

The New York Times

Where Chicago Trounces New York: Fixing Mass Transit

By **Winnie Hu**

Oct. 18, 2018

CHICAGO — Like New York’s subway, it is another century-old system struggling to keep up with the transit demands of a booming city. It, too, has been plagued by crumbling tracks, antiquated signals and unreliable trains that turn routine commutes into nightmares.

But the difference is that Chicago’s L has made a comeback, reversing decades of cost-cutting and neglect.

Today, nearly one-third of its tracks have been rebuilt for faster and smoother rides. Rail cars from the 1970s have been replaced with the latest models. More than three dozen stations have been overhauled, many rebuilt into sleek, steel-and-glass outposts. There are new elevators, wider platforms, high-definition security cameras and works by Chicago artists.

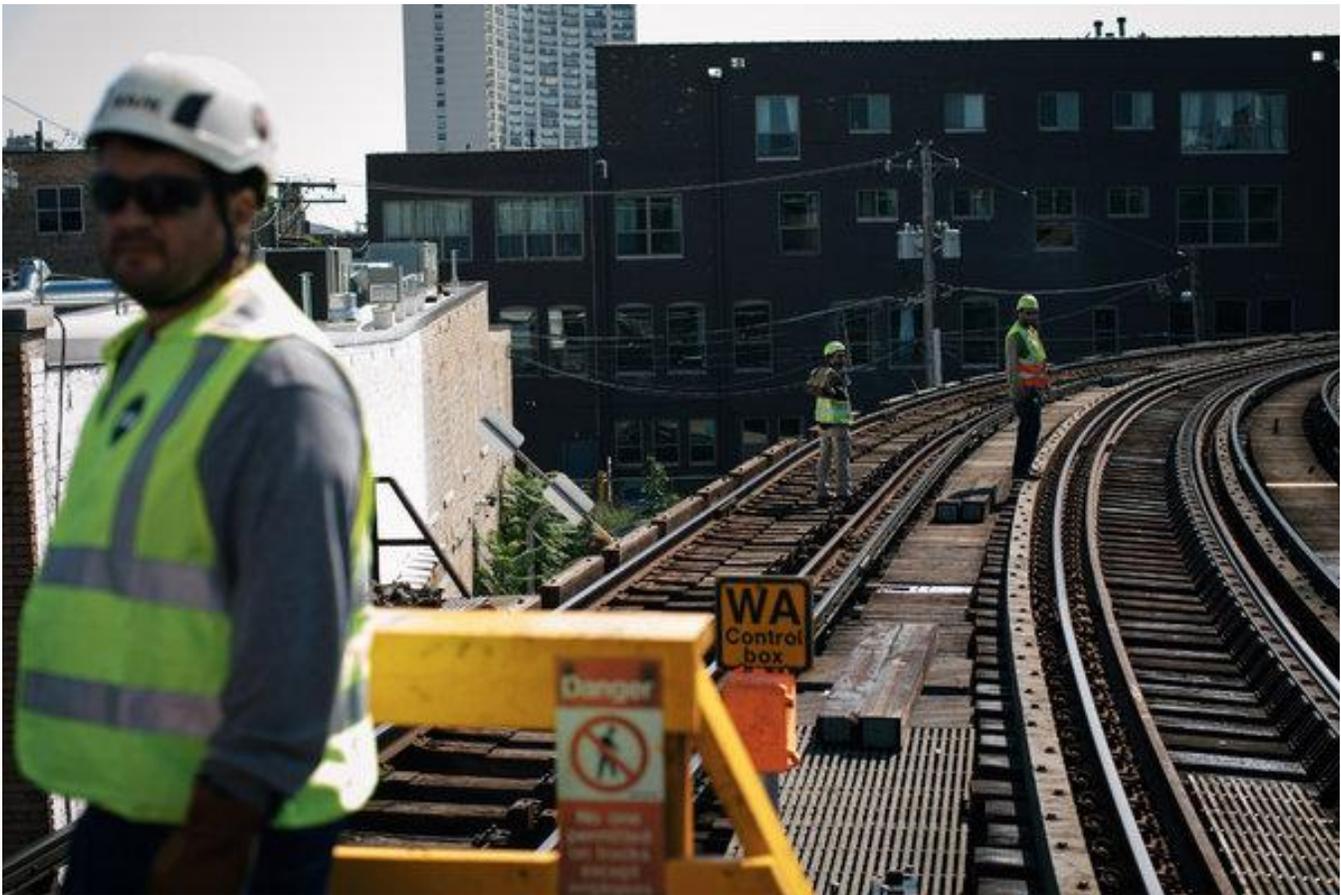
“We’ve had a pretty impressive turnaround,” said Joseph P. Schwieterman, a professor of public service at DePaul University. “It’s still an old system — and we still have delays — but the problems are staying out of the headlines and that’s quite an achievement.”

