

WHAT SUBWAY RIDERS NEED FROM CITY LEADERS AFTER IDA



Betsy Plum [@betsyplum](#)
Executive Director, Riders Alliance

As Stacey Abrams says, “We have to start thinking about transportation as a critical part of emergency management, in a way that we don’t as a nation right now.”

Storm Ida stopped New York’s subway in its tracks, flooding stations and stranding riders across the city. Extreme rainfall now outpaces Sandy-like tidal surges as the biggest weather-related threat to public transit.

City leaders must better leverage public space, particularly streets, to protect the subway from floods. Streets are our largest shared asset, 27% of the City’s land area. Today streets are largely given over to drivers to congest, pollute, and emit carbon.

Instead of slouching toward a future mired in gridlock, we need to make three key improvements: rapidly redesign our streets as sponges for stormwater, secure containers on streets for trash, and allow streets to function as arteries for a fast, reliable bus network to complement and supplement subway service.

First, the City must accelerate installation of green infrastructure to complement sewer drains. Tree pits, bioswales, and other permeable surfaces are no longer just about improved water quality; they’re essential to transit reliability. The more water that streets

soak up, the less water descends into the subway. In neighborhoods where runoff floods tunnels, DOT should turn asphalt streets into green sponges.

Siting and maintenance of green infrastructure have proven challenging to the City’s Department of Environmental Protection. But aided by lanes of asphalt and space at intersections and expert maintenance teams from the Parks Department, there’s no reason that public space cannot quickly become much more permeable and absorbent during storms.

Properly constructed and stewarded, green infrastructure affords enormous additional benefits. It cools neighborhoods, lessening the deadly, inequitable urban heat island effect. Bioswale soil and plantings both filter pollutants from air and water and beautify communities starved of green space. Scaling up the Green Streets program will ensure adequate public investment in green infrastructure projects, alleviating burdens on local communities.

Second, the City needs to implement policies that let all of us clean up our act. Walls of trash stacked on sidewalks before garbage collection all too easily become clogged sewer drains and worsen subway flooding during heavy rains. Businesses are required to contain

their waste. Residential buildings should do the same. Both should use containers in the street, leaving sidewalks clear, safe, elevated corridors for every neighborhood.

“SECURING TRASH AGAINST INFILTRATION BY RODENTS, RACCOONS, AND RAIN WILL MAKE OUR TRANSIT SYSTEM MORE RESILIENT IN THE FACE OF EXTREME WEATHER”

Securing trash against infiltration by rodents, raccoons, and rain will make our transit system more resilient in the face of extreme weather. It will also improve the liveability of our neighborhoods, cut down on litter, and help homeowners avoid sanitation tickets. All it requires is a portion of our scarce street space, which doesn't necessarily mean less parking; we can often narrow or eliminate travel lanes instead.

Third, as the MTA upgrades infrastructure like the power backup that failed three days before Ida and weather-proof more of its stations and tracks, the City should also accelerate its initiatives to improve bus service. The more redundancy the bus system can provide during subway outages and maintenance, the more reliably transit riders will be able to get home and reach other essential destinations no matter the weather. When our entire subway system went out of service during Ida, 90% of buses kept running.

Bettering buses means dedicating lanes and implementing signal priority at intersections so riders can spend less time in slow traffic and at red lights. The Streets Master Plan, now in development at the Department of Transportation, should prioritize new busways and bus lanes on heavy ridership routes and lines that help alleviate pressure on the subway

system.

Our bus network will increasingly need to do double duty, providing connectivity to a subway that doesn't serve every neighborhood while also tracing many of the same central arteries where subways usually run. With more priority on streets, better buses will help get New Yorkers out of cars and also improve transit service for the millions already reliant on it.

The transit system that the majority of us depend on faces serious external threats and needs support from City officials. The answers, which would be both commute- and life-saving, are right there on our streets.