

News and Notes from The LIRR Today

December 8, 2014

WHAT LIRR PASSENGERS ARE COMPLAINING ABOUT

The LIRR presented the results of its 2014 Customer Satisfaction Survey to members of the MTA Board in November, and the study showed that about 84% of passengers are either satisfied or very satisfied with LIRR service, the same percentage as last year.

Port Washington and Montauk Branch riders are the most satisfied with train service on those branches (87% responded satisfied or very satisfied), while riders on the Port Jefferson Branch were among the least satisfied passengers for the second year in a row. Passenger satisfaction on the Port Washington, Hempstead, Oyster Bay, and Ronkonkoma branches declined over last year, satisfaction on the West Hempstead and West of Babylon branches stayed the same, while passenger satisfaction on the Montauk, Far Rockaway, Long Beach, West of Huntington, and Port Jefferson Branches showed improvements over 2013.

Restroom cleanliness, availability at parking at stations and value for money for using the railroad continue to be among the lowest-scoring areas in terms of passenger satisfaction, while passengers continue to be satisfied or very satisfied with conductors, safety from train accidents, and the AVPS signs at stations.

But what are LIRR passengers really complaining about? I have a column on TweetDeck (an application for viewing Tweets from Twitter) that lists off every Tweet that anyone sends that has the letters “LIRR” included in them. One day, I combed through one week’s worth of Tweets (the 7-day period from November 2nd through November 8th) including the phrase “LIRR” (not just complaints) and classified them into one of 18 different categories based on what they were about. In total there were 773 tweets, and they broke down into the 18 different categories as follows:

Category	%tweets	Description
Being on the LIRR	20.5%	Passengers saying they’re on the train, waiting for the train, what they’re doing on the train, where they’re going on the train.
Conduct of other passengers	17.2%	Observations on how other passengers are behaving (or misbehaving). Usually related to intoxicated passengers, people talking loudly on cell phones, people taking up more than one seats.
Delays	11.6%	Passengers complaining about service disruptions, train delays, or lack of communication during delays.
Photos	8.1%	People tweeting photos of LIRR trains or infrastructure.
News Articles	7.0%	News articles about the LIRR.
M3’s	4.6%	Passenger complaints about the M3 fleet. Usually related to the age of the equipment, or other conditions onboard trains that are operated with M3 equipment.
Fares	4.1%	Passenger complaints about the cost of fares, or the LIRR’s tariff structure.
Scheduling	3.3%	Passenger complaints about scheduling or service patterns. Usually related to infrequent service, trains at inconvenient times, or having to change trains as part of their journey.
M7’s	3.0%	Passenger comments or complaints about the M7 fleet. Usually related to the volume/frequency of announcements, under- or over-performing HVAC’s, repairs to seat tears with duct tape/advertisements.
Compliments	1.9%	Passenger compliments.

Stations	1.8%	Passenger complaints regarding their boarding station. Usually related to the cleanliness of the station, announcements, accuracy of information (complaints about trains that are more than 1 but less than 6 minutes late are also included here)
Train Bathrooms	1.7%	Passenger complaints regarding bathrooms onboard trains.
Penn Station	1.4%	Passenger complaints regarding New York Penn Station.
Travel Time	1.1%	Passengers complaining how long it takes to go between two stations by train.
Standees	1.1%	Passengers complaining about the lack of available seats on trains.
Directions	1.0%	People giving each other directions that involve the LIRR over Twitter
Direct Correspondence	0.8%	Passengers communicating directly with the LIRR's official Twitter account.
Miscellaneous	9.8%	Complaints and tweets not elsewhere categorized.

The highest proportion of Tweets about the LIRR are merely Tweets about them being on the LIRR—there's no real complaint or compliment here, it's just letting people know they're on the train.

The first major category of complaints that arose were complaints regarding the conduct of other passengers—and this represented the largest amount of complaints mentioning the LIRR on Twitter by a lot. There were a significant number of people who Tweeted that they were being bothered by another passenger on the train—be it an intoxicated or disorderly passenger, someone talking loudly on their cell phone or playing music that was audible to others, or someone taking up more than one seat on the train.

