by Bruce Schaller
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The election results contained much good news for transportation in New York City. Voters statewide approved the $2.9 billion transportation bond act by a surprisingly large margin -- 55 percent to 45 percent -- five years after narrowly rejecting a $3.9 billion measure. The bond act provides $1.45 billion to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's (MTA) five-year capital construction program.

Voter approval came after elected officials and civic and advocacy organizations came together to support the ballot proposition. Supporters raised $1.8 million for advertisements, flyers and an election-day operation to remind people to find the proposition on the ballot.

What Passage Will Mean

The bond act allocates $450 million for the first phase of the Second Avenue subway, and $450 million for bringing Long Island Rail Road trains to Grand Central Terminal. Passage of the bond act makes it almost certain that the federal government will contribute $4 billion for these projects between now and 2012 to round out their financing. MTA Chairman Peter Kalikow expressed confidence that his agency will reach agreement with the Federal Transit Administration on long-term federal funding agreements.

The bond act also commits $100 million for a rail link between lower Manhattan and Kennedy airport, $115 million for purchase of new subway and commuter railroad cars, $90 million for new buses; and $161 million for track replacement and tunnel lighting. In addition to transit projects, the bond act will fund tens of millions of dollars in highway improvement projects in New York City.

What Bloomberg's Victory Might Mean (i.e. Congestion Pricing?)

Mayor Michael Bloomberg's victory was also viewed as a potentially promising development by transportation analysts who are hoping that the mayor will give more focus to transportation needs in his second term than he did in his first term. They hope that he will tackle the politically controversial idea of congestion pricing in Manhattan, which could reduce congestion and provide funds for better bus and subway service. The New York Times quoted Kathryn Wylde, president of the Partnership for New York City, a business group, saying that, "We have every indication that the city is prepared to look closely at that." Bloomberg officials warned, however, that the mayor has been focusing on winning re-election and has not yet decided what initiatives to pursue.

Transit Security,

Voter approval of the bond may mean a broadening from the almost singular focus on financing needs to a range of other issues. This year has seen the adoption the bond act, a new five-year capital plan for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and a six-year federal transportation bill that will provide increased funding to the transportation authority. With tax revenues exceeding expectations, the MTA is experiencing a surprising budget surplus. The surplus is unlikely to last very long and the MTA continues to forecast a fare increase in 2007. Nevertheless, financing of transit will compete for attention with several other issues.

One such issue is transit security. The MTA is seeking to use high-tech means to monitor activity in subway stations and catch possible terrorists. Whether this technology will actually work and whether the MTA can successfully install and operate it remains to be seen.

The MTA's Credibility

Another issue confronting the MTA is its own credibility. Kalikow is the first MTA chairman appointed by Governor George Pataki to take independent stands in favor of transit needs and breathe a greater openness into the MTA. But the effects of the fiasco that accompanied the MTA's 2003 fare increase, in which the agency was accused by lying about its finances, continue to linger. This was seen most poignantly in the public's reaction to the MTA's plan to use part of its surplus to discount fares over the year-end holidays. Man-on-the-street interviews by reporters revealed a deep-seated skepticism about why the MTA would want to say "thank you" to riders with this small holiday gift. Some saw the discounts as an attempt to manipulate the public into voting for the bond act.

Overcrowding

The fact is that although the transit system is vastly improved from 25 years ago, riders' expectations are also much higher. Revamped stations, new subway cars, fare discounts and a host of other improvements have drawn huge crowds into the subway. Overcrowding is now the system's biggest problem, inevitably exacerbated whenever there is a service delay. A major challenge for the MTA is to reduce overcrowding in the short term, through signal and communications improvements and management of trains in the tunnels. Riders won't tolerate waiting until the Second Avenue subway is built.

Better Relations With The Public?

While Kalikow stresses the MTA's "transparency," his philosophy is not always evidenced in the

workings of the agency. Ask a token booth clerk whether trains are currently diverted for announced construction and you are likely to get a puzzled shrug â€“ why would a token clerk know about such things as what trains are stopping at the station? Ask MTA staff for a report that was completed months ago, and one is likely to be told it is still a “draft,” or that staff are too busy to fulfill formal freedom of information requests for four to six months. Look on the MTA’s website for board minutes or detailed budget information â€“ similar to what one finds for the Los Angeles MTA or other major transit agencies â€“ and the effort will be in vain.

The election brought good news about how the MTA will pay for needed subway and bus improvements. But the task of improving the daily commute remains a daunting challenge.

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