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# REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

## Don't Hold Your Breath

**Original Reporting** | By Kevin C. Brown | Infrastructure, NYC, Transportation

Dec. 5, 2012 — “I wonder if you might advise me,” wrote a New York City resident to the director of public relations of the New York City Transit Authority in 1963, “whether, in your opinion, there is any serious possibility that the basic Second Avenue [subway] system will be constructed within the next few years.” If “no consideration” was being given towards building this new line, the citizen continued, “[W]hat possible alternative remains for the relief of the daily crowding and delays on the Lexington Avenue Line?”

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“The fact that it has been delayed for so long, the fact that the price has so escalated, the fact that it is being done piecemeal and not on the scale and magnitude that is required, is an indication of our failure to meet and recognize priorities.”

— Robert Abrams

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Almost 50 years later, and despite fitful efforts to bring the transportation, economic, and quality of life benefits of an additional subway line to the East Side of Manhattan, running mostly along Second Avenue and stretching from the Battery at the southern tip of the island northbound to 125th Street, such questions about the Second Avenue line’s future remain unanswered.

Today, no trains rumble under Second Avenue and only a small portion of the project is being worked on, despite the fact that Remapping Debate found widespread agreement that the need for a full-scale Second Avenue subway is greater than ever, and that there are no insurmountable technical, environmental, or logistical barriers that prevent multiple sections of the line from being constructed simultaneously. The full-scale project would offer the real prospect of materially

enhanced transportation options as compared with the one-and-three-quarter mile “stub” of new subway that is currently funded, and do so for a much broader swath of New Yorkers.

In conversations with policy experts, planners, and engineers, the immediate — but ultimately superficial — reply to why the rest of the line has yet to be built — a project that, because of decades of delay, would now cost at least \$12 billion — was a variation on “lack of money,” “money,” or “not enough money.” This dearth of funding, however, is more a symptom than the underlying disease. Robert Abrams, former Bronx borough president and former New York State attorney general, said that, while some policy makers argue “we can’t meet these [transit] needs because we don’t have the resources,’ it is always a matter of what kind of priorities you are going to set.”

A real Second Avenue subway, it seems clear, has never been a sustained priority for government officials at any level, and it isn’t one now.

## Inch by inch

Theoretically, the Second Avenue subway will be built in four phases. But the first, the stub between 63rd and 96th Streets, is the only one that has been funded. This section, currently under construction, is scheduled to open in 2016, although the Federal Transit Administration suggests it won't open until 2018.

The rest is unfunded and unscheduled. A second phase would bring the line northbound to 125th Street. The final two phases would extend the line southbound from 63rd Street to Lower Manhattan. If the first and second segments eventually come to be operational, that version of the Second Avenue subway would not actually be a “new” line, but rather an extension of the “Q” train. If phases three and four also came to be completed, only then would a new “T” train service begin operation (see map to the right).



## Why not do it all at once?

When Remapping Debate asked Robert Paaswell, the director emeritus of the University Transportation Research Center at the City College of New York, and the former executive director of the Chicago Transit Authority, if there was a technical reason why the entire length of the Second Avenue subway couldn't be developed simultaneously, he replied, “Not at all, not at all.”

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the public agency that administers bus, subway, and commuter rail transit in and around New York City, is on record as agreeing, writing in its Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Second Avenue subway in 2004, “The proposed phasing plan is also extremely flexible, in that it would permit, if practicable, multiple phases to be constructed simultaneously.”

The “if practicable” caveat doesn't relate to a technical problem, but to money. The MTA has described the current four-stage phasing as achieving “the best balance between constructability, operability, and the availability of funding.” Or, as the Federal Transit Administration has written, “Anticipating the financial difficulties in implementing the entire project at once,” the MTA chose to implement the project in phases.

An MTA spokesperson declined to be interviewed on the record and would only provide answers to emailed questions with attribution on condition that the agency be given quote approval. Remapping Debate does not collaborate with that practice.