If you ask people what do you like least about riding the train, I would imagine that the majority of them would offer up an answer along the lines of the complaints about the conduct of other passengers, or the aftereffects of their misconduct. I know other people being annoying is what bothers me the most about riding the train. The conduct of other passengers are complaints that are not really reflected in the official customer satisfaction survey since it's not really appropriate for the LIRR to offer that as an option when someone is listing off their complaints about the railroad, but, when you look through an avalanche of people's first hand remarks about what is coming to their minds onboard the train, comments about the conduct of other passengers is certainly among the most prevalent comments shared. The conduct of passengers is also a difficult problem for the LIRR to remedy. The LIRR has a reasonable expectation to expect adults to act like adults and treat each other with respect, and the train crew is not really there to babysit passengers. The LIRR has been trying to remind people that [Courtesy Matters](#) through posters or station announcements, but perhaps stronger reminders are needed.

The second major category of complaints by LIRR passengers on Twitter was in regard to train delays. About 12% of the Tweets mentioning the LIRR during the week-long period were complaints about service disruptions or train delays. Additionally, the lack of communication during delays, or unclear information conveyed during delays, continues to be a cause of angst among LIRR passengers.

The next category of Tweets that were complaints about one particular thing were complaints regarding the M3 equipment. The M3 equipment, which is currently the LIRR's oldest operating fleet, is the source of complaints from about 4.6% of LIRR passengers over the course of the week. Complaints about the age of equipment seem to be most prevalent when old equipment is run on the same services as newer equipment. A similar skimming of tweets mentioning Metro-North show very, very few comments about the age of Metro-North's Shoreliner fleet, which have visually similar interiors and are only slightly newer, which could possibly be due to the fact that the services where they are primarily used on (the Upper Hudson and Upper Harlem Lines, and the New Haven Line Branches) only operate the Shoreliner equipment. The few comments that do pop up regarding the age of the Shoreliner fleet appear to be by those who board through-trains at stations in electric territory, where they can compare them to the M7A's. Similarly, on the New Haven Line, the number of complaints about the condition of the M2's, M4's, and M6's appear to be rising steadily as more M8's are accepted and entered into service.

The next major complaint that passengers express on Twitter are complaints over LIRR fares, specifically, how much it costs to travel on the LIRR, or certain aspects of the LIRR's tariff structure. Complaints seem to be most prevalent during the off-peak times (midday/evening weekdays and all day on weekends), where most of the people traveling are discretionary travelers. Comments about fares are typically the highest on Mondays, and specifically the first Monday of the month, when everyone is purchasing their monthly or weekly commutation tickets. The survey period did include November 3rd, the first business day in November, but another examination of all Tweets on November 18th (a Tuesday) showed that about 3.8% of all Tweets complained about fares, so the number is fairly consistent throughout the month. Most passengers (especially discretionary travelers) complain about how expensive the fares are, while others complain about the complexity of the fare structure or the refund fee, among other things.

Other major sources of complaints are included in the table on the previous pages, and a brief description of what kinds of complaints would be classified into those respective categories are included in the table. The sampling of Tweets appears to provide a more organic view of what passengers are most annoyed about when traveling on the LIRR, as Twitter provides a much more informal and open forum for people to air their complaints. While the MTA's official customer satisfaction survey is very thorough, it is very structured, and lends its self to getting certain responses back more often than others.

It is worth noting that, for the most part, constructive complaints, or complaints that actually include most of the necessary information the railroad would need to actually do something about the concern (i.e. the train, car number, location, or time of day), are few and far between. Most complaints are thin on the details and require further clarification before any action can be taken to resolve them.

