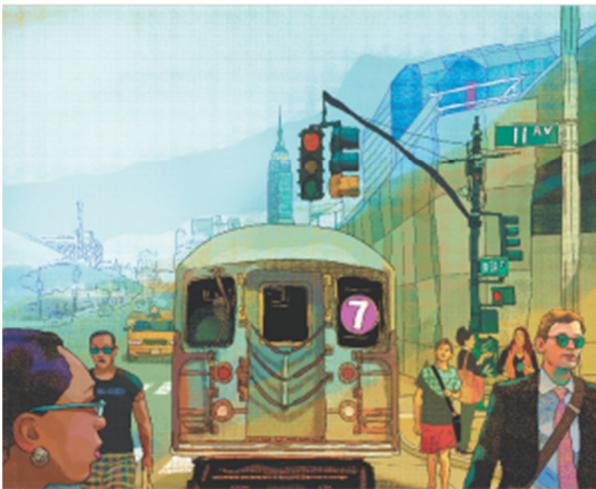


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## Inside the 7 Train's Delayed Far West Side Expansion

BY STEVE WEINSTEIN



Expect delays. *Zina Saunders*

Do you remember the long-promised 7 train subway extension? Seven years after Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced with great fanfare that the 7 line would extend to 11th Avenue and 34th Street, the opening was postponed—again—in June.

Lost in the complaints about cost overruns and a completion date now set for December is the controversy over the aborted subway station at 41st Street and 10th Avenue. Since the time that the Bloomberg administration made it clear that it would not pursue the station, a city-within-a-city has arisen in the area west of Ninth Avenue between 43rd and 38th Streets. While Hudson Yards remains a sea of construction cranes and earth movers, the area north of the city's largest remaining development area has become a boomtown, with thousands of residents.

The collective shrug over the scrapped station is an object lesson in how the city considers its mass transit priorities—and the acquiescence of the city’s development community.

Even Gene Russianoff, the voluble head of the Straphangers Campaign, has given up the fight. “It’s tough to go back now,” he said. “They’d have to start from scratch. It was once ‘now or never.’ The result is never. The horse is out of the barn. It’s too late to build it now. It would cost a fortune.”

According to Christine Berthet, the founder of Chekped, a non-profit group that advocates for publication transportation on the West Side, the developers who have flocked to build high rises in the area did so with the expectation that the city would, indeed, be building a station in the area. “Now,” she said, “we are suffering from the loss of that. All the buildings around 42nd Street and 10th Avenue have hired small bus companies to shuttle residents to the subway. All this is only adding congestion to the neighborhood.”

The lack of a station angers Elliott Sclar, a professor of urban planning and director of the Center for Sustainable Urban Development at Columbia University. “I’m having trouble understanding why they wouldn’t build the subway stop,” he said. “It was an incremental amount of money on top of this huge project. I can’t figure out for the life of me why, if you’re putting the line in, you wouldn’t put the goddamn subway stop in or make provisions for it. It’s a marginal amount of money!”

The cost actually wouldn’t have been all that marginal, even by the mega-budget standards of a new subway line in New York City. The original estimate for just a study ran into the millions, and to construct a “ghost station” that would at least be there in case the money ever materialized to make it a reality topped out at \$700 million.

The thinking was that the subway extension would give the Related Companies’ massive Hudson Yards project the added boost it needed to get off the ground. Robert C. Lieber, Mr. Bloomberg’s deputy mayor for economic development, made the administration’s priorities clear back in 2008: “Unlike the extension to 34th Street and 11th Avenue, which the city is funding, a 10th Avenue station is not necessary to drive growth there. A 10th Avenue station would be nice, but it’s really a straight transportation project versus an economic development catalyst.”

A few voices were raised in protest. The Times complained in an editorial that the lack of the station took away much of the justification for the 7 extension. “Failure to build a full 7 train extension is a huge missed opportunity to promptly realize the complete potential of the Far West Side,” noted Sen. Chuck Schumer.

Apparently, the long walk to subway stations in Times Square hasn't deterred new residents from pouring into these glittering high-rises. So perhaps the Bloomberg administration was right when it said, at the very start of the project, that the subway stop wasn't needed to spur development here.

