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Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

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## Don't Hold Your Breath

[Original Reporting](#) | By [Kevin C. Brown](#) | [Infrastructure](#), [NYC](#), [Transportation](#)

Dec. 5, 2012 — "I wonder if you might advise me," wrote a New York City resident to the director of public relations of the New York City Transit Authority in 1963, "whether, in your opinion, there is any serious possibility that the basic Second Avenue [subway] system will be constructed within the next few years." If "no consideration" was being given towards building this new line, the citizen continued, "[W]hat possible alternative remains for the relief of the daily crowding and delays on the Lexington Avenue Line?"

"The fact that it has been delayed for so long, the fact that the price has so escalated, the fact that it is being done piecemeal and not on the scale and magnitude that is required, is an indication of our failure to meet and recognize priorities." — Robert Abrams

Almost 50 years later, and despite fitful efforts to bring the transportation, economic, and quality of life benefits of an additional subway line to the East Side of Manhattan, running mostly along Second Avenue and stretching from the Battery at the southern tip of the island northbound to 125th Street, such questions about the Second Avenue line's future remain unanswered.

Today, no trains rumble under Second Avenue and only a small portion of the project is being worked on, despite the fact that Remapping Debate found widespread agreement that the need for a full-scale Second Avenue subway is greater than ever, and that there are no insurmountable technical, environmental, or logistical barriers that prevent multiple sections of the line from being constructed simultaneously. The full-scale project would offer the real prospect of materially enhanced transportation options as compared with the one-and-three-quarter mile "stub" of new subway that is currently funded, and do so for a much broader swath of New Yorkers.

In conversations with policy experts, planners, and engineers, the immediate — but ultimately superficial — reply to why the rest of the line has yet to be built — a project that, because of decades of delay, would now cost at least \$12 billion — was a variation on "lack of money," "money," or "not enough money." This dearth of funding, however, is more a symptom than the underlying disease. Robert Abrams, former Bronx borough president and former New York State attorney general, said that, while some policy makers argue "we can't meet these [transit] needs because we don't have the resources," it is always a matter of what kind of priorities you are going to set.

A real Second Avenue subway, it seems clear, has never been a sustained priority for government officials at any level, and it isn't one now.

### Inch by inch

Theoretically, the Second Avenue subway will be built in four phases. But the first, the stub between 63rd and 96th Streets, is the only one that has been funded. This section, currently under construction, is scheduled to open in 2016, although the Federal Transit Administration suggests it won't open until 2018.

The rest is unfunded and unscheduled. A second phase would bring the line northbound to 125th Street. The final two phases would extend the line southbound from 63rd Street to Lower Manhattan. If the first and second segments eventually come to be operational, that version of the Second Avenue subway would not actually be a "new" line, but rather an extension of the "Q" train. If phases three and four also came to be completed, only then would a new "T" train service begin operation (see map to the right).

### Why not do it all at once?

When Remapping Debate asked Robert Paaswell, the director emeritus of the University Transportation Research Center at the City College of New York, and the former executive director of the Chicago Transit Authority, if there was a technical reason why the entire length of the Second Avenue subway couldn't be developed simultaneously, he replied, "Not at all, not at all."

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the public agency that administers bus, subway, and commuter rail transit in and around New York City, is on record as agreeing, writing in its Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Second Avenue subway in 2004, "The proposed phasing plan is also extremely flexible, in that it would permit, if practicable, multiple phases to be constructed simultaneously."

The "if practicable" caveat doesn't relate to a technical problem, but to money. The MTA has described the current four-stage phasing as achieving "the best balance between constructability, operability, and the availability of funding." Or, as the Federal Transit Administration has written, "Anticipating the financial difficulties in implementing the entire project at

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once," the MTA chose to implement the project in phases.

An MTA spokesperson declined to be interviewed on the record and would only provide answers to emailed questions with attribution on condition that the agency be given quote approval. Remapping Debate does not collaborate with that practice.

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