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Brodsky grills MTA chief on \$30 billion capital plan

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NEW YORK - A committee of Assembly members scrutinized the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's \$29.6 billion, five-year capital budget yesterday, questioning the agency's expectations of funding, not to mention the \$9 billion for which no funding sources have been identified.

"At what point do we get from 'hopeful' to 'wildly out of touch?' " Assemblyman Richard Brodsky, D-Greenburgh, said at the Assembly committee hearing in the building of the Bar Association of the City of New York on 44th Street.

When MTA Chief Executive Elliot Sander countered that the projects were not "out of touch," but were necessary, Brodsky clarified that he agreed the work was needed, but that there was no plan to fund it all.

Sander held throughout the hearing that his responsibility was to lay out the needs and that it was up to others, including the state Legislature, to decide where money would come from. He said other legislators have told him in the past: "Your job is to say how much you need, defend it, do that properly and let us find the money."

The meeting was a joint hearing of two committees - Ways and Means as well as Corporations, Authorities and Commissions - and was led by Ways and Means Chairman Herman Farrell.

The legislators challenged the MTA's expectations of funds from the federal government, New York City and other sources. The \$527 million relied upon from New York City, for instance, represents an increase of about 25 percent over current city funding, MTA officials said. Sander acknowledged he has no assurance from the city that the agency will get all that money.

The most intense grilling came from Brodsky. The assemblyman objects to a proposal before the Legislature, seen as crucial to the capital plan, to charge motorists \$8 to cross Manhattan's 60th

Street southbound during business hours. Sander supports the "congestion pricing" idea and said it would be used to pay back \$4.5 billion in bonds sold to pay for the capital work.

Brodsky said a tax for millionaires would be better than congestion pricing, which he calls a "middle-class tax." Assembly Democrats have proposed raising the income tax paid by the wealthy, including an increase of 3 percentage points for those who make \$1 million or more. Gov. Eliot Spitzer and Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno oppose the idea. Brodsky and other legislators also have recommended alternative congestion measures for mid- and lower Manhattan, including higher fees for riding in taxis and higher fines for parking violations.

The capital budget lays out a host of projects to upgrade the subway, bus and commuter rail systems under the MTA. They include everything from track work to continuation of the East Side Access project, which is drilling a tunnel for the Long Island Rail Road to Grand Central Terminal, where another station will be created. It earmarks about \$1.8 billion for Metro-North Railroad, including \$37 million to overhaul the Tarrytown station.

Sander said after the hearing that he knew the capital plan required some "heavy lifting," but he reiterated the need for transit systems that keep pace with the growing region.

"If we don't do this, we put the future of New York at risk," he said.

Outside the building, a small group of congestion-pricing advocates held a mock "Better Transit Bake Sale," with prices such as \$1.6 million for a fudge brownie and \$2.4 billion for a cannoli, asserting that the money will be needed for transportation systems if the congestion-pricing plan fails.