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New York City's planning outran its adaptation

Julia Pyper, E&E reporter

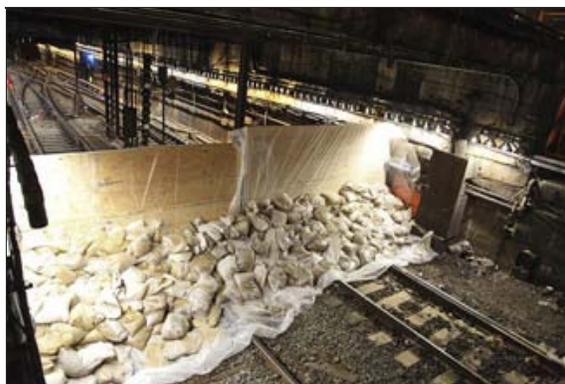
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Large sections of New York City's subway system remain waterlogged or destroyed in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, which is raising questions on how to protect East Coast and other transportation networks from severe weather events in the future.

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One of the major lessons learned from the storm "is the recognition that climate change is a reality; extreme weather is a reality; it is a reality that we are vulnerable," said New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D) in a press conference yesterday.

The governor called for a "fundamental rethinking of our built environment" to ensure the city is more prepared to deal with extreme weather events like Sandy in the future.



Better late than never? New York subway workers put a dam of plastic sheets, plywood and sandbags across the tracks in an attempt to halt underground flooding at Lenox Terminal at 148th Street. Photo courtesy of the New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

"Protecting this state from coastal flooding is a massive, massive undertaking. But it's a conversation I think is overdue," Cuomo said.

Researchers, however, have been warning of the damage New York City would sustain in the event of severe flooding and sea-level rise for years. A 2009 study by Stony Brook University's Storm Surge Research Group, for instance, estimated that building a barrier network to protect New York City and the surrounding area from storm surges would cost at least \$10 billion.

"At the end of the day, I wouldn't be surprised if fixing the city up from this catastrophe costs more than that easily," said Malcolm Bowman, an oceanography professor at Stony Brook and

author of the report. "And it could happen again in the next year."

New York has been a leader in studying the impacts of flooding and sea-level rise and has already taken some initial precautions. In response to a fierce storm during the summer of 2007, the city began raising subway entrances and ventilation grates to stop runoff from entering the tunnels. But it has been slow to make long-term preventive measures.

Last year, David Bragdon, former New York City sustainability chief, told the New York's City Council that the city government was looking at a number of "structural and non-structural" coastal protection strategies. But he did not make mention of any major engineering solutions, such as storm surge barriers.

Asked whether Hurricane Sandy had triggered action to take on future adaptation measures, a spokesperson with the mayor's office said in an interview that, for the moment, the city is focused on "dealing with the current situation."

Turning to a 'bus bridge'

After suffering what New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) Chairman Joseph Lhota called "a disaster as devastating as it has ever faced in its history," the New York transit system is starting to reopen.

According to the MTA, the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North Railroad started offering select service yesterday and the subway system will start to offer limited service on several routes today, supplemented by a shuttle bus where necessary.

Hurricane Sandy caused an immense amount of damage to New York's metropolitan area, but the damage would have likely been worse if city managers hadn't pre-emptively shut down the subway, blocked grates and built makeshift dams to hold back water in vulnerable stations.

In the aftermath, with all subway lines still closed, Mayor Michael Bloomberg gave orders to allow yellow cabs to pick up multiple passengers. "We're encouraging this ride sharing," Bloomberg said at a press conference Tuesday.

To help ease traffic, which is expected to worsen as more and more people return to work, Gov. Cuomo said there would be a "bus bridge" running express service between Brooklyn and Manhattan.

These types of temporary measures the city has put in place in the wake of the storm are practices that could reduce congestion and greenhouse gas emissions on a daily basis in future, said Michael Kodransky, global research manager at the New York-based Institute for Transportation and Development Policy.

"The city tried to get congestion pricing to pass, and for political reasons, it didn't work. Now here's an opportunity to try other strategies and still mitigate greenhouse gases from the transport sector," he said. "I think it's providing an interesting testing ground."

Who will make the needed investments?

The problem with implementing transportation-related adaptation or mitigation strategies in New York, or elsewhere, is that there are not enough resources to do so, even if there is enough will, said Joshua Schank, president and CEO of the Eno Center for Transportation in Washington, D.C.

"I think it's harder and harder to ignore the reality that we need to make some upfront investments now in order to avoid paying more later," Schank said. "But I still think it's a hard sell to people. When the storm recedes and things get back to normal, asking people to pay more is going to be very different than recognizing the need [to act]."

Cuomo said this week that he expects the federal government to pick up most of the tab for rebuilding a "stronger and better" New York City.

But the federal government is facing a massive deficit and earlier this year could only find enough money to pass a two-year surface transportation bill, so it may not be in the best position to help out, said Schank. Further, Congress has been largely silent on the climate issue.

"The federal government has been, for the most part, denying the existence of climate change, and that has unfortunately extended to transportation funding and transportation planning processes, which do

not account for adaptation to climate change," Schank said.

"And that is part of why we saw the devastation that we saw today, because we haven't been acknowledging it and, therefore, we haven't planned to adapt to it or made changes to reduce emissions."

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