



Regional Plan Association

... a research and planning agency supported by voluntary membership to promote the coordinated development of the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut Metropolitan Region.

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PLANNER TO SHOW SUBWAY OFFICIALS WHERE NEW LINES WOULD BE COST EFFECTIVE

Simply rehabilitating New York's existing subway system would be less efficient than removing some sections and building some new lines after the current Metropolitan Transportation Authority five-year capital program is complete. That is the message Regional Plan Association Vice President Boris Pushkarev will deliver to New York's public transit leaders Thursday, December 16, at the City's first annual Conference on Public Transit. The Conference, organized by the Mayor's Transit Office, will be held at the New York University School of Law. Background papers have just been published in New York Affairs.

The Regional Plan presentation contradicts the widely-held view that the City cannot afford to build any new subway routes, showing that:

- In virtually all New York City areas, subway service is far less expensive than bus service;
- Several elevated portions of the existing system can reasonably be replaced with surface or below-ground rights-of-way that would be faster, cheaper to operate and more attractive.

Generally, increasing speed on the system by eliminating little-used stations and building some new lines would save operating funds as well as passenger time, according to the Association study.

Because the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's bond program for capital improvements will be paid back from operating revenues, the distinction between capital and operating funds is now blurred, Mr. Pushkarev points out. Cutting operating costs can, therefore, provide more capital funds to make long-term improvements which, in turn, will help cut operating costs.

Why Subway Improvements

Subway improvements are essential, the Association said, to maintain Manhattan's prosperity and spread its benefits to the other boroughs. Of all goods and services produced in New York City, 75 percent come from the 8½ square miles between Central Park and the Battery, the central business district (CBD). Over half of the people going there arrive by subway.

But recent increases in CBD jobs have increased travel on suburban railroads, express buses and private vans more than on the subways, the Association noted, in part because the quality of subway service is poor. The key to linking Manhattan's prosperity to the other boroughs is better subway service, the statement added.

Some people question any capital improvement in the subway system because "nobody dares to ride the subway anymore." In fact, a billion rides are taken on New York's subways every year, and changes in the crime rate on the subways explain only one percent of the changes in number of rides. The number depends foremost on whether jobs in the central business district grow or shrink, second on subway service quality; third on fare levels and fourth on the number of cars New Yorkers own. Service quality, the Association points out, not only directly affects the number of rides but also indirectly--by inducing or discouraging the location of jobs in the CBD. Assuming no serious decline in public services, the Association projects an increase in CBD jobs from 1.9 million to about 2.2 million in 2000, returning to the high point of the 1960's. This alone would raise subway rides by eight percent, about 80 million a year.

Six Goals for the Subways

Mr. Pushkarev proposed six long-term goals for the City's subways.

1. Acquire cost-saving equipment, particularly cars from which motormen can see both sides of the train, eliminating the need for a conductor on every train; automatic change machines that would allow stations to be unmanned when little used--as PATH does in New York and New Jersey; modernized track maintenance.
2. Increase speed, mainly by closing little-used stations to eliminate stops, consolidating routes within walking distance of each other and connecting lines more directly where outlying stations are more than 30 minutes from Midtown and a new route would cut travel time. There are about 30 stations entered by fewer than 1,000 passengers a day, worth considering for closing. Faster running speeds are not anticipated; time would be saved only by reducing stops and new shortcuts. A 10 percent rise in overall speed would produce more than a two percent saving in total operating cost.
3. Consolidate duplicative routes, which would cost about 30 percent less than running the service on two lines. One possible consolidation would be rerouting the Jamaica elevated over the Fulton IND "CC" tracks; another would be rerouting the McDonald elevated ("F" train) over a portion of the Sea Beach line ("N" train).
4. Relate stations to density. This should include extending service to some high-density outlying areas within 10 miles of Midtown where there are enough residents to make subway operations much more efficient than bus service.

Six areas have sufficient density to make subways less costly to operate than buses, and the capital costs of extending service there can be justified by savings in time and greater convenience for passengers: Queens south of Queens Boulevard, southeast Queens, northeast Queens, southeast Brooklyn and the Bronx near the former Third Avenue elevated. Three of these areas even have rights-of-way available to minimize new-line costs. Where new lines are built, they should use IND equipment, which has 1,118 passenger places per train compared to the IRT's 834.

