Because the radial subway system is oriented toward Manhattan, it is much less successful in meeting the needs of those not destined for the central business district.
New York City’s subway system, built mostly in the first third of the 20th century, was designed to open up the rapidly growing city to residential development beyond lower Manhattan. That was accomplished remarkably well. Collectively, the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens added three million people from 1910 to 1940. Today, these subway lines, along with bus, commuter rail and ferries, deliver almost 90% of those traveling to work in Manhattan below 60th Street. Without this transit network, the economic engine and the heart of New York region couldn’t function.

Because the radial subway system is oriented toward Manhattan, it is much less successful in meeting the needs of those not destined for the central business district. Indeed, less than half of the 3.4 million trips made within and between the boroughs are made on transit. In contrast, almost nine in every 10 trips for work made to and from the boroughs to the Manhattan business district are on transit.

A well-functioning transit system is especially important for both low- and average-income New Yorkers, the majority of whom who don’t own a car. Not only does the system put them in reach of millions of jobs, but it enables them to get to schools, hospitals, cultural facilities, parks and services. This helps mitigate New York’s high cost of housing, and it is part of the reason that low-income New Yorkers have a better chance of getting ahead than residents of many other U.S. regions.

1 In this report, the boroughs are defined as the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and Manhattan north of 96th Street on the East Side and north of 125th Street on the West Side.
2 Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, Emmanuel Saez, The Economic Impact of Tax Expenditures: Evidence from Spatial Variation Across the U.S., The Equality of Opportunity Project, July 2013, Summary of Project Findings. Among its findings, this comprehensive study found that the New York region ranked high on scales that measured the chances of someone born in a low-income household achieving a relatively high income as an adult. It found several contributing factors, including shorter commuting times, characterizing places that provided greater opportunity for upward mobility.
The Boroughs Have Outgrown Our Manhattan-Oriented Transit Network

The Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and Upper Manhattan are home to 7.3 million people, who make more than 20 million trips a day.

**Job Growth, 1993-2013**
Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boroughs</th>
<th>774,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manhattan</td>
<td>538,000</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Journey-to-Work Trips, 2000-2010**
Source: U.S. Census

| Within the Boroughs | 242,000 |
| To Manhattan       | 105,000 |

Jobs and population are growing faster in the boroughs and upper Manhattan than in the central business district. Over the last two decades, 774,000 jobs were created in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island, where jobs grew twice as fast as in all of Manhattan. What’s more, growth in travel within the four boroughs exceeded the growth in travel into Manhattan. From 2000-2010, the number of people living and working in the boroughs grew by 242,000, while those destined for Manhattan grew by only 105,000. Sixty-one percent of New York City workers residing outside of Manhattan work in the other boroughs as well.

Inadequate service is a likely reason that New York’s bus ridership has declined by 7% since 2003, even though the city’s population and economy have grown and subway ridership has risen by 23% during that same period. For those who don’t own a car and are unable to use the subway, including many seniors, the disabled and those not living near a subway, lack of good bus service is a significant detriment to quality of life and economic opportunity.
The disproportionate growth in jobs and travel outside of the central business district is expected to continue. As the workforce of the boroughs expands, more jobs will follow. There is more room for growth outside of Manhattan, and many future jobs will be in health care, education, technology and other sectors that don’t need to be in a high-cost office district. More jobs outside Manhattan’s core can help revitalize neighborhoods, expand economic opportunity and increase the city’s tax base. Yet growth won’t be sustainable if the transportation network is ill-equipped to handle it, and opportunities will be limited if it’s too difficult for residents to get to jobs.

This report examines how effectively our transit system meets the mobility needs of the boroughs today and recommends both small- and large-scale changes in the transit system that would expand opportunities for borough residents and create benefits to the economy of the city and region.

The Manhattan-oriented transit network is already straining to meet rising demand, and the burden will only grow. Many heavy travel markets are unserved, requiring circuitous, time-consuming and multiple-transfer journeys by combinations of bus and subway. Even those traveling at times and to places where transit is more available will often choose to drive if they own a car rather than dealing with the shortcomings of traveling by transit within the boroughs.

The subway network leaves out large parts of the city, and is of limited use for travel within the boroughs.

