



# LAGUARDIA BY TRANSIT:

## An Immediate, Free Proposal to Bring LaGuardia to the Subway



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For decades, New York City visitors, travelers and business leaders have lamented the insufficient public transit access to LaGuardia, the city's major domestic airport. Successive proposals to connect LaGuardia to the subway system — extending the N train from Astoria, building a \$1 billion AirTrain to Willets Point — have gone nowhere, buried by community opposition and excessive cost.

Access to LaGuardia matters, not just to the city's economy but to millions of people: more than 27 million people traveled through LaGuardia last year, and almost 85% of those passengers were beginning or ending their trips at the airport. Approximately 11,000 people are employed at the airport itself, and many rely on public transit — a recent Cornell study found that 40% of Q70 riders are employees at the airport or of airlines. Travelers, workers and the regional economy demand a more transit-accessible airport.

An analysis by the Riders Alliance, a grassroots organization of subway and bus riders, found that the MTA has already taken the first important steps to improving public transit access — but that these improvements are overshadowed by poor branding, directions that confuse visitors, and overlooked opportunities to make the service accessible and user-friendly.

The MTA may soon consider improvements to the Q70 bus to LaGuardia, including introducing a Select Bus Service route. But these changes are modest, and a missed opportunity to reinvent transit access in a way that will be noticed by New Yorkers and visitors alike. The Riders Alliance found that a series of inexpensive steps could dramatically improve public transit access to the airport — beginning with the surprising step of transforming the Q70 bus into a free LaGuardia Subway Shuttle.

In Boston, turning the airport bus into a free shuttle resulted in an 18% ridership gain in its first year. A similar ridership gain for the Q70 and its subway connections would more than make up for revenue lost by making it a free shuttle, making the proposal a revenue winner for the MTA.

A free LaGuardia subway shuttle can be implemented immediately, with no construction costs.

In Boston, making the Silver Line bus from the airport free produced an 18% jump in ridership in its first year, and the free bus program has been extended indefinitely since its original 2012 pilot. Our analysis showed that introducing a free LaGuardia Subway Shuttle could be a net revenue gain for the MTA while reshaping public perception of LaGuardia's accessibility by transit.

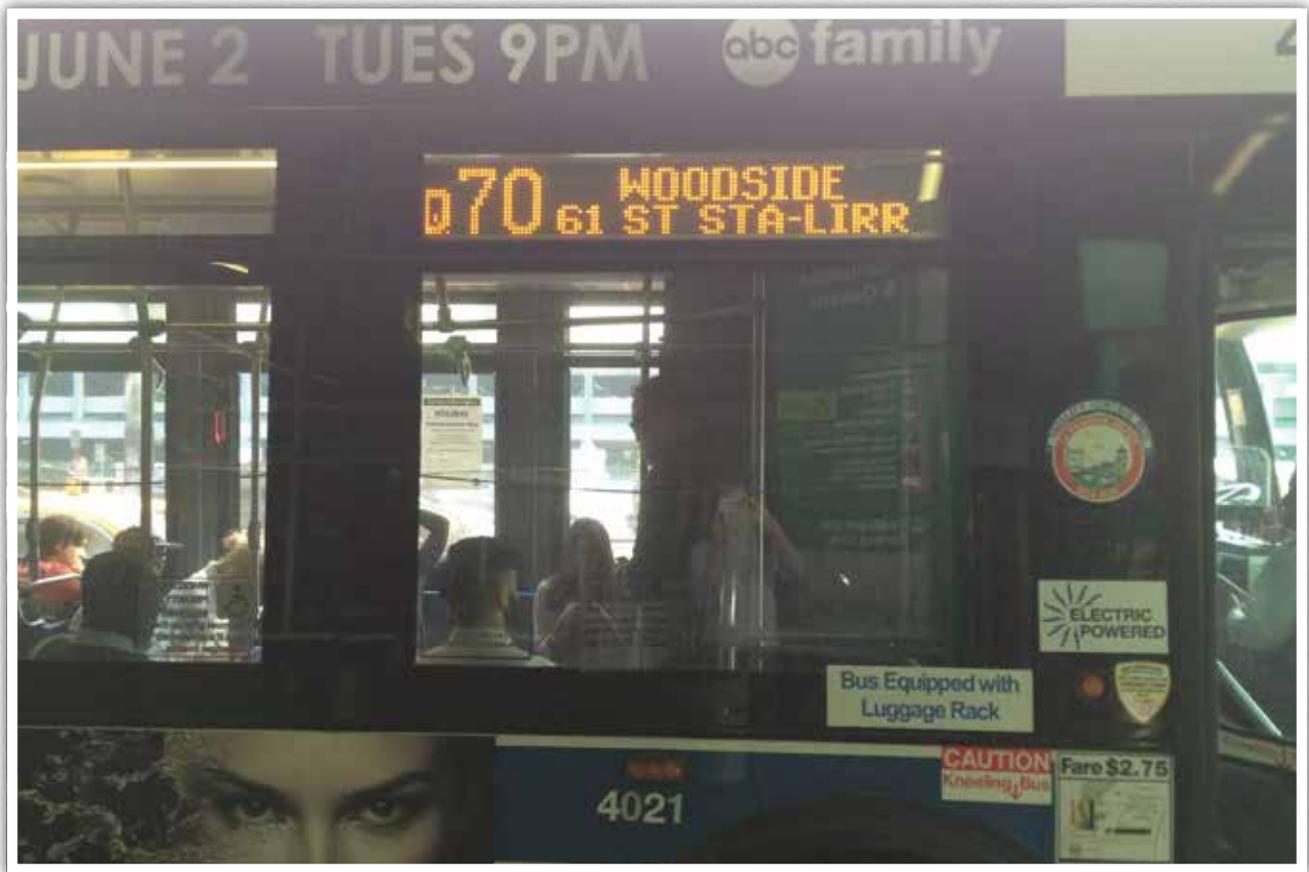
Over two months in 2014, Riders Alliance staff conducted a study of the newly created Q70 bus that connects LaGuardia Airport to the subway system and to Long Island Railroad, and surveyed approximately 500 Q70 riders and LaGuardia travelers waiting at baggage claim. The following analysis shows:

