony Weiner proposes to modernize the city's transportation system, but in a quite different fashion. Where Miller emphasizes underground transport â€“ over which the mayor has no direct control -- Weiner emphasizes waterborne and surface transit programs that are subject to City Hall's direction.

First on Weiner's plan is building ferry landings throughout New York. Weiner would thus expand ferry service to neighborhoods like Red Hook, Long Island City, Sheepshead Bay, Marine Park, Coney Island, Bayside and the areas around LaGuardia and JFK airports. He believes that ferries, which are currently a small niche transportation provider, can circumvent congestion and spur economic and residential growth in these areas. Toward this end, Weiner, who sits on the House transportation committee, secured $15 million toward ferry service from the Rockaways to Manhattan.

Weiner also emphasizes creating a bus rapid transit system throughout the city, including bus-only lanes on major travel corridors. Weiner thus seems prepared to support plans currently being drawn up by a joint City-MTA task force to establish at least five bus rapid transit corridors in the city.

From his seat in Congress, Weiner also helped obtain $100 million in the new federal transportation bill for a freight tunnel between New Jersey and Brooklyn. The tunnel is a controversial proposal that lacks the support of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which would be charged with finding financing for the multi-billion proposal and building the tunnel. Mayor Michael Bloomberg at first supported, and then under pressure from Queens community groups opposed the tunnel plan.

Finally, Weiner also jumped on transit security issues after the London bombings. He announced a six-point security plan that includes bomb resistant trash cans, digital station cameras and 911 subway cell phone service.

by Bruce Schaller
Thursday, August 18, 2005 12:00 AM

Ferrer and Fields

Remarkably, a search of news clips and the campaign Web sites of Fernando Ferrer, the former Bronx borough president, and Virginia Fields, the Manhattan borough president, turned up only sparse comments on transportation issues.

Ferrer's most widely publicized transportation issue has been reversing the expansion of metered Sunday parking instituted in 2003 and recently rolled back by the City Council. Ferrer assailed metered parking, which forced some worshippers to feed the meter in the middle of services, as "a tax on worshipping." Ferrer has also advocated using the MTA surplus for security cameras and counter-terrorism training.

Fields has not made transportation issues a focus of her campaign. As borough president Fields has supported the Second Avenue subway and lower Manhattan's new transit hub, and opposed the Jets stadium deal and MTA plans to purchase more diesel buses.

In the August 16 candidate debate, Fields said she is open to the idea of London-style congestion pricing and using the revenue toward improving mass transit. But like all her opponents, she opposed tolling the East River bridges. She also stated her support of a commuter tax, with revenues directed to mass transit.

Bruce Schaller, who has been in charge of the transportation topic page since its inception in 1999, is head of Schaller Consulting, which provides research and analysis about transportation. He is also a Visiting Scholar at the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management at New York University.Â