In parts of Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx there are entire neighborhoods located beyond a comfortable walking distance to a station, making it necessary to rely on another vehicle, usually a bus, to access the subway. Staten Island doesn’t have a subway, and the Staten Island Railway, built in the early 20th century, serves only a small fraction of that borough’s land area. Even for those who live near a subway, many trips that stay within the outer boroughs require an additional mode of transportation. Even when they can be accomplished via transit, trips between boroughs by subway are especially long and arduous, often requiring a trip through Manhattan first. Many places around the world – London, Madrid, Tokyo and others - have long since identified this limitation and taken steps to introduce partial or complete circumferential lines to allow riders to navigate around city centers. Aside from travel time savings and improved access, circumferential services also provide redundancy for the system, take pressure off existing radial lines and foster development in outlying areas of the city.

Bus service in the boroughs is slow and infrequent.

The average speed of a local bus is New York City in 8 miles per hour. In Manhattan and much of the Bronx and Brooklyn, speeds are even slower, only twice as fast as a pedestrian and slower than cycling. Even express buses, which are designed to serve travel to Manhattan, average only 11 miles per hour. Local bus service is often infrequent, meaning long waits and crowded buses. Many routes aren’t aligned with the most desired trips, leaving the rider no choice but to transfer, adding to the time and inconvenience of bus use.

The commuter rail networks largely bypass the boroughs.

The service and fare policies of Metro-North and Long Island Rail Road aren’t designed to attract those living and working within New York City. There has been a substantial increase in reverse commuting from Manhattan and the Bronx to the northern suburbs, fueled largely by the job growth in White Plains and Stamford and new track capacity that permitted additional reverse service. The LIRR hasn’t experienced similar growth, due to insufficient capacity for rush-hour reverse service and few large job concentrations near suburban stations.
Low-Income and Car-Less Households Are Especially Burdened

Many residents of the boroughs depend on the transit system because they don’t own a car. More than half the households in the city are without one, including almost four of five in Manhattan, close to 60% in the Bronx and Brooklyn, and more than one-third in Queens. Most of the remaining households in those boroughs own only one vehicle, which is a handicap for two-worker households. On Staten Island more than half the residents own one or none. Low-income households depend on good transit service. While most low-income neighborhoods are within walking distance of a subway station, there are several communities with high poverty and a high share of autoless households that are not, including parts of Morrisania and East Tremont in the Bronx, East Harlem in Manhattan, East New York, Flatlands, and Canarsie in Brooklyn, and Elmhurst, Corona and South Jamaica in Queens.

Even low-income residents who live near a subway are more burdened by the lack of effective intra-borough transit. On average, jobs in the Manhattan central business district have higher education and entry-level requirements than jobs in the other boroughs, leaving many poor and moderate-income households more dependent on retail, industrial, health care and service jobs that are spread throughout the boroughs. Many poorer neighborhoods have relatively few jobs within walking distance, leaving many workers to rely on long and often unreliable bus or subway trips.

Lower-income households also are less able to afford taxis and frequently have fewer service and retail options within walking distance than more affluent neighborhoods. The cost of commuter rail service also is a barrier for many who might otherwise look for jobs in the suburbs or use commuter trains where subway service is lacking.
More than half the households in New York City don’t own cars, including over 60% in Brooklyn and the Bronx.
New York’s transit system, designed to accommodate demographic and travel patterns that existed 100 years ago, needs to be adapted and expanded to better address the way residents work and live today and to take into account how the city is likely to change and grow in the coming decades.

Much can be done to address the transit network’s shortcomings and expand economic opportunity for residents of the four boroughs and Upper Manhattan. Many improvements are low-cost steps that can make a big difference in the short term. Others will cost more and take longer.

A comprehensive strategy to upgrade the transit system will need to achieve three complementary goals:

- Create a first-rate bus system
- Improve and extend rail service
- Make commuter rail work for borough residents

The recommendations that follow were developed from a rigorous evaluation of existing service using nine criteria that a transit user would consider — proximity, frequency, span, speed, crowding, reliability, connectivity, amenity and price (see diagram on following page). Particular attention was given to the needs of low-income and auto-less households who are most dependent on transit.

In addition to data and service analysis, public meetings were held in five communities across the city. These meetings produced a wide variety of ideas and actions. Among the most often mentioned problems were the long walk needed to reach subways and buses, the need to make too many transfers, slow speed, particularly of buses, and infrequent service.
9 Key Things That Determine the Appeal of Transit

**Proximity:** Is the transit stop nearby or will I have to walk too far at either end of my trip?

**Frequency:** Will I have to wait too long for a train or bus?

**Span:** Is service available and frequent enough at the times I need to make the trip?

**Speed:** Can I reach my destination in a reasonable period of time?

**Crowding:** Will I be able to get a seat or will the vehicle be uncomfortably overcrowded?

**Reliable:** Does the transit service arrive when I expect it to, based on the schedule?

**Connectivity:** Will I get to where I am going without transferring to additional trains or buses?

**Amenity:** Is the service comfortable, and does it provide useful and timely information and a pleasant physical environment?

