Will the L Train Shutdown be a Missed Opportunity or Model for the Future?
Here’s how to improve plans for the L train before it’s too late

The MTA has said it will shutdown the L train for 15 months starting in April 2019 to conduct needed repairs on the tunnels under the East River. The agency has released plans to upgrade the L train during the closure, and has been working with New York City Department of Transportation to develop alternative transportation options for the 400,000 riders that use the L train each weekday.

The shutdown makes sense because the work will be able to be done faster and at lower cost. But many organizations and elected officials have been asking that the agencies make the most of the shutdown, so riders see a substantial improvement once the line reopens. At the same time, the closure presents an opportunity to test bold street designs being used in other cities to move buses and people faster. The specific details of the service plan are not yet public, leaving elected officials and local business groups nervous.

While the MTA has some important capital improvements planned during the shutdown, including new elevators at 1st Ave and Bedford Ave stations, the project still falls short. For example, the MTA has no plans to improve accessibility at 3rd or 6th Avenues, circulation at Union Square, or start track extensions at the 8th Ave station that would allow more service to run.

Time is of the essence. The MTA is about to miss a key opportunity to make the project more beneficial to riders. A firm has already been selected and is moving forward on design and engineering plans. If changes are not made to the capital project plans soon, the window for modification closes.
Advocates have said it’s “unconscionable” to close subway lines and not make station accessibility improvements. It’s true there is no better time to conduct station upgrades than when the stations are closed, because workers can have 24-hour access and their work has fewer conflicts with trains and riders. If not done now, improvements like elevators at 3rd and 6th Avenues will not come to the L train for decades, possibly never.

This report recaps what the public knows to date about the MTA’s and DOT’s plans during the L train closure, and offers an urgent call for both agencies to move immediately to make bolder plans and firm them up. It is the third report RPA has released on the L train closure in addition to A New L Train for New Yorkers and Fixing the L Train and Managing the Shutdown.
Current MTA and NYC DOT plans

**Capital Improvements**
The MTA has the following improvements planned for closed stations:

- At the First Ave station at the Avenue A entrance, the MTA plans to add new station entrances on both sides of the 14th street, new elevators serving both platforms and new turnstiles and MetroCard vending machines.

- At Bedford Ave station, Bedford Ave entrance, it plans to add two new street-level stairways, more platform stair capacity, a larger mezzanine, new elevators, and additional turnstiles.

- At the Bedford Ave station, Driggs Ave entrance, it plans to add two new street stairways, redesign the mezzanine area and add turnstiles and a new platform stairway.

- At the Union Square station, the MTA has said it will make improvements to circulation and stairwells at Union Square station, but the specifics have not been released publicly yet.

- At the 3rd Ave station, the MTA has recently said it also plans to test platform screen doors, which separate the platform from the train, improving service reliability and safety, and reducing litter on tracks.

- At 8th Ave, begin track extension work to 9th Ave needed to provide a faster and more reliable service once the line reopens and allow for even more service in the long-run. Also, improve circulation to the A-C-E and enhance flood protection.

- Use Design Build to make accessibility improvements, install platform screen doors, and rehabilitate stations using the Governor’s new 30-station design guidelines.

**Service alternatives**
The MTA is working with NYC Department of Transportation, who controls city streets, on an alternative service plan. The plan is still being developed, but we know the agencies are considering a variety of measures including the following:

- Additional service on G, J and M lines

- Free out of system Metrocard transfers (between Livonia Ave L train and Junius Ave 3 and Broadway G and Lorimer Street J, M and Z trains)

- The purchase of 200 new buses for enhanced bus service over the Williamsburg Bridge and across 14th Street in Manhattan

- High occupancy vehicle restrictions on all East River bridges

- New ferry service between North 6th Street and East 20th Street

- Bicycle and pedestrian improvements, including high capacity bike parking stations

Until the agencies commit to a more detailed alternative service plan, elected officials and advocates will continue to be concerned that the alternatives will leave riders stranded.

It's not too late to make changes to the MTA construction project.
As of December 2017, the MTA is missing a number of opportunities to improve accessibility and service. The most notable of these include:

- At 3rd Avenue and 6th Avenue stations, the addition of elevators.

- At Union Square Station, improvements in circulation and accessibility, including the possibility of installing escalators.
Map of Service Improvements and L Train Alternatives

- **LIRR Free Subway Transfer & Equal Fare**
  - at Woodside and Flushing Main Street to reduce crowding on 7 Line and to accommodate transfers from the O at Court Street

- **Increased Service**
  - 8 cars per train

- **14th Street Transitway**
  - with a center running bus lane

- **Williamsburg Bridge and Delancey St dedicated bus lanes**

- **Express Bus**
  - Midtown West 8th & 9th Ave
  - Midtown 5th & 6th Ave
  - Midtown East 1st & 2nd Ave
  - Downtown

- **Service Terminates at Bedford Ave**

- **Repair Canarsie Tubes**

- **Tail-end Tracks**

- **Explore Ferry Opportunities**

- **3 Increased Service**

- **Atlantic Terminal**
In November 2016, RPA worked with local advocates, business leaders, and elected officials to develop a mitigation plan for the shutdown. While the MTA and NYC DOT are considering many of these ideas, they have not released a final plan.

