

The Main Street WIRE

Roosevelt Island's Community Newspaper

in association with Website NYC10044

TOWN MEETING EXTRA

Island Faces Transit Crisis; RIOC Lays Off Tramway Staff; RIRA Slates Town Meeting Tonight



Website NYC10044

Photo from Roosevelt Island shows the reach of the barge-based crane in relation to Tramway tower height.

A Routine Tram Trip, Then Chaos, Terror Over the East River

An 8:52 a.m. trip.
Tuesday, January 24.
Weather clear.
A RIOC surveillance tape would later show that more than two dozen boarded Aerial Tramway Car No. 1, Manhattan-bound.
No babies in strollers, no children, no wheelchairs.
An experienced cabin attendant, Elliot Isaac, veteran of 18 years on the Tramway, secured the straps at the turnstiles, slid the platform barrier gate into place, closed the cabin doors. Then, at the controls, he did what he had done hundreds of times before to start a trip.
Routine.
Nothing, at the start, to suggest that within minutes there would be a dozen injuries, seconds of chaos and minutes of terror, then news choppers overhead, ambulances, and – in the small way that Roosevelt Island sometimes manages – media attention and history.
Precautions
Weeks before, there had been special Tram trips, pausing over the East River while operators of a crane helping with repairs of the Queensboro Bridge set limit switches that offered assurance their long reach, sometimes augmented by estuary tides, would stay out of the path of passing Tram cars. Arrangements were in place for communication – not directly with cabin attendants, but through supervisors – when the huge Summerville crane would be ranging near the very predictable path of the Tramway's cabins.
Tram workers had noticed, days before, that the crane operator must be lifting limit switches, and there had been complaints and discussion to reinforce safety.
Even then, this was a routine trip.
Even with two maintenance workers on tower number 3, greasing the track ropes, and a supervisor in the booth as required when personnel are potentially at risk – a routine trip.

Collision
“There was a bang, like an explosion,” one passenger says. “Then we were all on the floor, the cabin swinging wildly. I thought we were going to go down.” [See related report on passenger accounts, this page.]
The huge boom of the construction crane had hit the bottom left corner of the leading edge of the cabin, and while the 3,000 horsepower motors of the Tramway continued to pull the cabin toward Manhattan – and Cabin No. 2 toward Roosevelt Island – Cabin No. 1 was retarded in its progress while its overhead hanger arm continued to move. Then, seconds later, hauled clear of the crane, the cabin



Channel 7 Eyewitness News

See **Collision**, page 3

– Bulletin –

RIOC President Jerome Blue ordered “all but a handful” of Tramway workers laid off early Monday evening, suggesting the Tramway can be expected to be out of service for an extended period. Blue’s reason: He wants to study all the safety and operational reports on the Tram following last week’s accident before allowing the Tramway to go back into service.

With the Tramway down for what the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation (RIOC) officially describes as an “indefinite” period, after a week with no transit alternative for schoolchildren and the disabled, and facing a 15-month cutback in subway service, the Roosevelt Island Residents Association (RIRA) has called a community-wide Town Meeting on transit for tonight (Wednesday, February 4) at 8:00.

The Tramway is down after last week’s accident, but the Town Meeting was in RIRA’s plans even before then, responding to a projected cut in subway service slated to start February 22 and last 15 months or more. That service cut will replace the Q train – which normally runs every ten minutes during rush hour and travels down Sixth Avenue to Brooklyn – with a two-stop shuttle that will offer riders a choice of the Lexington Avenue station with no transfers, or the station at 57th Street and 7th Avenue, where transfers to the N/R line will be available.

Estimates put the transit time increase at about 30 minutes each way for the average Roosevelt Island commuter – more, of course, if a rider arrives at the Island subway station only to find his shuttle train has just left.

Even if the Tramway goes back into service – and some unconfirmed reports from sources in the know, but unwilling to be named, say it could be running again in as little as a week, presuming RIOC authorizes a re-start – even then, Tram riders can’t use the Metrocard for free transfers from the Tramway to MTA buses or subways. And for subway riders intending to use the Lexington Avenue subway line to travel north or south in Manhattan beyond the range of a normal bus trip, even the subway is currently a two-fare

zone: Free “walking transfers” using the Metrocard are not available from the Lexington Avenue station of the Q line to the 59th Street station of the Lexington line.