See, New York, it *is* possible.

The first lesson is to think big

Chicago could have taken baby steps to shore up its failing system. Instead, it embarked on a slew of ambitious projects to reimagine the L. Total bill? \$7.2 billion since 2011.

The Chicago Transit Authority spent \$425 million to tear out and rebuild 10.2 miles of the southern end of the Red Line in 2013, choosing to shut down the entire section for five months — using free buses to shuttle riders to other stations — rather than spread the work over four years of nights and weekends, which has been New York’s approach.



The Chicago Transit Authority has spent \$7.2 billion since 2011 to upgrade the subway, including installing new tracks, replacing antiquated signals and buying modern trains. Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

[New York's subway crisis was fueled by politics and poor decisions.]

A year later came a \$492-million rehabilitation of the Blue Line to improve service between downtown Chicago and O'Hare International Airport. Now, it is pushing ahead on its most costly project, a \$2.1 billion reconstruction of the northern end of the Red and Purple Lines.

Some stations are being turned into community anchors. At the 95th Street Station, where a \$280-million terminal replaced a shabby building with no doors to keep out the cold, a community radio station will broadcast live. There will be a food co-op next to the Wilson Station and an incubator for businesses steps from the Garfield Station.

"It is not just about moving people from Point A to Point B," said Dorval R. Carter Jr., the president of the Chicago Transit Authority. "These investments are also connecting people to their community."

It helps to have a transit-loving mayor

Mayor Rahm Emanuel has been a driving force behind rebuilding the L. It is Mr. Emanuel, a Democrat, who wields local control over the Chicago Transit Authority. Any major decision is run first through the fifth-floor of City Hall.

In contrast, New York's subway has been a pawn in the political feud between Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, a Democrat, who controls the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and Mayor Bill de Blasio, also a Democrat. Each has blamed the other for its dismal state.

Mr. Emanuel, who took office in 2011, said in an interview that a reliable and efficient transit system is essential for a 21st-century city. It improves quality of life, allowing families to spend more time together and less time commuting. It spurs economic development, helping to create jobs and attract relocating companies.

The turnaround of the L has been a bright spot for Mr. Emanuel, who announced last month that he would not seek re-election after a turbulent tenure that included clashes over police misconduct, school closings and street violence.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who has made rebuilding the L a priority, opened a new subway station in August. “Planes and trains are called a choke point for a reason,” he said. “You don’t do it, you choke.” Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

Mr. Emanuel said he made rebuilding the L a priority and expended the necessary political capital to make it happen. He takes the L to work himself a couple of times a week.

“Planes and trains are called a choke point for a reason,” he said. “You don’t do it, you choke.”

Chicago was creative in finding funds

Chicago’s leaders have been dogged — and unusually creative — in finding ways to pay for the L. As state funding dried up in tight budget times, they worked together to mine new sources. They brought in about \$1.5 billion alone in new federal grants and low-interest loans.

