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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 modes. But New York is a large and diverse city and despite having so much infrastructure, public transit doesn’t meet the needs of all New Yorkers, evident by the number of private cars and taxis on our streets. Another mode that helps fill this transportation gap is known as “dollar vans.” Dollar van are an informal public transit system hallway between a taxi and a bus. They are privately owned vehicles which offer shared rides along somewhat fixed routes, mostly catering to immigrant communities or areas with poor alternative transit options.

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 and threatening to grind the city to a halt. The strike lasted 11 days and during that time mandatory carpooling was put into effect, and 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.

There have been attempts to regulate the dollar van industry over the years and in 2014 The Taxi and Limousine Commission started to license dollar vans, but under the designation of “commuter vans.” This allows them to offer pre-arranged services in designated areas. Pre-arranged means that they can’t just pick people up off the street, either at specific “stops” or from a street hail. But under these rules the dollar vans wouldn’t be able to operate as intended and thus none of them follow these requirements. And while they are technically operating illegally, the NYPD rarely enforces these laws, instead allowing to dollar vans to continue to operate as they are as long as they follow rules such as staying out of bus stops and not driving recklessly.

Information spreads throughout a community by word of mouth – there are no official websites, timetables or maps; no uniform branding to help you recognize the vans; no standard fare. Image 1 shows a map that was hand-compiled by Aaron Reiss in 2014 by riding the vans and documenting their routes, although it is incomplete and now out of date. There are several main sets of dollar van routes in New York City: Chinatown, Flatbush, Eastern Queens, each with their own reasons for existing.

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.

In Eastern Queens a whole number of dollar van lines connect Jamaica Center, the terminus of a number of subway lines, to the rest of Queens, Rockaway and further into Long Island. In some cases, the vans provide alternative transportation to buses and in others they go where no buses run. Similar to the Chinatown vans, the Queens vans are largely licensed by the TLC and have “official” stops that they are able to operate from.

The Flatbush vans the odd ones out, being largely unlicensed and having frequent problems with the police. They are run by and serve the Caribbean populations in central, southern and eastern Brooklyn. Their main routes are in areas which lack Subway access – along Flatbush Avenue to Downtown Brooklyn, up Utica Avenue to the 2 and 5 subways at Eastern Parkway, and east/west between these two streets. These vans are in direct competition with official bus lines, and often the drivers will pick up passengers from bus stops. But dollar vans are often much more frequent than the buses and commuters might just go with whichever comes first, even at the cost of a free transfer. Jitneys are also a familiar mode of transportation to many recent immigrants from the Caribbean.

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.

In all cases, these dollar vans popped up in places where the official transit options were not meeting the needs of the communities. Whether it be no subways or buses, or inadequate service.

This is timely, because there is currently legislation in city council which will formalize some of the ways dollar vans are currently operating.

This is timely because there are now attempts to bring this system out of the shadows and legitimatize it. There are currently several bills under discussion in the New York City Council regarding dollar vans. Most importantly, there is a bill to remove the pre-arrangement and passenger manifest requirements, which would allow the vans to legally operate as intended, and as they currently do anyway. Along with that, dollar van applications would designate specific stops to make sure they have places where they can stop and not cause danger or traffic. The applications would also place the burden of demonstrating need for the dollar van service in the proposed areas. Finally, there would be increased penalties for illegal dollar vans or dollar vans which don’t follow the new rules.

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. They grew organically to meet demand – real demand, not perceived of future demand. And as opposed to public transit, which is heavily subsidized, dollar vans must be profitable or they wouldn’t be able to stay in business. Can we learn from this organic growth and apply lessons to our formal, planned transit infrastructure?

Nairobi, for instance, is a city which until recently was completely depended on informal transit, known there as matatus. Nairobi started to regulate the matatus for reasons common to many other cites, such as safety. After mapping the matatu routes, the resulting map looks uncannily like it could have all been planned:

In Mexico City, demand for peseros was used to inform the creation of new bus and routes.