**Price:** Can I afford the fare?
Create a First-Rate Bus System

The many weaknesses of the bus system perpetuate its image as a second-rate system. The image itself becomes a problem, depressing ridership and making new investment less likely. But these weaknesses can be addressed to create a more virtuous cycle, with improvements attracting more riders and more investments. Many improvements can be made with small initial investments and can save money in the long term by making the system more efficient. A comprehensive strategy would include the following objectives and actions:
Increase Frequency on Selected Routes, Initially on an Experimental Basis

Local bus frequency falls short of an acceptable industry standard of a bus every 10 minutes in peak periods, every 15 minutes at other weekday times and every 20 minutes on weekends. There are 56 routes with bus service that falls short of these standards for one or more time periods or days of the week. Service should be increased in those cases. Another 36 bus routes tend to be overcrowded and additional service would ease that problem. These additions would not only shorten waiting times but partially mitigate the negative effects of multiple transfers. Similarly, service should be added selectively where late-night service is absent, and to express service in the weekday off-peak and on weekends.

The estimated operating cost of these added services is estimated at $28 million, not including additions to the bus fleet and added bus depot space. It would be prudent to increase these services on a carefully monitored demonstration basis, starting with the most heavily used service.

Expand Select Bus Service in Major Corridors

The current Select Bus Service program by the New York City Department of Transportation and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority has been successful in improving bus service. The eight SBS routes implemented to date have speeded service, attracted riders and demonstrated that faster service is possible. We recommend prioritizing the implementation of SBS on another eight corridors, two in each borough except Manhattan, shown in Figure S-1. They meet all the criteria for successful SBS service: sizable ridership, slow bus service and poor subway connectivity. Most noteworthy is Woodhaven Boulevard in Queens, where a wide right-of-way makes possible a system closer to full Bus Rapid Transit, which includes a dedicated lane for buses.

RPA’s Recommended SBS/BRT Routes
Explore Variable Pricing

Lower fares on subway and buses in the off-peak and on weekends should be considered to move trips into time of days when there is less crowding, and to help lower-income residents with either the need or option to travel more in the off-peak.

Make Buses Faster With Vehicle, Fare Payment and Other Improvements

Numerous short-term measures would not only save time for passengers but also lower costs by making the buses and their drivers more productive. The MTA already has begun purchasing only low-floor buses that speed loading and unloading. Other measures should include a more aggressive educational program to encourage passengers to leave by the rear door; a modern and efficient contactless fare payment system that will speed boarding and alighting on all bus routes; street treatments on congested or high-traffic corridors and intersections that will enable buses to maintain reliable and quick service; improved traffic enforcement to further reduce congestion; and the introduction of more limited-stop service on some high-frequency routes. These measures would be directed to all of the more than 200 local buses routes in the city, not just the handful of those that benefit from SBS or BRT treatments.

Slow Local Buses (Buses traveling one mph or less than the borough average)
During the investigations and outreach process, many ideas for new or rerouted routes were suggested. Many would serve industrial areas, such as Maspeth in Queens and Hunts Point and Zerega Avenue in the Bronx. Other routes were suggested to serve the airports, which would serve both airport workers and air passengers. Following further market and operational analysis, these could also be tried on an experimental basis with sunset provisions and clear criteria for whether or not to continue service.

Improve Bus Amenities

Improving amenities are important to signal commitment to a better quality of service. Greater priority should be given to improving bus shelters, bus schedules and maps, real-time bus arrival information, and easier fare payment systems. These include shelters that are properly enclosed from the elements, dynamic signs with accurate bus arrival times, and real-time information for connecting transit services.

Initiate New or Modified Routes

During the investigations and outreach process, many ideas for new or rerouted routes were suggested. Many would serve industrial areas, such as Maspeth in Queens and Hunts Point and Zerega Avenue in the Bronx. Other routes were suggested to serve the airports, which would serve both airport workers and air passengers. Following further market and operational analysis, these could also be tried on an experimental basis with sunset provisions and clear criteria for whether or not to continue service.
Improve and Extend Rail Service

There are a number of actions that improve or better connect existing subway services, as well as provide new service that connect the boroughs without going through Manhattan. Some of the following recommendations could be implemented in the near term and would provide benefits that will accrue over time. Others are long-range steps that would require an infusion of dependable sources of capital.

