Dispatches from the deep state under New York

The City Flows

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Photography by Scott Rossi


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RIDE

In early April, Sean Duffy, Donald Trump's transportation secretary, rode the New York City subway for a reported 12 minutes. This can't have been easy for Duffy, a former congressman and reality TV star. Since taking office, he's called the subway "dangerous", "violent", a "failure", a "dirty, disgusting homeless shelter" and, while standing in New Jersey wearing a hard-hat, a "shithole".

Two weeks earlier, he'd sent a threatening letter to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which runs the subway – the sort of dubious correspondence that has become a hallmark of the second Trump administration. The letter insisted that the MTA reduce crime on the subway and provide data showing the same; if it failed, the department could withhold federal funding, about $14bn as projected by the authority. Never mind that crime is low – subway crime has been steadily declining to historic lows, according to the city's police department, with shooting incidents at their lowest-ever recorded levels. "This is not hard," Duffy said. "We're not sending rockets into space."

When he disembarked in Manhattan, Duffy made an "offer" to the MTA: "I know a few people in DC who are very successful at rooting out fraud, waste and abuse – it's called Doge."

Duffy was invited and joined on his jaunt by Eric Adams, New York's embattled mayor. Adams had been facing federal charges until the Trump administration had them dropped. They were chased around town by Janno Lieber, the chair of the MTA, who was not invited. Lieber never found them, nor did Duffy respond to our requests for comment. But we managed to reach Lieber on the phone.

"Subways," he told us, "to a great extent, are where a lot of New Yorkers form their impression of whether this community, this experiment in tolerance and diversity, is working well." This is not an experiment that the Trump administration seems eager to conduct.

We take the subway everyday, but we recently spent a few weeks exploring this experiment in earnest, traversing its hierarchy, its history and its right of way. It is this system, sewn by immigrants under a river and through a quilt of clay and bedrock, that created and maintains the largest city in the US – and therefore 10 per cent of the country's GDP. Under threat from the federal government, a dedicated band pulls the levers and pushes the buttons that keep the trains running.

"It's amazing that our ancestors had the foresight and the ability to get it done," Danny Pearlstein, a director at the grassroots Riders Alliance, told us. "And what we owe it is what we owe ourselves, which is a modicum of care."

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THEATRE

In a discreet, secure facility in Hell's Kitchen, just a few blocks from Central Park, a guard in the vestibule stood behind bulletproof glass. Past a bank of doors then metal detectors and up an elevator is a large conference room with big windows, like the bridge of a ship. The windows look down a storey on to the vast Rail Control Center, mission control for the urban underground.

They call the room "the theatre", and it's a grand one, nearly half an acre of carpeted workspace. Some 100 people work in it at any given time. Given the torrent of raw data visible in this room, the MTA is very touchy about what's photographed. Its two long space-age walls and one of its short ones display maps of every train and line in the city. The biggest of these, a digital marvel, is 160ft wide and 10ft tall.

We descended and made our theatre entrance alongside Jose LaSalle, the acting chief of this place. "That's all live, by the way," LaSalle said, in a smooth New York accent. We craned our necks upward. "What you see there is live. Those little red blocks are trains, OK?" White trains are early, green trains are on time, yellow trains are risking lateness, red trains are late, magenta trains are going to the yard. It's impossible not to search for your home station among the 472 displayed on the glowing murals, to find your little place in this metropolitan panopticon.

PREVIOUS PAGE: THE 6 TRAIN RUNS BETWEEN PELHAM BAY AND BROOKLYN BRIDGE. OPPOSITE: TRAIN CONDUCTOR RODNEY FLEMING ABOARD THE 6

The city flows through the subways and the subways flow through here. The vast open floor is divided into a series of departments – stations, communications, service delivery, car equipment, maintenance of way. It's a high-tech trading floor, moving New Yorkers in exchange for time. Certain employees monitor Instagram, X and TikTok for happenings and potential problems. Representatives of the city's police and fire departments are also stationed here. On this day, some 4.3 million people rode the subway – far more, for example, than traversed the entire country's aviation system. We rode it ourselves to get here, an R train from Jay Street in Brooklyn to 57th Street in Manhattan.