- Only 12.5% of people accessing LaGuardia use public transportation; but
- An additional 49% of travelers using others modes said in a survey that they would reconsider their choice if there were a free shuttle to the subway;
- 85% of people on the Q70 bus already transfer to or from the subway, meaning that their Q70 ride is already a free transfer that brings no new revenue to the MTA;
- Turning the Q70 bus into a free shuttle could encourage ridership, resulting in a net revenue gain for the MTA.

After examining current conditions and surveying riders and travelers, the Riders Alliance makes the following recommendations:

1. Replace the Q70 bus with a [Free LaGuardia Subway Shuttle](#);
2. Improve desirability for travelers with [clear signage, streamlined branding, and aggressive marketing](#) both locally and in nationwide travel press;
3. Upgrade service to include regular [10-minute departure intervals, countdown clocks at bus stops, and automated announcements and signage on the bus to tell riders which terminal to use for which airline.](#)

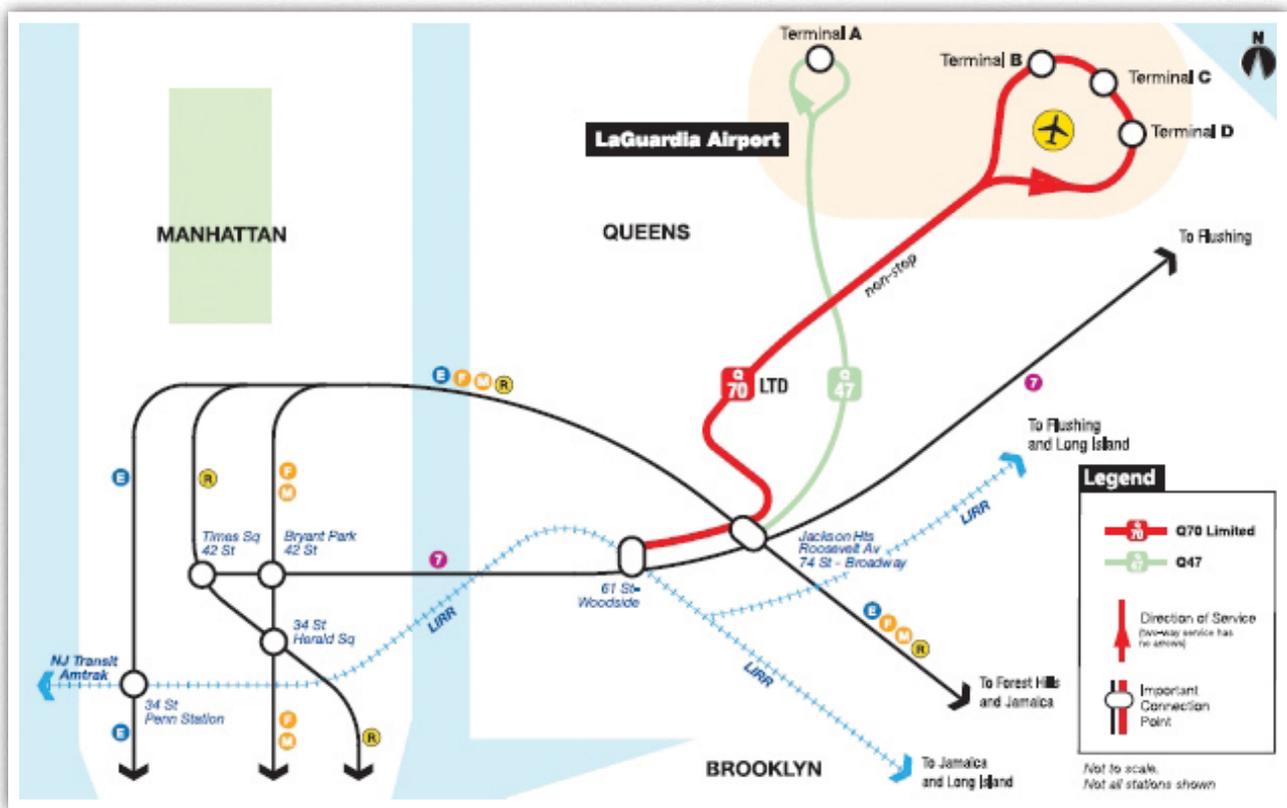
With these common-sense, inexpensive steps, New York City can announce that transit access to LaGuardia has arrived — and the world is encouraged to use it.