It is also worth noting that over the seven-day period, there were 107 tweets directly mentioned the LIRR that either asked a question or reported a condition on the train that they wanted to bring to the LIRR's attention. The LIRR actually responded to only 24 of those tweets, less than one-fourth, and most of the responses were merely a link to the MTA's online contact form, not really substantial responses to that person's concerns. There were also one or two instances where the information the LIRR's Twitter account gave out in direct correspondence to a question was either misleading or incomplete—in this day in age many passengers are looking to interact with the railroad on their social media sites, and while the railroad is slowly coming into the twenty-first century, there is still plenty of room for improvement both in this area, and with their communication during delays in general.

MTA ANNOUNCES 4% FARE INCREASES FOR 2015

Now that election season is over and done with, the MTA “unveiled” its proposals to increase fares and tolls by 4% over the next two years. The MTA cites their “continued budget discipline” among one of the reasons why the upcoming fare increases will be less than the previously announced biannual fare increases of 7.5%.

The MTA is proposing increases between 2.2% and 6.1% to the base fare for travel to and from Zone 1 on the LIRR. Monthly and weekly fares, which are calculated based off of the peak fare, will also increase by around 4%. The CityTicket fare will also increase by 25-cents to \$4.25.

The proposed fare increases do not include any changes to the LIRR's tariff structure, i.e. the discount percentages on off-peak, monthly or weekly

commutation tickets, or off-peak ten-trip tickets—all of those will remain the same. There will also be no other fare policy, so the refund fee, 60-day validity period on one-way tickets, and six-month validity period on ten-trip tickets will remain the same. There are no proposed changes to the Family Fare, which will remain at \$1, and half-fare and Family Fare tickets will still not be allowed on AM Peak trains.

The MTA is holding public hearings, as they must do with any fare increase, across the service region this week. Details regarding the public hearings, along with the proposed fare tables, are available [on the MTA's Website](#).

FOR FAR ROCKAWAY, TWO TRAINS 7 MINUTES APART

During the wintertime, the LIRR operates an extra Friday-only sundown service train, train 2898, on the Far Rockaway Branch, leaving Jamaica around 3:05 pm and running to Far Rockaway. Traditionally, this train fills in between the hour-long headways on the Far Rockaway Branch (when Far Rockaway trains would depart Atlantic Terminal near the top of the hour). This year, due to trackwork on the Long Beach Branch, the midday off-peak Far Rockaway trains have swapped their Atlantic Terminal departures with Hempstead trains that normally depart towards the bottom of the hour. This results in eastbound Far Rockaway Branch trains being shifted a half hour later, departing Atlantic Terminal around :35 minutes past the hour. But, the Friday extra train was not adjusted to fill the gap in service. Instead, the Friday extra still departs Jamaica at 3:05 pm, which is just seven minutes after train 2854, which departs Atlantic Terminal at 2:35 pm, leaves Jamaica at 2:58 pm.

What's more, the extra train, 2898, has the same exact connections as the regular Far Rockaway train, 2854. The New York connections for both trains leave Penn Station at 2:36 pm, and the regular Far Rockaway train is the Brooklyn connection for the extra. The extra train leaves Jamaica 7 minutes after the regularly scheduled train, train 2854, catches up to train 2854 by Valley Stream (since the extra does not stop at Locust Manor, Laurelton, or Rosedale while the regular train does), and then runs 3 to 4 minutes behind the regular Far Rockaway train, making the same stops Gibson through

Inwood. The extra train ends up sitting in Inwood station for 6 extra minutes waiting for train 2857, the next eastbound train from Far Rockaway, to clear the station, before pulling into the final stop.

This is a textbook example of how inflexible the LIRR can be with their scheduling... the two trains have the *exact* same New York connections, the *exact* same Brooklyn connections, and the extra train doesn't make any stops that the regular train doesn't make already (it actually makes three fewer stops). So unless you commute from Jamaica, on Fridays, during the winter, and in the seven minute window between 2:58 pm and 3:05 pm, the regularly scheduled Far Rockaway train is very much likely the faster option for you. As a result, the LIRR ends up sending 6 MU's and three crew members from Hillside to Jamaica, then from Jamaica to Far Rockaway, and then from Far Rockaway back to Brooklyn for roughly zero passengers.