## It's not really an addition; it's a replacement

“Even though it has been long overdue,” Peter Derrick, a former assistant director in the capital program management department and planning department of the MTA and now a visiting fellow at the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management at New York University, told Remapping Debate, the Second Avenue subway “is actually the replacement project for the Second and Third Avenue Els [elevated railways].” Before they were torn down in the 1940s and 1950s, the presence of these elevated trains meant, according to Derrick, who has also written a book on the expansion of the subway system at the start of the twentieth century, “[Y]ou had twice the capacity of the rapid transit system on the East Side of Manhattan.”

In other words, a full-blown Second Avenue subway would belatedly bring back transit benefits already lost.

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A “three-mile subway stub from 125th Street to 63rd Street will utterly fail to accomplish its goal — relief of crowding on the Lexington Avenue line.” — Jeffrey Zupan, 1999 Statements

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Since the removal of the Els, the only subway on the East Side is the Lexington Avenue Line (“the Lex”), two blocks west of Second Avenue. The Lex is the busiest rapid transit line in the United States, carrying some 1.3 million passengers on an average weekday — including roughly 400,000 riders during each of the AM and PM rush hours in Manhattan. (The West Side of the city has two subway lines running the length of the island.) “Anybody that rides the Lex,” explained Joseph P. Viteritti, professor of public policy and chair of the urban affairs and planning department at Hunter College, CUNY, “knows that it is overcrowded...I know that when I travel during the rush hour, I have to stand in the 68th street station and let three trains go by before I can get on it.”

Viteritti’s experience is not unique. According to the Federal Transit Administration, over the course of a 15-minute period of the morning rush hour, some stations may have 3,000 passengers utilizing the platform. That causes “significant delays in service due to the excessive overcrowding along station platforms and queuing on stairways.”

The MTA calculates that if the Second Avenue subway were completed from 125th Street to downtown Manhattan, the line would carry 560,000 people on an average weekday, reducing some of the burden on the Lexington Avenue Line (it would carry even more if, as discussed in the box on the next page, it were built to link to New Yorkers who live in the Bronx). By contrast, the nation’s second and third largest rapid transit systems — the Washington, DC Metro and the Chicago “El,” — carry *in their entirety* 744,000 and 703,000 passengers on weekdays, respectively.

In addition to relieving overcrowding on existing service, a Second Avenue subway would, as Peter Derrick told Remapping Debate, increase the accessibility of public transit to residents and workers and “reduce travel time for those living east of Third Avenue...because they don’t have to walk or take the bus.” The MTA has reported to the Federal Transit Administration, for example, that 93 percent of Upper East Side and East Harlem residents who currently live further than one-half mile from the Lexington Avenue Line would have less than that distance to travel to get to that part of the Second Avenue subway being constructed in Phase 1. (The utility of the new service for residents, of course, would depend on whether the service took them where they needed to go.)

### What about the Bronx?

“The other thing that people tend to forget about,” Peter Derrick, the transit historian and former MTA planner, told Remapping Debate, “is that the original Second Avenue subway plan that the MTA had back in 1968, when they revived it for the third time [after the 1920s and 1950s], was to [continue it into] the Bronx to replace the Third Avenue El,” which was torn down in 1973. “And nobody is talking about anything in the Bronx [now].”

Robert Abrams, the Bronx borough president when construction ceased in the mid-1970s, was interviewed for a 1975 [Channel Thirteen documentary](#) and said, “If people are saying that Second Avenue is a wrong priority, I think they are mistaken again...They don’t understand that the Second Avenue subway was created to be a major help to the borough of the Bronx.” In addition to the Third Avenue corridor, Abrams commented, the large Bronx communities of Parkchester and the then relatively new Co-op City lay far from subway access. Canceling the project meant, Abrams thought, that “we are losing sight as to what the main purpose of the second avenue subway was: to open up a new link between the central business district of downtown Manhattan and the borough of the Bronx.”

