Securing America's mass transit systems

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Introduction

9/11 can be considered the start of terrorist attacks on Critical Infrastructure in the Western world. 9/11 was a cataclysmic “step-up” for terrorism. 9/11 was the start of simultaneous attacks, causing massive destruction, casualties and injuries, and economic loss. Planes were commandeered during 9/11 and used as weapons against innocent civilians. The commuter rail attacks in Madrid, the London heavy rail and bus attacks, the Mumbai commuter rail attacks, and the most recent Mumbai attacks all involved mass transit systems and produced a great many casualties and injuries. These attacks were “spectacular” and “highly successful” from the perspective of terrorists. All transportation modes are vulnerable, but public transportation is particularly so. At the same time, transit more than other modes plays a major role in emergency response, recovery, and evacuations.

Vulnerability of transit

Transit is vulnerable because it is visible, critical to the mobility and regional economy of urban areas, contains large numbers of targets (passengers) within enclosed areas, and is open and accessible to the general public. Transit is also vulnerable because its infrastructure is typically expansive and is practically impossible to completely secure without shutting down the system. While no technology has been created that will accurately sense the presence of all threat materials before they enter the transit system, there are numerous security protective measures that can be implemented and have. These measures include increased presence of officers and special patrols and technologies such as video surveillance systems. There are also some measures that have not been deployed, and gaps that need to be addressed.

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- Do we want a terrorist to get hold of a transit bus that holds large amounts of fuel, and can be used as a weapon? Why, then, are many keyless? Do we want a terrorist behind the controls of a subway system? Impersonation is not difficult in larger transit systems because not all dispatchers know all operators, and worker schedules change. Why, then, hasn't TWIC (Transportation Worker Identification Credential) which uses biometrics been implemented?
- Worker preparedness and training is important. On practically any attack on a transit system, transit workers will be the first on the scene. Most frontline transit workers have not gone through a real-life emergency situation or drill. Training all frontline workers for large agencies is very expensive for these agencies, and this is where the issue of funding equity comes in.
- Modal Funding Allocation—Especially in the early post-9/11 years, aviation obtained much of the security funding. This inequity left transit riders wondering whether aviation customers were somehow more important than they were.
- Information Sharing—Timely intelligence and information sharing is critical to preventing attacks. This was evidenced by the many dots that were not connected prior to 9/11. Successful uses of intelligence were the prevention of simultaneous aviation attacks on planes originating from London and the prevention of the attack on the PATH tunnel under the Hudson River. However, needed funds were not provided to maintain and operate the Public Transit Information Sharing Analysis Center (ISAC) even though funding had been authorized under H.R.1.

Funding mismatch

The federal government expended more than \$24 billion on aviation security and only \$898 million for transit security since 9/11.¹ Does it make sense to spend so little when so much is at stake? H.R.1, the 9/11 Commission Recommendations Act of 2007, which authorized \$3.4 billion to be spent on transit security over 4 years appeared to be a step in the right direction. However, while \$750 million was authorized under the H.R.1, the Administration's DHS budget proposal for 2009 offered only \$175 million. In his testimony to the Senate, the President of APTA noted the following additional discrepancies between the intent of H.R.1 and actual actions taken by DHS.

- H.R.1 directed DHS to distribute grants directly to transit agencies. However, DHS has kept 3% in management and administrative costs and distributed the grants to states and not to transit agencies.
- Cost shares unfavorable to local agencies were imposed—for example, DHS guidance imposed a 25% local match requirement for purchase of equipment, management and administration. In H.R.1, there is no local cost share requirement.

¹ Testimony of William Millar, President, APTA, April 2, 2008, before the Senate Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Homeland Security

- H.R.1 had included funding for important items such as chem.-bio detection and redundant Operation Control Centers (OCCs). The DHS guidance excluded these items.

Summary

Transit, vulnerable as it is, is able to and needs to play a major role in Emergency Evacuations. During Hurricane Katrina, how many lives could have been saved had buses been used to shuttle the elderly, disabled, and carless to dry ground? Ferryboats were the first responders, first on the scene, rescuing many of the passengers on the U.S. Airways Miracle flight in Jan., 2009. Ferries also played a major role in evacuating the public on 9/11, and transit buses transported emergency responders to the WTC site. With a few more dollars for public transportation security and preparedness, entire Regions will benefit from the enhanced preparedness of their transit systems should a terrorist strike or any other major emergency occur.