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OPINION



Those new MetroCard passes will probably backfire horribly

By Johnny Oleksinski

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Just wait, New York. Glitches from the Ventra card left Chicagoans cold.

Getty Images

When the MTA announced in October that it would be **switching to contactless passes in 2019**, replacing our current yellow swiping MetroCards, the news seemed worthy of Champagne and prime rib.

For commuters — and 2016 presidential candidates such as Hillary Clinton — who just can't master the Zen-like rhythm of the swipe, the pain would be over. The new cards require just an easy tap. Better yet, payment for many passengers will be computerized and automated, so no more lining up at kiosks in the cold and fumbling with touchscreens while you watch your train fly by.

Finally, a smidgen of good news for a transit system plagued by aging infrastructure, constant delays, poor customer service and rancid press. This new card will be its savior, right?

Eh. Just ask Chicago.

I was living in that city in 2012, when the Chicago Transit Authority announced it was switching from a flimsy pass similar to New York's to a contactless card called Ventra. The much-heralded change was to be implemented by Cubic Transportation Systems — the New York-based company that's also responsible for the MTA's new passes — and had the same simple goals. "The process is intended to be more convenient and speed up boarding, particularly on buses," said the Chicago Tribune.

The opposite happened.

When Ventra kicked off in August 2013, it spurred a litany of errors including extra charges, malfunctioning card readers and payment confusion. It was a p.r. disaster. For months, amid a frigid Chicago winter, passengers were in daily agony.

Although riders were able to purchase Ventra cards at vending machines, many people — such as office workers using WageWorks and college students — received their new passes in the mail. Separately, those users were e-mailed a transit ID, which was required for activation. On a Monday morning in October — the final day the old passes were usable — the Ventra help line received 10,000 phone calls from customers who had not received new cards or transit IDs. Wait times to speak to an agent lasted as long as an hour.

In addition, many commuters chose to keep their contactless card in their wallets at all times, like you might with an employee ID, tapping the leather on the touch panel. But a significant number of passengers began seeing small \$5 charges on their bank statements. It turns out the technology was charging their credit cards instead of their passes.

In response to this debacle, the CTA issued a weak statement: "We do recommend that you take the card out and wave the card in front of the reader." An act that requires the same amount of time as swiping.

Ventra also cost the debt-plagued city.

In November 2013, there was a massive outage that hit 165 Ventra card readers (then 20 percent of Chicago's total) and lasted 90 minutes during rush hour. The CTA chalked it up to a malfunctioning "back-office server," with the flippancy of announcing a copy machine has run out of toner. Irritated customers were waved through at no charge — leading to 15,000 free rides and \$33,750 in lost revenue for the city.

'I think [the Brits] just aren't as vocal as people in Chicago'

- Robert Paaswell

And once things were finally running smoothly? Having regularly traveled to work on Ventra and the MTA's current card, I prefer our standard swine. During rush hour, seasoned New York commuters have their routine down, needing to barely even pause at the

standard swipe. During rush hour, seasoned New York commuters have their routine down, needing to barely even pause at the turnstile. Our 5.5 million daily riders just don't have time for a breather.

In Chicago, you stop, you tap, you wait for the green light, and you go. For a ridership of about 1.65 million, that's OK. But New York's transit troubles aren't at the turnstile — they're at the platform, where we suffer from an embarrassing glut of train delays and mechanic failures for a "world class" city.

Looking across the pond, there is a glimmer of hope. The most notable touch transit system in the world is London's Oyster card, originally rolled out by TranSys, which Cubic was a part of, in 2003. London's average daily ridership is about 5 million people, just a half-million shy of New York's, and by all accounts the Brits think Oyster is brilliant.

"The high usage, network coverage and customer satisfaction of the Oyster card serves as a role model for other big cities," said Eltis.org, an urban-mobility Web site, in an article assessing London's 10 years with the smart card.

But Robert Paaswell, distinguished professor of engineering at City College who headed the CTA from 1986 until 1989, says Oyster is glitchy too, with accidental double charges and server outages. You just don't hear about it. "I lived in London for a year," says Paaswell. "And I think [the Brits] just aren't as vocal as people in Chicago."

So, look out Cubic. Because complaining is one thing New Yorkers really excel at.

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