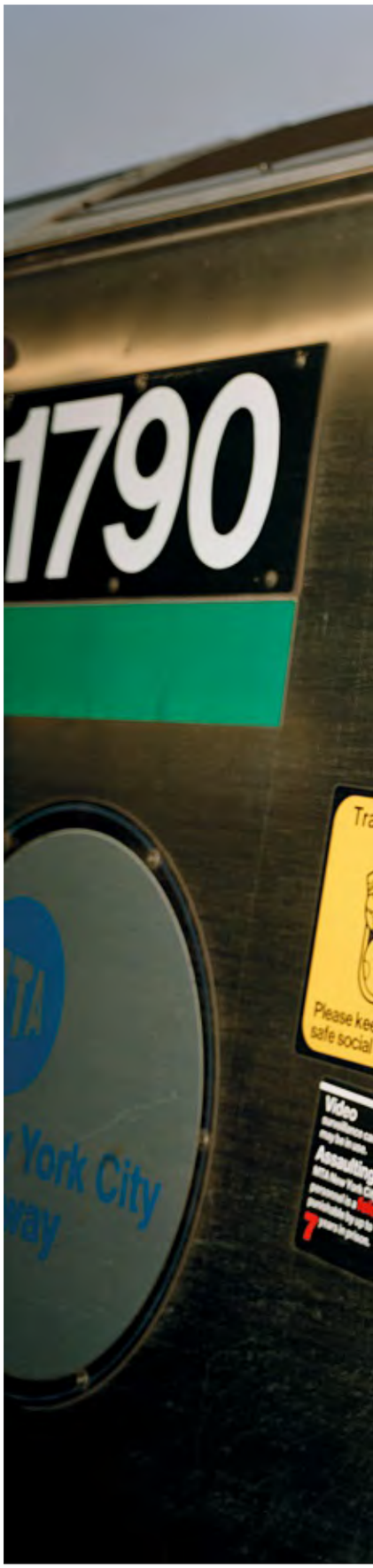
In one corner, a large television displayed spaghetti-like data visualisations called stringlines. Every line is a single train, traversing axes of space and time at slant angles. Certain savants who spend their working day here can pick apart stringlines at a glance, offering railway diagnoses and treatments.

On a nearby tabletop sat an intricate schematic of a third rail, a system that supplies electrical power to the subway and through which some 600 volts flow. As it happened, a track inspector had just emailed a photo to the combined-action team – a third-rail protection board was damaged at 231st Street, in the Bronx.

There are an estimated 600 computer monitors in this room, and seven of them sit on the desk of Shivaughn Frank, a customer advocate – three are square, four are rectangular and one of these is incredibly wide, a panoramic ultrasound of the veins of the city. She might as well have been launching rockets into space. Frank also commands one of three microphones, depending on whom she is addressing. If you hear a service announcement while riding a train – "Attention passengers, southbound 1 trains are delayed at 231st Street" – odds are it was uttered in this room.

"This is the nucleus of the subway," Frank told us. "Everything comes through here, you know? We're the ones that run the system."

Frank, like most here, is glued to the "six-wire", a squawk box that chirps and crackles in 93 locations throughout the




in Crew's Cab
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theatre, and in stations and offices beyond, delivering unfiltered audio dispatches of city life.

A trash can is on fire. A man is wandering around. Someone has fallen ill.

The six-wire is basically an analogue telephone, a relic from the 1950s. It's not the system's only antique. Some of the subway's signals, which control the flow of its trains, date to the presidency of Franklin D Roosevelt. These run analogue, "fixed-block" signalling, which controls trains by large, 1,000ft chunks of track. In other rooms, far less grand than this one, workers pull physical levers to shift subway tracks. The move to smoother digital "communications-based train control" has been slow and is incredibly expensive.

LaSalle tried to grab the attention of Maria Andujar, a desk superintendent near the prow of the room. Andujar is responsible for giving permission for many things, including to workers who need to go on to the tracks. "The first clue we get is..." said Andujar, then she hustled off. A call had come in from 14th Street. She granted the necessary permissions, and returned. "When it comes to the work that's being done, we stay away from the rush hour," she said. "Unless it's an emergency."

On the big board, trains were turning yellow at 231st Street. The third-rail team was being deployed.