This isn't the only example of the LIRR's scheduling stubbornness—over the summer there were two eastbound trains (one to Babylon and one to Long Beach) scheduled to arrive Lynbrook at the exact same time, and on New Year's Day this year, the Long Beach extra that operates in the early morning runs 7 minutes ahead of a regularly scheduled Long Beach train (so if those looking to take the train back to Long Beach after the ball drops miss the train at 1:19 am, the next one is 87 minutes later, then 7 minutes, then another 76 minutes after that.)

EXTRA LIRR TRAINS FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON

Every December, the LIRR takes all the timetables they printed for their November schedule change four weeks previously, throws them all in the trash, and print new ones that are nearly exactly the same to replace them. For the December timetable reprint, all of the trains that run daily stay exactly the same (there is one General Order that is issued for November through February)... the only difference is that the extra trains for Thanksgiving Day are removed from the timetables, and the extra trains for Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve, early New Year's Day morning, President's Day, and the Appendix M trains for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (and whatever surprises Winter brings us this year) are added

into the timetable. Other than that, everything remains the same. The railroad could just as easily add the Thanksgiving Day trains onto the regular winter timetable with all of the other holiday extras and skip the December timetable reprinting altogether. Some say that everything on one timetable would be too confusing, but considering most passengers don't know how to read the timetables anymore anyways and just use the website or TrainTime instead, it's unlikely too many people will notice. And considering the LIRR now prints almost all of their reference notes directly in the column for the train (instead of making you flip back to

the full reference notes table on the other side of the timetable), it shouldn't be all that confusing.

At any rate, the table below shows an outline for the LIRR's Holiday service for the remainder of this year's

holiday season. Note that ten additional Shopper's Specials (four trains from Long Beach to New York, four from New York to Long Beach, and a late night train to Babylon and Huntington) operate on all weekend days from Thanksgiving to just after New Year's.

Monday & Tuesday, December 22-23, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normal weekday service, normal fares apply
Wednesday, December 24, 2014 (Christmas Eve)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normal weekday service, normal fares apply • 10 usual Holiday Eve trains (4 to Babylon, 2 to Huntington, 1 to Hicksville, 1 to Great Neck, 1 to Far Rockaway, and 1 to Ronkonkoma) • 3 additional getaway trains for December 24 only earlier in the afternoon (2 to Babylon and 1 to Ronkonkoma)
Thursday, December 25, 2014 (Christmas Day)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holiday schedule, off-peak fares in effect all day • Shopper's Specials will not run
Friday, December 26, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normal weekday service, normal fares apply • Trains 2710 (4:06 pm DM to Montauk) and 2898 (3:05 pm Jamaica to Far Rockaway) will operate normally
Saturday & Sunday, December 27-28, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular weekend service, with extra shopper's specials
Monday & Tuesday, December 29-30, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normal weekday service, normal fares apply
Wednesday, December 31, 2014 (New Year's Eve)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normal weekday service, normal fares apply • 10 usual Holiday Eve trains (4 to Babylon, 2 to Huntington, 1 to Hicksville, 1 to Great Neck, 1 to Far Rockaway, and 1 to Ronkonkoma) • 2 additional getaway trains for December 31 only earlier in the afternoon (2 to Babylon) • 20 additional westbound extras on the evening of New Year's Eve to New York Penn, as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 11 equipment trains to Penn Station and Atlantic Terminal will operate as passenger trains (2 from Babylon, 1 from Freeport, 1 from Hempstead, 1 from Long Beach, 3 from Huntington, 2 from Hicksville, and 1 from Great Neck) ○ 8 additional extra trains to Penn Station (1 from Babylon, 1 from Long Beach, 1 from Speonk, 1 from Port Jefferson, 1 from Huntington, 1 from Port Washington, and 2 from Ronkonkoma) ○ 1 additional westbound extra to Atlantic Terminal from Babylon
Thursday, January 1, 2015 (New Year's Day)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holiday schedule, off-peak fares in effect all day. • 12 additional eastbound extras on New Year's Day early morning from New York Penn (3 to Babylon, 1 to Long Beach, 1 to Speonk, 1 to Huntington, 1 to Port Jefferson, 3 to Port Washington, and 3 to Ronkonkoma) • 4 additional eastbound extras on New Year's Day early morning from Atlantic Terminal (2 to Babylon, 1 to Huntington, and 1 to Ronkonkoma) • The Babylon late night Shopper's Special will run. The Huntington and Long Beach extras will not.
Friday, January 2, 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normal weekday service, normal fares apply • Trains 2710 (4:06 pm DM to Montauk) and 2898 (3:05 pm Jamaica to Far Rockaway) will operate normally
Saturday & Sunday, January 3-4, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular weekend service, with extra shopper's specials

