

# Reports highlight the crisis of New York mass transit

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Three recent reports highlight the severity of the breakdown in infrastructure and persistent underfunding of the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), the largest mass transit system in the US, and its inability to serve the needs of society.

The first report, issued by New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer last month, explains the serious neglect to New York City's bus system.

The aging fleet, according to the report, provides slow and unreliable service on routes that no longer match commuting patterns. New York City buses move at an average rate of 7.4 miles per hour, the slowest amongst the 17 largest bus companies in the country. The buses spend slightly over half of their time in motion, and the rest of the time stopped at lights, and in bus stops collecting fares. In addition, there are only 104 dedicated miles of bus lanes along the city's 6,000 miles of roadway. This is far less than many other major cities worldwide.

With over two million riders daily, the city's buses carry more passengers than the Long Island Rail Road, Metro-North commuter rail, the PATH subway, which connects New York City and New Jersey, and New Jersey Transit combined. Because of the bus system's unreliability and slowness, however, there has been a steep drop in ridership with 100 million fewer bus passenger trips in 2016 than 2008.

The largest decline has taken place in Manhattan, a sixteen percent drop since 2011, where there are, however inadequate, subway alternatives.

However, for many workers in the other four boroughs, buses are the only means of public transportation to get to and from work and school, and it is lower-income riders in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx especially, who suffer disproportionately from the system's failures. The average income for bus

riders is \$28,455 compared to \$40,000 for subway riders.

Moreover, planning for bus routes has not considered changing travel patterns in recent years when more workplaces in the city have increasingly been outside of Manhattan and are now often service-sector jobs, which operate over a wider span of hours throughout the day and night than office and manufacturing businesses.

A second report, "Financial Outlook for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority," issued last month by New York State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, warned that if new funding for the massive New York Metropolitan Transit Authority is not found, the authority may have to raise fares and tolls more quickly than planned to stop and reverse a deterioration of the transit system.

The MTA, a state agency, is the United States' largest mass transit system, servicing nearly a third of the country's commuters. The system includes the New York City bus and subway system, the Long Island Railroad, the Metro-North railroad, and nine bridges and tunnels.

The report follows a summer of discontent by millions of New York commuters who found themselves facing significant delays and derailments of trains in the subway and on the commuter rails. Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo was forced to declare, with few tangible results, a state of emergency at the end of the June.

The report notes that by 2016, the average distance that a subway traveled before breaking down had fallen to 112,000 miles, the worst figure since 2001. The report noted that a third of the subway cars are now more than 30 years old and about 40 percent of the signals are more than 50 years old. More than one-third of the 201 tunnel emergency ventilation plants are more

than 50 years old and have never been rehabilitated and over half the tunnels are not protected by ventilation.

Two of the four tunnels that were severely damaged by Hurricane Sandy in 2012 have still not been repaired.

Although the transit agency has spent more than \$120 billion since its first capital improvement program in 1982, the funding has not kept up with the need. While the MTA has an \$836 million action plan for infrastructure improves, the city and state have not agreed on how to pay for it and the agency has been drawing on its monetary reserves.

The DiNapoli report concluded that recurring costs for maintenance could exceed \$300 million annually. This would force an unscheduled fare and toll increase of about 4 percent, in addition to the two fare and toll hikes of 4 percent already scheduled for 2019 and then for 2021. Recent studies have shown that over a million regular subway riders cannot afford the present fares.

The MTA is counting on the federal government to finance almost one-quarter of its next capital improvement program, but the report recognizes that, considering President Trump's proposal to eliminate the funding of the next phase of the construction of the Second Ave subway in Manhattan, this projection is "uncertain."

Finally, a third report last month in the *New York Times* highlighted the persistent underfunding of the MTA over several decades. New York City has reduced its contributions to the authority to about one fourth of what it was in 1990. New York State has not increased its funding to the agency even though ridership has increased, and the State budget has grown to \$90 billion from \$45 billion in the 1990s. Under former Republican Governor George Pataki, from 1995 to 2006, the state eliminated subsidies for the MTA including those for the capital improvement work.

Due to a lack of federal, state and city funding, the MTA has accumulated mountains of debt, from which bond underwriters have made millions of dollars in refinancing fees. According to state legislation records, the MTA had to pay \$328 million in bond issuance fees over the last 15 years.

The annual debt service of \$2.6 billion makes up 16 percent of the authority's budget and is projected to grow to 22 percent, or \$3.5 billion, by 2023. Even

before taking into consideration the 2020-2024 capital improvement budget, the total outstanding debt is projected to reach \$42.6 billion.

Due to the 2008 financial crises, the MTA lost 75 percent of its income from real estate transfer taxes and its revenue dropped by about \$1 billion, and the authority was forced to eliminate 40 types of necessary maintenance.

The *Times* piece, significantly, blames MTA workers' wages and benefits, which, it claims, are taking funds away from other parts of the budget.

That this heralds a ferocious attack on transit workers can be seen in the hiring of Andy Byford to run the NYC bus and subway system. As head of the Toronto transit system, Byford pushed to establish one-person train operation, among other anti-worker measures. In New York City, the transit authority's own drive for one-person train operation has been a source of conflict with the workers for years. With the assistance of Transit Workers Union Local 100, the MTA has been able to eliminate conductor positions in several subway lines.



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