Renee Haynes, a train dispatcher, sat nearby. Haynes has worked for the MTA for 19 years. She came straight from college. "I started as a conductor, like Ms Frank," Haynes said. "I was also a train operator, and then I went to dispatcher." Her mother urged her into this career – her mother was also a conductor. "I loved being a train operator," Haynes said.

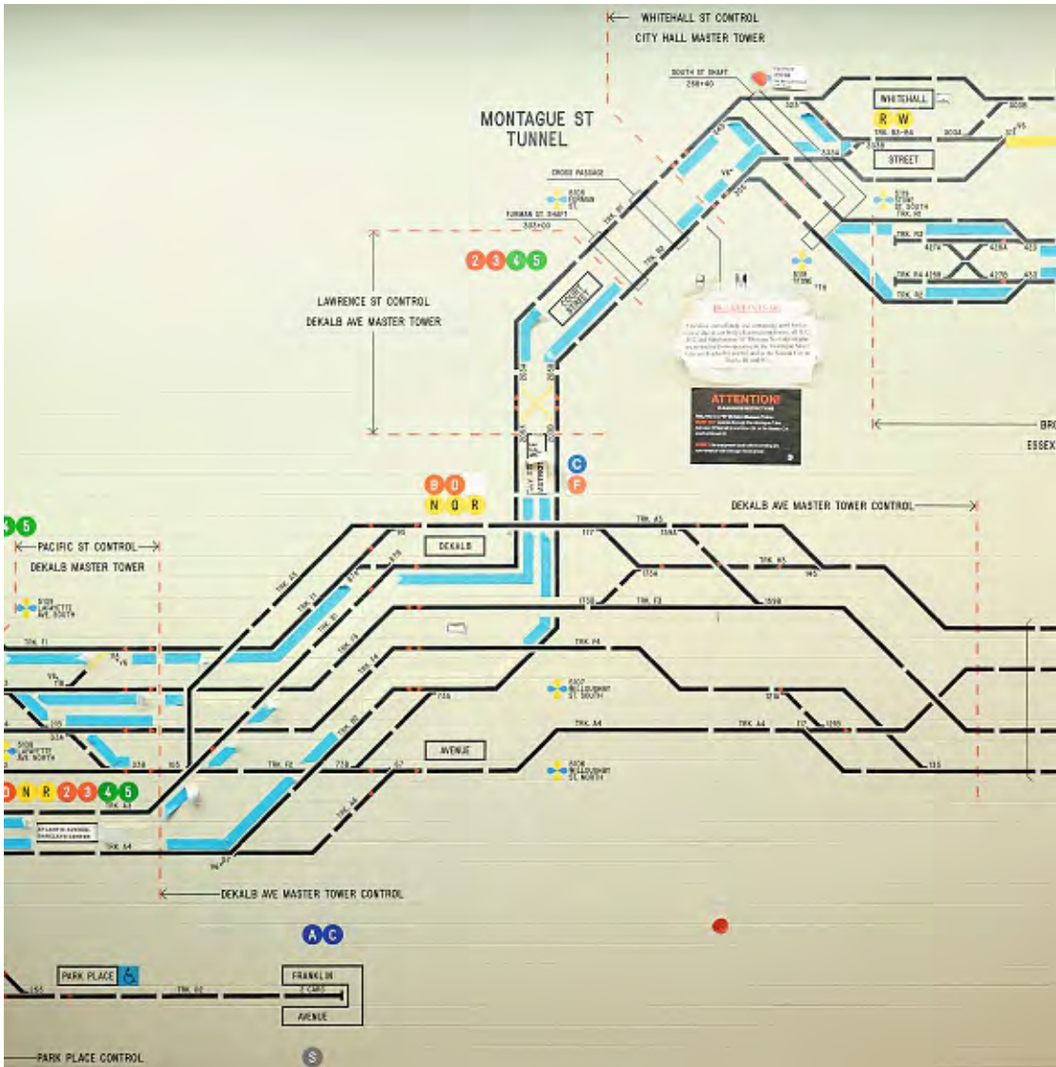
A warm formality coloured the chatter in the theatre. Frank is Ms Frank, Haynes is Ms Haynes. "We're family here," Haynes said. "We work together like a family." That work is fast-twitch and intense. "I used to play *Super Mario* a lot," Haynes said. Her colleagues recognise the controller-grip intensity. "You would see me locked in, and they'd be like, 'Are you playing your game?' I'm like, 'Yes, and I don't want to hit any turtles.'"