RIRA has invited transit officials, RIOC officers, and politicians to attend tonight’s meeting or send representatives. At press time the list was incomplete.

RIRA’s Common Council has also set forth a series of goals for tonight’s meeting – among them rallying the community to press for a better transit deal overall: Restoration of Console Operators to the Tramway as a safety measure, the Metrocard for the Tramway, the free walking transfers between subway stations, assurance of continuation of the Island Shoppers’ Bus (which the RIOC administration has talked of cutting or changing), and more timely maintenance of transit facilities needed by the handicapped, including the elevators at the Manhattan Tramway station.

RIRA also seeks the citizen backing that appears to be needed to gain recognition, as residents’ elected representatives, for the organization’s Common Council. The RIOC administration of Jerome Blue, Ph.D., has ignored the Council’s elected status, even referring to RIRA as “your club” at times, and has consistently treated it as just another resident social club.

Members of the Common Council also hope to deal with a fear that Blue will try to use any excuse to cut Tramway service or attempt to mothball the Tram completely. In a recent New York Times article, RIOC spokesperson Michael Greason dismissed the Tram as a “nice icon” in language suggesting it is obsolete because it can’t pay its way. While RIOC claims the Tramway loses \$700,000 a year, virtually all mass transit nationwide receives government subsidies, while RIOC has claimed financial self-sufficiency for Roosevelt Island and has refused to ask for State subsidy of its operating budget. Tramway boosters maintain the system could become a profit center if managed properly during the subway cutback, and might become profitable for the long term once Southtown is built, with buildings a maximum of three or four minutes from the Tram station.

**Town Meeting
Wednesday
8:00 p.m.
Good Shepherd**

I thought this was the end of my life...



Masae Moore
Island House



Ryoko Takaki
Island House



Marie Khan Kacou
Manhattan Park



Joyce Ayoub Trajanovic
Island House

This account of the Tramway accident was assembled in a conversation with these four passengers.

“Just at the peak, all of a sudden there was a big impact, a crash... a noise... like an explosion, and we were all thrown to the floor. And [after passing the tower] it went down very fast. I thought it was going to crash at the other end, but then it stopped. But it was still swinging wildly, and all these metal bricks [ballast weights] were scattered around.”

“The woman next to me, who was reading a book, just screamed, and her face was streaming down with tears. It was very wild.”

“We were swinging strongly. We were just thrown... [Later] the doctor asked me ‘How did you fall?’ but I don’t know how I fell, on whom I fell. I was asking for my friend,

‘Where is Marie?’ She was looking for me. I was thinking, ‘the kids, the kids.’ I’m Lebanese and I lived the war in Beirut for years. A bomb even exploded in front of my house near my baby’s crib. But I never felt like death as much as that day...”

“They slid down on us. Practically everyone was on the floor.”

“I was so afraid that the cable was going to snap. At one point we were down on the floor, and Elliot [cabin attendant Elliot Isaac] said, ‘It’s the crane. It’s the damn crane.’”

“We thought we were going down. I thought this was the end of my life... I thought, ‘How can we escape from this,’ and not knowing how deep the river is – but I have seen big ships going by. The doors were tightly shut

and I was constantly thinking how to survive, and at the same time, a couple of women were really wild...”

“Eric [Trowbridge] was bleeding from the back of his head, and didn’t know he was bleeding until he was told. Later, he found out he had two cracked ribs, as well.”

“I was very calm but I was thinking of the movie ‘Titanic.’ That’s my expression of it.”

“The UN lady was screaming, ‘We’re dying!’”

“Elliot acted very calm and said, ‘We’ll be OK,’ and then the car stopped, and two guys from the tower came on. Elliot was being very angry at the crane. ‘That damn crane. They’re sup-

See **Passengers**, page 3

Pages of Opinion

Thanksgiving

No, my calendar isn't going berserk. I am just giving thanks that more of us weren't injured and that those of us who were hurt did not sustain life-threatening wounds when the Tram was struck by the errant crane last week. A major disaster could have occurred. It is to be hoped that the Tram will be back in service as soon as possible.

Awed by Youth

There is something else that we all should be grateful for: the Roosevelt Island Youth Program. I recently received a copy of the program's current newsletter detailing the many changes that have taken place there. In addition to physical improvements to the facilities, the bulletin cites new staff members in place and thus the expanded services being offered children here. Drop in and see for yourself how your kids might benefit.

