



New York City Transit Needs

*A Report on the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's
2000–2004 Capital Program.*

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Speaker of the Assembly

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Introduction

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) released its 2000-2004 Capital Program in October 1999. The \$17.5 billion plan contains \$14.5 billion for its maintenance and replacement program. But, for the first time in decades, the MTA program includes money, \$3 billion, for much-needed system expansion. Two of the main components in MTA's expansion plan are the design and engineering of a 3.8-mile section of the long-awaited Second Avenue Subway in Manhattan and the construction of the East Side Access Project to provide direct access for Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) passengers to Grand Central Terminal.

■ Second Avenue Subway

The MTA's proposal to fund engineering studies and design plans for only a 3.8-mile line from 63rd Street to 125th Street for the Second Avenue Subway, rather than the "full-build" option, has encountered serious criticism. According to a spokesman for the Regional Plan Association, "*The need for a Second Avenue Subway is apparent to everyone. Thus, 1999 is an historic moment, an opportunity to finish what was started a generation ago.*"

The MTA partial line proposal fails to address critical issues such as:

- access to adequate transportation for residents of the East Side's large and growing neighborhoods, especially the elderly and the poor;
- commuter service to large areas of the City experiencing rapid economic development, especially in Midtown and the Wall Street financial district; and

- the critical overcrowding of the Lexington Avenue Subway.

These needs must be met if New York is to build on the current wave of growth in its economy.

■ East Side Access

The MTA's proposal to provide commuters from Long Island with direct access to Manhattan's East Side has its positive points. However, the MTA has not coordinated planning for the East Side Access Project and the Second Avenue Subway. Under the present plan, the East Side Access Project would be completed six years before the completion of any part of the Second Avenue Subway, resulting in immediate, serious, additional congestion to the Lexington Avenue Subway Line. The planning for the East Side Access Project and the Second Avenue Subway must be coordinated to avoid undermining the improvement of the neighborhoods and workplaces of New York.

■ "No New Diesel" Policy for Buses

The MTA proposes in its 2000-2004 Capital Program to build and refurbish several bus depots and purchase 1,056 new buses. For the most part, the MTA plans to replace diesel buses with diesel buses. In view of the serious air pollution problems in the City, it is unacceptable for the MTA to pass up this opportunity to replace heavily polluting diesel buses with environmentally sound buses. It is critical for the MTA to adopt a "No New Diesel" policy to clean up the air in New York City.



The MTA's 2000–2004 Capital Program

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) released its 2000–2004 Capital Program in October 1999. After years of simply maintaining its existing system, the MTA now has the resources to play “catch-up.” For this reason, it is finally proposing to expand the system to serve New York City’s transit needs that for too long have gone unmet. The MTA is at last ready to position the system to help New York and New Yorkers achieve the great potential now at hand in the new century.

On November 3, 1999, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, in conjunction with the Assembly Committee on Corporations, Authorities and Commissions, Committee on Labor, Committee on Transportation, Committee on Ways and Means and Commission on Critical Transportation Choices, held a public hearing in New York City to receive comment from civic leaders, advocates and affected citizens on the MTA’s Capital Program. More than 50 parties presented testimony.

■ Second Avenue Subway

The MTA’s proposal relating to the Second Avenue Subway has drawn severe criticism from civic leaders and citizens alike. Even though a Quinnipiac College poll showed that more than 75 percent of New Yorkers support the “full-build” Second Avenue Subway, the MTA’s plan recommends building only a 3.8-mile line from 125th Street to 63rd Street. This scaled-back line would provide limited service only from the Upper East Side to Midtown Manhattan.

To begin this truncated project, nicknamed the “Stubway” by its critics, the MTA has allocated \$700 million for the new Second Avenue Subway to pay for engineering studies and final design plans. Construction is not expected to begin on the first tunnel portion between 63rd Street and 92nd Street until the end of the 2000–2004 Capital Program. The MTA estimates that the project would be fully completed in 2015. The plan

makes no provision or commitment related to the remainder of the Second Avenue Line, first identified as an “urgent need” in 1950.