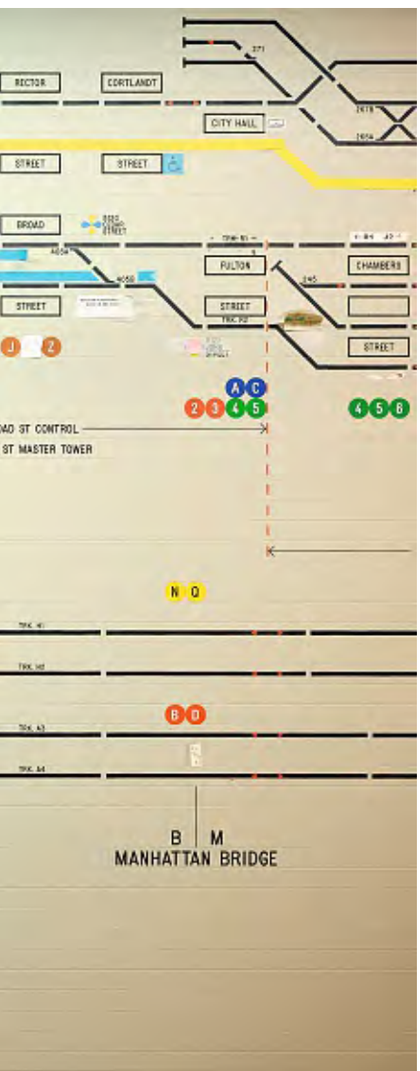
There are many turtles in this city. Another large screen listed that day's: track maintenance on the L, injured construction flagger at Coney Island ("lost footing, injured ankle"), track circuit failure at Queens Plaza, sick customer at 63rd Street and, now, the damaged third-rail board.

This room, like the city, is hectic on the quietest day, and we asked Frank about the most hectic time she could recall. She mentioned major storms, like Sandy and Ida, and their physical disruption. Later she wrote and shared a note, reflecting on the pandemic – the loss and the fear, but also "the extraordinary commitment of our entire team during this time and our overwhelming responsibility".

Like a human circulatory system, the subway both feeds its body and is affected by it. LaSalle, for example, when he worked a desk, kept local sports teams' schedules pinned nearby to better plan an evening's service. NY1, the news channel, played prominently in the theatre. "The monitors are there for a bunch of reasons," LaSalle said. "Anything going on in New York City."

Eric Adams, the mayor, popped up live on one of the monitors, giving a press conference in a T-shirt with an American flag and the words "In God We Trust". Signs behind him touted a drop in subway





crime, though he never got around to answering a reporter's question about his field trip with Duffy.

The trains turned green again at 231st Street. The room kept humming; the six-wire kept chattering.

"I care about the service, because I ride the train and I'm out there, right?" Haynes said. "I need to get home too."

The tour ended and we took a C train from 50th Street downtown to Spring Street, and walked to our office.

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TOLL

For all of the precision and ingenuity of those working in the control centre, they, and the rest of the conductors, engineers and operators within the MTA, are fighting an uphill battle against systems that are nearly a century old. Fixing and upgrading the subway requires enormous investment, but neglect would cost far more, and eventually threaten its existence. It's an iconic system, but its bills are coming due.

For example, finally ditching the Roosevelt-era signalling system will mean ditching its decaying machinery and mouldering repair manuals. Any regular subway rider is all too familiar with delays caused by "signal problems". The subway also perpetually pumps water out of its tunnels, which flood regularly during storms, grinding the system to a halt. Climate change will certainly exacerbate the issue in the coming years. Building resilience to these costly shutdowns requires a large, upfront investment.

"You might be a homeowner and you need to fix the pipes behind the sheetrock, and you spend a lot of money on it, and you'll never see it," Tiffany-Ann Taylor, vice-president for transportation at the Regional Plan Association, a non-profit organisation focused on the region's infrastructure and economy, told us.

FROM TOP: LIVE SCREENS MONITOR TRAIN LINES AT THE RAIL CONTROL CENTER; THE PHYSICAL BOARD USED BEFORE THE DIGITAL SCREENS

The MTA intends to fund many of these improvements through congestion pricing – a $9 toll on most cars entering the most congested chunk of Manhattan, below 60th Street. After years of debates, studies and delays, the charge went into effect on January 5. It will bring in hundreds of millions of dollars per year that, in addition to signal upgrades, will help fund an extension of a train line through East Harlem, improve the accessibility of the system and steel it against weather events.