| Prepare adjacent subway lines for higher ridership | Increase service on \( \text{C, A, C} \) and \( \text{J, M, Z} \) subway lines as alternatives to the L. |
| New rapid bus services with dedicated preferential treatments and auto-free zones | Commuter rail fare policy changes and upgrades at select stations to free up subway capacity. |
| New rapid bus services with dedicated preferential treatments and auto-free zones | Create new rapid bus services to connect Brooklyn residents to Manhattan job centers. |
| | Create a dedicated busway over the Williamsburg Bridge and HOV3+ restrictions. |
| New rapid bus services with dedicated preferential treatments and auto-free zones | Commuter rail fare policy changes and upgrades at select stations to free up subway capacity. |
| | Prioritize the movement of transit and people crosstown with a 14th Street Transitway closed to private vehicles. |
| New rapid bus services with dedicated preferential treatments and auto-free zones | Pilot new technology and street treatments to speed buses citywide. |
| New rapid bus services with dedicated preferential treatments and auto-free zones | Improving existing local bus routes in Brooklyn. |
| Transform streets in Brooklyn to better connect people and cyclists to transit | Alleviate sidewalk crowding by limiting private automobile access to crowded |
| Transform streets in Brooklyn to better connect people and cyclists to transit | Improve pedestrian and bike connections to existing subway services and streets in North Brooklyn (i.e. sections of Bedford Avenue and Grand Street). |
| Improve ferry service and reduce fares to serve Williamsburg residents | More frequent ferry service |
| Improve ferry service and reduce fares to serve Williamsburg residents | Free transfer between ferries and other modes of transit |
| Improve ferry service and reduce fares to serve Williamsburg residents | Explore extending ferry service to the Hudson River |
A robust, alternative service plan should be released immediately.

As the MTA and DOT move forward on their alternative service plan, the following should be prioritized:

- A designated bus/truck lane on the Williamsburg Bridge, combined with HOV3+ restrictions on the East River Bridges
- Priority access for buses on streets connecting and across the Williamsburg Bridge
- During peak hours, replacement bus service should be offered every few minutes
- Bus routes that travels across the Williamsburg Bridge and connect across 14th Street and 8th Ave (right now proposed bus routes terminate at Bleecker or 1st Ave/14th Street)
- A 14th Street transitway, with a center running bus lane
- Tap and go fare payment on bus service
- Expansion of Freedom ticket, especially on the LIRR between Atlantic Ave and Jamaica, to make LIRR trips within Brooklyn and Queens a more affordable alternative. Downtown Brooklyn is a key work destination for many commuters along the L train corridor.
- Creation of bi-directional bicycle paths on key routes, including Delancey Street limiting automobile access on certain streets, such as 13th, 15th, and 16th Streets in Manhattan. (Allow deliveries, emergency access and residents)
- Addition of Citi Bike stations and bike share valet service paralleling L train route and extension of the service farther east
- Improve local bus service on B12, B15, B20, B24, B26, B32, B52, B60

Timing and Funding

RPA estimates upgrades at the closed stations would cost somewhere between $500 and $600 million.

As officials have noted, it would be hard to accomplish all this work in 15 months. But that is not a reason not to start. The 15-month outage will give the agency an enormous head start and allow for the most disruptive work to be done while service is idle. That could mean huge cost savings. The unprecedented access to the five stations in Manhattan presents the MTA with a unique opportunity, unshackling designers and construction crews from normal operating constraints.

Given the unusual opportunity of a full tunnel closure, the MTA should consider using funds allocated for other upgrades in the 2015-2019 capital plan that are not as critical and are unlikely to be started on (procurement completed and funds committed) in the plan’s time horizon. The MTA also should allot funds for this project in the first year of the 2020-2024 capital plan. Finally, the agency could pursue additional federal funds from the same core capacity improvement program it is using to improve the First Avenue and Bedford Avenue stations.
This is the subway system New Yorkers deserve—with platform screen doors, better elevators, less congested platforms, and more light and air.
Conclusion

The L train closure presents a unique opportunity for the MTA and NYC DOT. For the MTA, much better service, improve circulation and new elevators could build support among riders for targeted shutdowns to improve other lines, one-by-one, throughout the system. As noted in RPA’s Fourth Regional Plan, this approach could save time and money, and bring more urgently needed improvements to the subway system at a faster pace.

The MTA and DOT will also need to work together in order to show New Yorkers what modern, reliable bus service can look like. This relies on prioritizing buses across the East River and along the 14th Street corridor. With bus ridership declining, losing 100 million passengers over the past eight years, the agencies cannot move fast enough to restore faith in the bus system.

The subway system needs to be saved. Congestion in New York is reaching record levels. Governor Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio must work together to restore faith in the subway and bus system, and they should start with the L train.

Riders deserve

- Elevators at 3rd and 6th Avenues
- 8th Ave track extension and improved terminal at 8th Avenue, which would allow faster and more reliable service along the entire L line
- Union Square circulation improvements
- High capacity bicycle routes
- Bus priority on access to bridges and designated bus lanes on Williamsburg Bridge
- A 14th Street transitway, with a center running bus lane
- HOV 3 on East River crossings
- Deploy tap and go fare payment on buses serving the L train corridor prior to closure
- Implementation of Freedom ticket for discounted LIRR fares between Atlantic and Jamaica.
- Expanded bike share, more stations, and protected bike lanes

This report highlights key recommendations from RPA’s Fourth Regional Plan for the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut metropolitan area.

View the full plan at fourthplan.org

Acknowledgments

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