■ The Need for a “Full-build” Second Avenue Subway Line

Since the removal of the Second Avenue Elevated Line in 1940 and the Third Avenue Elevated Line in 1955, the East Side of Manhattan has been served only by the Lexington Avenue Subway Line. As early as 1950, the need for a Second Avenue Subway was deemed “urgent.” Since that time, the need has only become more urgent. Without the additional subway line on the East Side, the current transportation system is severely out of alignment with the new neighborhoods and new job centers that have developed throughout Manhattan’s East Side.

■ Service to Neighborhoods

New York City has undergone tremendous changes since the subway system was planned and constructed in the early 1900s. New residential areas have arisen; old neighborhoods have evolved, expanded and become prosperous; and commercial and business centers have grown beyond all expectations. The transportation needs of these areas, especially on the East Side, are underserved, and, where service exists it is uncomfortable, crowded and unreliable. That is why the City, and particularly the East Side, needs a “full-build” Second Avenue Subway as soon as possible.

According to the MTA’s own study, nearly 50 percent of residents on the East Side of Manhattan are underserved by the current transit system. Residents of the Upper East Side (an estimated 118,000) and the Lower East Side (an estimated 113,000) have to walk more than ten minutes to the nearest subway station.

As the Regional Plan Association's Metrolink study points out, New York City planners prepared long ago for a Second Avenue Subway Line to serve the East Side. Much of the Upper East Side was rezoned to allow the construction of high-rise residential apartments in anticipation of a new East Side subway line. Those high-rise apartments were built, but the Second Avenue Subway was not. It is the residents of the high-rise residential apartment buildings that fill the Lexington Avenue Line to overflowing each workday.

The situation in the Lower East Side may be even worse. The Lower East Side is an intense, vibrant community that is being revitalized with a housing boom and an influx of new shopping centers. Joel Kaplan, Executive Director of the United Jewish Council of the East Side, Inc., testified at the Assembly public hearing that the Lower East Side is one of the most densely populated areas in the City, with nearly 200,000 people per square mile in some places. The Lower East Side has the second largest concentration of low-income housing in New York City, and there are 29,000 people over the age of 62 living in the Lower East Side. This large population of low income families and the elderly is highly dependent on public transportation to travel to work, to the store, to the doctor, to visit family and friends — to live a normal life.

The Lower East Side is also an area that suffers from a striking lack of transportation options. The two most crowded subway lines in New York, the Queens Boulevard Line and the Lexington Avenue Line, serve portions of the area. In most sections of the Lower East Side, the subway is largely inaccessible. *"Many people ... who live in the Lower East Side, as I do,"* retired schoolteacher and tenant spokesman Leo Hoenig told the hearing, *"have a long walk or must take a crosstown bus, if one even exists, to get to ... any subway."*

Parts of Lower East Side and Chinatown neighborhoods rely solely on bus service that is largely inadequate. Witnesses at the Assembly's public hearing testified that the bus schedules are continually cut back and that buses break down. In addition, bus service is vulnerable to weather, contributes to traffic congestion and worsens noise and environmental pollution.

The MTA's existing public transit system cannot be relied upon to serve the great numbers of elderly and low-income residents of the Lower East Side. Much of the elderly population relies almost completely on public transportation for doctor's visits and to keep them from becoming homebound. A new "full-build" Second Avenue Subway would not only meet the critical needs of the Lower East Side's changing demographics, but would also provide an opportunity to design and build a system that is compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

■ Service to Business and Commercial Districts

A "full-build" Second Avenue Subway is not only essential to serve East Side residential communities, but is also a critical element of a sound economy for the City, the State and the Region. In testifying at the Assembly public hearing, New York City Public Advocate Mark Green called the Second Avenue Subway *"an essential artery in our economic circulatory system."*

The historical investments made in the region's transportation infrastructure have helped spur the economic resurgence underway today. New York City has recovered from its fiscal crisis of the 1970s and has rebounded from the 1989 recession. Today, the economy is revitalized and growing stronger. New York City is forecast to add 210,000 jobs during the next five years. According to the 1990 Census, 1.2 million people work on the East Side of Manhattan. Nearly one-half of those people are employed in the East Midtown area and one-third are employed in Lower Manhattan. The MTA's partial line proposal would fail to serve all the commuters who must travel below Grand Central Terminal to work. Without safe, efficient and reliable transportation, New York City's ability to capitalize on projected job growth will be severely hindered. New York cannot attract new jobs if people cannot get to those jobs.

