

Public Authority Board Members To Take Law, Ethics Lessons

By **BRADLEY HOPE**
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It's back to school for board members of public authorities in New York State starting this month. Under a law signed by the governor last month, board members from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and other state public authorities are now required to take lessons in ethics, law, and personal and fiduciary responsibility.

One of the first rounds of training seminars is scheduled for February 24 in the city. The City University of New York's School of Professional Studies is hosting the all-day training sessions.

Governor Pataki on January 15 signed the sweeping Public Authorities Accountability Act, which called for codified principles for board members, a new Public Authority Budget Office to keep track of the financial status of the state's 744 public authorities, and

the appointment of an inspector general to make the authorities more transparent, among other changes.

One of the seven leaders involved in the training sessions, Robert Paaswell, said the lectures will make board members more independent of their appointers. As in the case of the MTA, whose members are picked by the governor, the mayor, and representatives from nearby counties, the training will help them make decisions in the spirit of the mission of the authority, not the political interests of the politicians who appointed them, he said. Mr. Paaswell is a former head of the Chicago Transit Authority and the director of the University Transportation Research Center at City College of New York. "The public should expect that when a board gets the training, they will be a little more responsive to the public's interests," he said.

Three sessions already have been

held at locations across the state, but board member attendance was voluntary. The new law requires all new and current board members to participate in the training.

The director of the Straphangers Campaign, Gene Russianoff, himself an advocate for subway riders since the 1980s, said while the training is a good idea, it isn't strong enough to correct the imbalances of power in the MTA.

The training comes on the heels of an announcement in January through which three more MTA officials agreed to pay back money that the New York State Ethics Commission said they accepted improperly. Nineteen officials have broken ethics rules since December 2004, according to the commission. In May 2005, the MTA created a zero-tolerance policy for gifts received by employees from companies involved with the authority.