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Trump Budget Leaves New York-Area Transit Projects Up in the Air



Former Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx, left, with Stephen J. Gardner, an Amtrak executive, touring the Hudson River rail tunnel last year. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

By [EMMA G. FITZSIMMONS](#)

When the new president is a lifelong New Yorker promising a trillion-dollar infrastructure plan, many believed New York would be first in line to benefit from the spending spree.

But only two months into President Trump's administration, elected leaders in New York and New Jersey are alarmed that some of the most high-profile and crucial transit projects in the region are already on the chopping block.

Mr. Trump's [budget blueprint](#) proposed slashing a major source of federal funding for transit projects, known as New Starts grants. As a result, two long-delayed proposals could now be in jeopardy: building a new train tunnel under the Hudson River between New York and New Jersey, and extending the Second Avenue subway in Manhattan north to East Harlem.

Gov. [Chris Christie](#) of New Jersey, in a move that was widely criticized, canceled an earlier proposal for a new tunnel in 2010, but he and Gov. [Andrew M. Cuomo](#) of New York support a new tunnel plan, known as the Gateway project. And after the first part of the [Second Avenue subway opened](#) in January to much fanfare, officials are eager to move forward with the next segment. Both projects planned to rely on federal funding.

"This is a dagger to the heart of the Gateway project that is so vital to our economy," Senator [Chuck Schumer](#) of New York, a vocal critic of Mr. Trump on many issues, said in an interview.

Mr. Schumer, a Democrat and the Senate minority leader, said he would fight the cuts to New Starts, a program that has benefited large cities with ambitious projects.

"New York is No. 1 on the list because we're the biggest city, and we're by far and away the biggest mass-transit city," Mr. Schumer said.

Across the country, transit agencies are worried about the proposed cuts, which could halt or delay an array of projects, including a subway extension in Los Angeles, a light rail plan in Maryland and a rapid transit bus line in Kansas City.



The Portal Bridge, a century-old drawbridge in New Jersey. Officials have the permits to fix it, but without approvals from the Trump administration, construction could be delayed by at least a year.

Robert Stolarik for The New York Times

Mr. Trump's budget suggested that new transit projects rely on local financing — a major shift in how such projects have been financed in recent decades. Still, it is early in the budget process, and Congress will weigh in on the cuts in the coming months.

“These agencies count on a strong federal partner,” said Andrew Brady, senior director for government affairs at the American Public Transportation Association. “There has been a federal role in public transportation since Ronald Reagan put it there.”

President Reagan signed a law in 1983 that raised the federal gas tax and reserved some of the money for public transit projects. The New Starts grant program was created in 1991 under the Federal Transit Administration, though conservative voices like the Heritage Foundation want to see it eliminated. Under Mr. Trump's budget, only New Starts projects that have already secured full financing agreements would receive money.

The trillion-dollar question is how Mr. Trump's broader infrastructure proposal could affect public transit and how it would be paid for. The new transportation secretary, Elaine Chao, said recently that the initiative would be unveiled this year and that, in addition to transportation, it could focus on energy, water, broadband and veterans hospitals.

As the Trump administration develops the plan, it is possible that major transit expansion projects could be part of the initiative, according to a White House official who was not authorized to speak about the plan while it was still under discussion. The official said a key component would be partnerships with the private sector to complete infrastructure projects.



The Second Avenue subway line. It is unclear whether plans to extend the line into East Harlem can proceed without federal funding. Josh Haner/The New York Times

In New York, Mr. Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio, both Democrats, have criticized the transportation cuts and other budget proposals that could hurt the city. The next phase of the Second Avenue subway is expected to cost about \$6 billion, and officials planned to rely on \$2 billion in New Starts funding. It is unclear if the project could proceed without federal funding.

“Defunding all of New Starts has a very big impact on us, and we hope that won’t happen,” said Fernando Ferrer, the acting chairman of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the agency that runs New York’s subway, buses and commuter railroads.

The first three stations of the Second Avenue subway finally opened on the Upper East Side this year after nearly a century of planning and debate. The second phase would extend the line to 125th Street — an expansion officials say is critical during a period of booming subway ridership.

The saga surrounding a new train tunnel under the Hudson River has also been tumultuous. Mr. Christie, a Republican who once led Mr. Trump’s transition team, has thrown his support behind the Gateway project. But nearly seven years ago, Mr. Christie canceled an earlier plan because of cost concerns.

Since then, officials have grown increasingly anxious about the century-old tunnel currently used by Amtrak and [New Jersey Transit](#) trains. It was damaged by [Hurricane Sandy](#) and needs major repairs.

After Mr. Trump’s budget was released, Mr. Christie said he would fight any cuts to the Gateway project, which could [cost \\$23 billion](#). The next day, the governor tried to calm fears over the project’s fate, saying that funding for the tunnel could be included in the broader infrastructure initiative.

“Whether it ultimately comes from New Starts money or from a new infrastructure program that’s passed sometime this year is really of no moment to me,” Mr. Christie told reporters. “And that’s why I don’t want to, you know, go jumping off the cliff quite yet.”

Under the Obama administration, federal officials and Amtrak agreed to [finance half the tunnel project](#). Mr. Christie and Mr. Cuomo agreed that the states would pay for the other half.

“New York has the most ambitious building plan in the nation, and it’s absurd the federal government claimed these projects were a priority one day and then cut funding for them the next,” Mr. Cuomo said in a statement.

Mr. Schumer had even harsher words for the Trump administration.

“How can you say you believe in dramatically increasing infrastructure and submit a budget this way?” Mr. Schumer said. “It’s a total contradiction. It’s schizophrenic.”

Last month, commuters got a preview of how traveling between the two states could become a nightmare if the current tunnel is closed for emergency repairs. An Amtrak train derailed near the tunnel, closing half of Pennsylvania Station’s tracks and leading to widespread train cancellations and delays.

“Without this project and this tunnel, that becomes the day-to-day existence for commuters, and I don’t think anybody wants that to happen,” said Carlo A. Scissura, the president of the New York Building Congress, a group that represents the city’s construction industry.

Officials had hoped to start fixing another [notorious choke point on the Northeast Corridor](#) next year — the Portal Bridge, a balky, century-old drawbridge in New Jersey prone to getting stuck in the open position, causing a cascade of delays. Without approvals from the Trump administration, major construction to replace the bridge could be delayed by at least a year, said John D. Porcari, the interim executive director of the

Gateway Program Development Corporation, a nonprofit overseeing the tunnel and other upgrades along the corridor.

“It’s 100 percent designed,” Mr. Porcari said. “The permits are in hand. It’s literally ready to go.”