

# A Breakdown In Mass Transit Caused By A Breakdown In Governance

by Marc Epstein



*“New York, New York, a wonderful town  
The Bronx is up and the Battery’s down  
The people ride in a hole in the ground  
New York, New York,  
It’s a wonderful town! “*

(Music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Betty Comden and  
Adolph Green)

In 1995 I returned to NYC after more than 25 years away from the place where I was born and grew up. I had lived mostly in Buffalo, where businessmen and politicians pray for some congestion, and Tokyo, where congestion is defined. Jokes about New York’s dysfunction had faded from the Tonight Show’s opening monologue. Rudy Giuliani had restored civil order, creating a desirable “quality of life” that resulted in an economic renaissance. New York was once again the “hot” place

to be.

While Giuliani had righted the ship, my sojourn in Japan showed me that New York's mass transit system was still a few decades behind Japan's, and there was no sense that anybody in charge had any desire to catch up with either the Japanese or the Europeans.

Since I was working at a high school in Jamaica, Queens, I had occasion to pass through my old neighborhood. Rego Park had been transformed from its mostly middle class Jewish-American demographic into a polyglot United Nations of mostly new arrivals.

Another change was the sobriquet given to Queens Boulevard, a six-lane roadway that cuts through my old neighborhood on the way to Manhattan. It was nicknamed the "Boulevard of Death." I grew up on both sides of the boulevard, and it was never referred to in those terms. When I reached the age of 11 I was allowed to cross it by myself. But it seems that over the past two decades an alarming number of pedestrians have been killed while attempting to negotiate this wide arterial known for its shopping.

What caused this change, I wondered? A number of things come to mind. For one, there appears to be more cars on the road. In addition there are many more older people living in the area, and that would make sense given increased life expectancy; more cars, more geriatrics, equals more accidents.

So how did the city respond to this crisis? They slowed down traffic by changing the light sequence and lowering the speed limit. At first parking was permitted on both sides of the boulevard's service lanes, slowing traffic further. The result has been more congestion. If that wasn't bad enough, most recently the city decided to eliminate the parking in the

service roads and turn them into bike lanes. So the past June, Ben's Kosher Delicatessen decided that after 73 years in business it no longer paid to stay open because its customers had no place to park.

I began to think about New York's commuting difficulties more and more as I reacquainted myself with buses, subways and commuter lines. I recalled that incremental changes for the worse were already occurring in the 60s.

My father used to drive to work from Queens and park across the street at the Gotham Garage in midtown Manhattan during the 50s and 60s. But towards the end of the 60s he had to start parking a few blocks further west because the Gotham had become too pricey.

By the 1970s he was taking his car to Queens Plaza and parking at the foot of the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge because traffic and parking costs made the commute into midtown impossible. He would complete his journey into Manhattan by subway. When my parents retired to Florida in the 70s this part of the narrative came to an end.

When I reminisced with a friend who grew up in Bayside, Queens, but spent about three decades commuting to lower Manhattan from the other side of the Hudson River, his experiences ran parallel to my father's.

Back in the 70s he could carpool and park under the Westside Highway. When the highway was taken down he started to drive to upper Manhattan and take the subway from 96<sup>th</sup> Street until the subways became unreliable. So he started parking in Hoboken, New Jersey, and took the PATH (the Port Authority's cross Hudson subway) until Hoboken became gentrified and parking became impossible. For the last ten years of his career in lower Manhattan he just took trains, but nothing about the commute really improved. None of the commuter lines goes directly into lower Manhattan making the daily commute

into the rebuilt financial center around Ground Zero as arduous as it was before 9/11. In the course of his career he was responsible for evaluating the bond worthiness of the Port Authority and the MTA for one the major bond rating agencies.

Once I was back in New York, It didn't take long for me to realize that tolls, traffic, and parking costs made taking a car into Manhattan except on Sunday prohibitive. And even on Sunday the proliferation of parades honoring a menu of nationalities and causes could turn driving into Midtown a nightmare.

I'm fortunate to live along the Port Washington line on the Long Island Railroad so the commute to Penn Station is only 30-35 minutes. In 1995, round-trip during off-peak hours along with parking at the station and subway cost about \$20 for one person. Today it's about \$30. The trip was convenient as long as I remained on the West Side of Manhattan. When I had to start using the complex of medical facilities located on the East Side of Manhattan it became a nightmare.

You see, New York City 's vast subway system does not have a cross-town train! ! The #7 subway train was extended by Mayor Bloomberg 1.5 miles to the West Side at a cost of about \$2.5 billion, but it won't have a stop on the East Side until the storied 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue Subway is extended during the third phase of its construction. With any luck that might occur before 2040!

