

MANHATTAN  
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*A POLICY PLAYBOOK FOR*  
**NEW YORK'S  
NEXT MAYOR**  
GROWTH, OPPORTUNITY, AND SAFETY

**A TRANSPORTATION PLAN FOR  
NYC'S NEXT MAYOR**

Nicole Gelinas  
Senior Fellow, Manhattan Institute

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## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic last year altered New Yorkers' normal transportation habits on a scale not seen since the subway first opened in 1904—ushering in an era of underground mass transit—or since the Triborough Bridge opened in 1936, and the city entered the automobile age.

A year into the Covid-19 disruption, subway, bus, and commuter-rail ridership remains near record lows. Auto traffic has rebounded more quickly but remains down significantly. On the other hand, bicycling has increased by double digits, representing a new way of getting around for workers and leisure travelers. At the same time, the city has stalled in its decades-long goal of reducing traffic deaths, with the number of motorist and vehicle-passenger deaths far higher in 2020 than in recent years.

It is unlikely that commuting and other travel will return to 2019 norms quickly, if ever. As of March 2021, public-health concerns—along with restrictions on activities such as in-person white-collar office work, leisure and business travel, and live entertainment—continue to stifle demand for transportation.

Even after the pandemic ends, it is unclear whether office workers will return to Manhattan five days a week. Likewise, it is not clear whether the city and the region will settle into new residential and leisure patterns, with more people choosing to live within cycling or walking distance of their workplace, for instance.

Despite this uncertainty, a return to some form of urban density is inevitable. Collaborative industries, such as architecture, design, and advertising, require daily spontaneous interaction. Recovery from the pandemic thus represents an opportunity for Mayor Bill de Blasio's successor, who will take office in January 2022, to build aggressively on the progress that the city made in the decades before the pandemic in providing more transportation options to local residents and regional commuters, as well as ensuring that all travelers move about in greater safety, no matter their mode of transportation. The state and federal governments also have a role in ensuring the viability of large-scale mass transit.

## Background Data: Pre-Pandemic Success upon Which New York City Can Build

Before Covid-19 devastated New York, the city had achieved significant policy achievements in transportation across several mayoral and gubernatorial administrations.<sup>1</sup> Both subway ridership and cycling were near record levels, and traffic deaths had consistently fallen (**Figure 1**). Despite a decline in bus ridership and a new challenge posed by tens of thousands of for-hire automobiles, New York City was moving a record-large population and workforce around more safely and effectively than ever before.

FIGURE 1.

### New York City Transportation Ridership and Safety Trends, 1980–2019

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2019
Population (000)	7,070	7,320	8,010	8,190	8,340
Annual subway ridership (000,000)	1,009	1,028	1,381	1,604	1,698
Annual bus ridership (000,000)	-	-	729	817	678
Daily cycling trips (000)	100	100	150	250	510
Daily free and tolled bridge crossings (000)	3,146	3,797	4,321	4,223	4,187
Daily motor vehicles entering Manhattan (000)	679	761	828	767	699
Annual traffic deaths - total	617	701	380	273	220
Annual traffic deaths - pedestrian	337	366	187	153	124

Source: New York City Dept. of Transportation, Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Bridge crossings are 2016 data.

The city was reaping the benefits of four decades of investment in mass-transit infrastructure<sup>2</sup> and, in particular, two decades of investment in protected bike lanes, pedestrian islands, and speed cameras and red-light cameras.<sup>3</sup>

## Background Data: Pandemic Strains

Yet the pandemic and its aftermath threaten this long-term success. As of late February, subway ridership hovered around 30% of normal levels and has not progressed at all since early summer.<sup>4</sup> Bus ridership hovered at 44% of normal levels.

The only bright spot was in cycling. Though citywide data are not yet available, a few data points demonstrate the boom. East River bicycle crossings increased by 21%, compared with last year, to more than 25,000 on an average weekday.<sup>5</sup> The eight-year-old Citi Bike bike-share system, which has continued to expand during the pandemic, is experiencing record ridership, with 83,990 rides on an average day in September 2020, compared with 80,475 rides in September 2019.<sup>6</sup> Citi Bike appears to be the only form of organized transportation that has regained its pre-Covid levels.

Unfortunately, with fewer cars and trucks on the road, many of the remaining drivers are speeding or otherwise driving recklessly, contributing to an increase in fatalities. In 2020, New York City saw 243 traffic deaths, a 10.5% increase over 2019, and the highest number during the seven years of the de Blasio administration.<sup>7</sup>

The increased death toll was not driven by more pedestrian and cyclist fatalities. Pedestrian deaths fell by 21%, partly a function of sparser foot traffic on the streets, and cyclist deaths remained flat despite the surge in cycling. However, there was a 76% increase in deaths of drivers and passengers in cars and motorcycles. The city needs to prioritize better road design and enforcement, in order to protect not only pedestrians and cyclists but also drivers themselves.

