

UNITED SPINAL^{NOW}

Farewell Andy – Hello Victor

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Frieda Zames and Michael Imperiali, two early members of New York City's Disabled In Action group, who are now deceased, came to see me, a new lawyer, in September 1977 at my Legal Services Corporation office to convince me to attend a public hearing required by the federal government when transit agencies requested federal funding.

The hearing was held at the old Commodore Hotel, which used to sit above Grand Central Station. Frieda, Michael and a couple of other advocates were there to encourage the MTA to try lift-equipped, accessible minibuses in Staten Island, since they were purchasing minibuses as an experiment. When they testified, MTA Board members had side-conversations, used the restroom, got up, turned their backs to the speakers, and got coffee – and generally ignored them. When the people with disabilities finished testifying, MTA Board behavior returned to normal.

It got under my skin – and stayed there, all these years. I freely admit that there have been substantial changes in mass transit since then, and I am proud to say that United Spinal Association/EPVA have been involved in many of them. However, this year, there have been two significant developments in NYC transit accessibility that have never occurred before and about which most advocates have dreamed for years.

Andy Byford, although he recently resigned as CEO of New York City Transit (NYCT), proposed rushing to make 70 more stations accessible in as short as five years. This is the first time that NYCT management has considered making the subway system dramatically more accessible, and it was Byford – via the London and Toronto transit agencies— who understood why.

As United Spinal/EPVA told MTA/NYCT forty-one years ago when we sued them, the workhorse must be the main-line system, i.e. buses, subways and commuter rail, supplemented by paratransit services. Paratransit cannot be the workhorse, as it is far too expensive. Forty-one years later, transit is embracing the argument.

Even though Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Andy Byford apparently didn't see eye-to-eye, resulting in Andy's resignation, the concept of enhanced station access, in a big way over a short period of time is out there. It has raised expectations, and the concept will not go away with Andy. Andrew Cuomo, like his father Mario, who supported the fight for access to mass transit forty years ago, has been a proponent of accessibility. (Remember, he forced the Bloomberg administration to accept accessible taxis.) We will expect the Governor to acknowledge and endorse Andy's concept.

Just as significant, however, is Mayor De Blasio's nomination of wheelchair user, United Spinal member, sled hockey Paralympian, former EPVA Coordinator of Sports & Recreation, former Parks Department accessibility specialist, current Commissioner of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, and all-around good guy, Victor Calise, to serve on the MTA Board of Directors.

While the nomination must be confirmed by Gov. Cuomo, as the MTA is a state agency with a catchment area from Port Jervis to Montauk, Victor's nomination is a tribute to all disability advocates, who have written, demonstrated, cajoled, argued and persuaded MTA and elected officials to support accessibility initiatives. Victor, by his presence and persuasion, will change the Board's deliberative process forever.

Congratulations Commissioner Calise. So long, Andy, and thanks for everything.