Improve Stations Throughout the Boroughs

The subway station upgrade program should be targeted to overcome an imbalance in the pace of boroughs’ stations improvements and give greater attention to station needs outside of Manhattan. Also, the MTA should accelerate its program to implement communications-based train control, which would replace outmoded signals from an earlier era and improve capacity and flexibility throughout the system.¹

Pursue Future Phases of the Second Avenue Subway and Other Subway Expansion

The completion of the initial phase of the Second Avenue subway followed by segments north to 125th Street and south to the Battery has both short- and long-term benefits for those living in the boroughs. The extension of the first phase between 96th and 63rd streets will have the initial effect of serving parts of East Harlem and of relieving severe overcrowding on the 4, 5 and 6 trains serving the Bronx and the east side. An extension north to 125th Street would bring service to all of East Harlem and relieve overcrowding on Bronx trains. Moreover, the extension northward could serve as a catalyst to extend the service northward into low-income neighborhoods of central Bronx with poor subway service, including East Tremont, Morrisania and Melrose.

The extension of the Second Avenue subway to the south would create better access from upper Manhattan and the Bronx to Midtown and Lower Manhattan. It also would set the stage for new lines in Brooklyn and Queens. Most immediately, funds need to be maintained in the MTA capital program for the next two stations to the north in East Harlem and at 125th Street, where connections to lines from the Bronx and to Metro-North could be made.

¹ RPA’s 2014 report, Moving Forward: Accelerating the Transition to Communications-Based Train Control in New York City’s Subways, details the benefits of CBTC.
Provide New Rail Alternatives for Boroughs Using Unused or Underused Rail Rights-of-Way

There are numerous possible rail expansions directed to borough needs that will cost less than subway extensions. By far the most promising is the Triboro Rx, a largely above-ground line first conceived by RPA in the mid-1990s that would stretch from Bay Ridge in Brooklyn through Queens to the South Bronx. This line would address many of the weaknesses found in the transit system in the boroughs – poor connectivity within and between the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn, slow bus service, excessive transferring and service reliability. Current bus service and improved SBS/BRT routes would be hard pressed to duplicate its speed and connectivity advantages.

The right-of-way is now used exclusively by freight services, but this valuable resource could be used for both freight and passenger service, as numerous other rail lines do around the world. We estimate that more than 100,000 riders would use the 24-mile, 22-station Triboro Rx line, with stops strategically situated to establish convenient transfers to subway stops and bus routes. Station locations would become a catalyst for development in areas where housing will be needed to meet New York City’s anticipated population growth.

The most promising of other rail possibilities involves the use of the Atlantic and Montauk branches of the LIRR east of Jamaica, which can be reconstituted and combined with service on the Atlantic Branch between Jamaica and the Barclays Center in Downtown Brooklyn. The current LIRR plans are to convert the Atlantic Branch into a shuttle service once the East Side Access project is completed in the early 2020s. We recommend that the MTA’s LIRR, working with the New York City Transit and NYC’s Department of City Planning determine how they should best be used.
Make Commuter Rail Work for Borough Residents

Metro-North and LIRR can be made to work better for the borough communities that they serve without significantly reducing service for suburban riders commuting into the city.
**Increase Off-Peak and Reverse Commute Service**
For many Metro-North and LIRR stations located within the Bronx and Queens, service frequency in the peak in both directions and at midday is very limited. Six stations in the Bronx all fall short of a 20-minute peak (both directions) and 30-minute off-peak standard. In Queens, eight stations have inadequate service in the off-peak and during midday hours. In all cases, one more train per hour during the affected periods would meet an acceptable standard. Service could be expanded with a demonstration program to determine whether goals for increased ridership are met.

**Reduce Weekday Rail Fares for Trips Within New York City**
Today, the railroads offer a half-price City ticket — but only on weekends. This makes using the railroad a prohibitive burden for many city residents. RPA recommends that expansion of the discount to weekdays. The commuter rail service would become more competitive to the subway, shifting some borough residents from the subway to the railroads, if they were willing to pay a small premium, reducing crowding on subway lines in Queens and the Bronx. The estimated cost to the MTA after accounting for the revenue gained by the shift from subway to commuter rail is $30 million annually.

