

## Howls at MTA budget bungles

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The MTA is mismanaging budgets for its biggest projects and failing to keep the public informed about skyrocketing costs and chronic delays, according to a scathing report released yesterday.

One factor that has hindered progress on major construction is that the agency uses three different reports to keep track of big-ticket jobs -- but the information doesn't always match up.

"Three sets of reports each provide partial information," said a report released by the Citizens Budget Commission. "And one set often contains contradictory information from the agency and its consultants."

In addition to critical projects like the Second Avenue Subway, the delays also extend to much-needed station rehabs and programs to modernize the subways, according to the report.

In the current capital plan -- from 2005-2009 -- 80 projects totaling around \$1.9 billion had to be deferred to the next budget, which starts in January, the report said.

"We spend an enormous amount of money on this capital plan, and it's not well-managed," said report author Charles Brecher.

He also found a significant lack of communication both within the agency and to the ridership.

"Clearly this information is not available to the public and I think it's also true that [the MTA] doesn't have it themselves," he said.

For example, public documents don't cover all projects in its five-year capital plan, and generally keep information related only to starting and finishing costs and dates.

Along with the report, the watchdog group yesterday also detailed just how much over budget some of the MTA's most crucial construction projects have become.

The Fulton Street hub in Manhattan is expected to cost a staggering 90 percent above initial estimates. The new South Ferry terminal in Manhattan -- which opened in March -- was over budget by 24 percent.

The budget for routing the LIRR to Grand Central Terminal is 14 percent higher than earlier expected -- and the first segment of the Second Avenue Subway has increased by 13 percent, the report noted.

MTA chairman Jay Walder yesterday addressed charges of insufficient public information by revealing an Internet-based program that will let citizens track every project in the upcoming \$28 billion capital budget.

It will provide "updated information" and will be running by the end of the year, said agency spokesman Jeremy Soffin.

The next five-year capital plan -- which needs state approval -- will include dozens of station rehabs and will also set money aside for the "swipeless" Smart Card, which will eventually replace the MetroCard.

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