

MAKING TRACKS

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Newsletter of the Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

Winter 2004

The Long Wait for the Second Avenue Subway: Why not Light Rail Now?

By George Haikalis

Surface light rail transit, the modern version of streetcars, would be an important first step in the long journey for better north-south public transit on Manhattan's densely developed East Side. While construction of the Second Avenue subway now appears likely to begin in a few years, it won't reach the East Village anytime soon. After a vigorous fight for a "full-length" Second Avenue subway, Manhattan's elected officials are quietly facing the reality that only a short "starter" segment from 63rd Street to 96th Street can be completed in the next decade.

MTA's price tag for the full 8.5 mile subway from 125th Street to Hanover Square is \$16.8 billion. At about two billion per mile, the subway's cost is just too heavy a lift given the many New York area transit projects competing for limited resources.

Crosstown Trolley as a Model for East Side Transit

VCTC has long proposed that surface street railway technology has a key role in improving mobility and livability in our crowded city. Light rail transit would cost only one-tenth as much per mile, and could be completed quicker and with less disruption.

Our proposed crosstown trolley would follow the route of the M8 bus river-to-river, linking residents and business along the way with Manhattan's five existing north-south subway lines. On the portions of the route that are crowded with pedestrians—Christopher Street, 8th Street and St. Marks Place—VCTC proposes that the rail line be placed in an auto-free street. A similar

approach could be applied to much of Second Avenue between Houston Street and 125th Street.

Why a Second Avenue Subway?

Relieving the legendary congestion on the Lexington Avenue Express subway has been a key goal of the new Second Avenue subway. Serving the densely developed slice of Manhattan that is a long walk from the Lexington Subway is an equally important goal. Perhaps a third unarticulated goal is to fulfill a promise long made by city officials to complete this civic enterprise. Three short segments were actually constructed in the early 1970s. A fourth segment in the East Village got as far as ripping up the pavement, and then restoring it before any excavation began.

When the elevated railways on Second and Third Avenue were removed some fifty years ago, a four-track subway was proposed. With costs rising faster than resources, in 1968 the newly formed MTA scaled back the project to a two-track subway, with stations more widely-spaced than the Lexington local but more frequent than the express. The most recent plan

would not reach the Bronx, limiting the amount of relief for the Lexington Express, even after the expenditure of \$16.8 billion.

What would a Second Avenue light rail line accomplish?

Local transit access along First and Second Avenues is by the M15 bus. A combination of local and limited articulated buses serves this densely-developed corridor. Bus service is slow and irregular. Surface light rail transit, operated in its own dedicated right of way, would provide a faster and more reliable service. Modern low-floor light rail vehicles would ease boarding for seniors, parents with strollers and persons in wheelchairs. A smoother ride would result, since vehicles would not lurch in and out of

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Modern Low-Floor Light Rail Vehicles operate on the streets of nearly a dozen French cities, like Strasbourg shown above. In virtually every case, these new light rail lines run through pedestrian-only streets in the historic cores of these cities, as would VCTC's proposed Crosstown Trolley.

On the Back: Letter from the Editor, Astor Place Festival

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traffic. Light rail vehicles would be electrically propelled, reducing noise and local pollution compared with diesel buses. With its higher capacity vehicles and more dependable schedules, light rail transit would improve productivity while increasing service levels.

South of Houston Street the Second Avenue light rail line would continue along the eastern side of Christie Street, leaving the western half of the street for vehicular access. In Lower Manhattan the light rail line would tie into the Liberty Loop, described in the previous issue of *Making Tracks*. The Second Avenue light rail line would connect with proposed crosstown light rail lines: the Village Crosstown Trolley at St. Marks Place; vision42's 42nd Street light rail line ("Update on 42nd Street", page 3); and the Grand Street crosstown line. (*Making Tracks*, Summer 1999).

A Second Avenue light rail line could serve as a feeder to the initial segment of the subway with direct platform to street escalators could ease the transfer (see illustration, at right). The light rail line would also serve as the "local" for the Second Avenue subway. The cost of stations for the new subway may account for half of its cost. Eliminating just one of the planned stations, and using the light rail as a feeder instead, could cover the half-billion cost of a new full-length light rail line from Harlem to Lower Manhattan. Light rail could be completed more quickly, with less disruption.

What about the overcrowded Lexington subway?

The short segment of subway now proposed for Second Avenue (the "stubway" as it was once irreverently called) will do little to relieve overcrowding on the Lexington express. Surface light rail transit may help a little, but it would more likely draw some passengers from the Lexington local. Clearly, MTA must re-examine near-term solutions for overcrowding. Several have been proposed, and should be explored more fully.

