



The MTA Refuses to Put a Price Tag on Yet Another Capital Project

By Stephen Smith

November 11, 2014

Last month, YIMBY took the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to task for including a request in their upcoming capital plan for \$1.5 billion for design and construction of the second, East Harlem phase of the Second Avenue subway, without providing the public with an updated price tag for the project. While transit projects around the world often run over their allotted budgets, we've never heard of an agency in a democratic country that gave up on publicly estimating costs altogether.

Now, the MTA is at it again. Also included in the authority's 2015-2019 capital program is a request for \$743 million to begin what's known as "Penn Station Access." The overall project includes building four new Metro-North stations in the East Bronx – at Co-op City, Morris Park, Parkchester/Van Nest, and Hunts Point – along a line currently used by Amtrak, which feeds into Penn Station via the Hell Gate Bridge and Queens, plus upgrades needed to run commuter service along it.

The independent, nonpartisan Citizens Budget Commission was the first to notice that the MTA did not include a price tag for the project, writing in their critique of the agency's capital plan: "The commitment of \$743 million to the Penn Station Access project seems particularly premature; its total cost has not been reported, its benefits have not been quantified" – there isn't so much as a ridership estimate – "and it is not clear why it is preferred over other projects previously discussed." (Can we take a guess?)

Following up on the CBC's remarks, we submitted a freedom of information request to the MTA, asking for a total cost estimate for Penn Station Access. Their response, received today, was as follows:

With respect to Penn Station Access, Metro-North does not have up-to-date total estimates as there is no final project scope. The documents Metro-North has in its possession are exempt from disclosure pursuant to New York Public Authorities Law section 87(2)(g) pursuant to which an agency may deny access to inter-agency or intra-agency materials that are not final agency policy or determinations.

The implication is that while Metro-North may have some idea of what the project will cost, they will not deign to share the estimate with the taxpayers they're asking to foot the bill.

Once construction starts on the East Harlem leg of the Second Avenue subway or Penn Station Access, political realities will require that they be finished, no matter what the costs end up being.



Published in the
NEW YORK
YIMBY

“Once you get that first stake driven,” Robert Caro quoted Robert Moses as saying, “no one could stop you.”

And given that the MTA has been known to set world cost records on its capital projects – the first phase of the Second Avenue line is the most expensive subway on earth on a per-mile basis, many times over, and the East Side Access cavern below Grand Central will vie with the World Trade Center PATH station as the world’s most expensive train station – those costs could be very high indeed.