How Brooklyn Could Survive the L Train Shutdown

A new report urges: Keep calm and get on the gondola.

LAURA BLISS | 🐦 @mslaurabliss | Aug 26, 2016 | 💬 1 Comment

The L train masses. Where will they all go? (Mark Lennihan/AP Photo)

Love CityLab? Make sure you're signed up for our free e-mail newsletter.

| Email | **Sign up** |

When New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority announced plans to close the L train between the Bedford and 14th Street stations for 18 months of repairs in 2019, Brooklynites freaked. Especially the ones in Williamsburg. The L train's Bedford station stop is the artisanal-everything neighborhood's portal to Manhattan. Without L train access, observers warned, real-estate values would plummet, the service industry would shrivel, and the neighborhood's up-and-comers would flee to more transit-accessible locales, leaving behind only a handful of taxidermists to gaze sadly at the now-vacant streets. "2019 is the year Williamsburg dies," shrieked the *New York Post*.

Predictions of an impending manbun-pocalypse may be hyperbole. But in the run-up to the L train's closure, it's apparent just how much the outsize success of neighborhoods like Williamsburg—whose cultural cachet has become synonymous with a certain global chic—depends on that single subway. A new analysis by the NYU's Rudin Center for Transportation makes that case compellingly, while also outlining steps that MTA and city leaders can take to keep affected Brooklynites connected.
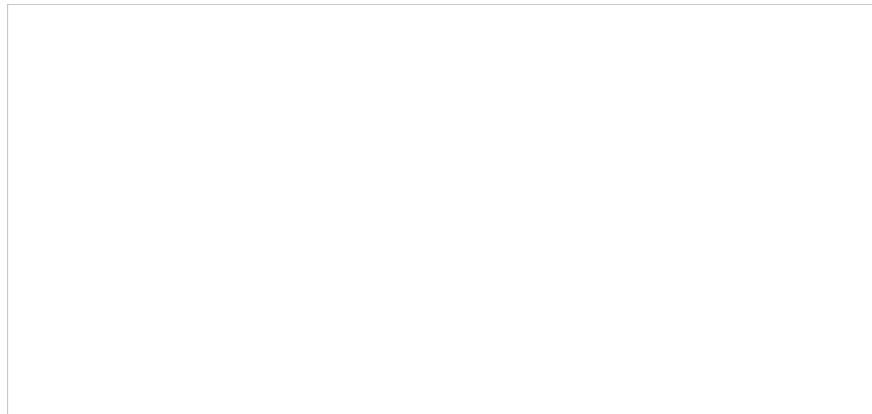
Bushwick booms. (NYU Rudin Center for Transportation)

The triumph of the gentrifiers

In recent years, ridership on the L has surpassed its 1940s peak, topping 133 million annual riders in 2014. "Stations along the L in Brooklyn have experienced far greater growth in usage than those in Manhattan, growing nearly 20 percent in the last five years," the report's authors write. Construction along the L has been furious and constant over the past 15 years, largely driven by access to the train and its convenient connection to Manhattan. Artists, students, and newly minted professionals have been drawn into Williamsburg, Bushwick, and other line-adjacent neighborhoods, building the brands of these communities as hotspots for the upwardly mobile. In North Williamsburg and Greenpoint, more than half of the population holds college degrees.

How will all the bartenders get to work?

More than 55,000 Brooklyn residents rely on the L train to get to jobs in Manhattan and the Bronx. Because of the L connection, North Brooklynites enjoy commutes far shorter than most in the region. Roughly 10,000 more New Yorkers —many of them in Brooklyn's vast service industry—are doing the reverse commute. When the subway goes down, both sides are going to feel it. So will the nearly 900 restaurants and nigh-countless bars and clubs surrounding L train stations in Brooklyn. Nowhere are restaurants more concentrated in Brooklyn than immediately around the Bedford Avenue stop. Williamsburg and Bushwick have more liquor licenses per square mile than any New York City neighborhood outside of Manhattan.

Commuters who live along L train stations in north Williamsburg enjoy shorter commutes than the average New Yorker. (NYC Rudin Center for Transportation)

Perhaps this gondola will help

What all of this means, which you may have already known: A lot people with outsize political, economic, and cultural influence are about to have their lives disrupted. So will many of the businesses, business owners and service workers that cater to that gentry. MTA and city leaders had better get a game plan in place, according to the report's authors. They suggest some obvious steps, such as bolstering subway service on other lines, ramping up the frequency of ferry connections, and adding high-speed bus service over the Williamsburg Bridge during peak hours. Increasing car-share options and creating partnerships with the likes of Uber and Lyft should also be on the table.

And, as the authors point out, the L train closure might also be an opportunity to pursue some outside-the-box transit improvements, like a scooter share system modeled after San Francisco's and even a high-speed gondola. There's actually a pretty detailed plan for that idea, as CityLab reported back in 2014: It's called the East River Skyway, and its prospective developers claim it could transport 5,000 riders in both directions between Williamsburg to the Lower East Side, every hour. That would be a helpful boost; the L's total daily ridership is 300,000, according to AMNY. These sorts of options might be especially appealing for a neighborhood known both for their youthful tech-savviness and their embrace of whimsical, anachronistic machinery.
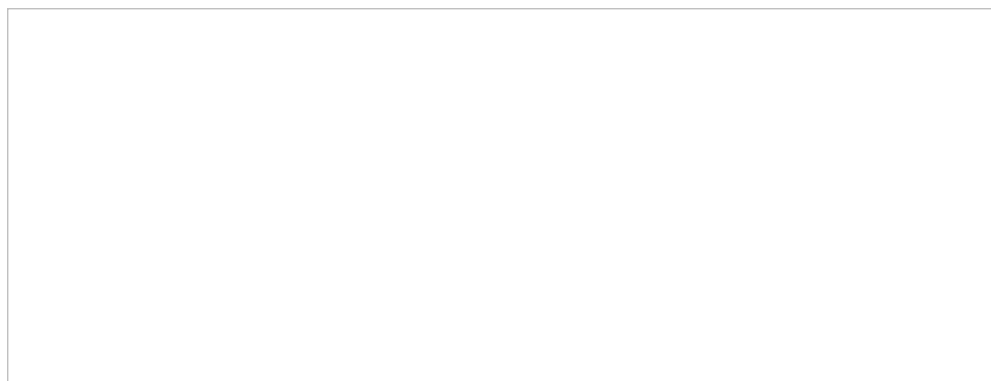
Take the Skyway to the high-speed bus to the M? (NYC Rudin Center for Transportation)

While the report emphasizes the subway closure's effects on Brooklyn's most economically successful neighborhoods, communities farther down the line will also feel the pain. And they might even get the worst of it: There's a big risk that the political weight carried by the Williamsburgs and Bushwicks of the borough will push the needs of lower-income neighborhoods such as East New York and Brownsville to the side. Ridership on the L train has grown a lot in those areas, too. That's an essential consideration as transportation policy-makers divvy up resources to strengthening transit alternatives for all Brooklynites.

Still, it's interesting to speculate on how this might affect the trajectory of New York City gentrification. Just as the L train paved the way for the utter domination of Williamsburg, its closure could redirect these forces, and other Brooklyn nabes closer to functional subway lines may be in for a sprinkling of economic fairy dust, for better or for worse. Watch out, South Williamsburg and Bed-Stuy: Your rents might be rising.

⬅ PREVIOUS
The U.S. National Park Service Grapples With Its Racist Origins

NEXT ➡
The Lonely Grandeur of Beachfront Motels