Like prior congestion pricing in London, Stockholm and elsewhere, the policy faced initial and intense opposition from lawmakers, interest groups and members of the public. Its perceived unpopularity was enough that New York's Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul delayed its planned rollout in June until after the election in November.

But evidence of its benefits piles up by the day. MTA data shows fewer vehicles inside the zone – 13 per cent fewer in March. Fatalities of cyclists and pedestrians have dropped dramatically. Cars are moving much faster over bridges and tunnels. Bus speeds inside the zone are up. Fire department response times are down.

"The programme solves a collective-action problem: unless the government steps in to save everyone time, no one saves time," said Pearlstein of the Riders Alliance. "Time is our most precious resource, they're not making any more of it, and we shouldn't be devoting any more than necessary to our commutes."

Not everyone is convinced. In a February letter, Duffy called congestion pricing "a slap in the face to working-class Americans and small-business owners". This echoed arguments from regional opponents like Phil Murphy, the Democratic governor of neighbouring New Jersey. (Murphy stood next to Duffy for the "shithole" comment, also wearing a hard-hat.) The New Jersey governor, who represents many suburban commuters, has criticised the programme as not having been "adequately studied" – despite a four-year, 4,000-page environmental review. And, like Duffy, he called it "a disaster for working- and middle-class New Jersey commuters". Murphy has also voiced concern about traffic spilling into communities surrounding the zone – though preliminary analyses dispute this. "Some of [the concerns] are legitimate, in my opinion, and some of them are just political," Taylor said.

An analysis from the New York City Economic Development Corporation found 3 per cent more visitors to the zone this March, relative to last year. This uptick in foot traffic, despite the new tolls, isn't surprising – travelling into Manhattan by car has never been particularly popular or affordable. Just 11 per cent of commuters into the central business district travelled by car, according to the MTA, and even fewer among the working and middle class.

Nevertheless, Murphy remains a fierce opponent. A lawsuit challenging the tolls, brought by the governor and the state of New Jersey two years ago, persists. And in January, mere hours after Trump was inaugurated, Murphy sent a letter to the president and Duffy, requesting that they give the programme "the close look it deserved".

For a few weeks, the administration was busy issuing a series of turbulent executive orders regarding trade, immigration, defence, foreign aid and federal spending. Then, on February 19, Duffy sent a five-page letter to Governor Hochul, notifying her that the Department of Transportation had "terminated approval" for the congestion pricing programme and offering to "discuss the orderly cessation of toll operations".

The message from Duffy's boss was more direct. "CONGESTION PRICING IS DEAD," Trump posted on social media. "Manhattan, and all of New York, is SAVED. LONG LIVE THE KING!"

That same day, the MTA sued Duffy and his department in federal court in New York.

4

PASSENGERS

In mid-April, we spent an entire day riding the subway – circulating. We began on a Q train in Downtown Brooklyn, where Duffy had begun. Beneath a DeKalb Avenue sign, someone had scribbled "Elon Sucks".

Nineteen people stood on the DeKalb platform. Many poked at their phones. An orthodox Jewish man took a selfie with his wife on an iPad. We all boarded an R46 model car, the fleet with the famous orange and yellow seats, produced in the mid-1970s, which is being phased out.

There were 44 people onboard. Again many poked at their phones, and a few napped. One did her make-up. Two had a conversation across a dog inside of a pair of overalls. We'd overhear conversations in four other languages: Italian, Mandarin, Spanish and Tagalog. Four men wore work boots, and one rested on his hard-hat.

The Q emerged into sunlight and crossed the Manhattan Bridge into Manhattan, with sightlines to the city's postcard icons – the Brooklyn Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building.

Sliding back underground, we took a sharp right turn, passing by the original City Hall station, where names of the subway system's financiers and engineers are immortalised on plaques. The names of the labourers who dug the tunnels in gruelling

conditions – many of them Irish and Italian immigrants – remain largely unknown. We moved under Wall Street, Soho, the Village and Midtown, before turning beneath Central Park, and a sharp left to race up the Upper East Side.