## The Status Quo: Transit Access as Best-Kept Secret

LaGuardia airport has long been served by multiple buses, including various Queens local buses and the M60 bus to Upper Manhattan. The M60 still serves the airport, and has been converted to a Select Bus Service route — a streamlined service that includes upgrades like off-board fare collection and dedicated lanes for a portion of its route.

In 2013, the MTA and New York City Department of Transportation implemented the new Q70 bus, providing the first-ever express ride from the LIRR at Woodside and the E/F/R/7 trains at 74<sup>th</sup> Street — Roosevelt Avenue to LaGuardia Airport. The bus replaced local Queens service that forced airport travelers to stop on every corner — a dramatic improvement for airport visitors. Today, the bus stops only at the LIRR, then at the subway, and then travels express via the BQE and Grand Central Parkway (see map below).



But public transit use remains minimal; in a city where fewer than half of residents own cars, almost 90% of travelers leaving LaGuardia continue not to use public transportation.

## FINDINGS PART 1: TRAVELERS FIND TRANSIT INCONVENIENT AND UNFAMILIAR

According to figures published by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, 87.5% of travelers to and from LaGuardia do not use public transportation, choosing instead to arrive by taxi, private car, rental car, limousine service or private shuttle.

Riders Alliance volunteers surveyed travelers leaving LaGuardia, and found that they chose other modes of transportation for a variety of reasons. The top two reasons travelers gave were that they found the public transportation options 1) inconvenient (25.2%) and 2) unfamiliar (23.2%).

Our survey of bus conditions backed up the travelers' perception that the bus option is inconvenient, and found that few steps had been taken to encourage unfamiliar travelers to choose public transit. Riders Alliance surveyors found that:

1. Public transit is not clearly marked — and the subway connection is not mentioned. Signage at the airport is flawed, inaccurate and misleading. Examples include:
  - Signs for express buses to Manhattan lead to a private bus, not the MTA bus;
  - The Q70 is described and branded as a bus to Queens, not a shuttle to the subway.

These are examples of signs advertising transit access at LaGuardia airport:



Signage describes the Q70 as a bus to Queens, not a bus to the subway.



The signs pictured here all lead to a stop for private buses, not the MTA bus. Even the sign labeled "buses."



Insufficient signage is supplemented by makeshift efforts.

## 2. Directions are unclear for travelers unfamiliar with New York City transit.

Even for those able to locate the bus stop, directions are confusing upon their arrival. Problems include:

- Metrocards are not sold at the bus stop; travelers are directed to go back inside the terminal or to find a private Hudson News outlet to purchase a fare.
- Instructions are almost incomprehensible for people unfamiliar with New York City public transit — including no “prompts” or suggestions to use the Q70 to access the subway, and signs that are inaccurate.



