

New York's overly political approach to mass transit

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As a political scientist I know that everything government does has a political dimension to it, but New York's governor, mayor and legislature have done a very good job of letting their petty political ambitions and competition destroy New York's subway system. In the 1960s and 1970s the subway was subjected to the city's financial neglect, but was rebuilt by Hugh Carey, Ed Koch and Richard Ravitch starting in the late 1970s and ending in the 1980s. After the creation of the MTA and the ascendance of competent management, the system did well for a while, but then was capital starved by the state and city until it once again fell apart in the past decade. The hope when the MTA was created was that it might be able to avoid some degree of political manipulation, but de Blasio and Cuomo's battle over subway funding has demonstrated that the MTA is a failed institutional innovation. This past summer, William Finnegan detailed New York's history of overly political transit management in an excellent piece in the [New Yorker](#). According to Finnegan:

"Part of the ongoing problem is the peculiar political status of the M.T.A., which is controlled by the governor but financed jointly by the city and the state. For governors, New York City's [transit](#) budget is a huge expense that delivers few votes; for mayors, it is a kind of taxation without representation. Leaders in recent years, starting with Governor George Pataki and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, have found it expedient to divert transit funds to other purposes. (Giuliani redirected four hundred million dollars from the M.T.A. in his first year in office.) Top officials have encouraged borrowing that has proved financially ruinous. This

lack of political seriousness is a root cause. Deferred maintenance, increasingly decrepit tracks and signals and cars, and filthy stations are knock-on effects. Lately, Governor Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio have exacerbated the transit crisis with a bitter, prolonged feud. The two of them will fight over anything—snowstorms, schools, pizza, naps, a deer in Harlem—but their most ferocious differences seem to be over the subways."

As Finnegan points out, the one positive in the city's mass transit picture is Andy Byford, the competent, committed and highly professional president of the Transit Authority. He is the subway system's best and brightest hope. But the governor seems determined to either drive him crazy or chase him from New York. Last week, the proposed subway fare increase—so desperately needed by the subway system—was put on hold. As Emma Fitzsimmons reported in the *New York Times*:

"Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo was not at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority board meeting in Lower Manhattan on Thursday. But his influence was obvious. Transit leaders had been sounding the alarm for months over the need for a fare increase. A vote was scheduled for Thursday. Then Mr. Cuomo and his allies on the board intervened, and the vote was delayed for at least a month... Without a fare increase, the authority expects to lose about \$30 million in anticipated revenue each month. If the board votes on a fare proposal next month, it is unlikely to take effect before April."

We have a governor who seems to relish his image as behind-the-scenes power broker and a mayor who thinks he's presidential timber, and neither seems to understand that their overly political approach to governance is destroying a critical piece of the city's infrastructure. It's time for a little apolitical competent management. It's time for transit management experts like Andy Byford to be given the money and time to fix the system.

The stars are now lined up in New York for political accountability. The state's legislature is controlled by Democrats and we have a Democratic governor, mayor and city council. The failure of the city's mass transit system is now completely owned by the state's Democrats. It's time to generate the revenues needed for mass transit capital, operations, and maintenance. It is also time for the MTA to work with state lawmakers to reform the ridiculous contracting and labor practices that make our mass transit system inefficient and ineffective.

The problem with mass transit capital construction was discussed in a classic New York Times piece in late December 2017. According to its author, Brian Rosenthal:

"The estimated cost of the Long Island Rail Road project, known as "East Side Access," has ballooned to \$12 billion, or nearly \$3.5 billion for each new mile of track—seven times the average elsewhere in the world. The recently completed Second Avenue subway on Manhattan's Upper East Side and the 2015 extension of the No. 7 line to Hudson Yards also cost far above average, at \$2.5 billion and \$1.5 billion per mile, respectively... The Times found that a host of factors have contributed to the transit authority's exorbitant capital costs. For years, The Times found, public officials have stood by as a small group of politically connected labor unions, construction companies and consulting firms have amassed large profits. Trade unions, which have closely aligned themselves with Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and other politicians, have secured deals requiring underground construction work to be staffed by as many as four times more laborers than elsewhere in the world, documents show."

The contracting practices that have led to these high costs may not be illegal, but they are nevertheless a form of corruption. One objective seems to be to enhance the governor's political support. Another seems to be to generate the political support needed to enact a capital budget

for the MTA. Both objectives can be achieved with more ethical and less expensive methods.

It should begin with making the MTA a state agency reporting directly to the governor with a board that no longer governs it, but advises it. The MTA is a failure and its structure does not work. Next, its contracting process should be streamlined and require competitive bidding that is open, rapid and transparent. Finally, the revenue needed to build and run mass transit must be determined, generated and then placed in a lock-box trust fund that can only be used for mass transit and is periodically reviewed by empowered experts for sufficiency. The percentage of funding required by transit fares should be set by law, as should subsidies for people who cannot afford the fare as set. It is obvious that congestion pricing should be one part of the revenue stream. A renewed commuter income tax should also be considered. What is key is that funding for mass transit must act a little like social security: guaranteed and so important that it becomes a (excuse the pun) third rail that politicians refuse to mess with.

The governor is capable of providing the leadership needed to reform the system and help Andy Byford do his job. The time for a comprehensive fix for this region's mass transit is long overdue. The governor's blatant political manipulation of the proposed fare increase is yet another example of sacrificing management on the altar of political gain. Meanwhile, the mass transit system continues to struggle. The city's underground arteries are clogged, decaying, and threatening damage to New York's economic heart. I've written about the need to save our subways before, the need to fund it, and its connection to a decarbonized, sustainable city. The governor should step back, take a deep breath, consult with the mayor, legislature and city council, and leave as his lasting legacy a functioning and well-funded mass transit system in New York City and its nearby suburbs.

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