First, more Lexington #6 local trains can be operated, attracting passengers from the express. Twenty-two peak hour trains are now scheduled on the local, but it could handle thirty. Capacity exists for a third express service on the Central Park West subway, which now

handles the A and D trains. This new service could run on the Sixth Avenue subway in Manhattan and operate locally on the Concourse Line in The Bronx, drawing some travelers from the #4 Lexington Express. A new Hell Gate rail service could be operated on existing Amtrak trackage in the East Bronx, attracting some travelers from the Pelham Line.

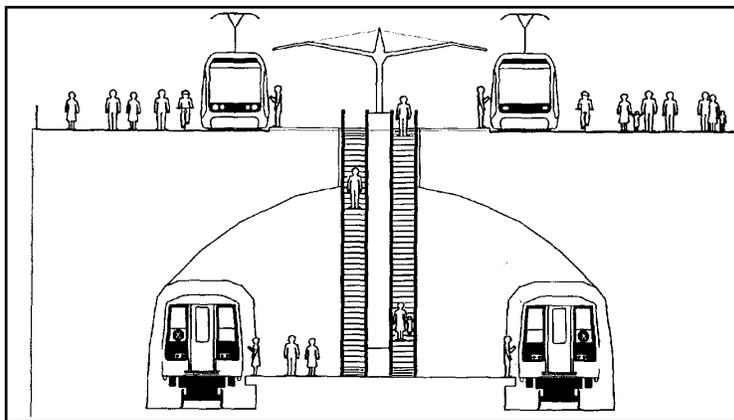
Two of the four track beds on the Grand Central-Times Square shuttle could be equipped with moving walkways allowing Downtown-bound Metro-North passengers from Grand Central to use the Sixth Avenue subway as an alternate. Sixth Avenue trains could continue south of West Fourth Street to the World Trade Center terminal now used by the E train and from there, with a simple track connection, on the R line further south to Whitehall Street.

Finally, further efforts can be made to increase the number of peak hour trains operating on the Lexington express. Dwell times could be reduced by assigning newer subway cars with wider doors to all #4 and #5 trains. Advanced signal systems, now being installed on the L line, could be added to the Lexington express, tightening up of operations to some extent.

Can portions of Second Avenue be made auto-free?

Second Avenue is lined with stores and restaurants for almost its entire length. High rise buildings along the street create a confined, canyon-like setting. Residential density is as high as it gets anywhere in the city. Yet most of the street space is given over to the movement of motor vehicles. This is not even productive, because traffic moves at a snail's pace during many hours of the day. Pedestrians are marginalized and intimidated by noisy, polluting traffic jams.

With light rail vehicles predictably channeled in their tracks in the center, the full width of the avenue could be made available for pedestrians for many block segments. Little public open space is available along this corridor, so Second Avenue would serve as a series of civilized outdoor public rooms. Sidewalk cafes could be extended into the widened sidewalks, enhancing New York City's business, and eliminating the motor vehicular-generated carcinogens now seasoning each meal.



Surface light rail transit could become the "local" for the Second Avenue subway. Direct street-to-platform escalators could make it easy to transfer from light rail, reducing the need for costly underground stations. A full-length surface LRT could be built on Manhattan's East Side from Harlem to the Battery for a tenth of the cost per mile of the subway, in three to four years.

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The closely-spaced crosstown streets, at 200 foot intervals, permit relatively easy access to building entrances and storefront businesses. Space for delivery trucks would have to be reserved on these cross streets near Second Avenue. Major deliveries and access for handicapped persons could be accommodated on a controlled basis within the pedestrianized street.

At the Queensborough Bridge and at the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, some traffic lanes could be retained on Second Avenue to distribute traffic from these river crossings. Elsewhere, lanes could be retained to reach a few garage driveways and some auto-dependent businesses. Loss of on-street parking would mean that some motorists would have to pay for the space they consume in Manhattan.

Where would the displaced traffic go?

First Avenue would be made two-way again. The existing double-barreled tunnels under First Avenue in front of the United Nations were built when First Avenue was a two-way street. Allen Street, south of Houston Street, is still two way, so at the southern end this would work well. Yet, during the busiest periods, not all southbound traffic using Second Avenue would fit on First Avenue. Nor would all existing northbound traffic on First Avenue be handled easily on a two-way First Avenue.

Experience has shown that when streets are closed in crowded cities not all traffic is displaced to adjacent streets. When the West Side Highway collapsed in 1973 (after years of neglect) traffic volumes declined on the segment that remained open. But 93% of the traffic lost did not appear on parallel avenues; it simply disappeared. This would certainly be the case on Second Avenue. Furthermore, with an attractive light rail transit line in place, many taxi users and motorists will gladly divert to public transit.