Black History Month

It's February and time again to celebrate the achievements of those sisters and brothers, past and present, who have contributed so much to our nation's greatness and to the world. Plans for the observance on the Island still are being set. If you have ideas, call Lael Freeman, 212-759-3037.

Women's Rights-150

In July, we'll all celebrate an event that reshaped the world's thinking: In Seneca Falls, N.Y., the first Women's Rights Convention was held in 1848. At that time, women did not have the freedoms meted out to men in the eyes of the law, church or government, including many that now are taken for granted. On July 16 to 19, the Convention will be recreated daily and programs will feature leading women in politics, sports, entertainment and the arts. Perhaps Island women could sponsor a miniature convention here?



Be Still, My Heart

Before I forget, there is another observance fast approaching that I want to be certain to celebrate. It's Valentine's Day. As I recall, last year I paid tribute to a number of women who had won my heart for their good works for the Island, much as I cited others during Women's History Month. This Valentine's Day, I'm not going to mention any names. One never can tell who is taking notes or recording them for the Special Prosecutor. I'll just say I love you all.

What's Your Gripe?

The Better Business Bureau has listed the industries with the most complaints received for 1997. Ranked first is mail order and direct marketing, followed by automotive, home improvement, consumer electronics, household and office furnishings, publishing, travel, financial services, moving and storage and health and beauty.



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Letters

To the Editor
The New York Times:

I was appalled to read your article *Tramless Days on Roosevelt Island* (Metro, Jan. 29) which jumped to the outrageous and inaccurate conclusion that the Tram is dispensable. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Tram is a critical piece of the City's mass transit infrastructure. Some 3,000 New Yorkers — a great many of them seniors, disabled persons, and schoolchildren — use the Tram each day because they see it as a safer and faster alternative to the subway. This is a significant number, given that Roosevelt Island has only 8,000 residents.

But what I find most disturbing is that The Times implies that the Tram is obsolete merely because it "does not pay the bills." Almost no mass transit system in the world makes money. If turning a profit is your measure of viability, we might as well shut down all of our subways, our buses, and our roads, for that matter.

Your article also allows a Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation (RIOC) spokesman to dismiss the importance of the Tram as a "nice icon." Such a statement once again shows how out of touch RIOC is with the Island's residents — a problem which your paper has covered in past articles. To the people who live there, the Tram is more than an icon; it is the Statue of Liberty and the George Washington Bridge rolled into one. It is a symbol of the Island's spirit and a truly indispensable part of daily life.

Gifford Miller
City Council Member
Fifth District - Manhattan

To the Editor,
The New York Times:

It would be unfortunate for all New Yorkers if the recent Tramway incident served as an excuse to permanently shut down the Tram. Given the recent history of accidents caused by the rehabilitation of the 59th Street Bridge (including the crane hitting the Tram) it sounds to be a much more dangerous undertaking than the Tramway. In the more than 25 years of its operation, the Tram has proven to be an energy-efficient, safe and inexpensive way of transporting large numbers of people. It's also become a New York City icon, tourist attraction, and symbol of the City's ingenuity, linking a unique residential community in the middle of the East River, to Manhattan.

The Tram should really be regarded as the Island's bus, necessary, despite the subway, as bus service is a necessity in other New York City neighborhoods serviced by the subway system. As welcome as the subway was when it arrived almost 20 years late, it does not make the Tram either redundant or obsolete. Planned as a unique residential community, particularly for families with young children, the elderly and disabled, many Roosevelt Island residents can't use the subway, much as their counterparts must rely on bus transport in other parts of the City, despite available subway service.

And how would Roosevelt Islanders travel to work, school, the doctor, if subway service is delayed or interrupted, as so often happens? You can't hop a cab across the river. As New York City residents, Roosevelt Islanders deserve to have a secondary means of mass transportation, just like their bus-riding neighbors across the water.