## How Does New York Recover and Rebuild?

### *Mass Transit: Rebuilding Confidence*

To regain its commuting population and to encourage travel to and within the city, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) must keep the transit system running at full capacity. Though the mayor does not control the MTA, candidates can do more than simply pledge to stick up for transit riders when it comes to continued federal and state aid. They can lead by example by taking mass transit to and from (outdoor) campaign events and promise to continue using mass transit on a regular basis if elected, just as most of their constituents will have to if New York is to resume a future similar to the pre-Covid normal.

Because the state-run MTA depends on fares and tolls for roughly half its operating revenues, fallen ridership has created multibillion-dollar budget deficits for the agency. The good news is that the federal government has approved more than \$14 billion in operating aid to the MTA, covering operating deficits through at least 2022. Thus, financial considerations have receded as the single biggest immediate impediment to recovering ridership, although the MTA continues to face multibillion-dollar future-year shortfalls that, if unaddressed, will impede both operating spending and infrastructure investments in the long term.

Right now, the biggest challenge is that the public fears the transit system, even though these concerns are not supported by the evidence. Through the summer and early fall, for example, transit ridership modestly increased, with no corresponding increase in Covid transmission (**Figure 2**).

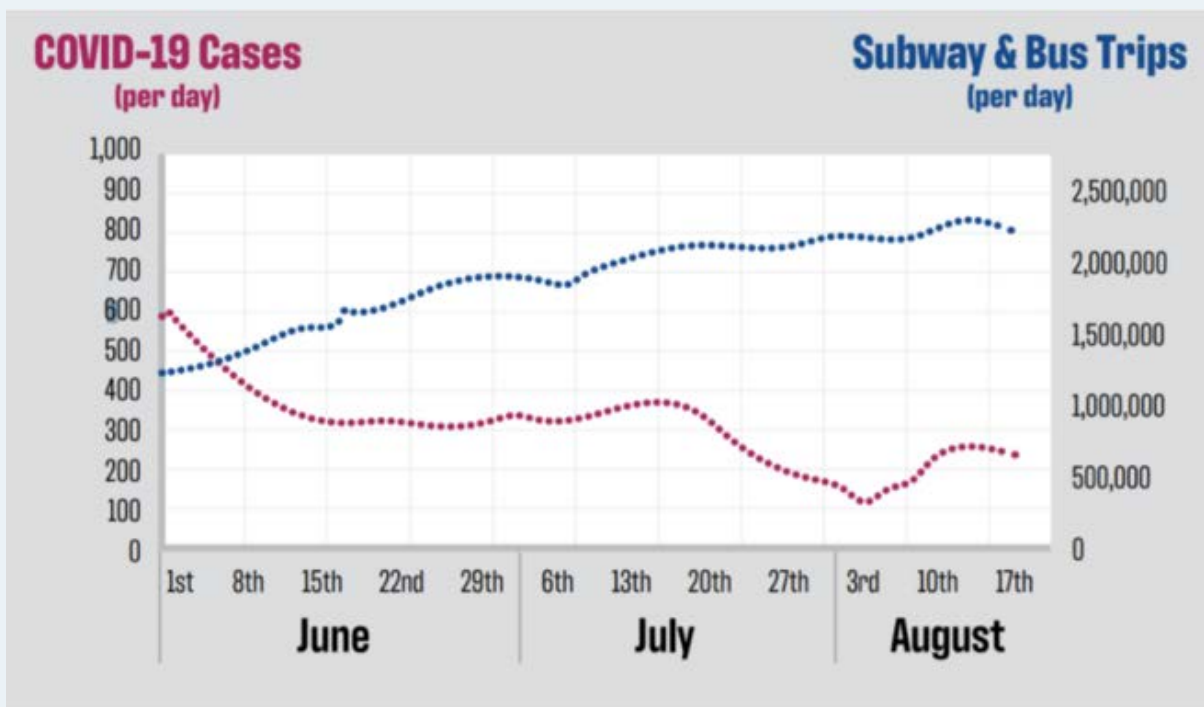
In a global survey, scientific research conducted by epidemiologists and public health experts concluded that there is little evidence of outbreaks across a number of transit systems, where mask usage ranges from 50% to above 90%.<sup>8</sup> The lack of evidence for transmission on mass transit systems is understandable because, even if riders are in proximity to one another, they do not tend to speak to each other. Covid-19 transmission depends more on what people do at the ends of their trips, not on their mode of transit.