Robert Paaswell told Remapping Debate that “to really create incredible economic growth in the region,” the Second Avenue subway needs to “link it to Brooklyn at one end and the Bronx on the other.”

The Regional Plan Association’s recent 2011 planning document, [Tomorrow’s Transit: New Mobility for the Urban Core](#), agreed, reiterating the importance of improving the “poor coverage and slow service” in parts of the Bronx by adding subway service on two or more routes. Given the existing Second Avenue subway plan for just two tracks, however, completing all of these Bronx connections would mean that “the capacity of the Second Avenue line would be compromised, leading to a lower frequency of service.”

The current Second Avenue subway plan calls for the northern end of the tunnel in Manhattan to be engineered for a future Bronx connection, but not anything more.

In 2003, the Partnership for New York City [released a report](#) in an effort to quantify the potential economic and transportation benefits of a variety of proposed transportation projects in New York City. The study, partially based on research by Paaswell and his University Transportation Research Center, found that the Second Avenue subway would recapture 55 percent of its cost in transportation benefits (calculated by summing the value of time saved by all riders from reductions in travel, waiting, and walking time, and through declines in overcrowding and transfers as a result of the project). The study also found that the project would recoup 82 percent of its cost in economic benefits (determined by calculating the value in the appreciation of property values and the increases in jobs and sales) over a 50-year period. A major reason that the benefits weren't higher (a few other projects had higher cost-benefit ratios), the Partnership reasoned, was "largely due to the 17 years it is expected to take to complete a full build-out of the line."

The Regional Plan Association (RPA), a private, non-profit New York metropolitan area urban planning organization and a long-time proponent of the Second Avenue subway (among many other transit projects), released [its own analysis](#) of the benefits of the Second Avenue in 2003 as well, estimating that the transportation benefits alone of the Second Ave subway, once running the length of Manhattan, would be over \$1.2 billion [in 2002 dollars] per year, a figure substantially higher than the Partnership's estimate.

The RPA report, while highlighting the economic and transportation benefits, added that other benefits of a full Second Avenue subway could also be substantial, if harder to quantify, including improved air quality, enhanced transportation options in neighborhoods where poorer residents currently have few alternatives to public transit, the encouragement of more sustainable development, and an increase in overall quality of life.

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## Going slow has its costs

If there are substantial benefits to completing the Second Avenue subway, there are also considerable costs to building at the current pace and scale.

The transportation benefits of the Second Avenue subway are constrained considerably by its slow implementation. As Jeffrey Zupan, the senior fellow for transportation at RPA and an author of its then just-published "[MetroLink: New Transit for New York](#)" urban planning study, explained to the MTA board of directors in 1999, "[A] three-mile subway stub from 125th Street to 63rd Street will utterly fail to accomplish its goal — relief of crowding on the Lexington Avenue line."

In fact, based on data from the MTA that Zupan presented to the board, even *with* the stub in service, crowding during peak periods on the Lex will still be worse in 2020 than it was in 1999. When taking into account another MTA project (now currently underway) that will bring Long Island Rail Road trains to Grand Central Terminal and connect suburban commuters to the Lex, crowding will be even more unbearable: one-third *more* riders than in 1999. “Why won’t the stub help the Lex rider?” Zupan asked the board rhetorically. “Simple,” without access to the Lower Midtown and the Lower East Side and the Financial District, the stub will not reduce demand on the Lex because the Second Avenue Line “will not take Lex riders where they want to go.”

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— Joseph Viteritti

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At the time Zupan made this argument he was specifically lobbying the MTA to fully fund the environmental review and preliminary engineering of the full Second Avenue subway in Manhattan, not just the segment north of 63rd Street as was being proposed. (He won that battle.) But given that the *construction* of only an even smaller stub has been actually funded (the 96th to 63rd Street segment), the argument remains relevant. There is still, as Zupan said in 1999, “no commitment to anything beyond spending \$3.5 billion [now over \$4 billion] to complete in 2015 [now 2016] something that will not do the job.”

