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Flanagan Says Cuomo's MTA Stance Not Unreasonable, Advocates Not So Sure

By Dana Rubinstein

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In the increasingly bitter dispute between Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio, Cuomo has found another ally.

During a scrum Wednesday morning with reporters, Senate Majority Leader John Flanagan said Cuomo's demands for more city money to fund the MTA's upkeep and expansion make sense.

"The city is enjoying a robust surplus, and I don't think it's unreasonable," said Flanagan, following a breakfast sponsored by Crain's — though he also cautioned that, "first of all, the state needs to meet its obligations."

The MTA has a \$30 billion, five-year capital plan with a roughly \$10 billion hole.

After a good deal of delay, Cuomo promised to put \$8.3 billion toward filling that gap and wants the city to increase its contribution dramatically to help fill the rest.

Some advocates have long argued that the city contributes far too little to the MTA capital plan.

But Cuomo and the MTA he controls only made their demands of the city after Mayor de Blasio met their earlier request for a contribution hike.

In the governor's new request, the mayor and others see politics.

They also note that the MTA is controlled by the governor, and that the governor has yet to identify where his promised contribution will come from.

"The MTA is essentially a state institution," said Regional Plan Association president Tom Wright on Monday, at a separate morning panel hosted by POLITICO New York. "And the state needs to come up with the funding for it."

In all likelihood, some sort of detente will result from all of this, at least according to Flanagan.

"I'm sure [the ultimate number] will probably be more than the mayor wants and less than the governor wants," he said. "That's why they call it compromise."

But this whole dispute might also be beside the point.

"I think that the fight, the tit-for-tat about whose responsibility it is, is, I think ... unfortunate, not in the public interest, and the wrong topic," said Carol Kellermann, president of the Citizens Budget Commission, during the POLITICO New York panel.



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She called the feud "a total distraction from really what the conversation should be about," which is overall revenue generation.

"[Citizens Budget Commission] has long said that the group that is underpaying for the MTA is auto users, who would be devastated if there was no public transit system," she said.

Wright made a similar point about the pointlessness of it all.

"The larger issue here is that we're going to need more funding to keep this system both maintained and upgraded at a level that we need," he said. "And until we we address that fundamental issue, we're going to keep fighting over the crumbs."