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**COMMENTARY**

# They're All 'F' Trains

 By **NICOLE GELINAS**
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When confronted with a February report detailing how New York City's taxes are the nation's highest, Mayor Michael Bloomberg replied that New Yorkers pay more because, well, they get more: "Given the level of services that the public wants, we just have to have money to pay for things," he said.

New Yorkers who suffered long delays on the subways last Friday due to a little rain may be wondering where all of that money goes. The city badly needs to beef up its investments in the public transportation system, as well as better manage those investments.


As New York grows more crowded by the day, and subway ridership increases -- up 33% since 1996 and at the highest level in 50 years -- conditions are dismal. Day after day, people wait 10-deep to get on the escalators to enter stations on Manhattan's East Side, then wait again in standing-room only crowds to exit through dangerous floor-to-ceiling-turnstiles. In Brooklyn, a borough that's seen more than 30,000 apartments go up in a decade, crowding worsens every week on the L and F lines, as more people start their commutes from new buildings.

In less-than-perfect conditions, the situation becomes downright intolerable. When it rains, tracks flood and signals malfunction: A 20-minute commute turns into an hour. Much more disturbing, nearly six years after 9/11 and two years after the London subway bombing, the system remains dangerously unprotected from terrorists.

The dollars that flow into the subway system could be put to much better use. Riders and taxpayers are funding transit-worker benefits that simply aren't available in the private sector anymore: Pensions and health-care costs consume 20% of operating revenues. Meanwhile, Bronx and Manhattan commuters are still waiting for a Second Avenue subway. Outer-borough commuters need new express tracks, as well as signal upgrades on existing lines, to support more trains and reduce overcrowding. And the subway system needs cameras, reinforced tunnels and communication upgrades to reduce the risk of attack. (The federal government has given New York money for this very purpose.)

Federal, state and local taxpayers -- as well as riders paying \$2 fares -- already foot the bill for more than \$3 billion a year on capital improvements, including big-ticket projects like the long-awaited Second Avenue

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subway. Sounds like plenty, right? Well, not really. To see what a low priority mass transit is, consider that New York City spends more than \$5 billion on Medicaid annually.

Furthermore, much of the subway spending is not for new projects but for core maintenance and replacement of existing assets: cars and tracks, for example. Nearly half of that work is funded with debt, almost twice as much as in the '80s and early '90s. As a result, within three years more than 21% of subway revenues will go directly toward paying interest and principal -- twice as much, percentage-wise, as just a couple of years ago. And it will only get worse: As debt service consumes more of the subway budget, fewer dollars will be available for operating tasks like cleaning stations.

Even when the city and state devote money to new projects, it's just not enough: The full cost of the Second Avenue subway, for example, is likely to reach \$20 billion, not the less-than \$2 billion allocated over five years. And as that project, now finally underway after 70 years of stops and starts, inevitably costs more than expected, and as work inevitably proceeds more slowly than expected, the shortfall will only grow. Vital signal projects begun years ago won't be complete for another 20 years. And a modest slate of security improvements, including cameras and tunnel reinforcement, won't be done until nearly a decade after 9/11 -- if things go well.

Mr. Bloomberg seems unconcerned about overcrowded and vulnerable subways. When New York Times magazine reporter Jonathan Mahler asked him last year about overcrowding on the East Side line, he replied that commuters should wake up earlier if they don't like rush hours. To be fair, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, accountable to the governor, not the mayor, runs the system. But that's no excuse. The fact that the mayor didn't run the city's dysfunctional education department six years ago didn't stop him from taking control to fix problems there.

If Mr. Bloomberg really wants to create housing and jobs, he'd invest more of the taxpayer money he controls in the subway, and use his representation on the MTA board to make sure it's spent wisely. Better subway service to Coney Island would spur developers to build more quality housing there, without taxpayer subsidy. Conversely, decaying assets underground will only retard the growth of New York jobs.

The mayor doesn't have to wrest control of the MTA from the new governor. But he does need to be a much more effective advocate for a subway system that so greatly affects New Yorkers' public safety and quality of life.

*Ms. Gelinas is a contributing editor to the Manhattan Institute's City Journal.*

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