Along Flatbush the dollar vans cannibalize bus business. Dollar vans can only seemingly operate along highly trafficked routes, the same places that the buses generally do fine business. But the MTA isn’t just a business. Public transportation is a social good. The midnight buses on the outskirts of Queens where per-trip subsidies are high are paid for by fares along well-trafficked lines. The dollar vans could very well be helping those with poor transit options at the expense of hurting those with even worse options.

The way dollar vans operate, even ones that are licensed by the TLC, is not strictly legal. Dollar vans are designated as commuter vans which means that all service must be prearranged and drivers need to keep passenger manifests. This means that they aren’t legally allowed to pick people up off the street, either at a “designated” stop or by hails. But, generally the police turn a blind eye to dollar van activities as long as they follow certain guidelines such as driving safely or not picking up passengers from bus stops. For example, in Sunset Park Chinatown, the police won’t harass the drivers as long as they keep to 7th and 9th Avenues, where there is lighter traffic and no bus routes. But if they were to go onto 8th Avenue the police will ticket them for the same laws they are breaking on the other streets.

As opposed to the situation in Chinatown, in Flatbush the drivers have a lot more difficulty with the police. There are hundreds of vans that are not licensed by the TLC at all. And there are more problems with aggressive driving, or picking up passengers in bus stops.

While dollar vans, based on user feedback, are generally more reliable than MTA’s buses, at the same time there is no guarantee of service. If the dollar van drivers all decide to take the day off, you can be left waiting for a ride without knowing that none are coming. There are also stories of drivers stopping midtrip to fill up on gas, or forcing everyone out of the van. Without regulation passengers have no way of

Vans were critical during Sandy. When buses weren’t or couldn’t run vans were still running getting people such as nurses around.