Since transportation infrastructure links people and jobs, it is important to consider the scale and density of employment a "full-build" Second Avenue Subway would serve. The employment density of Manhattan is more than 71,000 persons per square mile, and in the central

business district (CBD) south of 60th Street the employment density is more than 211,000 persons per square mile. Every business day, 3.2 million people enter Manhattan's CBD to go to work, more than the business districts of Tokyo, Paris or London. (See "*Transportation Infrastructure and New York's Competitiveness*," Citizens' Budget Commission, June 1999.)

On the East Side, the midtown area is a major office center. The area has 10 new office buildings either in the planning phase or under construction. Three of these locations are around Grand Central Terminal. Lower Manhattan, home to Wall Street and the World Trade Center, is a world-class business district with more than 120 million square feet of office space. Only Midtown Manhattan and Chicago have larger business districts. (See "*Lower Manhattan Alternatives Study*," Federal Transit Administration, June 1998.) While the economic climate of Lower Manhattan has improved in recent years with strong job growth, projections call for even greater job growth in the future. Lower Manhattan has the potential to become a 24-hour community of residents, office workers, and tourists. A "full-build" Second Avenue Subway will support that transformation.

■ Relieving Overcrowding and Unreliable Service

Financial investments, fare policies, and a favorable economy have led to record ridership numbers. Subway ridership is at its highest point in nearly thirty years. According to the MTA, subway ridership is up 17 percent in the past three years, and bus ridership has increased 18 percent on weekdays and 32 percent on weekends. However, the MTA has not provided a corresponding increase in service. The Straphangers Campaign points out that subway service has increased only four percent during the same three-year period, and, according to the Regional Plan Association, the MTA plans only a two percent increase in service over the next five years. System capacity has not kept pace with the impressive ridership gains.

Nowhere is the need for traffic relief more serious than the Lexington Avenue Subway. The MTA estimated that in 1996 the line handled 26,900 passengers (102% of capacity) during the peak hour. If the Lexington Avenue Line experienced even the average increase in ridership since that time, its peak load currently would be 119% of capacity. It is perpetually overcrowded and unreliable. Daily riders on the Lexington Avenue Line characterize their experience as "dangerous," "demoralizing," "dramatic," "elbows-in-the-ribs," "intolerable" and "horrible." One commentator did some legal research and determined that passengers on the Lexington Avenue Line must endure higher densities than are legally permitted for cattle transport.

When a subway line is consistently over capacity, the boarding problems and resulting delays make reliable service impossible. With the persistent crowded conditions, it is not surprising that the Straphangers Campaign gave the Lexington Avenue Line its lowest on-time rating among New York City subways, based on MTA data. Subway delays mean that frustrated commuters must pile onto overcrowded platforms, hoping to push their way onto the next train. Witnesses at the Assembly hearing testified that riders often have to wait on the platform while two or three trains filled to capacity pass by.

Frank McArdle, President of the General Contractors Association testified that in the last two years, 20,000 more subway riders get on and off the Lexington line in the residential corridor between 125th Street and 68th Street. Almost 50,000 new passengers have been using the Lexington Avenue Line stations between 59th Street and 14th Street. There is also growth from 14th Street south to Bowling Green. Ridership on the entire Lexington Avenue Line continues to grow and the overcrowding continues to worsen.

Furthermore, the Manhattan East Side Access Study (MESA) proposal to provide surface transportation as an alternative transit option for those who must travel below Grand Central Terminal is simply unworkable. A "full-build" Second Avenue Subway is key to relieving overcrowding on the city's subway system.

■ East Side Access Project

The MTA plans an additional expansion project, known as East Side Access. The East Side Access Project will provide passengers coming from Long Island with direct access to Manhattan's East Side, delivering passengers to Grand Central Terminal, thereby relieving congestion at Penn Station.

