



**Make Transparency A Core Value of the MTA
Recommendations for MTA Reinvention Commission
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Good afternoon, my name is Prudence Katze and I am the Policy Coordinator for Reinvent Albany, a member of the New York City Transparency Working Group.

The Reinvention Commission is looking at a broad range of ideas intended to help the MTA better serve the public. I am here today to ask that you recommend that the MTA adopts transparency as a core organizational value. The MTA has benefitted greatly from its customer oriented open data efforts. It has also suffered grievously from its historical lack of fiscal and spending transparency. When transit advocates speak with elected officials about new revenue for the MTA they are frequently lectured about the “Two sets of books” budgeting controversy, and the MTA’s history of questionable, opaque, real estate deals. The lack of transparency has cost the MTA public and political trust, which has in turn made increasing funding for the agency far more difficult.

Even now, transparency at the MTA is a tale of two agencies. The MTA has done great things with rider service data, like real-time train arrival and Bustime. But its fiscal transparency has lagged. It remains difficult for even informed members of the public to fully understand what the MTA spends its money on, and who benefits from MTA spending. Despite the Public Authorities Reform Act (PARA) large amounts of MTA spending and activity is opaque and potentially at risk for corruption, insider dealing or pay to play.

I do want to commend the MTA on the transparency efforts that they have enacted; the Transparency section on the website provides helpful [monthly budget reports](#) and [bond and debt performance reporting](#). Additionally, the [capital program dashboard](#) is a useful tool.

However, at this time the kind of information presented, and the way it is presented does not provide a clear, and easy to assess, picture of the MTA’s spending and resources. The MTA does not make available in a machine readable or “open data format” crucial information on:

1. Their extensive real estate holdings, sales, purchases and leases.
2. Details of professional fees, including legal and consulting services and bond underwriting.
3. Contracts are in a 13,000 page pdf format that is difficult to use or analyze.

4. Financial and budget briefings, voluminous documents converted from spreadsheets to non-usable pdf formats.
5. Payments. State agencies report each payment online, the MTA does not.

Priority Areas for MTA Transparency

Real Estate

Under the Public Authorities Reporting Act, Authorities must publish a listing of its real estate property holdings. However, the MTA Real Estate Department only publicly displays [current rental opportunity RFP's](#) in a slightly disorganized fashion. There is no comprehensive list of all of the MTA property holdings. Given the MTA's troubled record with real estate transactions, we would like to see a comprehensive online, public database of MTA properties and all sales, leases and purchases involving property.

Professional Fees

It is essentially impossible for the public to determine who the MTA pays professional fees to and how much they are paid. The MTA pays millions to law firms for labor negotiating support and specialized legal advice. The MTA pays tens of millions to Wall Street firms for bond underwriting fees and financial consulting, but does not break down how much each firm gets and for what. (In contrast, the public can see all contracts and payments with state agencies via Open Book NY, or for NYC agencies with Checkbook NYC.)

Contracts

The MTA contracts are only available on the Authorities Budget Office website in a clunky, nearly 13,000 page, pdf report. Currently only FY 2012 contracts are available to be viewed. Additionally, there is no comprehensive, searchable report or list of MTA's contracts on the MTA website. The New York State Comptroller maintains a website, Open Books NY, where state agency and authority contracts can be searched for and downloaded as machine-readable spreadsheets. Several state authorities have their contracts available to be searched on Open Book - the MTA does not.

Financial and Budget Documents

The MTA produces numerous important financial documents, from its preliminary financial plans to its monthly budget watch. It's to the MTA's credit that so many documents are posted online. Unfortunately, many of these documents are only available in a pdf format, some of them even as images. In this form, documents are not easily findable from the Internet, cannot be searched, and cannot be used by the public.

It is clear that the copious tables and charts in MTA fiscal documents are created using some form of spreadsheet or database. It is very simple to put these tables online in a CSV format, and the MTA has numerous technologists who can do so very quickly and cheaply.

Payments

Both the New York State Comptroller's Open Book NY website, and the New York City Comptroller's Checkbook 2.0 website are useful not just for the contracts that they list in a searchable and machine-readable format, but also for the matching payment data that is available to be perused in a public format. Even if one was able to comb through the MTA's current 13,000 page document of contracts, there is no way to accurately assess what amount of payments were ultimately paid to a vendor.

For example, some contracts are listed with a \$0 amount. On page four of the FY 2012 ABO Contract Document, a contract to 22ND CENTURY TECHNOLOGIES, INC that was made in January, 2011 has a 0\$ amount listed for "IT CONSULTING SERVICES." Without payment information, there is no way to determine how much this company actually received from the MTA.