5. Improve passenger amenity, particularly breathing space on trains and more attractive stations. While many trains are inhumanly crowded, only two lines require new construction to uncrowd them--the Queens IND and the Lexington Avenue. Other lines could provide a reasonable space per passenger by simply running more trains than they run now. The Queens line can be uncrowded by using the new still-empty 63rd Street tunnel to good advantage; only the Second Avenue subway can relieve the Lexington line of severe overcrowding.

Nearly every subway line in the country provides a minimum of five square feet per peak-hour rider. The Lexington line now provides only three square feet and could not increase that even to four feet without the Second Avenue line. Regional Plan suggests the Second Avenue line be built in stages, beginning at the 63rd Street tunnel down to 34th Street.

Entries to stations probably deter many potential subway riders--first the steep steps, which are dangerous, uncomfortable and slow passenger flow; then the narrow entries into a dark hole; finally, the often unkempt and frequently hot dreary station itself. The appearance of 50 stations is being improved under current projects, but the next agenda should concentrate on entries, making it easier for the relatively old New York population to walk up and down and opening more of the underground world to sunlight for greater safety, easier orientation and a more welcoming feeling.

6. Improve neighborhood amenity by tearing down at least some of the remaining elevated lines. This has been City policy since the 1920s, and 57 miles have been removed, but 70 miles still stand. They are over half a century old--some nearly a century old. They endanger public health with their noise, and they blight the street level; they also restrict subway speed. Service provided on more than a third of the elevated lines can be replaced by new lines predominantly on existing railroad rights-of-way.

The fullest possible program to achieve these goals over the next 20 to 30 years would add 17 miles of subway and 20 miles of open lines, in addition to the 5.4 miles currently under construction. It would replace 26 miles of elevated lines for a net 11-mile addition.

The paper suggests specific projects only as examples; actual benefits and costs must be determined, the Association said, to set priorities for capital funds.

The conclusions were based on an analysis method worked out by Mr. Pushkarev for Urban Rail in America (Indiana University Press, 1982).

Finding the Money

Regional Plan Association sets the cost of this post-1982 subway capital program at \$5.5 billion in 1982 prices. It points out that nearly half of the current MTA five-year program is devoted to buying new subway cars and buses; once these orders are completed, annual spending for rolling stock--to replace equipment on a regular cycle--will drop from about \$445 million to \$195 million. The money no longer needed for new equipment--some \$280 million--would be sufficient to complete a program of the type proposed in two decades. The program would thus not cut into ongoing system renewal and rehabilitation, variously estimated between \$300 and \$500 million a year.

Who should pay for the improvements that are not repaid by operating economies or increased revenues? Regional Plan advocates getting more funds from motorist charges: motor fuel taxes, increased tolls into Manhattan and parking taxes. Motorists should help pay for public transit, the Association states, because the motorist is not paying the full cost of driving in New York City and the best way to improve driving conditions and reduce competition for parking space there is to divert more travel to subways.

The Association also suggests that operating economies are possible. Costs for many specific functions are much higher on the New York system than they were 20 years ago or than they are on other systems today. For example, the Association observed, in 1960, the Transit Authority had 10 percent fewer employees yet had only a fourth as many breakdowns while maintaining more track and more cars. PATH has 20 percent fewer maintenance of way employees per mile of track than the New York subways, and Toronto has a fourth as many even though the tracks serve more trains.

When compared to spending for automobiles, the Association noted, the proposed subway capital program is small. New York City residents spent \$225 per capita in 1980 to buy cars even though only half the City's households own them. In that year, \$32 per capita was spent on subway construction and rehabilitation. What the current MTA plan calls for and what Regional Plan proposes is to continue annual capital improvements and maintenance at just over \$110 per capita.

Regional Plan Association is a civic organization serving the Tri-State New York Urban Region that proposed the regional highway network in the 1920s and stimulated the first federal aid for public transit through a report commissioned by the U.S. Senate in 1961. William S. Woodside, Chairman of American Can, is the Association's Chairman.

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