Although the MTA's mask mandate is not strictly enforced by police, the agency has had great success in getting passengers to wear masks voluntarily, even giving out masks at token booths and on trains. Compliance is above 90%. The MTA could further experiment with technology to monitor mask compliance by station location and route, publicizing the results to potential passengers. Such a measure could make potential riders feel confident that most people are wearing masks and could spur more people in stations or on routes where mask compliance is relatively low to comply with the mandate to wear a face covering.

To rebuild public confidence in transit, New York City leaders in the public and private sectors should lead by example, encouraging the use of transit by frequently riding subways, buses, and commuter rail and publicizing such trips through broadcast, print, and social media.

FIGURE 2.

### 2020 Covid-19 Transmission vs. New York City Transit Ridership: No Correlation



Source: Sam Schwartz, "Public Transit and COVID-19 Pandemic: Global Research and Best Practices," September 2020.

### Mass Transit: Longer-Term Money Needs

Though federal aid means that the MTA's financial issues are not as acute as they were in the fall, they do remain. Even with new federal aid, the MTA faces at least a \$2 billion budget deficit for 2022, or more than 10% of its proposed \$19.3 billion 2022 budget. Again, the mayor does not control the MTA, and Albany lawmakers are unlikely to cede any authority over the agency.

The MTA controls both mass transit and tolled bridge and tunnel infrastructure within New York City. For several decades, both subway and bus transit fares, as well as bridge and tunnel tolls, have been increased by roughly the rate of inflation every two years. Given the pandemic, however, the authority plans to delay a previously planned subway and bus fare hike, but not a bridge and tunnel toll increase, of approximately 4%, effective this spring.

Because auto drivers are wealthier and can better withstand a toll hike, the MTA has the right approach in increasing tolls and not fares; the MTA could go even further with variable toll-rate policy, increasing the charges for Manhattan crossings by a higher percentage than for outer-borough-to-outer-borough crossings that don't touch Manhattan.

At minimum, if the MTA does increase fares later in 2021 or in 2022, poorer New Yorkers should be protected from higher subway and bus fares through the next mayor's aggressive promotion of, and pledge of continued funding for, the two-year-old "fair fares" program, through which the city subsidizes half-fare rides for adults who earn below \$26,200 (family of four).<sup>9</sup> The MTA should also consider a lower fare structure for buses relative to subways.

Further, the MTA should move forward with congestion pricing. In 2019, the state legislature approved this program of tolls for motor vehicles entering core Manhattan (below 60th Street) to raise \$1.5 billion a year toward the MTA's \$53 billion, five-year program of planned investments in its physical infrastructure.

Lawmakers allowed for the program to begin in January 2021, but the MTA has pushed it to as late as 2023.<sup>10</sup> During the Trump administration, the MTA claimed that the culprit for the slow rollout was the federal Department of Transportation's refusal to say whether it would require an extensive environmental review of the project. Under the new Biden administration, the MTA should explore whether it can use digital simulations of congestion pricing's impact on traffic, and thus on the environment, to speed up any environmental-review process.

Despite the holdup attributed to the Trump administration, the MTA itself hasn't done everything it can to speed congestion pricing. To wit: under its enabling legislation, the MTA must empanel a "traffic mobility review board" to implement the new tolls. Even with congestion pricing, however, the future of the MTA's capital plan will depend on a federal infrastructure package.

### ***Motor-Vehicle Management ... and More Money***

With car traffic still below pre-pandemic levels, the city has an opportunity to reshape how that car traffic returns. Much of this reshaping could be achieved by monetizing the streets, in ways beyond congestion pricing. Higher prices for street parking, too, could provide more revenues. The city could unilaterally implement, without state authorization, a more aggressive parking policy, raising street parking-meter rates. The city could also entirely eliminate employee parking placards, which allow public-sector workers to park free at legal spots (and, in practice, are often used to park in illegal spots and avoid tickets).

Without parking placards, the city would effectively require its workers to pay for municipal or private parking, as private-sector employees do. For the rare instances in which public-sector workers must use their private vehicles to conduct their job duties during the course of the workday, the city could implement Q-code or other technology to monitor parking workers' location and duration and ensure that employees are parking only to perform their work duties, not for commuting purposes. Ending parking corruption is not only a financial issue but also a fairness issue, as public employees who drive to work have higher salaries and more generous retirement benefits than most transit riders.