To accommodate the additional rail service into Grand Central Terminal, new tracks and platforms will be constructed in the lower level of Grand Central Terminal. Passengers will access the street level through new and existing points at the south and north ends of Grand Central Terminal. In addition, the project proposes the construction of a new passenger station at Queens Boulevard in Sunnyside, Queens.

The East Side Access Project will be a great benefit to Long Island commuters. It is projected to permit 24 trains per hour to reach Grand Central Terminal, for an increase in capacity of approximately 35,000 people per hour or more than 70,000 commuters during the full morning peak. The MTA estimates that by 2020, there will be 172,000 riders each day entering Grand Central Terminal to or from the Long Island Rail Road.

On the other hand, the East Side Access Project would not be such a benefit to riders on the Lexington Avenue Line. Of the new arrivals from the Long Island Rail Road to Grand Central Terminal, some 6,000 additional riders an hour would board the Lexington Avenue Line during the peak periods, according to the MTA. The Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA puts the number at more than 7,000 additional rush-hour riders per hour. Testimony at the Assembly hearing, on behalf of the East Sixties Neighborhood Association, Inc., estimates that more than 19,000 commuters per day will take the Lexington Avenue Line at Grand Central Terminal. The Lexington Avenue Line cannot absorb that number of new riders without raising safety concerns and affecting economic growth.

According to the proposed plan, the East Side Access Project is scheduled to be completed six years before the anticipated completion of the abridged Second Av-

enue Line. Lexington Avenue Line riders would have to suffer this increased crowding for six years before experiencing even the small relief provided by the short section of the Second Avenue Subway. The fact that plans for the East Side Access Project have not been coordinated with that of the Second Avenue Subway reflects poor planning and a shortsighted approach by the MTA. The East Side Access Project would have a serious negative impact on the Lexington Avenue Line and exacerbate some of the problems that the Second Avenue Subway would address.

The MTA needs to reevaluate the East Side Access Project plans in coordination with its review of its Second Avenue Subway plans. There is no question that any facility expansion can cause problems during construction periods. However, to add so many more commuters into an already overburdened system six years before any relief can be realized by that system seems to be the epitome of inadequate planning.

■ “No New Diesel” Policy

With more than 4,000 buses on the streets each day, the MTA operates the largest fleet of diesel transit buses in the nation. The proposed Capital Program calls for buying more than 1,056 badly-needed new buses for the system. Of the 1,056 buses the MTA plans on buying, 756 will be standard high-polluting diesel buses and only the remaining 300 will be so-called “clean-fuel” buses. However, the MTA has not said how many would be compressed natural gas (CNG) buses and how many would be hybrid buses that burn diesel fuel for their primary power. The MTA has adopted a diesel policy that is inconsistent, dangerous and inherently inequitable.

The need to switch from diesel to less-polluting buses has been recognized by transit agencies throughout the country and in New York State. Syracuse is committed to a “No New Diesel” policy, and the New York City Department of Transportation has been steadily converting its 1,100 buses to CNG. Atlanta has committed to CNG and has converted most of its bus fleet. Even the MTA has committed to an all-CNG policy for Long Island Bus by 2004. Its policy for New York City Transit is markedly different, however.

People testifying at the Assembly hearing point to compelling environmental and public considerations to support a “No New Diesel” policy:

- Diesel exhaust is New York City’s number one air pollution threat. Residents breathe more diesel emissions than anyone else in the nation.
- Diesel-caused airborne toxins are 421 times greater than the recommended safe level in Manhattan and 320 times greater than the recommended safe level in Brooklyn.
- East Harlem has the highest per capita rate of asthma in the United States.
- The Bronx has the highest rate of asthma-induced pediatric hospitalizations.
- Manhattan is the only non-attainment area in the eastern U.S. for particulate matter from human sources. More than half of these particles come from diesel exhaust.
- Particulate matter from all sources exceeds the Federal Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) health standards, and actually increased by approximately 20 percent in 1998.
- Fine particulate emissions in Manhattan are now double the pending EPA health standard.
- The downstate region is classified as a “severe” non-attainment area for ozone. Only Los Angeles has a worse ranking.
- One-third of the ozone-forming nitrogen oxides in the northeast comes from diesels.