As we passed through Manhattan, we picked up many passengers. A man in a suit, with sunglasses and a sunburn, got off at Times Square. A girl used her coat as a makeshift blanket and slept against her mother's shoulder. A man dragged three large plastic bins behind him, full of crutches. The crowded train emptied out as we neared the current end of the line, in upper Manhattan. A man sat next to his partner reading a magazine. She read a newspaper, then split off a section and they traded.

Twenty-three people disembarked with us at the last stop in East Harlem, which opened in 2017. An extension of this line, the Second Avenue Subway, is under way, funded in part by congestion pricing. The line has been discussed for a century; ground was first broken in 1972. If it were complete, perhaps these people would have taken this train farther. Instead they left the station at 96th Street, past its hospital and handball courts, its vendors selling stuffed animals and herbs, its hot-dog cart and scaffolding.

"The subway, at face value, is a way to convey people from point A to point B," Jodi Shapiro, curator of the New York Transit Museum, told us. "But on a larger scale – a social scale, intellectual scale, cultural scale – it is what makes New York what it is today." (The museum is housed in a decommissioned subway station, and we spoke to Shapiro inside a subway car from 1938.)

In the late 19th century, the city was overcrowded and strained. A deadly equine flu in 1872 exposed the vulnerability of its largely horse-drawn transit system. The Great Blizzard of 1888 trapped people in the city's exposed railcars. A new underground system, shielded from the elements and with much more capacity than the horse-buses and streetcars, would provide a means for the city to expand.

The growth of the city was guided by the paths of these new subway lines, and their direction was guided by something much older than 19th-century New Yorkers: geology. Underneath Manhattan was bedrock far more inconsistent, and far less suitable for tunnel-boring, than the London Clay that had been cut through decades earlier. Moving through that schist and marble was gruelling work that required incredible innovation. Rather than tunnel through, constructors would dig down from the street and build a roof later – cut and cover. This technique is still in use today, including in new construction in East Harlem.

We retraced our steps and headed west to Hudson Yards, the new terminus of the 7 train. We ducked back underground; eastbound again. The 7 is one of the only lines equipped with modern signals, and therefore has the best on-time record.

Numbered trains, once operated by the Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT), are now known as the A Division. Lettered trains, once operated by the Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit Corporation and the Independent Subway System, are known as the B Division. The divisions carry different rolling stock; numbered trains are about a foot narrower than lettered trains. They were unified on paper by the city in 1940. They are unified physically on a platform at Queensboro Plaza, with the convergence of the 7, N and W. We stopped here to look around. "The reason why Queens is the way it is is because they built the Flushing line out there," Shapiro said. She lives in a neighbourhood made possible by the line. "There were steam railroads out there before, but nothing as efficient and fast as the IRT."

The narrow 7 train rumbled above Sunnyside, Woodside, Jackson Heights and Corona. We finally departed at Flushing-Main Street, the end of this line. This is Flushing's Chinatown, home to one the largest Chinese populations in the US. We refuelled with noodles and dumplings.

When the subway was being built, underground was a strange and fearsome place to New Yorkers – the site of mining and danger. And then the system opened. "Everyone starts getting excited and kind of scared about what's going to happen, like, 'What's down there?'" Shapiro said. "People go underground and they come back up and they're changed dramatically."

5

TSUNAMI

The MTA's lawsuit asserts Trump tried to kill congestion pricing for "blatantly political reasons", with motivations "entirely based on political considerations", in order to "achieve political objectives". But other than references to Trump's claim that congestion pricing is a "business killer" – which data shows it is not – the lawsuit makes little guess as to what exactly these political reasons are. And Lieber, the MTA chair, said only that he'd "let the document speak for itself".

"There's this widespread suspicion about everyone who rides the subway. 'What's up with them? What's wrong with them? They're not like normal people,'" said Pearlstein.

A month after the lawsuit was filed, Duffy sent a new letter, this one making fresh demands about transit safety and setting a deadline in April. When that April deadline came and went, a third letter arrived, with a new May deadline and a new set of demands, which the governor rejected within hours. The pattern of vague, shifting and contradictory demands is one now familiar to elite universities, white-shoe law firms and major trade partners. "We are a footnote in this bigger tsunami of change," Lieber told us. "Obviously that doesn't minimise it for New York, but I look at it in that context."

