

# New York's Subway: Easy To Complain About But Extraordinary

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If Amazon or any other company needs reasons to come to New York, one reason at the top of the list ought to be our subway system. Of course the subway is an endless punching bag. Sometimes it deserves that treatment. But if you step back a bit and think about it, New York City's subway system is amazing and extraordinary.

This city occupies a few hundred square miles of highly congested and highly populated real estate. The subway system crisscrosses much of that real estate, making it easy for anyone to get anywhere in the city, at least between many of its more densely populated areas. If Amazon opens its second headquarters here, it will be blown away by how easily its people can get around the city to get to and from work and conduct business.

Often any trip on the subway will be faster than any alternative, especially if you don't have to change trains or deal with a breakdown or a sick passenger. Unlike a few decades ago, the trains are clean, air conditioned, graffiti-free, and quiet. Also unlike a few decades ago, announcements of station stops have become reasonably consistent and reliable.

We often see in the press that the subway system is in crisis. But today's deferred maintenance and delays are nothing compared to the 1970s and 1980s. Yes, trains do break down or suffer delays more than one would like. Much of the signal system belongs in an antique store or a junkyard. Trains are often crowded, especially in rush hour, except when a train car has become the home of a homeless person who has not taken a bath or shower in recent history. But the system still works and remains reasonably reliable overall.

The subway system has nearly 500 stations. All but three operate 24 hours a day. Trains run under the streets and buildings all day and all night. That's a scope and a schedule that few if any other subway systems can match. Practically every corner of Manhattan is close to one subway line or another—sometimes many subway lines—making it easy and quick to get around. That isn't as true in the other boroughs, of course.

Private entrepreneurs built most of the subway system in much simpler times, when it was possible to undertake and complete large projects quickly and easily. If the subway system didn't exist today, it would be impossible to recreate. The recent minor expansions of the system amply

demonstrate that any substantial construction of that type has become hugely expensive and impossibly slow. A couple of miles of subway extension under Second Avenue cost over a billion dollars and took at least ten years.

If we had to build the present system from scratch, it just wouldn't happen in today's environment. In as much time as the original builders constructed the entire original Interborough Rapid Transit system over a century ago, we would be lucky to have identified all the city, state, and federal permits, filings, and approvals needed just to start the design process. And we'd probably need the same amount of time to develop a complete list of all the lawsuits filed against the project.

Other cities face similar challenges in creating or expanding their subway systems, though perhaps not quite as daunting. But it's safe to say that the New York City subway system is unmatched and will probably never be matched anywhere else in the United States.

As a result, the subway system gives New York City a major competitive edge for any company that plans to hire a lot of people and wants them to be able to get around easily without relying on cars. Amazon has said it cares about this issue in choosing its second headquarters. So New York City ought to emphasize it as a huge strength.

Of course we all know the subway system needs more capital investment. That is the nature of any extraordinary capital asset. You have to keep it in good shape and keep upgrading it as pieces wear out and technology changes. We already do a lot of that for the subway system. But we surely can and should do more.

That will always be true, no matter how much money we sink into the subway system. It can always use more capital expenditures. And when an extraordinary capital asset is not—and cannot be—operated as a business, the taxpayers will need to provide the necessary capital. No one else will.

New York's politicians have been doing a great job of trying to make this someone else's problem. Regardless of how those disputes and claims turn out, the subway system remains a major part of what makes New York City extraordinarily attractive, for Amazon or anyone else.