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L Train Service Between Brooklyn & Manhattan May Be Shut Down For Years

by [Christopher Robbins](#) in [News](#) on Jan 13, 2016 1:42 pm



([Michael Semensohn](#)/Flickr)

Governor Cuomo’s announcement last week that [30 subway stations would be completely closed for months at a time](#) in order to properly “revamp” them was greeted with groans by riders. But a disruption of epic proportions potentially looms for New Yorkers who rely on the [L train](#) to get in and out of Manhattan.

Like the R train’s Montague Tube, the L train’s Canarsie Tube was flooded with saltwater and severely damaged during Hurricane Sandy. The Montague Tube was shut down and [repaired](#) in 13 months—one month and [\\$58 million under budget](#)—while riders [found other ways to get to work](#).

The project to repair the Canarsie Tube is projected to take three years, and the MTA is considering shutting down service between Manhattan and Brooklyn entirely to get it done, according to MTA sources familiar with the initiative. In this scenario, Manhattan-bound L service would terminate at Bedford Avenue, the line's busiest station.

More than 300,000 New Yorkers ride the L train on an average weekday. When the Montague Tube was damaged by Hurricane Sandy [it had 65,000 daily riders](#).

Another option being weighed is to keep one of the two tunnels open while repairing the other—there are separate Manhattan-bound and Brooklyn-bound tunnels—leaving room for limited service.

“If one tunnel is down, how bad will the L train be in the mornings just going one way?” one source says. “It’ll be packed beyond belief. It’ll be a fight. Is that the smartest way to do it if it’s going to be the difference of a year? I don’t know.”

In either case, to get L train riders where they need to go, the MTA is planning on increasing M train service, adding two cars to G trains, and running a system of shuttle buses; the sources say that the tunnel work is slated to begin in late 2017. A bid outline for the tunnel repairs [that was made public last year](#) stated that the work would cost “OVER \$50 million” and that the contract would last 40 months. The Montague Tube cost the MTA \$250 million. Tunnel repairs are covered by Sandy relief funds from the federal government.



The Canarsie Tube after the MTA pumped out the saltwater that flooded it during Hurricane Sandy ([MTA New York City Transit / Marc A. Hermann](#))

“Unfortunately [we all knew this day would eventually come](#) on the Canarsie line, because this is, once again, the legacy of Sandy,” says Richard Barone, the Director of Transportation Programs for the [Regional Plan Association](#).

“It really depends on how quickly it takes the MTA to get the job done versus the severity of the shutdown. So if they can get it done in a year, but they have to shut both tunnels down, it’s one thing. If it takes them three or four years to do it, and they have to alternate shutting down the tunnels, you have to question, which is better? Is it better to get it done faster but with massive disruption? Is it even possible to do that? Is there an another alternative that these folks can take to get to Manhattan for work?”

Dr. Robert Paaswell, an [engineering professor at City College of New York](#) and Director Emeritus of the [University Transportation Research Center](#), believes that a complete shutdown is the wisest course of action, and likened it to Governor Cuomo's [announcement](#) to take "30 stations put them out all at once, design build whole new station, let people walk in there and say, 'Wow, this is the MTA.'"

(Or in the [MTA's words](#), "get in, get done and get out.")

"[Cuomo's] absolutely right," Paaswell said. "That's the way to do it."

"You're going to have to take some lumps, people are going to be inconvenienced—get it done as quickly as possible, then reopen with a new system," Paaswell says. "I hate to be hard about it—that's why I'm not the head of the MTA, because I don't have to make that decision—but if I were, I would get it done as quickly as possible."

Paaswell, who was the executive director for the Chicago Transit Authority from 1986 to 1989, argued that a one-tunnel system wouldn't be able to handle the line's [growing ridership](#).

"You're doing one track at a time, all of a sudden you have a summer thunderstorm and the track floods or a signal goes down and you have no tracks and that was the only option and people haven't even thought of other ways to get around, and you're screwed," Paaswell says.

Either way, the MTA is going to have to get "very creative," according to Barone: "There isn't really much redundancy here except for a portion of the M."

Barone suggested networks of bus services that "mirror" the Canarsie line, installing express bus lanes on bridges, and telecommuting as possible ways to alleviate the strain. "Are there other things you can do to help with demand?" Barone wonders. "Maybe management kind of shifts people to work other times of day, to get them to kind of actually work at home a few days a week? There's other options out there."

[Ferries](#) would only have a limited impact, Barone says, "because you have to get people to the ferry. It's really a waterfront to waterfront type of mode."

"Once you look at all these, all these individual mitigation measures, you add them up and say, well, is there still a deficit? If there is still a significant deficit, then you have to say, we can't really shut it down completely," Barone said.

Both experts compared the MTA's dilemma to that facing New York, New Jersey, and the federal government over the tunnels under the Hudson River, which are in dire need of repair [that will likely cut their train capacity by three quarters](#).

"It shows that the lack of investment in infrastructure over the last thirty, forty years is really hurting the city now," Paaswell says.



Governor Cuomo at the Transit Museum, announcing the closure of 30 subway stations for months at a time in order to facilitate repairs ([Kevin P. Coughlin/Office of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo](#))

MTA spokesman Adam Lisberg said that shutting down the Canarsie Tube entirely "is one of several options that we're considering."

"On the one hand [with] Montague, which has lower ridership and abundant redundant options around there, we were able to close it down with relatively little customer impact. The ability to get in get it done and get out was a huge factor in being able to do it with as little pain as possible for our customers," Lisberg said.

"At the other end, right now we're doing dozens of weekend closures to do Sandy repair work on the A/C/E and F lines because those under-river tunnels were both damaged in Sandy and need work as well. It's frustrating for people who use those stations on the weekends, we know, but we decided that that was still preferable to doing full shutdowns on those kinds of tubes. So somewhere in the middle of those, we have to deal with Canarsie."

Lisberg could not comment specifically on how the MTA would get customers where they need to go in the event of a complete shutdown. "Anything and everything will be on the table," he said. It also wasn't immediately clear if the federal relief funding can be used towards mitigating the impacts of a shutdown.

According to Barone, the ideal situation will allow the MTA to simultaneously [repair the Canarsie Tube](#) and knock out \$300 million in upgrades to the line, including [new entrances on Avenue A and Bedford Avenue](#), and three power substations, allowing for two additional trains every hour.

“The problem I think that people have today, is that they don't really believe that it will be done [in three years],” Barone says. “People were surprised with the Montague. That happened better than people thought, earlier than people thought. If they deliver the Second Avenue Subway in December of 2016 [as they promised](#), if they start delivering things when they say they're going to deliver them, then people have confidence. If the MTA keeps showing that it can get things done on time, then people might be okay with that, if you couple it with: we're giving it back to you better than we took it away.”

Lisberg said that while nothing had been finalized, “The logical thing to do is to piggyback the station work and the elevator work and the substation work on the Sandy work, so we absolutely will be combining that work as much as possible so we can minimize the impact on our customers. We will make sure it all gets combined as much as possible.”

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