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Op-Ed

Albany must not repeat its mistakes with the MTA

Time is running out for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

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There have been some encouraging signs in recent weeks that public officials are aware of the urgency of funding the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's \$32 billion, five-year capital program, with the governor's announcement of a \$1 billion federal loan and a bump in the city's MTA contribution.

But these moves would still leave the MTA woefully short of what it needs to maintain and improve a mass transit system that is the lifeblood of the region's economy. And federal funds are severely limited to a small number of large-scale projects and cannot cover the maintenance needs that are the heart of the capital plan.

Time is running out. With the legislative session barreling toward its summer recess, the onus falls on Albany to find the revenues to keep our trains and subways running as they should.

The capital program has been the force behind the MTA's revival since the first five-year plan in 1982. As a result of billions that have been poured into infrastructure, delays have plummeted—by as much as 85% for Metro-North—while ridership has soared. Subways, trains, and buses all suffer fewer mechanical failures, allowing them to run thousands of miles longer before needing to be replaced.

The program has also helped keep the MTA affordable for New Yorkers. As of 2014, the network was ranked the fourth-most affordable out of 15 major cities. And cheap transit means less of a New Yorker's budget is eaten up by subway and bus fare. In fact, transport costs are a smaller fraction of household income in New York than in any other U.S. city except San Francisco.

However, the city's transit network will soon face some unprecedented challenges. It is already under stress from climate change, which will necessitate massive spending to beef up resiliency to stronger and more frequent storms. Ridership is also growing and changing, with more New Yorkers moving to outer-borough areas that have, until now, lacked significant transit options. With the system operating at capacity, delays have begun to creep back up—a preview of what awaits us if capital needs continue to go unfunded.

The MTA has proposed to make these necessary investments via a \$32 billion capital program, but a \$14 billion gap in funding remains. The gap represents system upgrades, renovations, and new buses and train cars that would drive the city forward.

When the MTA faced a similar shortfall in its last five-year program, state leaders divided the funding into two-year and three-year segments. That ended up increasing the MTA's debt to \$34.1 billion and led to a reduction in investment from the originally proposed five-year program. The results can be seen every day as we watch the system struggle to accommodate surging ridership.

Given the absence of any real discussion of funding solutions, state leaders may be tempted to again divide the funding for the program. Doing so, and funding the program through borrowing, would only push the search for money down the road. We urge lawmakers not to take this approach again.

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