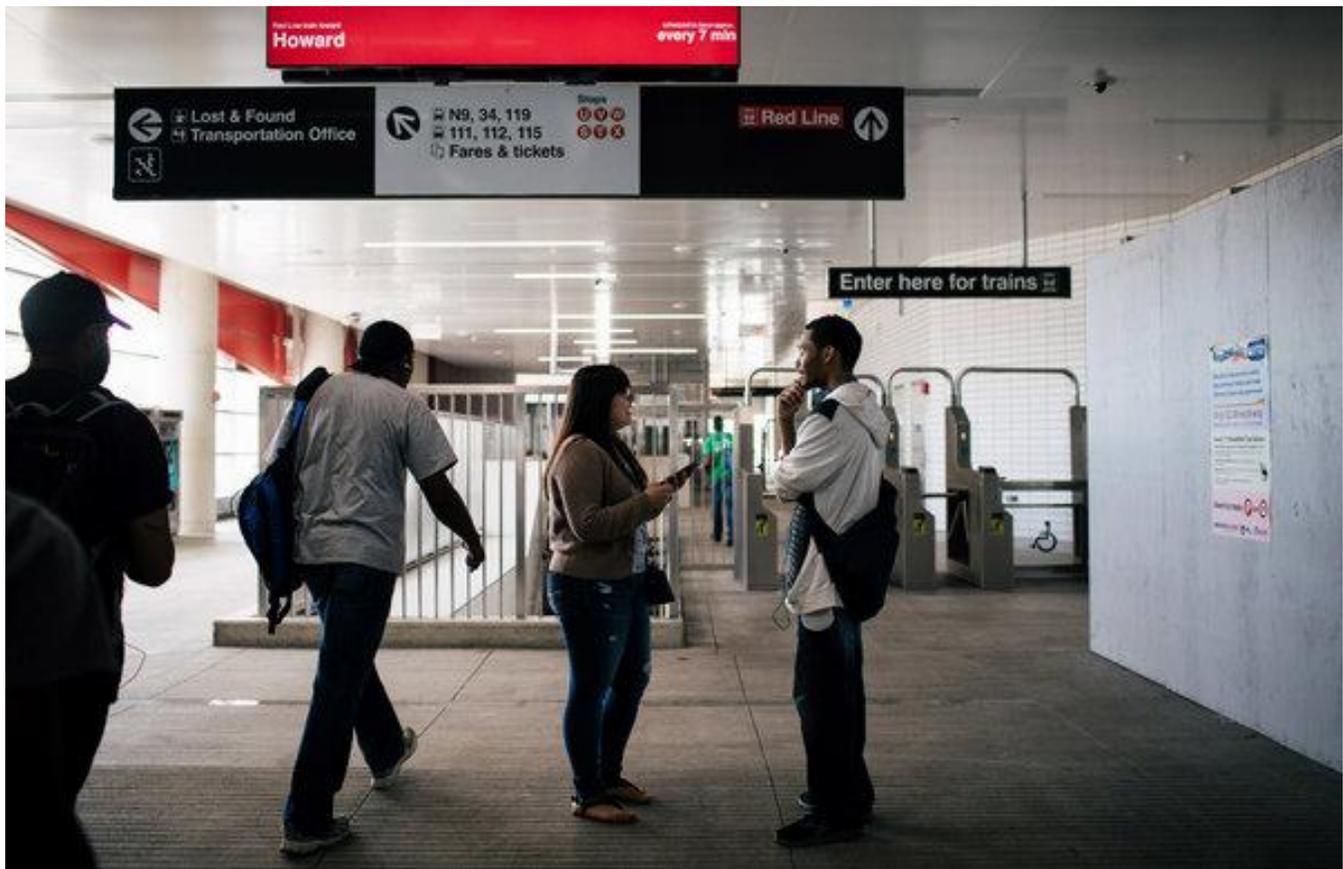
Mr. Emanuel, former chief of staff for President Obama, tapped into his Washington connections, even turning up in person to lobby federal transportation officials.

Senator Richard J. Durbin of Illinois, a Democrat, led an effort in 2012 to create a federal program to provide money for improving existing transit systems. Chicago was first in line, with a \$957 million grant for the Red and Purple Lines. (New York has also applied for money from the program.)

This year, Mr. Emanuel and the Chicago City Council increased a per-ride fee on ride-hailing services by 15 cents to raise money for track maintenance and safety upgrades.

“You have this unity of purpose,” said Robert E. Paaswell, a former executive director of the CTA. “Chicago is almost like a small town and everyone feels the L is really critical.”

In contrast, New York’s elected leaders have been divided over how to pay for the subway. This year, an ambitious congestion pricing plan died in Albany, though state legislators did pass per-ride fees on ride-hailing services. Mr. de Blasio has also opposed congestion pricing, saying it hurts low-income drivers.



To rebuild 10 miles of the Red Line, Chicago transit officials shut down the entire section and relied on shuttle buses. That's a different approach than New York where major work is typically done on nights and weekends.

Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

Now the subway's leader, Andy Byford, has proposed an ambitious overhaul of the subway that could cost as much as \$40 billion, but where all that money will come from no one knows.

Failure to address issues has cost billions

Many cities are struggling to modernize aging, but vital, rail systems. Nationwide, there is an \$89.9 billion backlog of unfunded infrastructure projects to keep rail and bus systems in a "state of good repair," according to the Federal Transit Administration.

"There simply isn't enough investment in public transit to address the infrastructure needs in our industry," said Paul P. Skoutelas, president and chief executive officer of the American Public Transportation Association. The failure to address the backlog, he said, has cost the economy billions of dollars, including from lost productivity, wages and jobs.

