



Doomsday on the MTA:

What happens if New York's public transit system runs out of federal aid

Introduction: A transit system and city on the brink of destruction

COVID-19 brought financial devastation to New York's public transit system. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which operates trains, subways, buses, and paratransit vehicles for nearly 40% of the nation's riders suffered a near total loss of fare revenue and major declines in the toll and tax payments that subsidize transit. As New Yorkers sheltered in place, the agency's already precarious \$17 billion annual budget began losing \$1 billion each month. Meanwhile, the MTA continued to move nearly one million essential workers to the pandemic frontlines daily, 75% of them New Yorkers of color and the majority of them women.

In March, Congress passed the \$2 trillion CARES Act, an unprecedented aid package that included \$25 billion in federal aid to public transit systems nationwide. CARES gave the MTA \$3.9 billion, roughly enough to get it through four months of COVID, distributing funding according to federal aid formulas that favor small and rural bus systems, rather than high ridership levels, acute need, or regional dependence on transit. CARES aid began flowing in April. By late June, the MTA had spent 73% of its CARES allocation. The MTA's CARES money will run out entirely in July.

In May, the House of Representatives passed the \$3 trillion HEROES Act, which included another \$15 billion for transit. This time, most of the transit aid was set aside for the 15 largest metropolitan areas, giving the MTA a much larger share of the pot, again about \$3.9 billion. The agency projects that HEROES would fund its shortfall through the end of 2020. It then

projects a COVID-related budget gap of over \$6 billion for 2021. However, HEROES has not moved through the Senate and prospects for additional funding are uncertain.

Accordingly, the MTA now faces the prospect of a budget hole of several hundred million dollars each month. While ridership has grown somewhat from the April depth of the pandemic, even as offices may reopen, most New Yorkers have not returned to transit. Overall, subways and buses are seeing 25 to 30% of pre-pandemic ridership levels. Moreover, bus fares are not being collected to promote driver safety. The MTA's farebox revenue is therefore still far short of normal, and toll and tax revenue remains heavily depressed as well. Yet with two million trips each day, the MTA continues to perform its essential function. Key service sector workers and New Yorkers overall, the majority of whom do not have cars, depend on public transit.

Without more federal aid, the MTA faces an imminent budget shortfall approaching fifty percent. The MTA Chairman Patrick Foye has already said that the MTA "won't survive" without the additional \$3.9 billion from Congress. He is predicting unprecedented service reductions. Should these cuts move forward, they would end New York's recovery, hamper the city's ability to respond to a second COVID wave, and create such a drag on the region's economic output as to negatively impact the national and global economy.

Dramatic MTA cuts would transform life for New Yorkers in a way approaching the significance of sheltering in place itself. Isolating millions in their neighborhoods, they would compromise the city's character to an unimaginable degree, rendering it difficult to recognize and woefully unlikely to recover for a decade or more. Since large majorities of subway and bus riders are Black and Brown New Yorkers, transit service cuts also would inflict a severe, lasting, new racial injustice. The cuts could hardly come at a

worse time, immediately on the heels of COVID's racially disparate devastation and a resurgent movement for Black lives following several police murders of unarmed Black Americans.

While the MTA has not outlined the cuts it would make, austerity measures from a decade ago offer insight into a fraction of what is to come. After the Great Recession, the MTA made \$400 million in total cuts, axing the V and W subway lines and eliminating or curtailing 110 bus routes. In an analysis one year later, the agency estimated that the cuts had inconvenienced 15% of its riders. Within a decade, bus ridership had fallen 25% from its recent 2008 peak. In contrast, without the \$3.9 billion it needs beginning in July, the MTA would now need to impose cuts totalling \$650 million per month, or about 20 times deeper than the 2010 cuts.

People have a hard time imagining how cuts so deep would look. So the Riders Alliance examined three scenarios that cut the transit agency's service approximately in half. Focusing on the subway, we offer a visual display of the damage that federal austerity now would inflict, followed by more context and commentary.

Agency leaders could face a “Sophie’s Choice,” eliminating every other subway line from New York’s iconic system map

In this scenario, half of the system's trunk lines would be eliminated (considering frequency, we count the J/Z and G as one trunk). The precedent of the much smaller 2010 crisis shows that eliminating lines entirely is a very real possibility. While it is impossible to know exactly which lines would be eliminated, this is one logical scenario.