Though the stated rationale for constructing of Second Avenue Line in phases over decades is an unwillingness to commit to paying the full costs now, it is also true, according to Robert Paaswell, that “the longer you delay the project the more it costs, because costs just escalate over time.” The inflation of material and equipment costs (which may rise faster than the broader inflation rate) as well as unexpected technical obstacles can all increase the price of a project. If construction occurs on a larger scale, a project like the Second Avenue subway could “take advantage of today’s costs rather than tomorrow’s costs,” and means that it “could save a lot of money,” Paaswell told me.

## What about the tracks?

Much of the subway system in New York City runs on four tracks (two in each direction), especially in the system’s center of gravity, Manhattan. This allows service to operate like a highway with local trains that make frequent stops staying to the right and express trains passing by in the center and stopping much less frequently. This arrangement shortens trip times while also increasing the overall capacity of the system.

The new Second Avenue subway, however, will be “local” in both directions, being constructed with just two tracks (one in each direction).

“Ideally, they should have found the money for express tracks,” said Robert Paaswell. “They are going to be very sorry in the future. Because the East Side, which is already dense, is going to become dense like the West Side, and there isn’t enough capacity on the West Side even with express tracks.”

The MTA made this design decision, Paaswell suggested, “because they wanted to get the project started, they wanted to come in with a budget that would be acceptable to the State and the Feds... So they made the choice of building something rather than nothing... It could have been designed to a higher standard.” He says frankly that, given the MTA’s prediction of 560,000 riders per day once fully constructed, “I don’t see how they are going to do that on two tracks.”

In another concession to increasing budget limitations, the MTA has further cut back on Phase 1, deciding in 2008 to change the 72nd Street station from a three-track configuration to a two-track configuration in order to save money. That station is where “T” and “Q” service will merge, and three tracks, as the original Final Environmental Impact Statement explained, would allow for a more fluid connection between these services and for some “Q” trains to terminate service at the station (as the “Q” currently does on weekends and off peak at the 57th Street station) without inhibiting “T” service.

## **A result of the societal choices we make**

“We say that there is not enough money,” observed Joseph Viteritti, the Hunter College public policy professor who is also working on a book on John Lindsay’s years as mayor in New York City during the late 1960s. But, Viteritti said, part of responding to that dilemma, in addition to using resources efficiently, is engaging in a “conversation nationally about having people contribute sufficiently so that we have adequate money” for public purposes.

Robert Paaswell agreed that the inability to build the Second Avenue subway on a larger and more rapid scale was not inevitable but a result of “social choices that we make.”

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“There hasn’t been any — that I know of — sustained effort on the part of any state or federal politicians to say, ‘Well, you know the city owns the subway system, we are fixing up the city’s subway system; we are expanding it... Why the hell aren’t they putting up some money for it?’” — Peter Derrick

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Or, as Robert Abrams, the Bronx borough president when an earlier, aborted effort at Second Avenue subway expansion took place in the 1970s, told Remapping Debate, “The fact that it has been delayed for so long, the fact that the price has so escalated, the fact that it is being done piecemeal and not on the scale and magnitude that is required, is an indication of our failure to meet and recognize priorities.”

Abrams added that the money, in fact “is there.” It may not be in the hands of the MTA, he said, but it is “in the society.”

One of the priorities that has trumped transit, says Viteritti, is simply “keeping the tax and revenue structure in such a way that people [who can readily afford it] get off without paying anything.”

Planners are not shy about other places where money could come from. Art Guzzetti, a vice president of policy at the American Public Transit Association, argued that an increase in the federal gasoline tax, stuck at \$0.18 per gallon since 1993, could help stabilize and grow the ailing federal highway trust fund, out of which federal transit expenditures are made.

