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White, Embattled Head of Transit Agency, Is Fired : MTA: Board's vote comes as he warns that MTA is an out-of-control 'money train.' Riordan says chief executive suffered from 'paralysis by analysis.'

December 21, 1995 | RICHARD SIMON and ERIC LICHTBLAU | TIMES STAFF WRITERS



The former New York state transportation commissioner was hired in 1993 to run one of the nation's largest public works agencies, created by the merger of the rival Southern California Rapid Transit District and Los Angeles County Transportation Commission.

Referring to the subway construction problems, White said, "Had we not experienced several serious mishaps within a very small time frame, I don't think we'd be sitting here today.

"But I also think that everybody knows there is nothing that Frank White did or didn't do . . . that caused the sinking or the sinkhole in Hollywood. What I am prepared to be judged by is what I did in the wake of the things that did happen."

Earlier, an overflow crowd of more than 300 people packed the boardroom at the MTA's new Union Station headquarters with the spillover forced to listen in a separate room.

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If the audience had been deciding White's fate Wednesday afternoon, his \$178,000-a-year position would have seemed secure. More than a dozen people spoke out in support of the chief executive, arguing that he was being made a scapegoat, while two supported his firing.

The most prominent--and surprising--speaker was former Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, who was instrumental in bringing White to the MTA in 1993.

Bradley's appearances on political issues have been rare since he left office, but he said in an interview that he wanted to "break his silence" because he felt so strongly about White's mistreatment.

"I could no longer sit back and be quiet," he told the board. "I have too much of my blood, sweat and energy wrapped up in the MTA for me to ignore what is taking place in my community."

Bradley urged the board against a "rush to judgment," saying that White's honesty and integrity were beyond reproach. "If you're looking for a yes man, you don't want Frank White."

Bradley and other speakers maintained that the board must shoulder blame for the agency's troubles.

"Firing Frank White will not solve the basic problems," Watson said. "This is a recipe . . . for disaster."

State Sen. Tom Hayden (D-Los Angeles) concurred. "Instead of scapegoating Franklin White, the MTA should look in the mirror. . . . He tries to be independent. Now he becomes a sacrifice to the gods of '60 Minutes,'" Hayden said, referring to a recent critical report that ran on the national news show.

The public testimony, which lasted more than 90 minutes, assumed some measure of levity when a few speakers speculated on possible successors to White.

Activist John Walsh suggested that former coroner Thomas Noguchi would be the only one able to preside over an agency as near to death as the MTA, while bus riders organizer Eric Mann said, "Anybody who would want this job is probably unemployed and probably under charges of incompetence in their previous job."

* RAIL LINE VOTE: MTA urges that a Valley rail line be removed from a list of state funding priorities.

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