

# LIRR EYES NEW TICKET PLANS

Loss of ridership, revenue prompt look for options

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Sales of the Long Island Rail Road's monthly commuter passes have plummeted 85% during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a Newsday analysis, prompting railroad officials to consider new ticket types that reflect the reality many commuters won't be returning to the office five days a week anytime soon.

LIRR president Phillip Eng said railroad officials have "been discussing internally and reviewing different options" for new ticket types that would better reflect how often, and when, passengers travel to work.

"We've been monitoring ridership that's been returning. We want to make sure that the tickets that we have can better sustain and support the changing ridership," Eng said June 29. "All of this is going to be reviewed and discussed and, eventually, brought to the MTA Board for consideration."

Through May, the LIRR has sold, on average, 15,433 unlimited-ride, monthly commuter passes each month, down from 103,027 each month over the same period in 2019 — a year in which the LIRR would go on to set a modern ridership record.

Once the foundation of the railroad's ridership, and its finances, monthly tickets now account for only about 28% of the fare revenue collected by the LIRR each month, compared to about 50% in 2019, according to railroad statistics.

The drop in sales coincides with two major changes in commuting during the pandemic: traditional commuters working from home more often, and the LIRR suspending "peak" pricing during the rush hours. With monthly, unlimited-ride tickets costing about the same as 22 peak trips, it makes little economic sense for many LIRR customers to buy them anymore.

"People are doing their calculations. And if it's two off-peak



LIRR passengers purchase tickets at Jamaica Station in Queens. ■ Video: [newsday.com/transportation](https://www.newsday.com/transportation)

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round trips, why would anybody buy a monthly?" said Gerard Bringmann, chairman of the LIRR Commuter Council, the railroad's state-regulated rider advocacy group, and a member of the MTA Board. "They need to do something, because the people that are coming back, a lot of them are coming back two days a week, sometimes three days a week. But very few of them are coming back the full five."

Statistics show the LIRR is carrying about 40% of its pre-pandemic weekday ridership, and the MTA has projected that it may take until 2025 to get 80% of its riders back.

### Fares 72% less than in 2019

The drop in sales of monthly tickets, which can range in price from \$197 to \$500, has contributed to a decline in overall fare revenue for the LIRR. Through May, the LIRR had collected about \$84 million in fares — 72% less than in 2019, when the railroad collected about \$303 million during the first five months of the year.

The MTA was initially sched-

uled to consider a fare hike in January but postponed the move, citing the economic impact of the pandemic on riders. The MTA has received \$14.5 billion in federal COVID-19 aid.

Kyle Strober, executive director of the **Association for a Better Long Island**, a business group, said that because the economies of the Island and of New York City are so closely linked, the LIRR's ticket revenue shortfall "should be of deep concern for every Long Islander, regardless of whether they commute or not."

Strober said it's critical that the MTA make a proactive effort "to adapt to changes in what a post-pandemic workforce looks like."

Helping to offset the loss of monthly ticket revenue, sales of LIRR Ten-Trip tickets surged 149% through the first five months of this year compared to the same period in 2020, and 27% above 2019 — another indication of workers commuting to the office far less often than before the pandemic. Ten-Trip tickets are discounted by 15% compared to the cost of 10 off-peak trips.

While railroad officials have declined to release additional

details of the kind of tickets being considered, LIRR external affairs director Hector Garcia Jr., in a February meeting with the LIRR Commuter Council, acknowledged that a 20-trip ticket "has been part of the discussion."

West Hempstead commuter Carrie Dugan said a 20-trip ticket "would have been great" over the last several months, when she was commuting two to three times a week to her job as a New York City teacher.

"So, instead of a monthly, which would cost me \$270, I was able to buy an off-peak Ten-Trip pass for \$78.75. So even if I bought two Ten-Trip passes a month, I was still saving over \$100 a month," said Dugan, 41, who expects to return to work five days a week in the fall. "The monthly ticket would be the best option for me since the trains will probably also be back to peak fares again."

### No date for peak fare return

The LIRR has not given any indication when it will return to peak fares, which charge about 27% more for westbound trains scheduled to arrive at their terminals between 6 a.m. and 10

## WHAT TO KNOW

■ **Sales of Long Island Rail Road monthly tickets** have fallen 85% over the last two years, from 103,027 each month in the first five months of 2019, to 15,433 each month during the same period in 2021.

■ **The drop coincides with two major changes** in the Long Island commute during the pandemic: fewer people going to work five days a week, and the LIRR suspending peak fares.

■ **Responding to the change in commuting patterns**, LIRR officials have said they are considering introducing new types of tickets that will reflect how often and when people ride the train, including, possibly, a 20-trip ticket.

a.m., and eastbound trains departing from western terminals between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m.

The LIRR historically has not offered any discount for peak Ten-Trip tickets, which cost the same as individually purchasing 10 peak tickets. If the LIRR does introduce a 20-trip ticket, Bringmann said he hopes it includes a discount during both peak and off-peak hours, in recognition that, for many commuters, this will be their new monthly pass.

Babylon commuter James Sabia, who recently has been using the LIRR two or three days a week, said he's been buying off-peak Ten-Trip tickets. But, without new ticket options, he said he'll likely revert to a monthly ticket once the LIRR resumes peak pricing.

"It was a nice savings for 16 months," said Sabia, 35, who believes that, rather than just raising rates, the LIRR's next fare adjustment needs to better consider the changing role of the LIRR in commuters' lives. "Every other year, they raise prices and nothing changes. Their answer is always to just raise the fares."

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