



Cuomo was less immediately invested in the city's subway system, despite warnings that the aging system was falling into disrepair. | AP Photo

## Sputtering subways threaten Cuomo's infrastructure image

By **DANA RUBINSTEIN** and **JIMMY VIELKIND** | 09/12/2017 05:11 AM EDT

Dressed in pale dress trousers and workboots, Gov. Andrew Cuomo grasped an industrial

vacuum known as a “Vac-Tron” and sucked up a pile of litter from the subway tracks in Union Square last week.

The event was ostensibly about cleaning up garbage and reducing track fires, but it was also about tidying up the governor’s carefully crafted image as the kind of executive who can make the trains run on time.

In New York City, where the subways have suffered a meltdown over the last six months, Cuomo’s name has instead become synonymous with the system’s neglect. Riders have blamed him in polls for the deteriorating service, and a Twitter hashtag #CuomosMTA has catalogued the system’s problems throughout the summer. “Tired of New York’s subways? Blame Andrew Cuomo” read one New York Times op-ed.

The bad press comes just as Cuomo is trying to build a case for reelection next year, and, perhaps more importantly, introduce himself to a national audience as a master-builder of infrastructure and a viable challenger to President Donald Trump in 2020.

Two weeks before the subway clean-up, Cuomo stood atop the new Tappan Zee Bridge with a reporter from CBS This Morning. “What made America is what we built —the railroads, the tunnels, the bridges, the skyscrapers,” he told the national morning show. “We can’t lose that. If we lose that we lose who we are.”

Before this summer, Cuomo’s fondness for flashy mega-projects — be it a new Tappan Zee Bridge, or a new LaGuardia Airport, a new highway bridge outfitted with dancing LED lights, or a new train hall for Amtrak and the Long Island Rail Road — was a relatively uncontroversial way to present himself as a get-things-done governor.

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"The subway thing is so profound because it undermines his very *raison d'être*," said one Democratic strategist, who asked to remain anonymous to avoid earning the governor's ire. "His whole core message about himself is that he takes on these tough challenges."

At the opening for the new Tappan Zee last month, Cuomo recounted all the obstacles he had overcome in building a new bridge over the Hudson River.

"Twenty years they talked about it. And nothing was done. And it became a symbol of procrastination, incompetence, government that just talks and government that can't act," the governor said, after arriving in a lemonade-colored Corvette.

The 62-year-old span was already known to be in need of replacement by the time Cuomo took office in 2011, but the previous three governors had simply pushed for short-term maintenance.

As Cuomo tells it, when he asked his cabinet for big ideas that summer, one suggested he could "say he was going to replace the Tappan Zee Bridge." What about actually doing it, the governor asked? Using a one-time design-build authorization, a \$1.6 billion federal loan and cash wrung from foreign banks, he actually put the project in motion.

Cuomo was less immediately invested in the city's subway system, despite warnings that the aging system was falling into disrepair.

In 2011, the same year he committed to rebuilding the Tappan Zee, Cuomo swept \$100 million from the MTA, according to an analysis by the state comptroller.

In 2014, after Cuomo hosted then-President Barack Obama at the new Tappan Zee worksite, he resisted the MTA's proposed \$32 billion capital plan, most of which would go toward keeping the sprawling system in a state of good repair, calling the proposal "bloated."

The following year, shortly after Cuomo sent \$1.3 billion to the Thruway Authority, which is building the Tappan Zee bridge, he announced he had cut the "fat" from the MTA's long-term repair plan, to the tune of \$2.2 billion.

A spokesman, Jon Weinstein, said Cuomo has been focused on infrastructure since he took office in 2011, and he cited the new Tappan Zee Bridge, as well as Cuomo's effort to rebuild LaGuardia Airport and expand the Long Island Rail Road, along with his recent

commitments to the MTA's capital plan.

The governor "believes New Yorkers deserve subways that run better and more reliably which is why he has secured record investment in the MTA - \$8.3 billion in state funds for this Capital Plan and \$5 billion a year in operating support - and brought in a Chairman who is a proven manager," Weinstein said in a statement.

On New Year's Eve, Cuomo held a public event to celebrate the opening of the first three stops of the Second Avenue Subway on the Upper East Side, and bragged about his ability to deliver the project by a self-imposed deadline (even if it was, on a per mile basis, the most expensive subway ever built).

"They said, 'Well why did you need to get this done on deadline?'" he asked. "We needed to get this done on the deadline because we're New York and when we set a deadline, we're going to get it done. We needed to show people that government works and we can still do big things and great things."

But when the subways began to melt down in the spring, Cuomo initially disavowed his control of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and sought to place blame on his rival, Mayor Bill de Blasio, saying the governor merely had "representation on the board" — along with New York City and several surrounding counties.

The hands-off approach did not play well with city voters.

In its July poll, Siena found that Cuomo's approval rating had dropped 17 points in two months. The fall-off was concentrated in the MTA service area, the poll showed: Job approval declined by 27 points in the MTA region, but ticked down by only a single point in upstate areas.

The governor's critics were quick to seize on the perceived vulnerability.

"The governor should step up, say once again he's responsible — because he seems to change that message every week or two, whether he's responsible or not," de Blasio said during a press conference held on the subway in July. "He's responsible. It's clear. Just take ownership and fix the problem."

America Rising, a Republican opposition research group, has gleefully touted the decline in Cuomo's polls as evidence he's unfit to run for president in 2020, saying his "growing unpopularity means he's not the national contender he once was."

In recent months, Cuomo has labored to show his attention to the problem.

In late June, he declared an MTA state of emergency, said he would reorganize the authority, argued it needed more money, not less, and as a down payment, promised to put another \$1 billion into the system. He has also promised to find new revenue sources, even embracing what he had long regarded as a political third rail: congestion pricing.

His subway chairman has since launched an \$836 million subway stabilization plan, and hinted at a longer-term, possibly \$8 billion, system fix, one that would begin, at earliest, in 2020.

And, in typical Cuomo fashion, the governor has taken to the tracks himself, promising the MTA would “remove all the trash, and all the debris” — something he claimed hasn’t been done in “over a hundred years.”

The hope in Cuomoland is that the governor has “taken the sting out” of this so-called summer of hell and that it will be remembered as just that — a summer, according to someone familiar with the administration’s thinking.

Asked for comment, Weinstein said the administration is committed to repairing the city’s subway system and “will keep focus on it until it is a system worthy of them.”

In the meantime, a Siena poll released last week showed voters remain frustrated with the governor’s handling of mass transit. Only 27 percent of city voters gave him positive marks on mass transit, and 71 percent rated it was either “fair” or “poor.”

“The subways are serving extraordinary numbers of people every day and are the heart and soul of the city economy, which are the heart and soul of the state economy,” said Gerald Benjamin, a political scientist at SUNY New Paltz. “And they’re in trouble. That’s a fundamental challenge.”