The alarming health risks posed by diesel pollution has prompted elected officials and the affected community to call for the immediate adoption of a “No New Diesel” policy.

Thomas Maguire, President of the International Union of Operating Engineers, has seen the high asthma rates and other respiratory ailments in his membership. In his hearing testimony, Maguire said, *“We in the labor movement share the goals of many of our colleagues in the environmental groups. We all want clean air for our children and grandchildren.”*

Despite the compelling reasons for implementing cleaner alternatives to the conventional diesel bus, the MTA will use more than 80 percent of its bus money for New York City to purchase 756 new diesel buses, build two new diesel bus depots and expand at least six of its existing diesel bus depots. The dirty diesel legacy will last well into the next millennium, as diesel buses purchased in 2004 will remain in service until 2019-2022.

According to the proposed plan, the MTA will purchase only 300 new “clean-fuel” buses. The new investment will bring the NYCT clean-fuel bus commitment to 760, roughly 18 percent of the fleet. However, the MTA is not expanding the number of depots that can service CNG buses. Without a commitment to CNG depot conversion, the program is effectively capped at this level.

The issue of depots deserves particular mention. Obviously, diesel buses need diesel bus depots, and CNG buses need CNG bus depots. Diesel bus depots are concentrators of harmful diesel emissions. One union spokesman told the Assembly hearing that in the depot, *“the diesel fumes are so thick you often can’t see the orange [safety] vests [worn by employees],”* and *“most of our guys are walking around coughing because of all the diesel fumes they’re breathing in....”* These concentrations of diesel fumes are harmful not only to MTA employees, but also to the surrounding neighborhoods with their children, elderly and at risk residents. Reducing the number of diesel buses through a “No New Diesel” policy reduces the need for additional diesel depot capacity and, in the end, would phase out all of these pollution centers to the benefit of employees and affected communities.

MTA officials have not identified the type of “clean-fuel” buses they are planning to purchase. Rather than choosing clean burning CNG buses, the MTA is more likely to purchase hybrid buses that still use diesel fuel to power electric generators. These “clean-diesel” engines, dubbed an “oxymoron” by the Natural Resources Defense Council and the City’s Environmental Justice Alliance, utilize a technology that has not been fully tested. Even granting without such evidence that they represent some improvement over the conventional diesel bus, their smog-forming and unhealthy particulate emissions are far higher than the well-proven CNG buses.

Calling MTA's proposal to purchase new diesel buses "*the really ugly part of the Capital Plan,*" Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields testified at the Assembly hearing, "*The MTA should not buy new buses unless they are powered by clean fuel.*"

It is impossible to disagree with this. Nothing is more important to the quality of life in New York than the

health of its people, especially its children. The epidemic of asthma, especially in children, must be stopped. The quality of the air that New Yorkers breathe has to be improved. No one can claim that diesel buses contribute to a solution of this problem. Substituting 1,056 new CNG buses for diesel buses would represent a giant step in the right direction.



Conclusion

The MTA is charged with the responsibility for: operating a transit system for the benefit of the people of New York; improving their quality of life; transporting them to work and other destinations; bolstering the local economy; and performing these functions without making it impossible for them to breathe clean air.

The new Five-Year Capital Program must take into account the necessary level of service for residential neighborhoods as well as business districts. Such an analysis could only conclude in favor a "full-build" Second Avenue Subway, in proper coordination with the East Side Access Project. The need for this critical line has gone unfilled for far too long. The MTA must reconsider its expansion plans, at the very least, to give proper consideration to the Second Avenue Subway and to coordinate that project with the East Side Access Project. The MTA must fund the planning of a "full-build" Second Avenue Subway.

Finally, there is no choice for the MTA but to adopt a "No New Diesel" policy. Clean air has to be an imperative for a transit system that now contributes to New York's serious air pollution problem. The people of New York deserve no less.

The MTA's Five-Year Capital Program affords an opportunity for the citizens of New York to help decide the future of their City in the new century. The process of approving this program will help provide input and direction to assist the MTA in delivering to the City, the region, and the State, all of the benefits they have so patiently waited for and truly deserve.