

TRANSIT

It's Not Easy Being Andy Byford When Your Job Is to Save the NYC Subway

Under his watch, subway service has improved and he is determined not to let Gov. Cuomo's unexpected plan for L train repairs 'throw us off course'



Andy Byford, president of the New York City Transit Authority, speaks with a transit employee on the 42nd Street subway platform. PHOTO: PETER FOLEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Paul Berger

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New York City's subway chief, Andy Byford, never misses the chance to introduce himself to a transit employee, nor pick up litter he spots at stations.

On a recent morning, he took a train to his lower Manhattan office, posing for a photo with a station cleaner and chatting with two conductors along the way. At one point, he picked up a plastic bag lying on the floor of a station and placed it in a trash can.

"I draw the line at hankies," he said.

Jan. 16 will mark Mr. Byford's first anniversary as president of New York City Transit, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority agency in charge of the subway and buses. New York Gov.

Andrew Cuomo hired him to oversee a nearly herculean task: turning around the subway system, which is outdated and unreliable after years of underfunding.



Under Andy Byford's watch, MTA data show that subway service has improved, and he has drawn praise for a customer-focused approach. PHOTO: PETER FOLEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Byford has drawn praise for a customer-friendly approach that focuses on clean stations and being responsive to riders and his workforce. Under his watch, MTA data show that subway service has improved. Still, almost one in three trains are delayed each weekday.

The start of 2019 was supposed to be the moment when Mr. Byford launched his final push to secure tens of billions of dollars in state and city funding to modernize the subway. But Mr. Cuomo recently provided a giant distraction by swooping in at the last minute and ripping up longstanding plans to shut down a busy subway tunnel for repair.

“It has added a huge complexity,” Mr. Byford said. “But I am determined not to throw us off course.”

Mr. Byford oversees an agency of 50,000 employees who help to carry more than 7 million daily riders. He must also stay attuned to a governor who is heavily invested in the region's infrastructure. Mr. Cuomo has criticized the MTA for being bureaucratic and lacking innovation.

On Jan. 3, Mr. Cuomo surprised New Yorkers by announcing an alternative to the L train tunnel shutdown that was planned for April.

The MTA spent almost three years planning a repair of the tunnel linking Brooklyn and Manhattan, which carries 225,000 daily riders. Agency engineers said the 15-month closure was needed to repair damage caused by flooding from superstorm Sandy.

Mr. Cuomo's alternative plan, suggested by university engineers working pro bono, only required



Andy Byford said of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's unexpected decision to scrap an L train tunnel shutdown planned for April: 'It has added a huge complexity. But I am determined not to throw us off course.' PHOTO: PETER FOLEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

closures on nights and weekends.

Some former MTA officials worry that Mr. Cuomo's solution is a Band-Aid and unsafe.

Mr. Byford said he welcomes the plan but added he will hire independent engineers to vet it before he proceeds.

"If I were ordered to do something unsafe, I would refuse," Mr. Byford said. "I came into this job determined to speak truth to power and to never prejudice my principle."

After this article was published online on Jan. 12, MTA Acting Chairman Fernando Ferrer said that he would oversee the hiring of a consultant to review all aspects of the plan, including safety. Mr. Byford said that as long as the consultant is independent he would accept that proposal.

Mr. Byford, who is 53 years old, was raised in the southwest of England. His transit career began almost 30 years ago as a station foreman on the London Underground. Since then, he has held senior transit posts in the U.K., Sydney and Toronto.

Mr. Cuomo hired Mr. Byford in the fall of 2017, a year in which a series of rush-hour subway disruptions, a derailment and rising commuter frustration caused the governor to declare a state of emergency at the MTA.

Mr. Byford says the past year has been the busiest of his life. He has built a new executive team focused on operations, station accessibility and customer communications. He took an existing \$800 million subway rescue plan to stabilize service and complemented it with a campaign to tighten train service. By the end of 2018, the subway recorded its lowest delay statistics in years.

John Raskin, executive director of advocacy group Riders Alliance, said Mr. Byford's biggest achievements have been to restore credibility in MTA leadership and to compile a comprehensive plan to restore service and reliability.



Andy Byford, right, oversees an agency of 50,000 employees who help to carry more than 7 million daily riders. PHOTO: PETER FOLEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The plan, which is expected to cost about \$40 billion over the next decade, includes new signal technology that will allow New York City Transit to run more frequent train service, reducing overcrowding.

But the agency faces significant financial troubles. Fare revenues from the subway and buses are falling as riders eschew mass transit, part of a nationwide trend.

Mr. Byford expects to spend the coming months lobbying legislators for more money, a pitch he will deliver in small groups and at public hearings. His hope is that the state budget, due this spring, will include a new funding stream for the MTA.

Legislators are expected to consider congestion pricing for parts of Manhattan, which could deliver more than \$1 billion annually to the MTA.

But Mr. Byford must make his case to lawmakers and the public while scrambling to alter a complex \$1 billion subway tunnel renovation and repair New York City Transit's damaged reputation.

"I am not going to hide in my office," he said.

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