Richard Barone, director of transportation programs at RPA, explained that in contrast to other countries, the landowners and developers adjacent to transit lines are not expected to contribute to an expansion, despite the fact that the buildings will rise in value (after the disruption of construction). “We want them [building owners] to make money on this,” Barone explained, “but they should be contributing for the service they are getting.”

The City of New York, meanwhile, is contributing nothing to the construction of the Second Avenue subway (though it has spent money on the No. 7 line extension on the West Side). Its \$500 million dollar contribution to the MTA’s 2010-2014 capital budget makes up just 4 percent of the MTA’s planned capital expenditures on its New York City Transit division. As Peter Derrick related: “There hasn’t been — that I know of — any sustained effort on the part of any state or federal politicians to say, ‘Well, you know the city owns the subway system, we are fixing up the city’s subway system; we are expanding it...Why the hell aren’t they putting up some money for it?’”

## **What keeps transit from being a priority?**

In response to Remapping Debate’s emailed inquiries, Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.), whose district includes parts of the East Side of Manhattan, acknowledged that, “unfortunately, there is a long history of bias — dating back at least to the 1950s — toward appropriations that favor automobiles as ‘transit.’” In her view, that bias has begun to lessen “as transportation planners begin to define road-building criteria in terms of passengers moved, not vehicle capacity.” She said that “we should be seeing this cup as half full rather than half empty.”

Others are less sanguine. Joseph Viteritti, the public policy professor, told Remapping Debate that the difficulty of getting funding “is not just about the Second Avenue subway,” but part of a larger problem in the United States, namely: “Do you hear anybody talk about an urban agenda anymore? I don’t.” In contrast to the 1960s, the period Viteritti is currently writing about, “there is no urban agenda.”

The lack of interest in an “urban agenda” or in increased funding for transit at the federal level, though partly longstanding historical phenomena, as Viteritti explained, are also, in part, a result of what Ethan Pollack, a senior policy analyst at the Economic Policy Institute, a progressive think tank, described as a “political economy” problem. “Where public transit is directly benefiting people,” Pollack explained, “That is in...a concentrated urban or metropolitan area. If you look at the senate, who is underrepresented? Urban and metropolitan areas.” The problem replicates itself at the New York state level, as well, Pollack asserted: “There is this big tension between New York City, and the suburbs, and upstate, and western New York.” Part of the problem, then, is that “people who are making the decisions are ones that are over-representing more rural and suburban voters.”



To Robert Abrams, though, making transit a priority is about making the case for the needs of people. In earlier eras, we made reforms that resulted in a more livable society for more people: “Whether it is a healthcare system — Medicare, Medicaid — or Social Security, there were always voices and forces who said, ‘it is too grandiose an idea, which we cannot afford.’ But there has got to be the leadership and the commitment and the will to forge ahead and to get it done.”

Over a long period, that sustained leadership has been lacking. In 1968, the Metropolitan Commuter Transportation Authority, the forerunner to the MTA, introduced an ambitious regional transportation plan that included a Second Avenue subway. The line was to be built in two phases: the first, between the Bronx and 34th Street in Manhattan; the second, from 34th Street to Lower Manhattan. The agency said, “The program is big. The program is ‘do-able.’ The program makes up for lost time. The program will meet present and future needs.”

Seven years later, in 1975, when New York City was in the midst of a severe financial crisis, the head of the MTA told a reporter: “I do not feel that the Second Avenue subway is dead. I think it will be built in the lifetime of most New Yorkers who are around today. And I hope I’m one of them.”

The MTA chief at that time was David Yunich.

He died in 2001.

*This content originally appeared at <http://www.remappingdebate.org/node/1567>*

## Plan for a full-blown Second Avenue subway

The MTA used this map of the four phases of its Second Avenue subway plan at a community meeting in 2006. Only phase one of the plan is funded. The 63rd Street station represents the point at which phase one would link up with existing “Q” train service. The entire Power Point presentation, of which the map below is the third slide, is available [here](#). Note: The MTA’s explanatory text that accompanies the slide is omitted here.

