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MTA'S CELL-ING POINT

\$25 BONUS FOR ANSWERING SURVEY

By PATRICK GALLAHUE and JEREMY OLSHAN

EXCLUSIVE

The rail facts

- **Cost:** \$2 billion, mostly in federal funds
- **Number of surveys mailed:** About 170,000
- **Expected gain:** Details on 20,000 rider trips from roughly 13,000 households.
- **Benefits:** Every week, one participant will receive \$500. About 10 percent of the participants — those who only have cellphones — will each receive \$25.
- **Sample questions:** "Did you use the subway or bus any time yesterday?"; "How did you pay your fare yesterday?"

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May 13, 2008 -- The MTA is offering \$25 - the price of a weekly MetroCard - to cellphone-using straphangers who fill out a survey about their riding patterns.

That bonus is on top of one weekly \$500 prize to randomly chosen respondents who use either cellphones or land lines.

The money is proving to be an effective lure.

"If I got this and it didn't offer \$25, there's no way I'd do it," said one lucky cellphone user who received the survey.

The agency announced the \$2 million survey earlier this month.

MetroCard data inform the MTA where most trips originate, but it doesn't include information such the rider's destination, stops made along the way or the purpose of the trip.

So the MTA is mailing letters to 170,000 randomly chosen New Yorkers to ask them personal questions about age and income, as well as their travel habits.

The MTA's chief of metropolitan planning, Lawrence Fleischer, said the information "will assist us in understanding how New Yorkers travel."

Once the letter arrives, people are offered a chance to complete the 20- to 25-minute interview by phone, mail or even online. Every week, a lucky contributor is chosen to win \$500.

Those riders with only cellphones - or no telephone at all - get the added bonus worth a weekly, unlimited-ride MetroCard.

That group is projected to be only about 10 percent of the responses, costing an estimated \$100,000, officials said.

"These are tried and true methods for getting the best data," said MTA spokesman Jeremy Soffin. "Without that data, we can't get federal funding, and we can't plan service."

About 80 percent of the funds for the survey came from the feds.

"It seems like a good deal for a cellphone user to me," said William Henderson, of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA.

But he said nonresponses also cost the researcher.

"My expectation is it costs a fair amount to find people willing to do the survey," he said.

Only those selected to participate are eligible for the bonus, and the survey requests a MetroCard serial number to keep track of respondents.

Gene Russianoff of the Straphanger's Campaign applauded the move.

"If they wanted to know what customers think, it makes sense to offer them an incentive," he said.

The MTA enlisted the firm NuStats/PTV DataSource to conduct the survey.

The questionnaire asks, among other things, for rider logs of each person in the household.

The agency says the survey's "origin destination data" from riders is now

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It has conducted various surveys since the '80s and has used inducements in the past.

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