



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

July 24, 2010

Aging Transit Systems Face Budget Crunch

By YEGANEH JUNE TORBATI

More riders, aging mass transit systems and inadequate money for maintenance and upgrades — a familiar story line for commuters and those faced with the task of keeping the trains running. What is new this summer is that the problems are making headlines again, in part because of an extended heat wave that has smothered so much of the country.

It would take \$77.7 billion just to get the country's public transit systems into shape, according to a [report](#) released last week by the [Federal Transit Administration](#). By comparison, the report stated, the entire amount spent on rehabilitating and reinvesting in public transit nationwide in 2008 was \$12 billion to \$13 billion.

With luck, riders would not have to contemplate these numbers on a train ride like the June trip endured by about 900 people going from jobs in Washington to homes in Maryland. Just minutes after pulling out of Union Station, the train got stuck — and stayed stuck for more than two hours.

Temperatures inside the railcars rose, almost as fast as the strain on the nerves of passengers who complained that transit workers provided no information about their plight. Riders debated whether to remove windows to let in air and whether they would be arrested for doing so.

“When the temperature in the train reached 110 degrees the consensus was that the Prince George’s

jail systems were air-conditioned and thus a better option than staying on the train,” one commenter wrote in response to an article on The Washington Post’s Web site about the episode on the [Maryland Area Regional Commuter](#) system, known as MARC for short.

For transit advocates and regular riders, the highly publicized incident — and a similar one this month on a [New Jersey Transit](#) train — are not rare. Nor are they limited to summer days when high temperatures warp tracks and overtax overhead electrical lines, although that is what has catapulted the infrastructure issues into the news recently. Instead, they are a result of two seemingly paradoxical trends: greater ridership but limits on the money available to improve the transit system.

“There’s a lot of older equipment out there that is being taxed highly because ridership is up in so many places,” said Steven Kulm, an [Amtrak](#) spokesman.

The [Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority](#) completed a contract this month to buy 20 diesel locomotives to replace equipment that had been scheduled to be retired in 2005. The agency estimates it will be 32 to 38 months until the locomotives are in service.

Commuters in the New York City metropolitan area have largely escaped drastic summer problems with the exception of a couple of days in early July, when the heat played havoc with the schedules of Amtrak and New Jersey Transit as trains were forced to travel more slowly over hot rails.

[Jeffrey M. Zupan](#), the senior fellow for transportation at the [Regional Plan Association](#), said the New York region had invested heavily in its public transportation system in the last two decades, and as a result, “these components are in a pretty good state of good repair.”

He added, however, that the financial situation of the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#), which also oversees the New York City subway system and some regional train service, is “very desperate,” after one of two taxes proposed by a state commission to finance the agency was rejected by the Legislature last year.

Every year, the cost of buying new equipment and repairing rail lines goes up, said Tony Dorsey, a

spokesman for the [American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials](#).

Combined with stagnating or falling revenues, he said, “we’ve got the perfect storm out there that is causing people in the transportation industry to feel very concerned.”

Rafi Guroian, who heads the MARC Riders Advisory Council, which monitors the status of the commuter-rail system, said, “This year, it kind of reached a breaking point.”

When railcars or engines do break down, “you’re basically scraping the bottom of the barrel to replace them,” he said.

Jack Cahalan, a spokesman for the [Maryland Department of Transportation](#), noted that the state spent \$100 million to replace many of the MARC system’s diesel locomotives, some of which were pushing four decades of service; most of the new engines went into service this year. He said the agency spent \$22 million for 13 new railcars, which were introduced last year.

The federal government is unlikely to step in to help strapped city, state and local transit agencies.

The 2009 economic stimulus devoted about \$8 billion to the development of [high-speed rail](#) but was widely criticized for devoting very little money for rebuilding and repairing existing transit systems.

Senator Christopher J. Dodd, Democrat of Connecticut, introduced a bill in May that would provide \$2 billion in emergency money to close gaps in operating costs for public transit systems around the country. But for the most part it would not apply to capital investment, and its prospects for passage are dim with lawmakers who are already skittish about the budget deficit facing the voters in November.

More in U.S. (1 of 25 articles)

Cities View Homesteads as a



Source of Income

[Read More »](#)

OPEN