

WEST HEMPSTEAD: LIRR service cut at issue

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Just as a developer prepares to build a 150-unit "transit-oriented" rental development next to the West Hempstead train station, the Long Island Rail Road is considering eliminating weekend service at that stop.

About 40 West Hempstead residents attended a public hearing held by the LIRR's parent agency, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, on Jan. 21 at the Garden City Hotel to oppose the change.

LIRR officials say the West Hempstead measure is included in \$54 million worth of cuts it has proposed to help close the MTA's \$1.2-billion budget gap.

The proposal came two months after developer Trammell Crow Residential struck a deal with the Town of Hempstead to build the complex next to the station on the site of the Courtesy Hotel.

"In these difficult economic times, eliminating weekend services will create hardships for both workers and customers," Civic Association president Rosalie Norton testified at the hearing. "You should be exploring ways to increase ridership, improve service and make every effort to keep fares reasonable."

Also testifying were Hempstead Town Councilman Edward Ambrosino and Nassau Legis. Vincent Muscarella (R-West Hempstead).

LIRR officials said the proposed cuts are based on ridership. On average, 360 passengers use the West Hempstead branch each weekend day compared with about 3,110 each weekday, they said.

"We're hopeful that we won't have to make any of these service cuts," said LIRR spokesman Joseph Calderone. "But we have to make difficult choices when confronted with having to cut \$54 million."

The LIRR has also proposed limiting service to the Belmont branch to the Belmont Stakes, closing 20 ticket offices and reducing weekend service on the Port Washington line.

The State Legislature is considering long-term solutions to the budget shortfall proposed by the MTA's financing commission. If those are approved, service might not have to be cut, officials said.

Residents in support of the Trammell Crow proposal fear the developer will back away if the cuts go through. "This is certainly not going to help them market their product," Norton said.

But Trammell Crow spokeswoman Maria Rigopoulos said while weekend service is critical to its transit-oriented development, they're forging ahead.

"The construction of 150 new residences directly adjacent to the station will most certainly increase demand and ridership to this branch," she said. "We hope the MTA will factor this demand in their decision."