**Bring Metro-North Service to the East Bronx and Penn Station**
Metro-North should move forward with its proposal to operate a commuter rail service to link the Bronx with Penn Station once the completion of LIRR’s East Side Access project makes it operationally feasible. The Bronx would benefit with four stations in the eastern part of the borough to allow residents to reach West Midtown faster, gaining access to jobs in Connecticut.

**Add LIRR Mainline Capacity to Create More Reverse-Commute Opportunities**
Today, transit options from the city to Long Island are severely limited by the lack of capacity for reverse peak service, denying city residents transit access to Long Island jobs, and Long Island employers access to the city’s workforce. On the LIRR, added service in the reverse direction would be helped by the addition of a third track on the Main Line in Nassau County. The LIRR proposal would build an additional track on its main line from Floral Park to Hicksville, a project that would open up reverse commuting jobs on Long Island for Queens and Brooklyn residents.
Until recently, the inattention to the needs of the boroughs has nowhere been truer than in its transit system. The subways were built to bring people to the core, only incidentally serving people traveling within the boroughs. Express buses, too, have been designed to deliver borough residents to Manhattan. The commuter rail network pays little attention to the boroughs. This has left the local bus network to be the workhorse for the mobility of borough residents. But buses are slow, unreliable, infrequent, and often do not take people where they want to without long walks or multiple transfers.

This is starting to change. Select Bus Service is a major improvement for the neighborhoods it serves. The large number of neighborhood plans and rezonings in the last decade provide a foundation to combine growth with more livable communities. And Mayor Bill de Blasio’s ambitious, five-borough Housing New York Plan is taking on the difficult challenge of making neighborhoods both livable and affordable.

But these efforts will fall short unless we create a transportation system that takes residents where they need to go quickly, reliably and affordably. Some recommendations in this report can be implemented today and save money in the long run. Others have a high price tag and will take several years to complete. Taken together, these actions will help create a city that is more prosperous, fairer and healthier. Employers would keep and create more jobs because they would have access to a larger number of workers and have fewer problems with lateness and absenteeism. Residents would have access to a larger number of job opportunities. The city could create more affordable housing with a larger number of locations that are well-served by transportation. Congestion and air quality would improve because people would drive less. And New York would enjoy a transit system befitting one of the wealthiest and most successful cities in the world.
Follow-Up Efforts by RPA

Regional Plan Association has a long history of not only providing research on regional planning and public policy issues, but of following them up by advocating for the steps to turn these plans into reality. The recommendations in this report are no exception. We believe that the theme of this report, that transit mobility in the boroughs has historically been neglected, is extremely timely today as a public policy issue, and we are in a position to press for change to overcome past indifference.

The steps we will take fit well with our Fourth Regional Plan (4RP) work that begun in earnest in 2014, and which we will be driving toward completion in the next two or three years.

Toward these ends, we intend to pursue the specific recommendations in the plan:

- Follow up with the MTA on our bus service recommendations and demonstration program, working with them to develop the sunset clauses for service continuation;
- Meet with the MTA and the NYCDOT and press our priorities for SBS/BRT services;
- Press for accelerated program for advanced fare collections technology advances that will help speed bus boarding;
- Work toward a system of compatible passenger and freight service with freight operators using the Triboro Rx right-of-way;
- As part of the 4RP, initiate a Transportation Oriented Development program for the MTA’s subway and SIR stations, identifying the most promising station areas in the city with an eye to simultaneously advance the City’s housing program;
- Continue to keep in the public eye on the Second Avenue subway extension options so that the limited segment soon to be opened does not become a “stubway”;
- Press for needed commuter rail and subway projects that will service new markets in the city and the surrounding suburban counties;
- Explore with the MTA the options for use of the underused and abandoned rail rights-of-way throughout Brooklyn and Queens; and
- Because the MTA’s operating and capital programs are far short of the funding necessary to insure continued reliability, it would be remiss not to raise this issue here, therefore: we will continue to advocate for adequate funding with our partners in the business, environmental and civic sectors to prevent the decay of the transit system and decline in mobility throughout the boroughs if transit is underfunded.

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The report was designed by Ben Oldenburg, RPA’s Senior Graphic Designer. The report was copy edited by Wendy Pollack, RPA’s Director of Public Affairs.

Technical Report

For more details on RPA’s recommendations to improve mobility in the boroughs, visit www.rpa.org/overlooked-boroughs.
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