

New York City transit upgrade aids developers

By Mark Witkowski and Philip Guelpa
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In early January, amid media fanfare, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced plans to rebuild vital transportation infrastructure in the New York City area, in what he billed as “the biggest construction program in our state’s history.” The centerpiece of this project is renovation of Manhattan’s Penn Station, through which hundreds of thousands of rail riders travel on a typical workday. Cuomo’s proposal calls for an ambitious upgrading of the station, as well as new train tunnels under the Hudson River to improve transportation between the city and New Jersey, and for a new section of track to be built along a rail corridor in Long Island which is currently a bottleneck in the Long Island Railroad system.

The governor has pledged \$8.3 billion in state assistance for these projects. However, actual funding details for Cuomo’s transportation projects have not been made public. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the state agency that includes the New York City transit system, is currently \$34.1 billion in debt. Rider advocates have expressed concerns that the state will not live up to its promises, leading to further fare increases.

Cuomo’s proposals are completely inadequate to meet current needs. The transportation infrastructure in the New York City metropolitan area has suffered many decades of neglect. The effects of the resulting decay are compounded by increased demand, brought on, in part, by gentrification spreading out from the city’s core neighborhoods, forcing working class families farther from their places of employment and into areas less serviced by the existing transportation system. There has not been a major expansion of the city’s subway system since the Second World War, when the population was much more concentrated than it is today.

Penn Station is a prime example of this deterioration, and few question the need for improvements. It is currently a complex and confusing warren of dilapidated passageways and overcrowded waiting areas, a legacy of the demolition of the original, classic station. Built in 1910, and considered a Beaux Arts masterpiece, it was torn down in 1963 to build Madison Square Garden. Critics question whether Cuomo’s plan, which has yet to be described in detail, would be adequate to substantially address the current severe congestion (more than 600,000 passengers per day) or growing needs in the future. It

is only the latest in a series of unrealized plans that date back over two decades.

The governor’s proposals come as a large swath of Manhattan real estate known as “Hudson Yards” is undergoing massive private redevelopment spurred on by the recent \$2 billion extension of the #7 subway line from its previous terminus in Times Square. Hudson Yards lies immediately to the west of Penn Station, much of the new development being built on a massive platform constructed over the rail yards which serve the station.

The Hudson Yards project is the largest private real estate development in the United States and the largest in New York City since Rockefeller Center was constructed during the 1930s. What is clear is that the private interests behind Hudson Yards will benefit greatly from Cuomo’s infusion of public funds into nearby infrastructure.

Cuomo has been touting high profile projects - which are meant to aid developers- as part of his legacy, while leaving the transportation issues faced by millions of working people largely ignored. Workers in New York City are more dependent on public transport than anywhere else in the United States. Approximately 55 percent of households in the city do not own or lease an automobile, and even for those who do, public transportation is typically the only practical option as parking is expensive or in many cases simply not available near workplaces.

Not to be outdone by Cuomo, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio has championed a proposal for a new light rail line which, if built as proposed, will connect the clusters of ultra-expensive luxury developments now rising along the Brooklyn-Queens waterfront on the East River. The light rail line could conceivably connect to existing subway lines, but would not provide direct access to Manhattan.

This light rail line is intended to make waterfront property in formerly industrial areas more accessible and, consequently, more valuable for developers. Many are rightly viewing this multi-billion dollar project as more public largess towards developers, which will do next to nothing to serve existing working class areas in Queens and Brooklyn, located further away from the rapidly gentrifying shoreline along the river.

It should be noted that Cuomo and de Blasio, both

Democrats, have been politically wrangling over numerous issues, including transportation and housing, as well other matters of concern to the city's working class, each trying to present himself as the leading "progressive" in the state. How much their squabble factors into these initiatives is debatable. That these expenditures are intended to benefit the city's wealthy real estate developers, while leaving the real concerns of working people unaddressed, is not.

The proposals presented by both the mayor and governor ignore the seriously dilapidated state of New York's existing subway lines, which are used by over 5 million people every day. The daily passenger load has increased 61 percent since 1992.

Alongside seemingly interminable construction delays, conditions continue to worsen. Peeling paint, rust and corrosion, and broken or filthy wall tiles are visible everywhere in the subway system, parts of which are 100 years old. Handrails and stairs are in bad repair, creating dangerous conditions, and the trains themselves are often delayed due to malfunctioning equipment. Few stations on the elevated lines have working elevators or escalators.

Long-delayed work (euphemistically called "deferred maintenance") has exacerbated the deterioration, resulting in the need for more extensive, time-consuming, therefore disruptive, repairs.

There is currently talk of shutting down the tunnel used by the L train, which connects northern and eastern Brooklyn to Manhattan, for extensive repairs. Doing so would force riders in some of Brooklyn's poorest neighborhoods to find alternate routes to work; however, media coverage has focused largely around inconvenience to the residents of the hyper-gentrified Williamsburg area where construction of many "luxury" housing projects is underway.

In Queens, the #7 line, which connects working class neighborhoods to Manhattan, has been in operation since 1917. Much of the line shows signs of severe decay and neglect. The line experiences frequent service disruptions during the rush-hour periods, leaving tens of thousands of workers no means to get to their jobs or home afterwards.

Maintenance work on the line has been ongoing for decades. Individual projects have often lasted for months, or even years, as was the case when express service was suspended for much of the 1980s. Nevertheless, these efforts have been grossly inadequate to meet the need. There simply hasn't been a sufficient expenditure of resources to reconstruct the line or build new capacity into the system. The lack of funding for transit systems stands in stark contrast to America's unlimited military spending.

Ryan Yuellendahl, a 27-year-old plumber's helper and musician who uses the #7, told the WSWS, "I ride it every day. There are a lot of track delays. In proportion to the rate hike [the base fare was raised to \$2.75 in 2015], I see very little being fixed. I have not seen positive changes in five years. The

only difference is the 34th Street station [that services Hudson Yards] was added at the other end of the line in Manhattan. That does not make any difference for all the riders from Queens, except for lining the pockets of some rich people."

Ryan also spoke about the connection between transportation and housing. "It is a big problem attaining housing, especially along this line. You see how busy it is. I pay \$1,300 for a studio apartment. I grew up in Long Island and have been in Queens for five or six years and seen significant changes. I used to pay \$600 in rent."

Michael Carter, a school teacher and longtime resident of New York, stated, "Everything is made worse because it is overdeveloped. [Former mayor] Bloomberg seemed to toss away all the zoning laws, and now it is overcrowded and the infrastructure can't handle it. Even in older apartments there could be five or six guys all crammed together even if the apartment was only made for two people."

Other riders we spoke with in Woodside, Queens voiced a number of concerns regarding the poor service and lack of alternatives. Bobby, a messenger, commenting on a scenario no doubt faced by many, said, "There have been times where I've spent 15 to 20 minutes on a train stuck between stations. When the trains don't work, I am late for work, and my boss doesn't want to hear any excuses. The supervisor will be mad at me because this kind of thing keeps happening." There are no hard statistics that we know of on how many workers have been fired or disciplined for being late. Business groups, however, have complained that such delays add to lost productivity and their bottom line.

Justin Hill, a longtime resident of New York, stated, "They always say that the delays are part of construction, and I believe them. However, everything is still in disrepair. I've seen places where the cement under the beams is falling out."

After a brief discussion about the city's budget, he added, "The resources really should be spread out, but the people that choose where the money goes are not the ones riding the trains."

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