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**WE ACT CO-SPONSORS CITY COUNCIL TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE
HEARING ON HEALTH IMPACTS OF MTA BUS OPERATIONS**

Peggy M. Shepard, Executive Director, WE ACT For Environmental Justice, today announced an initiative to advance accountability by the MTA's NYC Transit to the health and safety of its riders, workers, and residents living near its bus depots. WE ACT will co-sponsor a City Council hearing by the Transportation Committee Chair John Liu on Wednesday, October 16, 2006, from 10 AM to 1 PM, at the Adam Clayton Powell Jr. State Office Building Art Gallery, at 125th & Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd.

For 18 years, WE ACT has worked in Northern Manhattan communities to address residents' complaints of adverse health and safety problems related to the planning, siting, operations and disposition of MTA diesel buses and facilities. "During this period," says Ms. Shepard, "asthma rates have escalated in Northern Manhattan communities, and an air monitoring study of fine particulates by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region II, indicates that several key intersections in Northern Manhattan register fine particles at 200% higher than the federal fine particle standard. WE ACT and area residents believe that the thousand or more buses housed in Northern Manhattan neighborhoods (one-third of the citywide 4,200- bus fleet and 82% of Manhattan-based buses) are an important contributor to poor air quality and this public health epidemic."

Northern Manhattan residents, according to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, are 60% more likely than other New Yorkers to be hospitalized for asthma, and 25% of all children living in central Harlem suffer from asthma -- four times the national average, according to a study completed by a team of physicians and others led by the Harlem Hospital Center. A significant portion of Harlem's asthma epidemic is attributable to or exacerbated by diesel exhaust from buses and the disproportionate placement of diesel buses in this community. See Northridge, et al, "Diesel Exhaust Exposure Among Adolescents in Harlem: A Community-Driven Study," American Journal of Public Health, July 1999 at 998-1001.

The disproportionate siting of NYCT bus depots north of 96th Street (six of seven Manhattan depots are located there) has also placed added burdens on the quality-of-life of the 600,000 mostly African-American and Latino Northern Manhattan residents. For example, lengthy diesel-bus idling during maintenance operations, cold weather and at other times has been a regular and long-standing occurrence; such activities have added noise and pollution to Harlem neighborhoods. In addition, buses from these depots have often parked on public streets, sidewalks, vacant lots, and double-parked on streets, to address short-term storage needs at the depots. And indoor air quality impacts that have resulted at least in part from depot operations and maintenance activities have also impacted bus depot neighbors; among the regular adverse consequences has been incessant build-up of black carbon on window-sills and curtains in nearby apartments, schools and businesses, and the resulting necessity to keep windows closed even during the sweltering summer heat.

“Given the increased population estimates for New York City by the mayor, that there will be 1.2 million more New Yorkers over the next 20 years, there must be long-range planning for future growth and development that takes place between the city, its residents, and the MTA to address the impact of increased ridership on its transportation facilities,” said Ms. Shepard.

Two years ago, WE ACT and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) began negotiations with the MTA’s NYC Transit (NYCT) with a two-fold purpose. First, we were seeking to redress the grievances we outlined in our Civil Rights complaints with respect to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s bus operations disproportionately exposing low-income communities and communities of color to the negative health impacts of diesel particulate matter pollution. Second, we were concerned about the environmental and health impacts of New York City Transit’s unilateral decision not to convert the Manhattanville Bus Depot to clean-burning Compressed Natural Gas (“CNG”) buses. That decision reversed a specific commitment made to New York City residents by Governor George Pataki.

“At one point in the negotiations, said Ms. Shepard, “we thought we had a firm commitment from NYCT that it would take appropriate steps to ensure greater sensitivity to the environmental and health impacts of its operations in Northern Manhattan. Unfortunately, that no longer appears to be the case.”

WE ACT and NRDC remain desirous of resolving this dispute amicably and without extended delay. But to do so we must secure a reasonable settlement that addresses, with concrete commitments, our specific and reasonable concerns regarding the concentration and impacts of NYCT bus depots in Northern Manhattan. For this reason, we ask that NYCT revise its letter of agreement to include, among other things, the following firm commitments:

- NYCT will convert Manhattanville and Mother Clara Hale Depots to full hybrid electric buses by December 2008 and June 2009, respectively;

- NYCT will completely rebuild, rather than merely rehabilitate, the Mother Clara Hale Depot (such depot to be designed at the same 140 bus capacity as the existing facility) by June 2009, and will adopt U.S. Green Building Council Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Standards (“LEEDS”), or the City’s Department of Design and Construction High Performance Building Guidelines, or some other nationally recognized independent guidelines for “green” design in the rebuilding, renovation and landscaping of the Mother Clara Hale Depot;
- NYCT will close the Amsterdam depot to all transit operations by a date not later than the completion of the Mother Clara Hale rebuilding project, but in no case later than June 2010, and return the facility to the city for use as a community facility;
- NYCT will initiate a Northern Manhattan Depot improvement program for all five operating depots, which will include, among other things, the installation and regular maintenance of best available technology particulate traps on all emissions sources, including vehicles, equipment and the depot building itself; best practices for storage and disposal of hazardous materials; adequate staffing of depot facilities to ensure the safety and security of neighboring residents; provision for open and green spaces around depots and for planting of trees and shrubs; annual training on environmental health and safety work practices for all drivers and maintenance workers; and a stringent plan for enforcement of idling restrictions;
- NYCT will create and/or expand community outreach programs at each of the Northern Manhattan bus depots for the purposes of disseminating timely information and receiving community input on its operations and capital plans as they apply to Northern Manhattan bus depot operations and any future rebuilding or rehabilitation initiatives; these community outreach programs will include regularly scheduled meetings with neighboring residents to discuss health and environmental concerns, in addition to any other meetings convened for the purposes of discussing capital projects as required by state or federal law.

WE ACT will continue to take action to hold the MTAs NYC Transit accountable by asking the City council to do the following:

- Pass a City Council Resolution that describes the above concerns and requests the State Legislature and the Governor-elect to develop legislation and initiatives to address these concerns and hold MTA accountable for operating decisions that adversely and disparately impact low-income communities and communities of color.
- Call on your colleagues at the State legislature to hold public hearings.
- Pass a home rule message to the State legislature requesting city jurisdiction and/or requesting reform of the Public Authorities Law to ensure transparency and local community participation in the MTA decision-making process

While all residents and commuters in New York City enjoy the benefits of public bus service, residents of Northern Manhattan and other communities of color alone must live with a disproportionate, discriminatory burden of the health risks created by bus depots. With your help, all residents of New York City can breathe more freely knowing that the public transportation we use will not compromise our health or the health of our children.

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