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State Senate Confirms Prendergast for New Term as M.T.A. Leader

By EMMA G. FITZSIMMONS JUNE 24, 2015

ALBANY — The chairman of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority was confirmed by the State Senate on Wednesday for a new term at the helm of the agency he has led for the last two years.

As state lawmakers praised the chairman, Thomas F. Prendergast, at a confirmation hearing here on Wednesday, he made the case for why the authority needs more money from the state for its five-year capital plan.

Leaders in the Legislature are not planning to address the proposal's \$14 billion funding gap before the session ends.

Mr. Prendergast has visited the Capitol often in recent months to lobby for money for the plan, which would pay for maintenance and improvements to the region's sprawling transit system. At the hearing, Mr. Prendergast said that without an approved plan by the end of the year, the agency might have to delay contracts for some projects.

"We have some contracts in the hundreds of millions of dollars range, and we would have to get an approved program before we could award them," he told senators.

The hearing covered a wide range of issues facing the state-run agency. One senator complained about rats on the subway, and Mr. Prendergast said officials were working on the problem and had hired a scientist to curtail breeding. Another senator criticized a recent uptick in crime on the subway and rising delays for riders.

Mr. Prendergast, 63, the former head of the subway system, is widely respected by transit advocates and union officials. He had been finishing a predecessor's term and will now have his own six-year term after Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo reappointed him to the job.

Mr. Prendergast will oversee a board that may soon look very different — Mr. Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio recently nominated five new board members. Their picks include outspoken advocates for transit funding and the poor, a union leader and a close ally of the governor.

Transit advocates say the new members are likely to encourage more lively discussions — and possibly more conflict — at the monthly board meetings. The dynamic could pose a challenge for Mr. Prendergast, but will bring about more transparency at the authority, said Gene Russianoff, the staff lawyer for the Straphangers Campaign, an advocacy group.

“I think it's good that major debates about the transit system are conducted in public and not in the breakfast nook off the full M. T. A. board meeting,” he said. “Tom should be able to handle it.”

Mr. Russianoff praised the mayor for bringing more diversity to the board. Mr. de Blasio recommended Ydanis Rodriguez, a City Council member from the Dominican Republic who chairs the Council's transportation committee; Veronica Vanterpool, a Hispanic woman who serves as the executive director of the advocacy group Tri-State Transportation Campaign; and David R. Jones, a black man who is the president of the Community Service Society, a nonprofit organization that supports low-income New Yorkers.

Mr. Jones has supported reducing fares for low-income riders, an idea that has gained momentum after Seattle approved discounts for poor riders. He co-wrote an op-ed in March arguing that New York City should consider such a program.

Mr. Cuomo recommended two board members: Lawrence S. Schwartz, a former top aide to the governor who recently joined an airport services company called OTG Management, and Peter Ward, the president of the New York Hotel and Motel Trades Council, a union that represents hotel workers.

The governor's nominees are "seasoned warriors" who understand how to get things done, said Mitchell L. Moss, director of the Rudin Center for Transportation at New York University.

"They are not wallflowers," Mr. Moss said. "These are not people who are going to be shy, retiring board members."

Mr. Cuomo and Mr. de Blasio have outlined different transit priorities in recent months. Mr. Cuomo has called for an AirTrain at La Guardia Airport while Mr. de Blasio has said he wants to conduct a study on building a Utica Avenue subway line in Brooklyn.

The State Senate is expected to consider the board nominations before the session ends.

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