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## Nearly a century after the planning started, a New York subway arrives



Children peer through a train window at the newly opened 86th Street station on the Second Avenue subway in New York. (Craig Ruttle / Associated Press)

By **Barbara Demick**  
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When planning started for the Second Avenue subway, Woodrow Wilson was president of the United States and people were driving the Ford Model T. The subway fare was 5 cents.

On Sunday, nearly a century later, one of the most star-crossed infrastructure projects in the United States opened to gasps of disbelief.

“I am actually shocked. I really didn’t think it would open,” exclaimed Rebecca Liss, who was waiting in line with her equally skeptical 9-year-old daughter in a crowd that stretched around the block at 86<sup>th</sup> Street, one of three new stations that opened Sunday.

“Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one,” people counted down in anticipation of the advertised noon opening. When the police removed a blockade to the escalator exactly on schedule, applause erupted from the crowd.

“Bravo, bravo!” one man cheered. “Thank you for all your hard work,” another told a construction worker in a hard hat.

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

To understand the enthusiasm over a subway, something that's normally the subject of grousing, consider that New Yorkers have been promised a Second Avenue subway since 1919. Over the ensuing century, the Second Avenue subway became the punch line of jokes and a cautionary tale about the ineffectiveness of infrastructure development in America.

"When you'd mention the Second Avenue subway to someone, they would react with a Pavlovian giggle," said Jeffrey Zupan, a transportation expert and senior fellow of the Regional Plan Assn., an urban policy group. "Nobody believed it would ever happen."

Groundbreakings have been frequent, but each time wars or recessions would intervene to jinx the project. Meanwhile, officials were so confident the line would be built that they demolished elevated rail lines on Second and Third avenues, leaving the fast-growing Upper East Side of Manhattan with only one badly overcrowded subway on Lexington Avenue, two long blocks to the west.

In a poem published a few days ago to celebrate the opening, "Ode to the Second Avenue Subway," Zupan summed up this chapter of the saga:

"They were all very bad years,  
"With high-rise up-zoned pads, egads!  
"Filling Lex to the gills, no subway frills,  
"Crushing the soul, taking their toll,  
"Below mushrooms grew, with riders few,  
"They were all very bad years."

From its inception, the Second Avenue subway was intended to ease congestion on the East Side of Manhattan. By 1929, the city was ready to award contracts on what was estimated to be an \$86-million project. Those plans crashed along with the stock market.

Then came World War II, and new subway construction was suspended. Plans revived afterward and a \$500-million bond issue was approved in 1950. But with the Korean War driving up construction costs it was not enough, and the Metropolitan Transit Authority used most of the money for improvements on the existing system. In 1957, the New York Times opined in a front-page article, "It is highly improbable that the Second Avenue subway will ever materialize."

"It was one thing after another," said New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, speaking at a tour of new stations on Friday. "And I think along the way our courage to take on these ambitious projects waned.... We don't dream big, we don't build big anymore. Part of it is you get the sense we are not sure we can still do it."

A groundbreaking took place in 1972, but three years later New York City was broke again and then-President Ford opposed a federal bailout. ("Ford to City: Drop Dead," read a famous headline in the New York Daily News.)

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“We had these subway tunnels already dug and nothing to do with them. We tried to sell them and put out a request for proposals,” said Trudy L. Mason, who was working for the [MTA](#) in the 1970s. Among the proposals that came back were one to open the world’s longest bocce court and another by a consortium of Upper East Side restaurants to use the tunnels for a wine cellar.

Another groundbreaking took place in 2007. The deadline for the new line to open by the end of 2016 came two years later and was received with widespread jeering.

The streets were torn up and gridlocked during the construction, which unleashed a pestilence of rats through the neighborhood. Businesses closed along the construction route. The German butcher at 86<sup>th</sup> and Second Avenue complained that pickle jars were falling off the shelves from the vibrations of the construction.

“None of the businessmen in the neighborhood thought they would stick to their promise,” said Ruairi Curtin, who runs an Irish gastropub that has endured years of flooding, electrical outages, dust and clamor through the construction. “But they were working through Thanksgiving, through Christmas, working day and night to do it.”

The current iteration of the Second Avenue subway is both wildly more expensive and less ambitious than anticipated. It cost \$4.5 billion for only two miles of new tunnel and three new subway stations—at 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, 86<sup>th</sup> Street and 96<sup>th</sup> Street, covering the relatively affluent Upper East Side. Unlike earlier proposals, which would have covered the entire East Side of Manhattan, this new line merely connects with an existing line coming up from Times Square.

The largest expense was on the state-of-the-art new subway stations, which are impressive with shiny new escalators, elevators to provide access for the disabled, vast open concourses without the ominous dark corners that made some stations so intimidating. Stunning artworks in ceramic and mosaics grace the walls, featuring artists Chuck Close, Vik Muniz, Sarah Sze and Jean Shin.

For an opening party on New Year’s Eve, brand new, spanking clean subway cars painted a periwinkle blue carried hundreds of invited black-tie guests, many in tuxedos and sequined dresses, between the new stations.

However, the MTA has come under criticism for the high cost of the new stations, which many say are too big, too deep and too expensive.

“We have to figure out how to build the next phase cheaper and quicker. To spend \$4.5 billion for three stations is too much,” said Richard Barone, vice president of transportation for the Regional Plan Assn.

A second phase is supposed to bring the line up to 125<sup>th</sup> Street, serving the less economically advantaged neighborhood of East Harlem. Officials have said work on that phase could begin in 2019 or 2020, although already the naysayers are doubting it will happen on time.