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New York City Dollar Vans

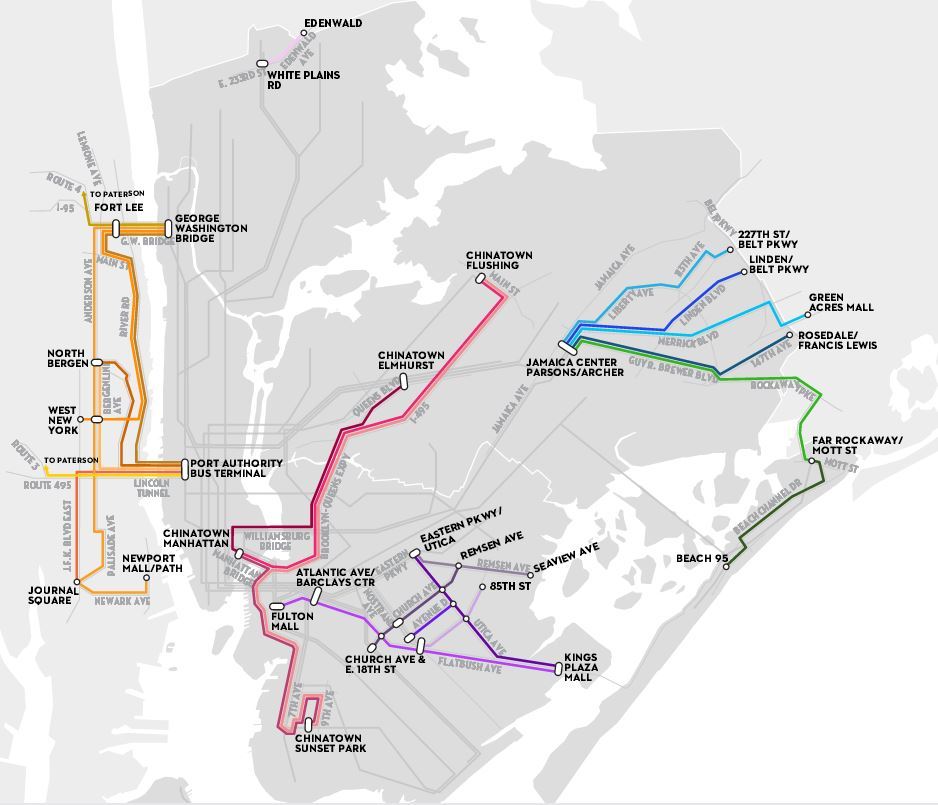
New York City has an extensive public transportation network – subways, buses, trains, ferries, bikeshare, among others. But New York is a large city and despite having so much transit infrastructure, public transit doesn’t provide adequet service to all parts of the city. That’s where cars, taxis etc. come in. As well as an informal transit system halfway between taxis and buses known as dollar vans, or jitneys, comes in.

Public transit is the lifeblood of New York City. Unlike most of the United States where people use personal automobiles, a majority of New Yorkers rely on public transportation to get around. On April 1st, 1980, for only the second time in New York’s history[[1]](#footnote-1), the Transport Workers Union went on strike, effectively shutting down all the subways and buses in the city. The strike lasted 11 days and during that time mandatory carpooling was put into effect, hundreds of thousands of people took to walking and biking to work.

It’s estimated that the strike cost workers and companies up to $100 million a day, and $3 million a day for the city. But not everyone fared so poorly. Prices for gas, taxis and hotels soared. Residents of Manhattan rented out their couches to people who didn’t want to commute back to work each day. The population of Manhattan is said to have increased by half a million people during the strike from people staying in the city.

Among the entrepreneurs were those who saw an opportunity to provide alternate transportation by using their own cars to pick people up and drive them to their destinations, charging a dollar for the trip. But even after the strike ended, these drivers continued to find demand for their services across the city.

Today there are a number of routes throughout the city that are frequented by these vans. They largely serve locations where the formal transit infrastructure is lacking and immigrant communities. This is an unofficial transportation system with varying degrees of legitimacy – some being completely unregulated and others having gentleman’s agreements with city agencies to allow their activities, even if not strictly legal. Information spreads throughout a community by word of mouth – there are no official timetables or maps; no uniform branding to help you recognize the vans; no standard fare. The following map was compiled by hand by Aaron Reiss by riding the vans and documenting their routes:



There are several main sets of dollar van routes in New York City: Chinatown, Flatbush, Eastern Queens and New Jersey.

The Chinatown vans provide service between the different Chinatowns of the city – Manhattan Chinatown, Sunset Park Chinatown, Elmhurst Chinatown and Flushing Chinatown. This is a case where there is large demand specifically between the endpoints of the routes. Despite being physically apart, there are a lot of ties between the Chinese community across the four Chinatowns. All of these places are served by Subways, so traveling between them is possible without the van service. But while possible, it is not that convenient due to the time it takes or number of transfers necessary. The vans generally make one, or few stops at the origin, and then run nonstop to the destination where they will make stops as requested – not necessarily precisely at a passenger’s destination, but they can get dropped off as close to their destination as possible along a predefined route. Another aspect of convenience is frequency of service. The vans generally run every few minutes, even out of rush hours. One passenger stated he took the subway into Manhattan in the morning because during rush hour the subway runs frequently. Yet he took the Chinatown van home to Sunset Park because during the midday train service is infrequent while the vans maintain frequent service[[2]](#footnote-2). Another aspect is that vans provide a familiar environment, language and community. New York City’s transit system can be daunting to anyone new to the city, let alone newcomers who don’t speak English.



1 A Sunset Park Chinatown dollar van waiting to depart Manhattan.



One more small route exists in The Bronx, going from a Subway station at East 233rd Street along East 233rd and then up Edenwald Avenue – just about a mile long in total. This route, like dollar vans as a whole, arose to replace the disappearance of official transit options. When the MTA shut down a bus along that route in 1984, two locals started driving minibuses along the former bus route. At its peak, about 15 vans served the route, but today it’s only five vans.

There are now attempts to bring this system out of the shadows and legitimatize it.

Despite being called “dollar vans” they no longer cost a dollar – usually $2-2.75 – and despite the emphasis on “dollar” the price is not often the primary consideration for the passengers. Although when you can’t take the van to your final destination, cost may become a bigger factor. If you take a bus you can then transfer to the subway. But if you take a dollar van for the first leg, your commute can end up being twice as much.

The vans have added flexibility that buses do not. For an extra fee (25 cents to a dollar) They will often go slightly off their route to drop passengers off at their final destination. This provides an added benefit for many of their passengers such as the elderly. At the same time, diverting off the route and adding extra time could have negative domino effects on later service and doesn’t seem like it would be suitable if the system were scaled up.

Dollar vans are unique in that they are not centrally planned like subways or buses.

Bibliography

1. Reiss, Aaron. "New York's Shadow Transit." The New Yorker. Web. 27 Feb. 2016.
2. Feinman, Mark S. "The New York Transit Authority in the 1980s." Www.nycsubway.org. Web. 27 Feb. 2016.
3. Chan, Sewell. "25 Years Ago, Subways and Buses Stopped Running." New York Times. 4 Apr. 2005. Web. 27 Feb. 2016.

1. And only strike until the 2005 transit strike during which this author happily enjoyed a several day vacation from school. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Based on a conversation the author had with a fellow passenger while riding the Manhattan Chinatown to Sunset Park van. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)