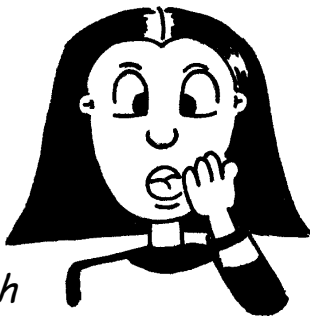
Rosina K. Abramson
President of RIOC, 1986-91

Letters Policy

The WIRE welcomes letters to the Editor, to the community, and to officials, and will consider publication *Name Withheld* basis, but the writer's name, address, and telephone number must be provided. Preferred methods of submission: IBM-compatible 3.5" floppy disk (any word-processing software) left at 531 Main Street for *The WIRE*; by ASCII text email (72260.20@compuserve.com); or typed, double-spaced copy left at 531 Main Street or faxed to (212) 755-2540. All letters are subject to editing for length and clarity.



The Tram is out... indefinitely



Oh, Oh



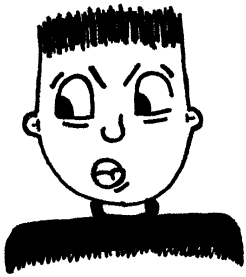
It's OK. Take the Q-102 bus.



Not going my way.



Use the subway.



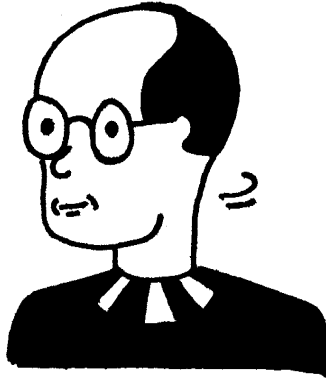
Not safe enough.



Then use your car.



At Motorgate rates, I should keep a car?



I've got it...



Water wings!

This terrifying Tramway accident could, and should, have been avoided but for the gross negligence of RIOC. Blue has been told again and again that the elimination of Console Operators must inevitably lead to injury. Blue has stated publicly that he planned to save more than \$160,000 with that personnel cutback. He has admitted to me personally that he did not, in fact, save one dime.

I was given the opportunity Sunday night to speak with some of those injured in this accident. I wish I could

express their heartrending trauma. I simply do not possess the eloquence. But I can speak of one telling incident.

One of the injured went to R.I.O.C. in order to give them her name. A courteous gesture, given

the circumstances. She was told by the receptionist to get herself a lawyer. He didn't want her name.

We are accustomed, by now, to the outrageous behavior of Jerome Blue and his staff. I no longer expect professionalism, or even common courtesy, from anyone at RIOC. But I will admit that even I have been surprised at the stony silence we residents have encountered on this matter. The pink Tram notice with the unqualified statement that the Tram will be shut down indefinitely, the "helpful" list of alternative transportation, the unreturned phone calls, the unavailable appointments.

Inconveniently, Blue was previously scheduled to see a number of us the day following the accident on another matter. When we arrived, he was gone. Unreachable, according to his staff.

He's been unreachable, all right. For eighteen months he's been unreachable.

He would love to use this incident to shut down the Tram for good, as he has been trying all along to do.

Collision from page 1

swung wildly – "so wildly that I thought it would jump off the cables," says an experienced Tramway observer who has asked to remain unnamed – so wildly that those in the cabin, almost all of whom had been thrown to the floor, elected to stay there even after ordinary impulse told them they might stand again.

Facts

The accident is being investigated by New York State, as required by law, and an official report will ultimately be issued. But some key facts have been established through conversations with informed observers and those at the scene at the time of the collision:

- No Console Operator was on duty at the time of the accident. Though a supervisor was in the console booth because maintenance workers were on the tower, he was not functioning as a Console Operator – not there to monitor the Tram's proximity to the crane. Console operators were eliminated by RIOC in the Fall of 1997 in an attempt to economize.

- After the accident, a RIOC spokesperson asserted at first that a Console Operator would not have been able to see the accident, later that there was a Console Operator on duty. Those familiar with Tramway operation say a Console Operator, functioning in that capacity, would have had a clear view of the accident about to happen.

- The automatic limit switches, set up when the crane operation began, were supposed to keep the crane at least 12 feet from the Tram. There is speculation, as yet unconfirmed, that the limit switches were not restored after an overnight period of crane activity during Tramway down time.

- A representative of the crane operator has offered to pay medical expenses for at least one injured passenger.

- Two trips prior to the accident, children and wheelchair-bound riders were aboard.

- RIOC President Jerome Blue did not go to the scene of the accident.

- The Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation has made no known attempts to contact the passengers who were injured.