In the Philadelphia area, transit officials started a rebuilding program in 2013 after warning of drastic service cuts. They have doubled their annual infrastructure spending to nearly \$750 million this year, including rebuilding tracks and stations, modernizing signals and adopting new technology like real-time travel alerts.

Even younger systems like Washington's Metro, which began operating in 1976, required a \$150 million maintenance blitz last year in response to electrical breakdowns, track fires and smoke, and other problems. In 2009, faulty track circuits led to a collision between two trains that killed the train operator and eight passengers.

San Francisco voters approved a \$3.5 billion bond in 2016 to overhaul the Bay Area Rapid Transit system, from replacing worn track and rebuilding power lines to repairing tunnels and renovating stations. But that covers only part of the \$17.6 billion needed over the next 15 years, transit officials said.

Both systems could be called 'Blues Line'

While New York and Chicago share similar problems, there are big differences, too.

New York's subway system is far bigger and more complex — as are its infrastructure challenges. In 2017, there were 1.7 billion subway rides in New York, or more than seven times the 230.2 million rides in Chicago.



A desolate alley below the elevated tracks of the Paulina Station was converted into a hip plaza with murals and seats.
Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

New York has 472 stations and 665 miles of track. Chicago has 145 stations and 224 miles of track, about half of it on elevated structures or embankments. New York's subway never closes. Six of Chicago's eight lines shut down in the early morning hours.

Still, both systems have been crippled by outdated and failing infrastructure. Mr. Cuomo declared a state of emergency for the subway last year, and the state-controlled Metropolitan Transportation Authority began an \$836 million emergency rescue plan. Transit officials say it is working, though fed-up riders beg to differ.

The L started rolling in 1892 with four wooden cars powered by coal and steam. By 2007, it had reached a breaking point from deteriorating tracks and trains, chronic budget shortfalls and overcrowding. The summer before, poor track conditions caused an eight-car Blue Line train to derail, injuring 152 passengers. A local blog christened the troubled Blue Line the "Blues Line."

Chicago's subway has become pleasantly reliable

The L is improving, by most measures. The average number of major delays every month — trains stopped on the track for at least 10 minutes because of mechanical issues — dropped to 78 in 2017, from 92 in 2011.

A younger fleet of 1,460 rail cars has meant fewer breakdowns, with cars traveling 8,525 miles between breakdowns in 2017, up from 3,732 miles in 2011.

Riders have returned. The L logged a record 241.7 million rides in 2015 — the highest in city records — from 190.3 million rides in 2007.

Even so, the Chicago Transit Authority still has a \$12 billion backlog of projects that is only growing because its infrastructure is "deteriorating rapidly," according to Stephen E. Schlickman, a transportation consultant.



Mr. Emanuel, former chief of staff for President Obama, tapped into his Washington connections to find money for the subway, even turning up in person to lobby federal transportation officials. Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

City leaders have also called for extending the Red Line nine miles into transit deserts on the city's far South Side.

"Unfortunately, many Chicagoans live and work in neighborhoods that lack access to Chicago's hub-and-spoke rail network," said Kyle Whitehead, a spokesman for the Active Transportation Alliance, an advocacy group.

Riders no longer dread taking the L

On trains and platforms around Chicago, many riders said the trains were finally running the way they were supposed to.

Kevyn Christopher, 28, a chef, said he no longer has to worry about always being late. He once dozed off on a stalled train, only to wake up 45 minutes later in the same place. "It's a lot better now," he said.

Some riders did complain that the widespread construction to remake the L has been just as disruptive as the breakdowns. "I've been stuck on the tracks numerous times in the last couple years and it really makes me mad," said Nikolina Apieczonek, 28, who has lost pay because she was late to work.

Still, Charles Paidock, 69, a transit advocate, said the promise of an improved L made the inconveniences more bearable.

“Its things that have to be fixed,” he said. “I’m glad it’s being done and not just being neglected.”

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 19, 2018, on Page A26 of the New York edition with the headline: Learning From Chicago’s Subway Transformation

WINNIE HU IS REPLYING TO COMMENTS



rixax

Toronto | Oct. 19

Chicago began the big budget rebuild in 2011. NY hired a new head to rebuild the NY subway system last year (or 2015/16?).

I think the success story of Chicago's transit rebuild is worth a big story in the NYTimes and a hearty congrats! But this type of comparison to NY seems unnecessary.

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