

Long-delayed Second Avenue subway extension opens in New York City

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On New Year's Day, the first phase of New York City's Second Avenue subway opened for regular service on the Upper East Side of Manhattan after decades of delays. There was much media fanfare to mark the opening, although the subway extension is only a small fraction of the original goal. Democratic governor Andrew Cuomo and state officials and TWU Local 100 president John Samuelsen were on hand for the opening ceremony photo op.

The new service is an extension of the existing Q line that runs from Brooklyn and along Broadway in Manhattan before turning east on the southern edge of Central Park. There are three stations and approximately two miles of new tunnel. The project cost \$4.5 billion.

Cost had been one of the major obstacles to building the stations, and funding from the federal government has been inadequate. On the local level politicians claimed the money simply was not there.

The line was originally proposed in 1919 but plans were shelved when the Great Depression hit. Work actually began on the line in the early 1970s but was halted by the city's financial crisis. Following years of delays, primarily due to the lack of funding, the project began to go forward in 2007.

The Second Avenue subway line is still decades away from being complete. Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) plans envision a line stretching from Harlem to the financial district in lower Manhattan via Second Avenue. According to the MTA website this will be carried out in three more phases. No dates or details on funding have been made available. It remains to be seen when and if this line will ever be completed.

Mass transit was first developed in New York City in the early 20th century, initially under private ownership, to bring large numbers of workers to jobs

but also to make largescale residential housing development possible in what was then farmland. Areas like The Grand Concourse in the Bronx and Jackson Heights in Queens, among others, saw the construction of large apartment buildings and developments in the ensuing decades, especially in the 1920s. Real estate developers made fortunes in the process.

Infrastructure development continues to benefit the real estate industry today, but in vastly transformed social and economic circumstances. The industry and the city government's goal is no longer to link affordable housing for workers to their jobs, but to build transportation infrastructure that will allow big real estate to speculate on rising rents and housing costs for the wealthy.

Accessibility to transportation heavily influences real estate values in New York City. In the largely working class borough of Queens, for example, a construction boom of high-priced rentals and condos continues on its western edge, which is served by numerous subway and bus lines offering quick access to Manhattan. Throughout western Queens real estate prices are skyrocketing.

In sharp contrast, ten miles away in southeast Queens, where there is a dearth of public transit providing access to jobs, there is a foreclosure crisis, as many properties have never recovered from the 2008 crash.

The area served by the new Second Avenue stations is among the most affluent in the city. The extension in its current phase stops at 96th street, abruptly short of much poorer working class areas uptown. 96th Street has long been considered a dividing line between the well-heeled Upper East Side and working class neighborhoods in East Harlem, although the gentrification of Harlem in recent years has begun to blur this divide.

The Upper East Side area is also one of the most densely populated in the United States. Overcrowding on the only other eastside line, running along Lexington Avenue, is so severe that it threatens to limit further residential development in the area by making it impossible for more people to commute to their jobs and elsewhere.

Along with the subway extension, however, much higher rents and housing costs are expected in the neighborhood. Residents may find that the added travel convenience is more than offset by skyrocketing rents that force them out of the area.

Curbed NY reports that rents have already been increasing significantly, in anticipation of the new subway extension. The *New York Times* reported, “People living near the three new stations at 72nd, 86th and 96th Streets could face rent increases as high as \$462 per month” The *New York Post* observed the new line will “be a boon for landlords.”

The real estate industry and its interests were similarly involved in the extension of the Queens No. 7 line, with the opening of a new station to serve the Hudson Yards real estate development on the far west side of Manhattan. Expedited by the administration of previous mayor Michael Bloomberg, this has become the site of huge new luxury housing as well as commercial buildings.

In contrast, there is little or no attention paid to the millions who live in the outer boroughs. The working-class Co-op City in the Bronx, for instance, home to more than 50,000 people and the largest cooperative housing complex in the US, has no direct rail access to Manhattan almost five decades after being built, despite being located in close proximity to working commuter rail lines. The ten or twelve-mile trip from outlying areas of the city can take well over an hour for those who must use buses to connect to the subways. On average, New York City workers face the longest commuting times in the US.

Governor Cuomo, playing to a general and widespread concern for inadequate and crumbling infrastructure, has been grandstanding about several prominent infrastructure projects in the state. However, much of the state’s infrastructure remains in a desperate state of disrepair and rot. The biggest beneficiary from Cuomo’s transit initiatives will be the real estate industry. Of Cuomo’s top donors, more than

half have connections to the real estate industry.

There are a total of 469 stations and 660 miles of track in the New York City public transportation network. The addition of a couple of miles of new track and three stations does not significantly increase the scale or scope of the system.

Much of the system, moreover, is in desperate need of repair. In many areas of the city’s outer boroughs, transit infrastructure is dilapidated and in disrepair after years of neglect. Elevators and escalators often do not work. Stairs and handrails are badly corroded and rusting. Service disruptions due to archaic signal and switching equipment failing are normal. When it rains, water pours down on the platforms in many stations. Last Monday there were substantial delays system-wide, reportedly caused by the melting of a small amount of snow that fell over the weekend.

The extremely modest subway extension calls attention to these much broader needs. Nor are they unique to New York City. Mass transit is inadequately funded across the US. The infrastructure needs of the wealthy are met first, with the mass of the population left behind. Claims that there are no resources for basic infrastructure and to meet the needs of the vast working class majority stand in stark contrast to the hundreds of billions of dollars allocated to the military and the trillions spent on the so-called “war on terror” over the past fifteen years.



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