The unnamed sub-neighborhood that has sprung up along the West 42nd Street corridor has continued to be a boomtown, and arguably the most vibrant area for new development in the five boroughs. A year ago, The New York Observer reported that an apartment in the Related Companies' Mima, at the southeast corner of 42nd Street and 10th Avenue, rented for \$18,000. At the twin Silver Towers west of 11th Avenue on 42nd Street, rentals in the top range go for five figures. A duplex at Fortis Property's eponymous 540 West 49th Street is asking \$3.575 million. New developments, like the Moinian Group's 1,100-unit 605 W. 42nd St., are adding to the mix.

The way the 42nd Street corridor has grown, in fact, proves that access to public transportation is far from a deciding factor for developers or new residents, according to James M. Gricar, the president of Halstead Property.

"In the development of neighborhoods that are formerly industrial, the normal order is gentrification, then development, then public transportation," he said. "Transportation doesn't beget the building." He lists Tribeca, the Meatpacking District and West Chelsea as other examples of areas that have blossomed without the benefit of access to widespread public transportation.

Mr. Gricar himself doesn't just talk the talk. He lives in the area, and finds the relative isolation anything but a drawback. "People who move into an area near Times Square and the Port Authority like the grit," he said. "I feel like I live in a city. It's unique."

"As the costs began rising," an MTA spokesperson told the Observer, "the Bloomberg administration decided that, rather than going over budget, it would trim the scope. Who should come up with the hundreds of millions to pay for it? That's not the MTA's concern."

In other words, the mayor and the MTA had already figured out how to pay for the extension to 34th Street and 11th Avenue. The ghost station, on the other hand, would have required an entirely new financing structure—and the participation of not just one developer, but a gaggle of builders.

Hindsight is always 20/20, but it's reasonable to ask if it would have been feasible to get all of the 42nd Street corridor developers into a room and get them to agree on a funding mechanism for the extra station. In the long run, issuing bonds might have been cheaper than funding a

patchwork of shuttle buses—and that’s not to mention the added carrot it would represent for prospective residents.

Not surprisingly, one of the biggest boosters of the 41st Street station was the Real Estate Board of New York. According to REBNY spokesperson Jamie McShane, the city’s private developers believe that “the door is still open” to the station, despite every indication that it would be impossible to create such a massive disruption in an area that has become one of the most intensely concentrated areas in the city.

“Our position remains that the station should be there,” he said. “We are continuing to try to identify revenue sources and funding to make that station possible.” In other words, the battle may have been lost, but not the war.

But David Andrew King, a professor who specializes in public transit at Columbia University, believes that the entire way the 7 extension was conceived from the start, particularly its funding mechanism, was the proverbial cart following the horse—something that REBNY and the city should have realized from the start.

Mr. King said that “The concern is ‘value capture mechanism’—the way new development is supposed to generate the income to pay for the bonds” for planned public transit projects like the 7 extension. “It’s extremely difficult to build infill stations with that mechanism.

“Public transit should serve existing neighborhoods,” he added. “The relationship between developers and the transit infrastructure is more complicated than anyone originally thought.”

All of this will no doubt provide fodder for future case studies from professors like Messrs. Sclar and King, but residents along West 42nd Street and environs have to live in the result of the city’s lack of foresight.

Ms. Berthet believes that the takeaway should be for developers to lean in early on, rather than letting a neighborhood grow without the transit infrastructure to support it. “It was purely a pragmatic decision,” she said. “The city figured, ‘Well, obviously they can sell apartments without a subway.’ ”

Meanwhile, residents continue to pour into the area without the benefit of mass transit.

When Susan Titone moved into Manhattan Plaza 31 years ago, she was one of the pioneers who helped spur the area’s development. Since then, she’s seen wave upon wave of new developments. “When we first moved in, this was all car lots and chop shops,” she recalled. “We didn’t want to leave Astoria. We hated the area. It was all prostitution, drugs and porno shops.

Now, it's kids in strollers. But I have to wait sometimes 30 minutes for the 42nd Street bus because of traffic delays—and even then, it can take 40 minutes to get to Sixth Avenue.”

Glenn Pollick lives in one of Silverstein's Silver Towers. “I appreciate the shuttle buses that take us to the subway stations and the East Side,” he said, “but I'd much rather be able to hop into a subway stop a block away.”