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Update on 42nd Street

by George Haikalis

First proposed in 1978, a river-to-river crosstown light rail line on 42nd Street almost became a reality in 1994, when the New York City Council approved the proposal by a vote of 49 to 2. The project lost momentum in the Guiliani Administration after a long debate about the cost of subsurface utility relocation. The 8th Street line proposed by VCTC was to be the city's second light rail line, following closely on the heels of the 42nd Street line. Without this line in place to serve as a model of civilized urban transport, VCTC has focused much of its energy in helping this long-stalled project move forward.

About five years ago architect-author Roxanne Warren initiated a new effort—**vision42**—that would not only advance the light rail plan but completely transform the entire street by making it an "auto-free light rail boulevard". This proposal was described in the Spring 2000 issue of *Making Tracks*. Up to date information is available on the web at www.vision42.org. With each new development along 42nd Street, the sidewalks are becoming increasingly overcrowded. The time has come to consider reshaping Midtown Manhattan to accommodate the masses of people who work, live or visit this extraordinary business district.

Until recently, advocacy for **vision42** has focused on making presentations to community and civic organizations, property owners and developers, and elected officials. Nearly 150 presentations have been made to date. Twenty-three distinguished New Yorkers have joined the project's Advisory Committee, including two former NYC DOT Commissioners. The reaction to the presentations has been quite positive although several key concerns have been raised about economic impacts, traffic dislocation and cost.

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The really exciting news is that an anonymous donor has agreed to fund technical studies that will deal with each of these issues. These studies will be completed this summer, and *Making Tracks* will summarize the results in future issues.

Another important development is that Manhattan Community Board Five, serving the area immediately north of our own CB2 district, called for a comprehensive planning study to consider **vision42** and other options for improving the walking environment and surface transit on 42nd Street at its December 11, 2003 meeting.

For a presentation about **vision42**, contact us at VCTC. If you would like to help, there is a monthly meeting of the **vision42** working group. Join us. □

Dear Reader,

The MTA has projected the cost for the 2nd Avenue subway at \$16.8 billion. That's a lot of money for a subway line that would not be completed for at least two decades. A 2nd Avenue light rail line could be up and running along the same route in much less time at fraction of the cost. Our cover story examines how light rail would complement the 2nd Avenue subway project. Back in the early 90's light rail on 42nd Street was on its way to reality until it lost momentum during the Giuliani administration. It may be closer to the front burner now as **vision42**, described in our second article. Let's hope the current administration gets this project moving again. Don't miss our next issue, which will take a fresh look at light rail on Grand Street as a key transit and pedestrian element in the Canal Area Transit Study (CATS).

Michael Goodman, *Editor*

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In many ways, we make the bed we lie in. Through the years, the city has consistently favored motor vehicles, making streets one-way even when it inconveniences transit riders, and subsidizing the costly repair of the city's East River Bridges, while refusing to charge motorists a toll. If we want a more civilized, humane and prosperous city, the choice is ours to make. □

Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition
is proud to sponsor the
Astor Place Festival

Saturday, May 15, 2004, 11am to 6pm
Astor Place between Broadway and Lafayette St. in
Greenwich Village, NYC

Please stop by our booth to learn more about our proposal.

Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

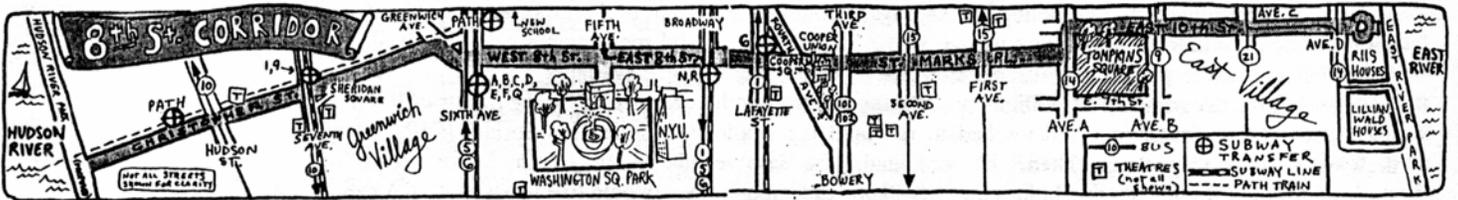
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The Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition (VCTC) has been organized by a group of neighborhood residents to develop plans and community support for a river-to-river light-rail trolley line linking the East Village, West Village and Greenwich Village.



VCTC

Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

Making tracks through the Village

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