Lines cut:



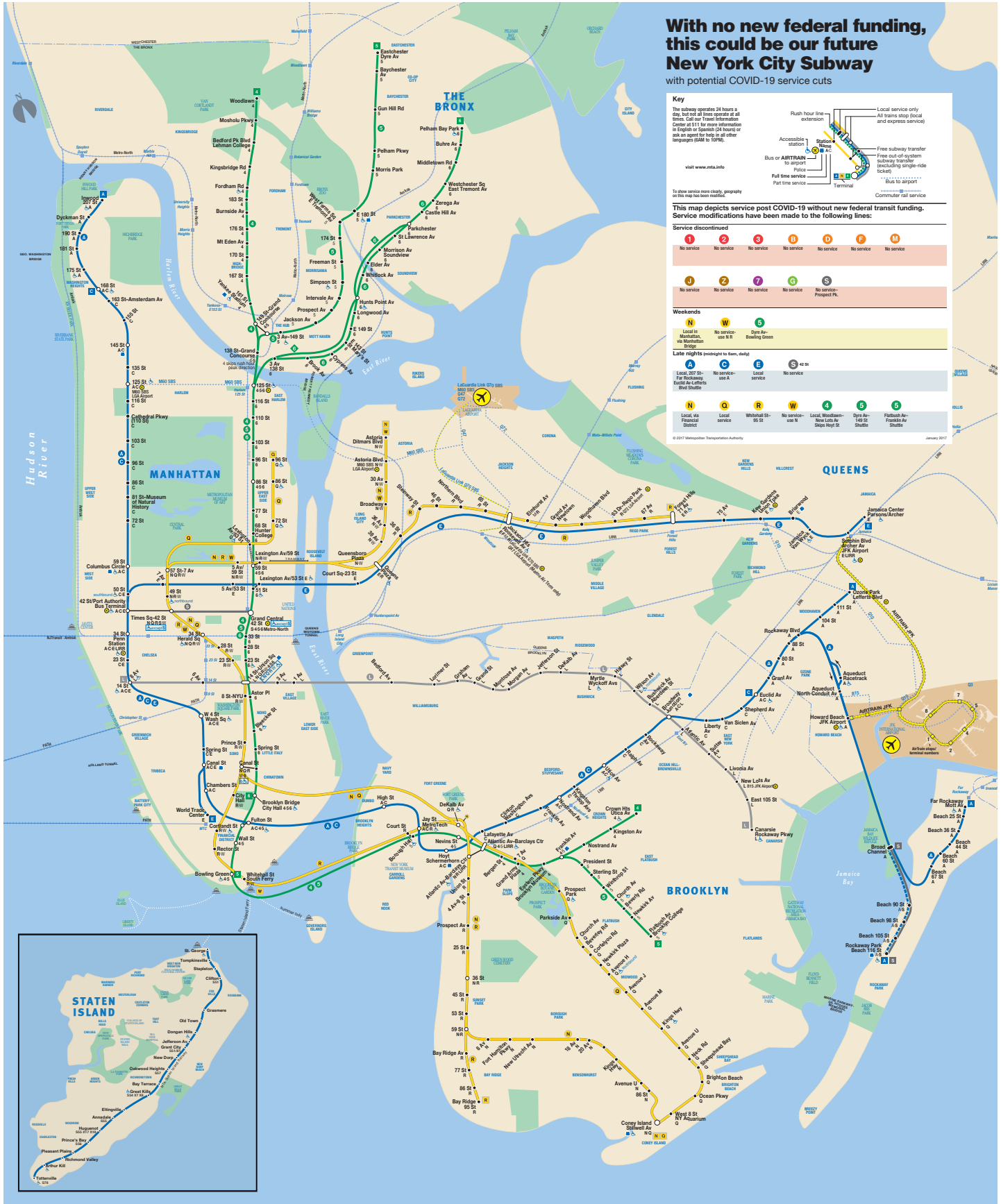
Remaining lines:

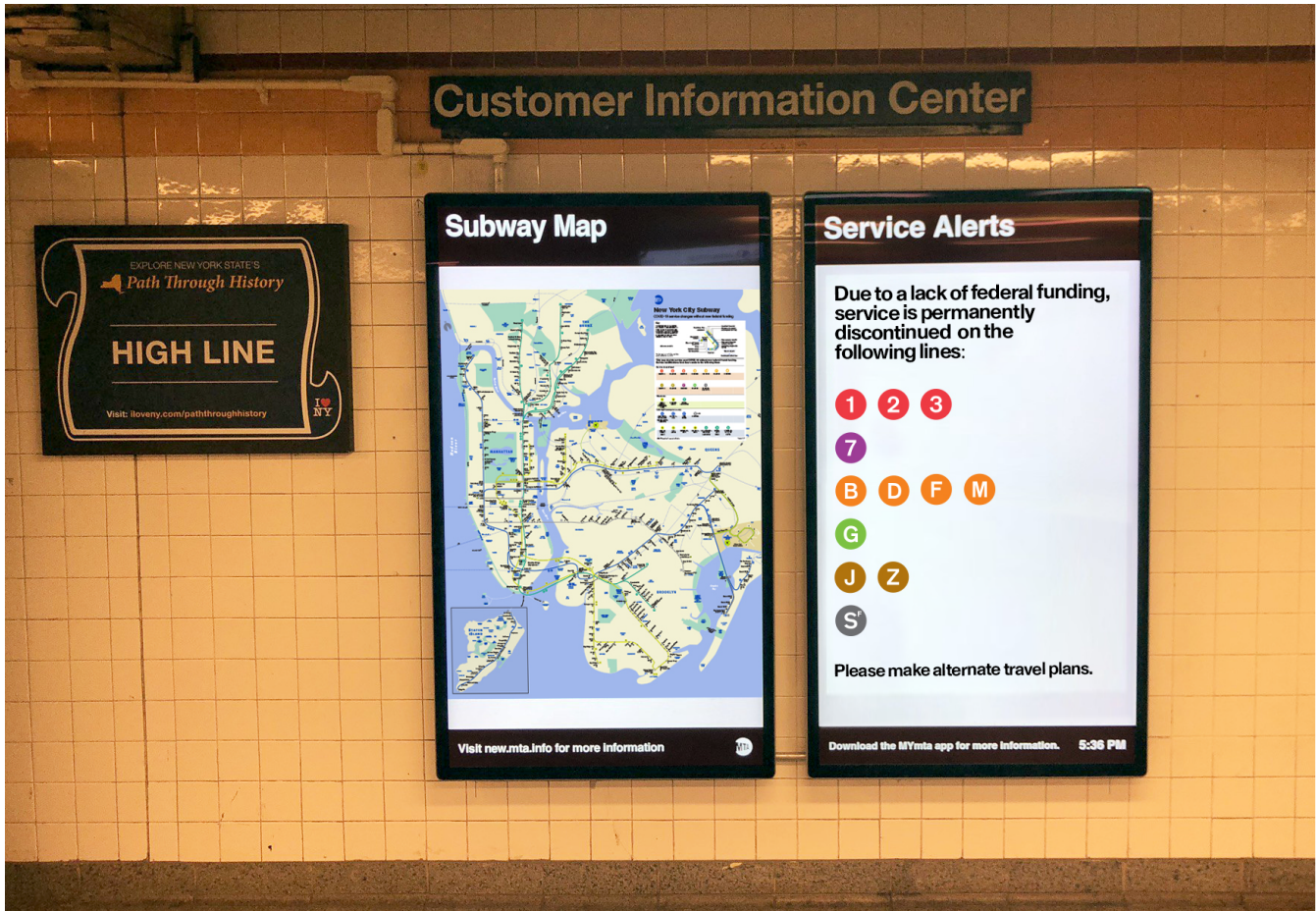


Current NYC Subway Map



NYC Subway Map Without New Federal Funding





The result is brutal, especially for end-of-the-line neighborhoods in the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn

1. Riverdale and Kingsbridge lose all subway service, requiring a bus ride to the A or the 4.
2. Flushing and Corona, the epicenter of COVID, lose all subway service, requiring bus rides to Jamaica, Kew Gardens, or Jackson Heights.
3. Across southern Brooklyn, the loss of B, D, F, and G service requires mile-long walks to remaining train lines and even longer bus rides from isolated areas like Red Hook.
4. The entire Upper West Side of Manhattan, normally served by five subway lines, would have just one, the local "C" train along Central Park West.