This year's collection of extra trains brings a few changes compared to what we saw last year. First off, the Holiday Eve ("early release") program appears to have grown by two trains from 8 to 10 trains. The day before Thanksgiving this year the LIRR operated an additional flyer to Babylon, leaving New York at 2:19 pm, as well as an extra (new) train to Ronkonkoma, leaving New York at 1:46 pm. And judging by the wording of the staff summary in the meeting notes for the November MTA Board LIRR Committee Meeting and how they are noted in the public timetables, these two trains will stick around to run on Holiday Eve's year-round. This is a nice improvement, especially for Ronkonkoma passengers who haven't had an extra train on Holiday Eve's for many years now.

On Christmas Eve in years past, the LIRR would combine trains 160 (5:59 pm flyer to Babylon) and 1064 (6:05 pm flyer to Wantagh) into one train due to light ridership, but they don't appear to be doing that this year.

Additionally, the LIRR has also added in several extra trains to and from Atlantic Terminal for New Year's Eve

and early New Year's Day morning for a concert at the Barclays Center. There is 1 extra westbound train and 4 extra eastbound trains for those going to the concert. Unfortunately, instead of having the extra New York trains and extra Brooklyn trains work together to add opportunities for those sober enough to change trains at Jamaica to do so, the two sets of extras are shown in the timetable as two ships passing in the night—the New York and Brooklyn connections are either not shown, or they only reflect regularly scheduled trains.

Early New Year's Day morning also sees a Dual Mode that makes 23 stops, the most any LIRR train makes all year. The 1:29 am train to Speonk leaves New York Penn, stops at Jamaica, Rockville Center, and then makes *all local stops* to Speonk. Last year the DM set overheated, and this year, the Thanksgiving Day extra eastbound train to Speonk (which makes local stops from Freeport to Speonk) could only make it as far as Babylon before experiencing equipment trouble. I guess it's good these superlocals only run once or twice a year!

ON-BOARD CAMERA CONTRACT AWARDED

In November, the MTA awarded a 36-month, \$16,698,528 contract to 4D Security Solutions to design and deliver inward- and outward-facing video and audio recorders in the cabs of the LIRR's MU's and locomotives (a similar contract was awarded to Sepsa North America to supply the same thing for Metro-North). The LIRR's M7's, C3's, and locomotive fleet (DE/DM30AC, MP15AC, and SW1001's) are slated to get the cameras. The LIRR's M3 fleet is left out of the contract and options, presumably due to the hope that they will be resting in their retirement homes not too long from now.

The contract involves the cameras recording the footage and then storing it for 7 days. The railroads have the right to exercise an option to increase the memory capacity to 30 days, the ability for the LIRR to remotely access the cameras, as well as "the addition of multiple functioning WiFi antenna."

The camera's 4D Security Solutions is supplying is based upon off-the-shelf products with no proprietary software

design, which makes it much easier for the LIRR to maintain or expand the equipment going forward.

