

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.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY



June 11, 2010

A Quick Kiss of Plastic, and Ready to Ride

By ARIEL KAMINER

It was there, at the corner of 110th Street and Lexington Avenue, between a neighborhood botanica and the DeWitt Clinton Houses: the future of New York transportation. One flight down in the No. 6 subway station, the left-most turnstile bore a new electronic reader. Clutching my specially enabled credit card, I made an initial approach, only to be cut off by a rider attempting to swipe a plain old [MetroCard](#) — a MetroCard, can you believe these people? — and experiencing all the usual setbacks. But eventually she made it through, and my turn was at hand.

A credit card. The electronic reader. The briefest kiss of plastic on plastic and then, just like that: open sesame!

I walked through and stood on the platform, savoring the shock of the new.

Well, not all that much shock, actually. Credit cards with RFID, or radio frequency identification, which allow you to make purchases by tapping instead of swiping and signing, have been in use in other settings for years. You may have bought your 32-ounce WEN Sweet Almond Mint Cleansing Conditioner with one at the drugstore, or put 12 mega rolls of Bounty Select A Size paper towels on one at the supermarket. Transit riders in many other cities are tapping their way around town without a second thought. But it's been a long time coming for New York buses and trains.

At a minimum, a little change like this could get riders through turnstiles more quickly — without having to stop at a vending machine to transfer money from credit card to MetroCard, and without having to endlessly “swipe again at this turnstile.” Fewer vending machines and fewer cash transactions to process could cut the 15 cents per dollar it costs the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#) to collect its fares.

But the bigger goal here is to link the metropolitan area's major transportation

systems with one common currency. So instead of fumbling around in a wallet full of MetroCards, [New Jersey Transit](#) tickets, Metro-North tickets, [Long Island Rail Road](#) receipts and so on, commuters could reach for a single piece of plastic. Doesn't that sound reasonable?

Well here's your chance to find out. A six-month trial started June 1 on the 4, 5 and 6 trains; the M14, M23, M79, M86, M101, M102, M103 and BXM7 buses; 9 of the 11 PATH train stations, and the 6, 80 and 87 New Jersey Transit buses. One card to rule them all. Tremble at the power.

If you already have a [MasterCard PayPass](#), you can go online to [ridenewyorknewjersey.com](#) and enroll, getting the same discounts available with MetroCard. (To use the PayPass for a single full-fare ride, you don't have to sign up at all.) If you don't have or don't want to get one of those cards, well, tough. This trial isn't for you.

I tapped my way into the Metropolitan Transportation Authority system, heading down Lexington Avenue on the 6 train, across 23rd Street on the M23 bus, and then, via a PATH train, down Sixth Avenue and under the river to Jersey City. There, in Journal Square, I went for the trifecta: I tried to board a No. 87 New Jersey Transit bus, my third transportation system of the day, in the same expedient and new-fangled manner.

Alas, it was not to be.

"That won't work," the driver told me, as I made for the electronic reader. "It won't work till, like, January or something."

So I got off and boarded a No. 80 New Jersey Transit bus, whose driver told me the gizmo would not work until November. Then I tried the No. 6 bus, where the driver didn't seem to care enough to stop me, so I gave the electronic reader a tap. It flashed its by-then-familiar green arrow and pointed me toward my seat, which I gladly took as we rolled toward Merritt Avenue.

If news of this brave experiment hasn't quite made its way to the bus drivers of the Garden State, it doesn't seem to have seized the riders of Manhattan either. Stand at the PayPass turnstile in the Grand Central subway station and, I predict, your interest in technology and transportation will give out hours before you see anyone even try it.

I did find a few people who said it sounded interesting, one who had even heard about the six-month trial. But none who had given it a shot. Pietro Mantia, an

enigmatic artist from Pennsylvania, said the sight of the electronic reader made him sad. "They should have used a wand instead," he declared.

Depending on how the test plays out, transportation authority officials say we could someday soon bid our MetroCards farewell. As it happens, that's something that critics have been begging for the chance to do since the cards' wide-scale adoption in 1997. "People are going to look at this," the transportation authority chief, [Jay H. Walder](#), said in a [video](#) announcing the project, "and say, 'Why didn't I have this sooner?' " Well, exactly.

If a single-payment system worked for Metropolitan Transportation Authority subways and buses, PATH trains and New Jersey Transit buses, perhaps next up would be the AirTrain, then Metro-North and the Long Island Rail Road. After that, why not Connecticut's CTTransit or Philadelphia's trolley?

What if they invented a single-payment system that could be used on all public transportation across America? They'd have to give it a very special name. Something that grabs hold of the imagination and inspires young people to dream. Perhaps they could call it: cash.