A group of passengers who were injured have gathered to discuss the possibility of legal action. Patrick Stewart, President of the Roosevelt Island Residents Association, has suggested that a suit against RIOC and RIOC executives might be appropriate. "We warned them repeatedly," Stewart says, "that elimination of the

Perhaps someone who can reach him will explain to him that this is a State-run community, with hundreds of disabled people who are subsidized by the State to live here, and that he is required by law to provide them access to Manhattan if they receive medical attention there. Many of them work or go to school. Through the wisdom of the State, our subway stop does not provide full handicapped access.

Those of us who have lived here before Blue's reign remember that any shutdown of the Tram for whatever reason was accompanied by immediate provision of bus service to 59th Street and Second Avenue. It took all week to convince Blue that it was necessary.

His response was to place calls after hours Friday night to the members of the Board of Directors, asking them to grant him permission to use the residents' Public Purpose Funds to provide the necessary bus service. He did this with the full knowledge that the State of New York had already authorized emergency funds specifically for this purpose. Read that sentence again.

Jerry Blue, during his tenure here, has made many, many mistakes. If there is any justice, he has just made his last.

RIOC has put forth any number of direct lies during this difficult week. By Friday's edition we shall address them in full.

There is one RIOC employee who has come out of this terrible incident a hero. Everyone that was on that fateful Tram ride has nothing but praise for Elliot Isaac, the cabin attendant, who behaved with masterful calm and caring professionalism throughout. Our community will be forever indebted to him.



Patrick Stewart

Console Operators would reduce the safety of the operation."

Aftermath

Immediately after the damaged car docked in Manhattan, perhaps a dozen passengers left the station, but some 20 registered their presence on a sheet of paper that Public Safety holds, and eleven were taken to hospitals — at least one on a stretcher, another in a wheelchair, others limping or dazed.

Some injuries drew blood, while others went unnoticed in the excitement, even until the next day when pain presented itself unexpectedly as notice of damage or a strain.

RIOC announced, at first, that Tramway service would be suspended for about a week, then changed the time period to "indefinite" in notices posted on Island kiosks.

RIRA President Stewart and five other Islanders secured a next-day appointment with RIOC President Blue, who then failed to show up and sent two deputies in his place. The residents then decided to leave for lack of a RIOC decision-maker who could respond to the crisis

actively.

Unlike custom established in all past interruptions of Tramway service, by the weekend RIOC had still not provided alternative transportation for schoolchildren and the disabled. On Friday, though the State had provided emergency funds for bus service, RIOC President Blue faxed members of the RIOC Board of Directors asking authorization to spend \$20,000 of Island public purpose funds for bus service. (Public purpose funds are earmarked for Island social purposes, not as RIOC emergency money.)

RIRA, which was already planning a Town Meeting on transit in the face of impending subway service cuts and lack of Metrocard transfers from the Tramway, held an emergency Common Council meeting Sunday night, confirming a Town Meeting for tonight.

About **EXTRA** editions of *The Main Street WIRE*: When community news warrants and adequate advertising sponsorship is available, *The WIRE* may publish an **EXTRA** edition, which may not carry all the normal features or advertising of a scheduled issue. **Advertisers who wish to register their interest in appearing without advance notice in one or more EXTRA editions are asked to call 826-9055.**



Guy Midkiff

This multi-alarm fire last week in 2/4 River Road, believed to have started in a heating unit, destroyed the apartment of Steven and Joan Raimone and their two children. An ad hoc group is taking donations of funds and furniture at **758-6560** (or c/o John Miller, 531 Main Street #204).

Passengers from page 1

posed to inform us, they're not supposed to be in this position.'

"Someone told the operator to call for an ambulance.

"I left the tram. I was able to walk, and I was on the way to Crunch [gym], when my head started bothering me, because I had bumped my head, and I had a little cut on my elbow. I spoke to my husband on the phone and decided I should go to the hospital. I saw a lot of ambulances, the firefighters, and some TV crews. I went to the token booth and I was asked, 'Why are you here? The Tram is closed.' I told them I was on the Tram and I put my name on the list. We saw two guys – one who was bleeding from the face...

"I could walk, so I wrote down my name and went to my appointment but by the time I reached my appointment the pain was coming up from my ankle, and by the time the meeting was finished, on the way home, my whole left leg was hurting. It was so strange – I didn't know what was hurting it. Then the next day I looked at my foot and at the ankle there was a dark circle around the ankle and it was black and blue and I thought it... and it was just a strange pain, so I decided to go to a doctor.

