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New York Subway Use Rose in 2014, Especially in Growing Neighborhoods

By EMMA G. FITZSIMMONS APRIL 20, 2015

The number of people riding New York City's subway system continued to rise last year, with some of the biggest jumps in ridership occurring in Brooklyn and Queens.

Millions of riders squeezed onto crowded trains to travel to work each day. And they also increasingly rode the subway at night and on weekends. Over all, the system handled 1.75 billion rides last year, an increase of 2.6 percent from 2013, according to statistics released by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority on Monday.

More riders are taking the subway outside the typical morning and evening rush periods, a trend the agency has seen for more than a decade, said Kevin Ortiz, a spokesman for the authority. Many customers are using the subway for fun, he said, to see plays or movies or for other activities.

"People are really ditching their cars in record numbers," Mr. Ortiz said.

Richard Barone, director of transportation programs for the Regional Plan Association, said some New Yorkers were commuting to offices less often and working more flexible hours.

“We’re seeing some different patterns than we used to see because people are not as chained to their desks as they used to be,” he said.

Some of the highest increases in ridership last year happened at stations in Williamsburg and Bushwick in Brooklyn and in Long Island City in Queens.

Mitchell L. Moss, director of the Rudin Center for Transportation at New York University, said the new figures showed how central the subway system was to people’s lives.

“The subway is far more than just a method for getting to work,” he said. “It’s the way people organize their lives — where they shop, where they visit.”

Officials at the transportation authority have cited the city’s population growth, an improved economy and more reliable train service as the major reasons behind the increase. While celebrating the subway’s popularity, they have cautioned that the aging system is struggling to keep up with the growth. The subway often handles more than six million riders a day, officials said.

The authority’s chairman, Thomas F. Prendergast, said on Monday that the agency was working to combat delays, to improve maintenance and to install a more modern signal system on additional lines.

“The renaissance of the New York City subway is a miracle for those who remember the decrepit system of the 1970s and the 1980s, but moving more than six million customers a day means even minor disruptions now can create major delays,” Mr. Prendergast said in a statement.

At the Marcy Avenue station in Brooklyn on the J, M and Z lines, serving a rapidly developing area in South Williamsburg with a mix of young newcomers and Hasidic Jews, ridership grew by 23 percent last year on weekdays. On the L line in Brooklyn, the number of riders increased by nearly 5 percent on weekdays, with the biggest bump at stations on the eastern part of the line.

In the Bronx, more riders took the 2 and 5 lines in the southern and northeastern parts of the borough. In Lower Manhattan, more riders are using the

Bowling Green station on the 4 and 5 lines and the Bowery station on the J and Z lines.

“These are terrific indications of the neighborhoods that are thriving,” Mr. Moss said. “These are the places where the growth is the greatest.”

The authority has proposed a \$32 billion five-year capital plan to pay for many of the improvements the system needs, but it has a \$15 billion funding gap. On Monday, transit advocates again called on state and city lawmakers to help pay for the plan.

Gene Russianoff, the staff lawyer for the Straphangers Campaign, an advocacy group, said that several factors had contributed to increased ridership, including the creation of the unlimited-ride MetroCard, which encourages people to use the system more, and a major drop in crime on the subways since the 1990s that made riders feel safer.

“Whether it’s a hipster going clubbing along the L line,” he said, “or tourists from Texas trying a new budget hotel in Queens, we welcome you — and demand that transit officials take action to make our commuting lives bearable.”

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