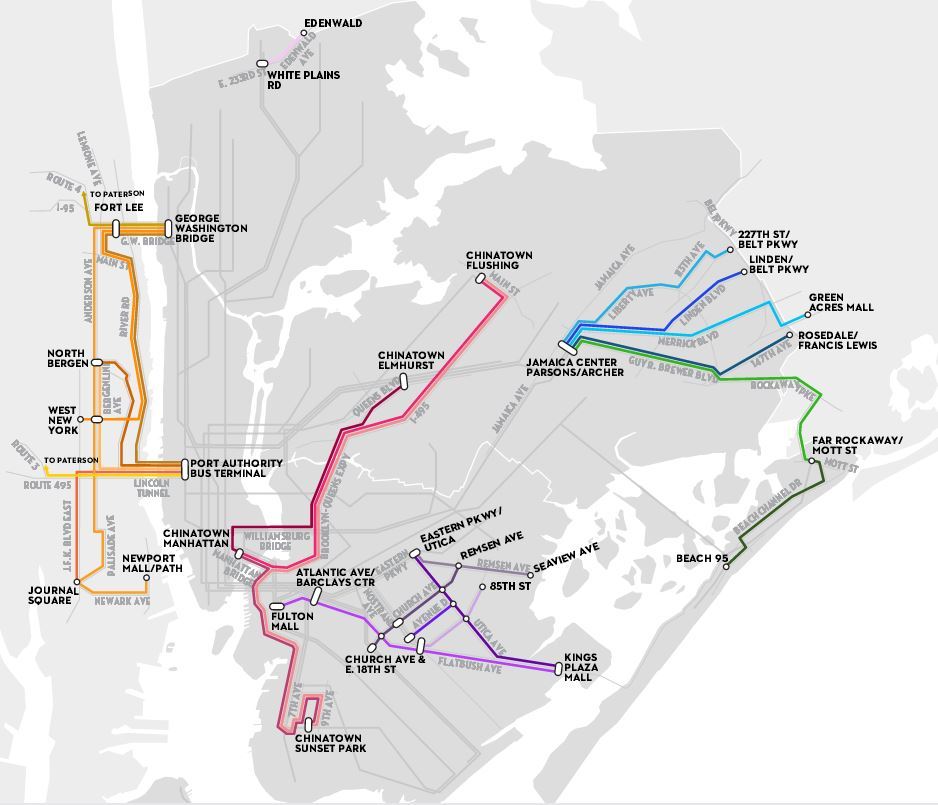


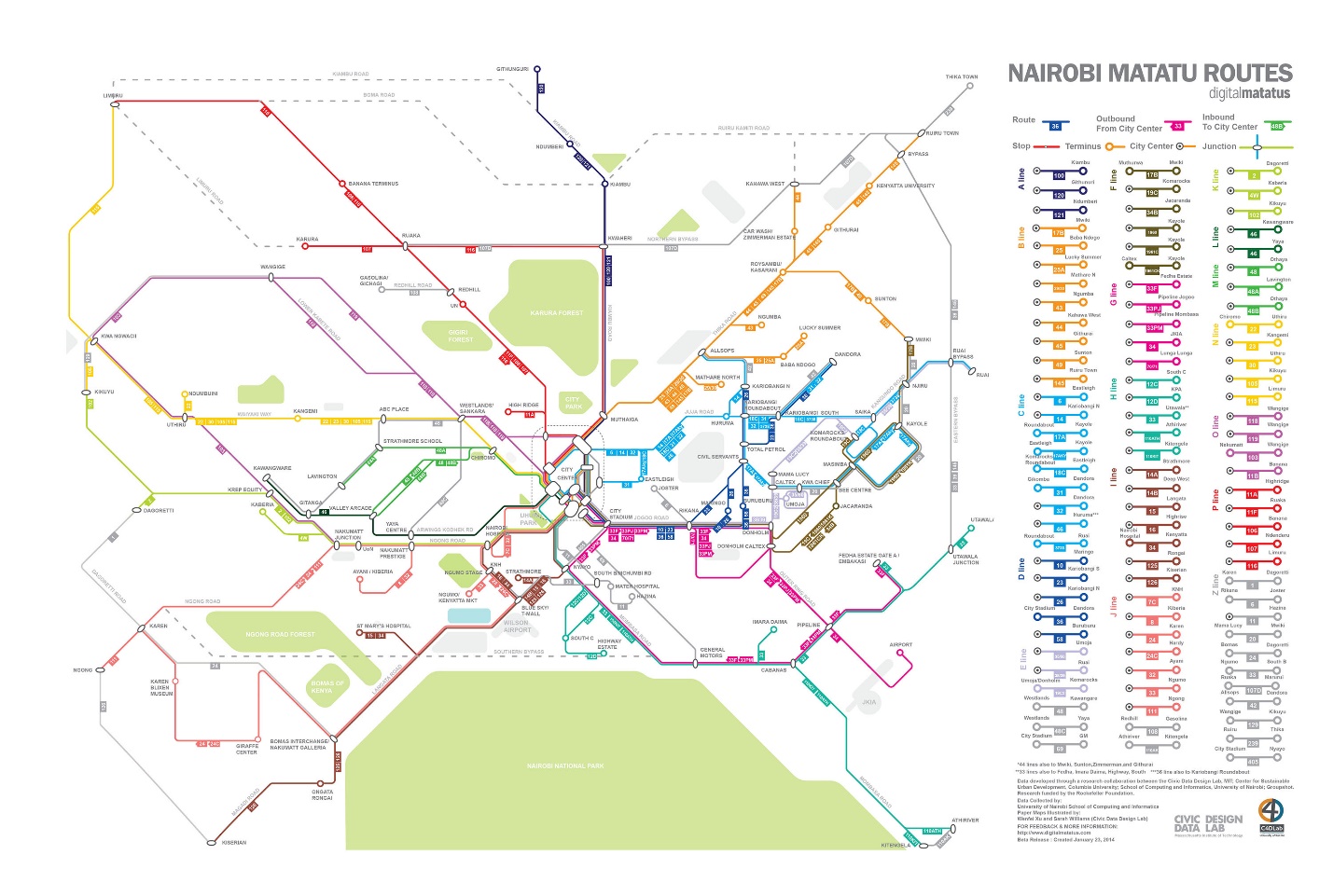
Image 1: A map of major dollar van routes



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



2 Inside a Chinatown van



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1. And the 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)