"The next morning I started to have neck pain so my husband and I went to the doctor. I got really strong pain killers that sometimes make me feel stoned... This makes my life crazy because my kids go to school at PS6, and I pick them up from the school bus, and I need my husband's help.

"I went to RIOC [the next day]. I didn't know if anybody was going to pay for medical expenses, so I went to RIOC. The receptionist, a black man, asked me, 'Do you have an attorney? Get a lawyer,' he said. He didn't take my name or anything, and didn't seem to have any instructions on how to handle it.

"I don't blame the Tram. I think eventually I would take it again because I would want to overcome the fear. We were suspended there and I thought we were going to drop. It was the crane, not the Tram people, and I should take it again, just to overcome my fear.

"Yesterday I saw them trying the Tram, and I could see it from the window. I know maybe I'll have to take it, but will I take my kids on the Tram? I don't know. There is a first time for everything, and anything can happen...

"The subway is not 100% safe, either. I would not take a subway late at night. [Even after this accident] I feel the Tram is safer.

"In my case I need [the Tram]. The Tram is very important for me. The tram is safer than the subway, and the subway is going to land only every 20 minutes [after the scheduled February 22 service cut]. My family and I were talking about how convenient the Tramway is – every 15 minutes. If the Tram is fixed, 100 percent, I would like to use it.

"I think the Tram was really strong and well-maintained to withstand this accident.

"I think Elliot was good," said Marie Khan Kacou. "He was very cool. He said, 'We'll be fine, we'll be fine.' After that he said, 'We're going to land. We're going to make it.'" Joyce Ayoub Trojanovic concurred: "He calmed the people. He was angry with the crane."

Asked their feelings about having had no contact from the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation, Ryoko Takaki said, "It doesn't surprise me. I've heard so much negative..." Marie Khan Kacou said, "I thought even if maybe they didn't have the names that maybe there would be an announcement – people involved please contact – but there was nothing like that. We were worried about the guy we left lying there – is he OK?"

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TOWN MEETING TONIGHT
Make our voices heard on the transit crisis
Chapel of the Good Shepherd, 8:00 p.m.

**Special Message to the
ROOSEVELT ISLAND COMMUNITY**

**WHAT DOES the CRANE-TRAM
ACCIDENT MEAN to US NOW?**

It means that the long-standing opposition of the community to the elimination of the Tram Console Operators, with 18–21 years of experience, points up, more than ever, that Tram accidents can happen at any time. It points up more than ever the imperative necessity for the immediate restoration of the Console Operators in order to provide a greater margin of safety for tram operation, where the instantaneous response of the Console Operator can avert “an accident about to happen,” as has happened so many times in the past years.

In September of 1996, when Dr. Blue had already been in office for several months and when the plan to eliminate the Console Operators had not yet been implemented, I met with Dr. Blue on two occasions.

I pleaded with Dr. Blue not to carry out such a radical undertaking, that the community was overwhelmingly opposed to the elimination of the Console Operators. He refused.

I pleaded with Dr. Blue to suspend final action for 30 days to allow for a further review, for further discussion with community leaders. He refused.

I pointed out that all of our elected officials had opposed the elimination of the Console Operators. No matter, he refused. I pleaded with him. He rejected all appeals.

Today, we can all see the value of having Console Operators in place. Will Dr. Blue listen to us now?

It is time for all of us to stand together in a sense of unity and togetherness and demand the immediate restoration of the Tram Console Operators. Let us make our voices heard for right and justice.

**BE SURE TO ATTEND THE CRITICAL
COMMUNITY MEETING WEDNESDAY
EVENING AT 8:00 IN THE CHAPEL**

Roosevelt Island Residents Association
Al Weinstein
Chair, Tram Committee

The Roosevelt Island Historical Society
presents

**WINDOWS
ON WELFARE**

**A PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORY OF ROOSEVELT ISLAND IN 1968
by Danielle B. Hayes**



Roosevelt Island Cultural Center
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February 12th to March 15th, 1998
Opening Reception Thursday, February 12th
Exhibit Hours: Fridays 8–10 p.m., Sat.-Sun. 1-5 p.m.