*CONFUSION:  
three adjacent signs  
at LaGuardia list  
three prices for  
the bus — none  
accurate.*



Given the difficulty of locating public transportation, the unclear and inaccurate instructions to use it and the emphasis placed on competing private options, it is surprising that as many as 12.5% of travelers do use public transit. There is clearly room to increase that proportion with relatively minor and low-cost improvements.

## 3. The experience of Q70 riders is not reflective of a special airport shuttle

Though the Q70 is functionally a shuttle to the airport, the experience of riding the bus does not help travelers with their unique needs. Limitations include:

- Bus departure location at Roosevelt Avenue is haphazardly marked, without clear indication that the Q70 is a preferred LaGuardia route over other options;
- There is no on-board signage telling passengers which exit to use for which airline;
- Announcements on the bus are inaudible.

*Signage on the bus is a Queens bus map and sporadic ads, with no advertising or announcement space dedicated to airline terminal information or subway/LIRR connections.*



In a recent sampling, multiple trips were reviewed in which no announcements were made at all, leaving riders guessing among themselves which stop to use for which airline.

## FINDINGS PART 2: MOST Q70 RIDERS TRANSFER TO THE SUBWAY

For those who do ride the Q70, the ride is almost invariably just one leg of a longer journey: almost all riders transfer to or from the subway or to Long Island Railroad.

Specifically, our survey of Q70 riders, conducted on the bus, showed that:

- 85% of Q70 riders transfer to or from the subway; and
- An additional 5% transfer to Long Island Railroad.

Because the MTA offers free transfers from the bus to the subway and vice versa, that means that 85% of riders bring in no new revenue, and an additional 5% are bringing in most of their MTA revenue through the connecting LIRR leg of their trip, not the bus.

Using the most recent published tally of 1,185,485 annual Q70 riders in 2014, it means that bus fares would bring in only \$489,000 at today's fares, and that's using a generous assumption that every rider is paying full fare, with no discounts or bonuses or unlimited ride cards.

In the last year, LaGuardia had 28,472,558 total passengers, of whom 84.7% were beginning or ending their trips in New York, rather than connecting to another flight. If just one additional percent of travelers decided to use public transportation — perhaps based on the recommendations in this report — the MTA would gain more than \$663,000 in new annual revenue, more than the current revenue provided by the Q70 bus.

In Boston, turning the Silver Line bus from Logan Airport into a free shuttle resulted in an 18% ridership increase in its first year. A similar increase in Q70 ridership, with the same proportion of riders as today transferring to the subway, would bring in an additional \$587,000 through new subway fares, more than making up for revenue lost by turning the bus into a free shuttle.



## Our Recommendations: Dramatic and Inexpensive Changes to LaGuardia Public Transit

Travelers reported being open to changing their habits. In a survey taken at baggage claim, 49% of travelers said they would consider using public transportation if it were a more appealing option — specifically, if there were a free shuttle that would take them to the subway.

Tinkering at the margins of transit service will not cause people to change their behavior: our analysis produced a series of dramatic yet inexpensive recommendations that, if implemented, could boost transit access, encourage tourism, and finally change the widespread public perception that LaGuardia Airport is inaccessible by transit.

### **RECOMMENDATION 1:** Replace the Q70 With a Free LaGuardia Subway Shuttle

Our prime recommendation is the most dramatic move that the City, the MTA and the Port Authority can take in the immediate future: replace the Q70 bus with a Free LaGuardia Subway Shuttle.

A free shuttle bus would bring important benefits, including:

- **Convenience:** riders would not have to purchase a Metrocard at the airport or on the street, and can wait to pay for transit service until they arrive at the subway station. The new system would save riders time and reduce the number of steps required to access public transit.
- **Simplicity:** travelers unfamiliar with New York can assume that they will not be required to learn local systems to board a free shuttle bus, and can purchase subway fare at the destination with the assistance of a station agent.
- **Appeal:** signage in the airport and throughout the subway system can advertise the Free LaGuardia Subway Shuttle, enticing travelers to shift from other modes to public transportation.
- **Publicity:** replacing the Q70 with a Free LaGuardia Subway Shuttle would allow the City to advertise, locally and globally, that New York has taken a dramatic step to improve public transit access — and encourage the travel industry to boost the new service as a recommended travel option.
- **Capacity:** maximizing the use of existing infrastructure will add travel capacity without significant new capital expenses.

The shuttle should employ distinct Free LaGuardia Subway Shuttle branding — setting it apart in name and function from local bus service that many travelers think of as slow, unfamiliar and inconvenient.