With these line closures, 163 of the system's 424 stations would shut down indefinitely. While the instantly recognizable subway map would be utterly transformed, so too would the borough bus maps and commuter rail lines, each of which would also be subject to a 50% reduction in capacity. Riders losing subway service would crowd scarce space on buses. Many difficult to reach neighborhoods and communities would be further isolated.

Areas with subway access would be inundated with additional car traffic that transit cuts would invite. Additional driving would create more traffic congestion, delays in emergency response times, particulate pollution that aggravates respiratory illnesses like asthma and COVID-19, and deadly and injurious collisions between vehicles and pedestrians and cyclists.

Alternative 1: Local Only Service

Essentially the MTA's current overnight service plan, but with an across the board 50% frequency cut: Most rush hour subway trains would come every 10 or 15 minutes and most off-peak trains two to three times per hour. Buses and commuter rail frequency would be cut proportionately so that lines would keep running but service would be dangerously crowded and delayed and also far less useful and dependable.

For this alternative, the map is less compelling than the legend:

1. No express service
2. Rush-hour service every 10 - 15 minutes
3. Off-peak service every 20 - 30 minutes
4. Late night service restrictions apply outside of rush hour i.e. no B, C, W and 5, M, and R shuttles

The overall result is unimaginable crowding during rush hour. This would greatly increase the risk of another wave of COVID-19. Neighborhood-specific results include extra transfers from the East Bronx (5), Middle Village (M), and Bay Ridge (R) due to shuttle service operations off-peak.

Alternative 2: Subway Only Service (plus Access-a-Ride)

The subway is the MTA's most popular and efficient service, moving more than half of all riders each day. In this scenario the MTA could shut down its commuter rail and bus lines, while leaving subway operations largely intact. Due to federal requirements, it would also need to operate Access-a-Ride paratransit for those unable to use the subway system, which is largely inaccessible and still requires climbing stairs to access most stations.

Conclusion: Averting The Death Spiral

Before COVID, the MTA faced nearly a billion dollar budget deficit and little appetite for raising fares to cover increased costs or cutting service to reduce costs. Officials and advocates sought increased subsidies and new sources of revenue. Agency leaders recognized that higher fares and service cuts would drive riders from the system, losing rather than making or saving money, and necessitating further fare hikes and service cuts.

This feedback loop is known in transit policy as a “death spiral.” While cutting cleaning and maintenance in 2018, then-New York City President Andy Byford said: “We are very mindful of that phenomenon and we’re trying to avoid that.” Then-MTA Board Commissioner Charles Moerdler added: “That’s a self-fulfilling prophecy for sure. We’ve seen time and again, as you reduce buses and as you give worse service, you’re going to have a greater problem.” Last February, MTA Board Commissioner Larry Schwartz announced a working group to explore alternative revenues to fare hikes that could drive riders off public transit.

Once a death spiral begins it becomes extremely difficult to halt. The results are miserable:

- Less access to jobs, education, and other institutions for transit-dependent people
- More driving, with all of its negative externalities
- A less efficient, affordable, and equitable city overall

Even before COVID, New York could ill afford its MTA going off the rails. Today, after the devastation the city has suffered, with all its inequities laid bare, it would be unconscionable. Austerity-induced failure of such essential infrastructure would be a crime against the city and its millions of residents, and a deep, self-inflicted wound to

the national economy. Congress must act now before it is too late to save the subway, buses, trains, and paratransit New Yorkers — and by extension the nation — depend on.

The hope for New Yorkers rests in the power of the New York area’s Congressional delegation. With 19 New York members of Congress and two Senators representing the MTA service area, we have a large delegation that needs to prioritize the MTA. And within that delegation we have two of the most powerful elected officials in the country: Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, the top Democratic in the Senate, and House Democratic Caucus Chair Congressman Hakeem Jeffries, the fifth most powerful member of the House.

With these leaders, there is a new hope for transit after decades when the federal government largely prioritized highways disproportionately serving whiter rural and suburban communities. Investing in public transit is not only an investment in the cities and the nation’s most productive regions, it’s also an advance for racial justice because transit is essential to the well-being of Black and Brown communities. It is long past time to reverse the racist pattern of federal transportation policy. COVID and Black Lives Matter have together brought home how long overdue federal investment in public transit is. We can wait no longer for transit equity.