The city could also assert more control over its streets through measures that fall short of monetizing them. The mayor could take such measures as banning single-occupancy vehicles on bridges and in tunnels during the long-term Covid-19 emergency, as former mayor Rudolph Giuliani did after 9/11 and as former mayor Michael Bloomberg did after Hurricane Sandy.

### ***Bus Travel: Go Where the Workers Are***

Even before Covid-19, the city's bus ridership had stagnated, as riders grew frustrated with long boarding times and long waits in mixed bus, car, and truck traffic. The city, through the mayor's control of the physical streets, can do more to encourage bus ridership, which will also help alleviate any potential crowding on subways as people return to work, school, and tourist travel.

Both the MTA and the city can build on a decade's worth of progress in building better bus infrastructure. In the past two years, for example, new state-authorized cameras have deterred car and truck drivers from driving or idling in bus lanes, such as on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. In 2019, the city converted much of Manhattan's 14th Street into a "busway," with priority given to bus passengers at the expense of car drivers and passengers and deliveries. Bus speeds increased between 22% and 47%, while ridership increased by 24% (and by 30% on weekends).<sup>11</sup>

To further speed up bus travel, the city should work with the MTA on comprehensive bus-network redesign, with more protected bus lanes citywide that prohibit car traffic and delivery idling, emulating the success of the 14th Street Busway.<sup>12</sup> The MTA and city should also redesign bus routes to connect essential workers to their workplaces, making far more straightforward interborough routes that bypass Manhattan, for instance.

Riders will soon see improvement in the boarding process, too. Over half a decade, the MTA has been designing and implemented a contactless-payment system. Last fall, the authority completed the installation of this technology, OMNY, on all buses (and trains), reducing the time spent waiting for passengers to pay by cash or by card swipe.

More money should be allocated to bus service. Bus ridership dropped less than subway ridership during the pandemic, and the allocation of funds should reflect that. Bus frequency should be increased as people continue to return to work. The MTA should also consider more efficient and frequent point-to-point bus service via micro- or minibuses, possibly through contract with a service such as Via.

### ***Cycling, Walking, and Scootering: Safer Spaces for More Vulnerable Travelers***

New Yorkers nervous about taking the transit system have taken to bike rides, long walks, and scooter trips in record numbers this year, even as the weather has grown colder. This "micro-mobility"—that is, travel via foot, bicycle, scooter, or similar mode—is not only for the young and physically fit. Bicycling, for instance, should be a commuter tool that ought to be as straightforward and spontaneous as using the subway.

Here, too, the city can build on more than a decade of progress: thanks to the construction of protected bike lanes across the city as well as the 2013 rollout and subsequent expansion of Citi Bike, cycling has more than doubled since 2010.

Yet the bike-lane infrastructure falls short. Even with New York's progress in building out protected bike lanes, many lanes still run through truck routes and long stretches of high-speed bridge traffic. Traveling long distances with a bike is often unnecessarily complicated, even chaotic.

To encourage more cycling, the city could develop a system of subway-like maps showing how to get from one point to another via a bicycle. The subway map is iconic because of its ease of use, and there is no reason that the city couldn't develop a similarly distinctive and accessible map for cycling, integrated with water taxi routes to expand usability for long-distance travel. Bike lanes should not feature gaps where cyclists must merge with truck and auto drivers, an unpredictability that deters novice cyclists.

Even with protected bike lanes, cyclists need protection from speeding drivers, particularly on long stretches of bridges alongside high-speed cars. An expansion of speed-camera and red-light-camera coverage could help achieve this goal. Here, too, there is progress to build upon. In 2019, the state legislature approved an expansion of school-zone speed cameras, contributing to a 17% injury reduction within school zones since then. The de Blasio administration has asked for authority to keep these cameras operational when school is not in session, at night and on weekends.<sup>13</sup> The state should approve this request.

The city should also do more to accommodate people who wish to use electric-powered vehicles to supplement physical exertion on their commutes. Many people would choose to commute by bike but need to look presentable and professional at the end of their journey, which often isn't possible if they pedal the entire way. Electric bikes, or e-bikes—newly legalized

by New York State and City—can make the last mile in a transportation network less physically arduous. Citi Bike is already supplementing its pedal fleet with e-bikes.

The city should consider building intermediate-speed lanes on roads and avenues for battery-powered scooters and e-bikes, which travel more slowly than motor vehicles but much faster than human-powered cyclists. For riders who wish to use their own e-bikes or e-scooters, the city should provide secure, attended parking for these valuable vehicles, either free or at a low price.