Based on our analysis, implementing free shuttle service would result in net revenue gain for the MTA. Because 85% of Q70 riders are already transferring to or from the subway and pay full fare there, the MTA would lose just \$489,000 annually in revenue by making the bus free. In Boston, making the bus free brought an 18% increase in ridership in the first year; assuming conservatively that 85% of travelers would transfer to or from the subway, a similar increase on the Q70 would bring in \$587,000 in new revenue from additional subway fares, more than making up for the revenue lost by turning the bus into a free shuttle.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** *Improve desirability for travelers with clear signage, streamlined branding, and aggressive marketing in tourism literature and in nationwide travel press;*

As discussed above, current airport signage is confusing and off-putting to travelers — and many New Yorkers remain unaware of the streamlined shuttle service the Q70 already provides.

The Port Authority and the MTA can implement simple, inexpensive solutions to show travelers that public transportation is a desirable and convenient airport option. These include:

- Clear signage throughout the airport publicizing the free shuttle option and directing passengers to the bus stop
- Streamlined branding of the bus so that New Yorkers recognize it as a unique option, more comparable to the AirTrain than to local neighborhood bus lines
- Advertising throughout the subway system alerting New Yorkers to the free shuttle bus option, and in Port Authority and MTA materials and web sites
- Coverage in nationwide tourism publications highlighting the new steps New York is taking to improve access to its long-suffering domestic airport
- Welcome guides in arrival areas who promote the bus connection to the city, comparable to those in London’s Heathrow who direct passengers to the train
- Promotion by airlines of the free subway connection in arrival videos or through materials handed out to LaGuardia-bound passengers

Most travelers are not in the habit of using public transportation to access LaGuardia, and many don’t realize it’s an option. Improving communications to publicize the Free LaGuardia Subway Shuttle would help alert passengers to the improved service — and a comprehensive campaign would include communications in the terminal, throughout the subway system, and in nationwide travel-oriented media.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** *Upgrade service to include regular 10-minute departure intervals, countdown clocks at bus stops, and automated on-board announcements and signage to tell passengers which terminal to use for which airline.*

In order to attract airport users to public transportation — and retain those who try out the experience — we recommend substantive improvements in service for riders of the bus.

The City and the MTA can implement some of the improvements they have already brought to other bus lines, including:

- Regular departure intervals of 10 minutes or less, so travelers can expect a timely ride;
- Installation of countdown clocks at bus stops, so riders who are waiting have convenient access to information about their expected wait time.

Additionally, the MTA should implement some changes unique to an airport shuttle, including:

- On-board signage indicating which airline can be found at which stop;
- On-board automated announcements conveying the same information.
- Dedicated bus lanes and bus access to highway shoulders, so that transit riders looking to access the airport can avoid the rush hour traffic congestion that is common in Jackson Heights and along the BQE and Grand Central Parkway

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4:** Find time savings for travelers

Q70 riders going to and from the airport are comparing public transit to other modes of transportation, and are often particularly concerned about time. The MTA and New York City DOT should take advantages of opportunities large and small to shave time off the travel experience.

Opportunities could include:

- Running buses more frequently, at departure intervals of 10 minutes or less; and
- Avoiding congestion by permitting buses to travel in dedicated bus lanes or on the BQE shoulder, which is available for a portion of the route; or
- Avoiding congestion by giving drivers route flexibility, allowing them to use real-time traffic data to determine faster routes and to use access roads and other alternatives if highway traffic congestion makes alternatives faster.

## Conclusion: Replace the Q70 with a Free Laguardia Subway Shuttle to revolutionize LaGuardia access.

As elected leaders and policymakers fret over billion-dollar proposals to improve transit access to LaGuardia, they overlook a simple and cost-neutral option, which is to reinvent the Q70 bus as a **Free LaGuardia Subway Shuttle**.

Running a free shuttle — with other common-sense improvements such as more frequent departures, useful on-board signage and clear directions for travelers at the airport — could immediately bolster New York’s global standing as a city that provides convenient airport travel options to its residents and visitors.

Our recommendations provide a simple, quick and efficient way to improve transit access to LaGuardia — and an opportunity to reintroduce New York to millions of air travelers nationwide as a convenient, accessible destination.



## Sources and Methodology:

Survey of 250 individuals waiting at baggage claim and 250 individuals riding the Q70 bus, compiled in July and August 2014 by Riders Alliance staff.

Field observations and photos taken at LaGuardia Airport and on Q70 bus August 2015.

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