In addition none of the commuter lines stops at both major railroad stations in the city. You either terminate at Penn Station or Grand Central. While the LIRR is scheduled to start providing service to Grand Central by 2022, there are no guarantees. That date has already been pushed back multiple times in what is turning out to be the most expensive per mile tunnel construction in history.

The cross-Hudson tunnels that bring rail traffic into New York are over a century old. They were badly damaged by flooding

during Superstorm Sandy. They need to be replaced, but to date the estimates are wildly unrealistic and the Federal government is reluctant to accept the exorbitant projected price tag. Under the best of circumstances construction and completion are at least a decade away.

Which brings us to the crux of the problem. If you want people off the roads and onto the trains you'd better make sure the trains can get to the places where the people need to go. A brief look at the places you can't get to in New York should give any politician pause before implementing any new schemes. You can't get to the airports by train. You can't get from Penn Station to Grand Central without taking two subways, and they are only a mile apart. None of the commuter lines goes into the Wall Street financial hub. The Port Authority's Air Train, which was supposed to provide a seamless trip from Manhattan to Kennedy Airport only gets as far as the Jamaica Long Island Railroad Station a few miles from the airport, so riders have to transfer to subways or the LIRR into Penn Station.

There was talk about linking the LIRR to Kennedy Airport but a similar plan went nowhere over thirty years ago. There is talk of a new cross Hudson tunnel that might take commuter trains to lower Manhattan. There is talk of using the extensive freight lines that go through Queens to alleviate the heavy truck traffic across the George Washington Bridge.

I wasn't sure that my view of New York wasn't more than an attempt to recast the city of my upbringing with a nostalgic golden glow that never existed in the first place, so I had a conversation about the state of affairs with my friend who is in the milk processing and distribution business. He suggested that I talk to his route manager, who had been delivering milk or managing its distribution for the past forty years.

Charlie Damino started delivering milk to stores in 1959. Since then a series of roadblocks and government policy

changes have made the process slower and more expensive. Up until the 1980s deliveries to stores would begin between 4:30 and 5:00 AM. But because of increased labor costs, stores started opening later in the morning. If you have to start your deliveries at 6 AM the city is already crowded. On 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenues the designation of express bus lanes forces the driver to double-park opposite stores and then cross the avenue with the product further slowing the process down.

The thousands of dollars in traffic tickets are factored into the price of doing business. Since the panic over the Minneapolis bridge collapse in 2010, the tanker trucks bringing their loads into New York for processing and bottling have been forced to reduce their loads. The result? You now have to have more tankers crossing our bridges to make up the difference. Two years ago distribution became so prohibitive that the last private milk processing plant was closed and the operation was moved to another plant upstate.

What you get from the political class in New York is happy talk, just like the song "Happy Talk" from South Pacific says,

"Happy talk keep talking happy talk. Talk about things you like to do. If you don't have a dream, you'll never have a dream. How you gonna make that dream come true?"

No one will admit that the mass transit grid of New York hasn't changed in any significant way for the past century! The massive infusion of funds into subway and bridge repairs in the 1980s simply prevented the system from collapsing. After patching things up forty years ago, the failure to maintain and sustain the infrastructure has taken the system right back to where it was in 1980. Once again it's on the verge of collapse

Whether it's rainstorms or track fires, it doesn't take a whole lot to shut the commuter system down altogether. As it

stands none of the schemes put forward comes to grips with reality, as a recent study by Conner Harris, "New York's Infrastructure Woes" (*City Journal*, Summer 2018), demonstrates.

Mass transportation systems are a beast to operate and maintain.

Ticket revenue for the subways provides about 35% of the costs, and the political class in charge of the operation has never been able to come up with a dedicated revenue stream that would replace crisis management with rational operations and planning.

The political imperative to keep fares low and featherbedding construction unions rolling in gravy are part of New York's DNA. When the first subway fare was set at 5 cents in 1904, maintaining that rate became a central tenet of mayoral elections through the 1940s! It rose but was never supposed to rise higher than a slice of pizza.

That fare structure has kept pace with the inflationary rise of the cost of the pizza, but the ongoing required maintenance and modernization costs have risen dramatically. Standard and Poor's has just downgraded the credit worthiness of the MTA, the state agency that operates the mass transit system. The MTA debt load will increase to \$41 billion dollars with the planned \$10 billion improvement plan according to Nicole Gelinas of the Manhattan Institute.

New York has become a one-party state. The governor and the mayor are political enemies, but that is of no consequence as far as their political survival goes. It is, however, consequential to those who depend on reliable mass transit to get to work. To date every major crisis involving infrastructure failure has resulted in little more than finger pointing and nostrums. New Yorkers are in for a very rough ride.

[A Queens Dairy Plant Closes, but the Cows Had Long Since Gone Home](#)

[Specter of the 5¢ fare haunts the current fare hike debate](#)