In a late-April memo, unintentionally made public, government lawyers representing Duffy and the Department of Transportation admitted that their case to end congestion pricing was "exceedingly likely" to fail. The department quickly announced that it would replace those lawyers.

The debate over congestion pricing is a policy fight, and a cultural one. Congestion pricing involves a number of long-running ideas on the American right: that public transit comes at the expense of drivers, efforts to reduce emissions at the expense of personal freedoms and shared transit at the expense of safety.

"There is a deeply selfish and cynical strain in American politics, and in New York politics," Pearlstein said, "even though in New York we have disproven a lot of the rationales for selfishness and cynicism by having a massive amount of common infrastructure that we all depend on, from public transit to public housing to public universities."

Duffy, a resident of New Jersey, has called the programme "elitist" for ploughing the tolls into the transit system, largely centring the concerns of drivers. "If I'm a taxpayer, I'm like, 'I already paid for the street, why am I paying an additional toll to the taxes I already paid?'" he told CBS News. But most New York City households own zero cars, and nearly twice as many New Yorkers commute on public transit than in cars, according to census data.

And the MTA, like nearly every other urban transit system, runs at a deficit – something that Trump famously detests in all its guises. The government invests in its construction, maintenance and operation because of the immense benefit it provides to people and businesses. But to this

TRAIN DISPATCHER RENEE HAYNES WORKS ALONGSIDE A COLLEAGUE AT THE RAIL CONTROL CENTER

‘The subway, at face value, is a way to convey people from point A to point B. But on a larger scale – a social scale, intellectual scale, cultural scale – it is what makes New York what it is today’

administration, spending more than you receive is evidence of incompetence.

Trump grew up in Queens, but he has long had a strained relationship with New York. It may have a tower bearing his name, but it does not take him seriously. “What Trump knows is that he can dominate America but not Manhattan,” writes the journalist Ross Barkan. “Trump is now in Florida because they will have him there.” In 2017, Trump was asked by The New York Times when he’d last ridden the subway. “It’s been a long time,” he said. “It’s been a long time.”

6

CONDUCTOR

A few days after Flushing, well before dawn, we travelled to Pelham Bay Park station, the terminus of the 6 train, on the eastern edge of the Bronx. This station, which opened in 1920, is elevated, and on that day was suspended in a cool, grey morning.

A string of ramshackle offices lined the platforms. In a locker room next to the train dispatcher office, we met Rodney Fleming, a conductor who was beginning his day. Fleming began his transit career in 2003 as a station cleaner, and has conducted since 2011. He wore a handsome dark-blue suit, keys and walkie-talkie at the ready, safety glasses perched on his head.

That day he’d be conducting the R62, a workhorse from the 1980s that is his favourite model. He doesn’t much care for the brand-new rolling stock; everything is too automated. His favourite service is the 6 – he grew up not far from here, in Co-op City, and lives in Pelham Bay.

We explained that his train was the last stop on our exploration, and that we’d talked to the chair and hung out in the Rail Control Center. “They are the heart, they pump the system out, and we are the eyes and ears,” Fleming said.

A few minutes before the hour, Fleming climbed aboard his 7.02am train, and into a tight compartment, phone-booth sized, at its centre – his office. A pair of “zone lights” and two pairs of “open” and “close” buttons will occupy most of his working day, as he operates the doors at each of the 38 stops on this service. With the cab’s window down, inquisitive passengers on platforms will occupy him too.

7.01am. Showtime. “Good morning, good morning to all my beautiful people on this train. On behalf of the train crew, welcome aboard. This is your 7.02, the 7.02 Pelham Bay to Brooklyn Bridge. The next stop on this train is Buhre Avenue. Once again, good morning and welcome aboard your 7.02.” Talking to people is Fleming’s favourite part of the job and he’s good at it. He cares especially for his regular customers. “This large system can be very confusing,” he said. “Helping people through the system, I love doing it.”

A schoolteacher named Karimah Moreland, a Fleming regular, rose from her seat and pulled us aside. “Every morning he tells us to have a beautiful, wonderful day,” she said. “It makes us feel good.”

Fleming closed the doors. His train gathered speed and rounded a gentle corner into the morning haze, into the city. FT

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