The next mayor can frame improvements to bicycle and e-mobility infrastructure not just as transportation improvements but as a key part of a public-safety program to reduce injuries and deaths.

### ***Highways: Highest and Best Use?***

Absent multibillion-dollar federal investments in a rail-freight system, New Yorkers will continue to rely on trucks over highways and local roads to deliver goods.

To better use the highway and road network and reduce congestion and wear and tear, the city, state, and Port Authority of New York and New Jersey should work better together to develop an analysis of the best use of the highway network.

Using new technology, agencies should collaborate to revisit authorized truck routes to determine whether they are the most efficient means of moving goods, updating decades-old truck routes where applicable. The city could consider allowing small commercial trucks on the Belt and Grand Central Parkways, for example.

The state and city should better work together, too, to use highways in coordination with the goal of getting car traffic away from the dense urban street network, including exploring the possibility of dedicated highway lanes for bus-only traffic.

State and city agencies can better coordinate enforcement of rules, as well. Government entities should find more effective ways to deploy truck-weight sensors and explore automated enforcement of overweight trucks. The region needs an interagency freight plan to coordinate truck-regulation enforcement, such as deterring overweight trucks.

The city should also prioritize truck access over car access on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, which forms part of the only heavy-truck route from Long Island to Manhattan and plays an outsized role in the movement of goods across the region. Meanwhile, rather than focus on new interborough passenger-rail service, the city and state should prioritize new interborough freight-rail service.

### ***24-Hour Subway Service***

The MTA ended 1 AM–5 AM service in early May, both to ensure that homeless individuals did not use overnight trains for refuge and to deep-clean stations and trains. In February 2021, the length of the nightly shutdown was reduced to 2 AM–4 AM. For the city's economy, particularly its nightlife, to recover, the MTA must reestablish 24-hour-a-day subway service. Mayoral candidates could seize on this issue as part of an economic-recovery platform as well as a fairness platform, as many overnight riders are poorer hourly wage earners.

Overnight service is necessary for the hospitality and restaurant industry to thrive. Before the pandemic, more than 80,000 New Yorkers regularly took the subways between 12:30 AM and 5 AM. There is no evidence that the MTA saves money by closing subways during these overnight hours, either in the short or the long term. Indeed, the MTA still must run trains during these overnight hours to move its employees and equipment around and because train-storage yard capacity is constrained.

Moreover, the MTA has never explained why it cannot deep-clean trains while keeping service running. Most trains are idle during the overnight hours even during normal times, and stations are sparsely populated. Finally, as evidence

emerges that Covid spreads more readily through air droplets, not through touching surfaces, the MTA may be able to ease up on cleaning surfaces.

### ***Enforcement: Who Should Maintain Law and Order on the Streets?***

Right now, the New York Police Department (NYPD) is primarily responsible for enforcing the rules of the road, with uniformed officers enforcing moving violations (such as speeding) and civilian traffic agents enforcing stationary violations (such as double-parking).

The city should move many traffic-safety enforcement functions away from NYPD and toward a civilian agency, most likely the Department of Transportation (DOT). Civilian workers reporting to DOT, not NYPD, could enforce parking and idling violations, for example. NYPD has not historically performed well on enforcement functions such as keeping bike lanes clear of motor vehicles and ensuring that government workers (including police officers themselves) haven't illegally parked their private cars.

Civilian enforcement of parked-vehicle violations was the practice from the 1970s through the 1990s. The city should also move toward more automated enforcement of moving violations, including more speed-camera and red-light-camera coverage, as well as exploring cameras to enforce no-standing regulations in bike lanes, a measure that would require state legislation. Just as with ending parking-placard corruption, the next mayor could frame civilianization of most parking and idling violations as a key part of public-safety and justice reform.

Finally, the city should deploy more neutral, passive, nonhuman enforcement of traffic rules and laws through physical means—for example, deploying barriers to keep faster-moving cyclists from slower ones and pedestrians from cyclists, as well as experimenting with pavement materials that discourage high vehicle and cyclist speed in mixed-use environments.

## Conclusion

New York faces a formidable challenge in encouraging commuters to return to day-to-day travel, particularly travel to Manhattan. Yet the city has much pre-pandemic success upon which to build, including its partial network of protected bike lanes and speed cameras and red-light cameras or the tens of billions of dollars already invested in the mass-transit system.

In building out bus and bike lanes, New York must do what it had already been doing—just more of it, more quickly, and more thoughtfully and competently. When it comes to pricing of valuable street space as well as enforcement of traffic laws, however, the city must be far more aggressive and consider entirely new approaches.

## Endnotes

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