The vendor will also install CCTV cameras in the passenger compartments of rail cars. I'm a fan of CCTV cameras just about anywhere, and think it's a great choice on the MTA's part to fit the interiors of the train's out with CCTV cameras. While criminal activity onboard LIRR trains is rare, the cameras will help deter crime and other onboard mischief, and when things do happen on the train, provide authorities with a way to look back and see what happened. (Some have also said that it will also help the MTA reduce their injury numbers, which everyone's been obsessed over lately, by deterring fake injury reports). Now all we need is some sort of high-powered laser to zap people who are talking on their cell phones loudly or blasting their music through their headphones so everyone else in the car can hear and we'll be all set!

PLEASE SWIPE AGAIN

The month of December got off to a rough start for roughly 9,200 LIRR and Metro-North commuters who use the commuter railroad's Mail & Ride Service. On the LIRR, AM peak service on December 1 took a hit when train 2815 from Far Rockaway reported a scraping sound while traveling through Line 4 of the East River Tunnels, prompting the tunnel to be removed from service temporarily so Amtrak could inspect it. This resulted in several trains being diverted or partially cancelled, and dozens of others being delayed by as long as 45 minutes. But to add insult to injury (or injury to insult), many LIRR passengers were in for a surprise when they went to go swipe their MetroCards at turnstiles in New York Penn Station and other subway stations or bus routes across the city. A "processing error" resulted in 7,100 LIRR passengers who get monthly unlimited MetroCards on the back of their monthly tickets through the Mail & Ride service getting a message saying "insufficient fare." The fare control area was quite a mess at the peak of the morning rush as people expecting their MetroCards to work as usual had to find some other way to get to the other side of the turnstiles and on to work.

Shortly after 10:00 am that morning, the LIRR sent an alert saying there was a processing error on MetroCards for December Monthly Mail & Ride Tickets and that they were "working on a solution" and more information would be provided as it became available. Another hour and a half later, the MTA issued a news release saying that because of a technical error, monthly MetroCards on the back of LIRR and Metro-North tickets would not work this month, and Mail & Ride customers will receive a credit for buying a new \$112 30-day unlimited MetroCard towards their January ticket.

This solution is imperfect in it of itself, as it shifts the burden of resolving the problem onto the passengers, requiring them to layout an additional \$112 and wait until next month to be reimbursed for the error. Many have expressed concerns over having to layout another \$112 at times when money can be tight enough, how some

riders will still be losing out as they typically pay for their monthly fares with pre-tax transit benefits, and the railroad still has not provided any information at all (other than to call 511) on how those who no longer plan on using Mail & Ride in 2015 can get their money back. Furthermore, the MTA said in their announcement that for the remainder of the first day of the month, passengers could show their monthly passes at token booths or to bus operators to ride for the remainder of the day until they could purchase their new card, but there were several reports of station agents or bus drivers refusing to let passengers through until they went and purchased an additional fare—only adding more to the frustration.

The situation, as it was, was frustrating enough for LIRR passengers expecting their MetroCards to work, but what only made it worse was the lack of communication from the LIRR during the issue. A quick scan of the LIRR's various social media channels showed that a passenger first brought the issue to the railroad's attention at 6:20 am, and by time the LIRR had first acknowledged the issue at 10:07 am, sixty three different people had said something about the issue without a word from the LIRR (or the MTA) about the error. All the while, the Mail & Ride website was malfunctioning and calls to 511 were going unanswered. Someone commented online that we get an e-mail every time the elevators at Woodside break down every other day, but something like this goes unacknowledged for nearly four hours. Mistakes happen, but the amount of time it took the LIRR to acknowledge the error, and the amount of time for them to come out with a "solution" (five and a half hours), coupled with the fact that the MTA's way of fixing the problem involves passengers laying out an additional \$112 of their money this month, only makes things like this exponentially more frustrating for commuters... and on the day the public hearings for the 2015 fare increases began, "we're sorry for the inconvenience" and the copy-and-pasted responses do not go very far.

STATION PARKING SURVEY

I've been taking an informal look at parking conditions at LIRR stations across Long Island. If you regularly commute via the LIRR and park at your local station (and even if you don't), please take a few seconds to fill out [this survey](#) about how parking is at your station. The responses so far have been interesting, so please take a second to answer the few questions.