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Leaders in New York and New Jersey Defend Shutdown for a Blizzard That Wasn't

By MATT FLEGENHEIMER JAN. 27, 2015

It was an unprecedented step for what became, in New York City, a common storm: For the first time in its 110-year history, the subway system was shut down because of snow.

Transit workers, caught off guard by the shutdown that Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo announced on Monday, scrambled to grind the network to a halt within hours.

Residents moved quickly to find places to stay, if they were expected at work the next day, or hustle home before service was curtailed and roads were closed.

And Mayor Bill de Blasio, whose residents rely upon the transit system by the millions, heard the news at roughly the time the public did.

“We found out,” Mr. de Blasio said on Tuesday, “just as it was being announced.”

The storm largely spared the city, instead battering eastern Long Island and much of New England, where Nantucket lost power and Scituate, Mass., flooded.

And on Tuesday, local and state officials were left to defend one of the most consequential decisions elected leaders can make: effectively closing a city, in light of an uncertain forecast.

With travel bans instituted across the region, residents had little choice but to heed the warnings to stay put. Even as roads reopened and trains creaked back to life early Tuesday, there would be no normal business day, even though most parts of the city received less than 10 inches of snow, not the two to three feet that had been predicted.

The weather laid bare the civic and political high-wire act of the modern snowstorm — poked with doomsayer proclamations and sporadic lapses in communication.

At the episode's heart is the sort of damned-if-you-do decision that has bedeviled politicians for decades: Play it safe with closings, all but guaranteeing sweeping economic losses, or try to ride out the storm?

“I would much rather be in a situation where we say we got lucky than one where we didn't get lucky and somebody died,” Mr. Cuomo said.

Briefings and interviews with officials suggest that recent challenges — including Hurricane Sandy, a snowstorm in Buffalo and public spats between top local leaders and forecasters — have left decision-makers even more risk-averse.

As the storm approached, a sort of one-upmanship theater had visited the local political stage: Mr. Cuomo's announcement about the subway shutdown came hours after the chairman of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority suggested a full shutdown was unlikely. New Jersey Transit riders were told on Monday afternoon not to expect rail service until Thursday.

On Sunday, Mr. de Blasio said, “This could be the biggest snowstorm in the history of New York City,” a bit of speechmaking that spawned a widely distributed parody in *The Onion*: “NYC Mayor: ‘Reconcile Yourselves With Your God, for All Will Perish in the Tempest.’ ” (On Tuesday, the mayor gave a reading of the article for reporters at City Hall.)

The abundance of caution was perhaps understandable, particularly in this city. Last year, shortly after taking office, Mr. de Blasio drew the ire of snowbound residents on an under-plowed Upper East Side. Weeks later, amid criticism that he left schools open in a heavy storm, the mayor, a Democrat, appeared to deflect blame to a shifting forecast, setting off a dispute with the television weatherman Al Roker.

For this storm, the sanitation commissioner, Kathryn Garcia, first heard about the dire forecasts on Saturday afternoon. She thought the projection by the National Weather Service — possibly three or four inches of snow per hour by Monday night — was a misprint.

“Can you get on National Weather,” Ms. Garcia recalled telling aides, “and find out what the hell they’re saying?”

In their storm preparations, according to an official, Mr. de Blasio and his staff alluded often to two predecessors: Michael R. Bloomberg, who was blamed in 2010 for snowed-in streets outside Manhattan, and John V. Lindsay, who faced withering criticism after a storm that killed 42 people in the city in 1969.

The message seemed clear: A failed snowstorm response sticks with a mayor. And Mr. de Blasio would not be seen as underprepared. “This is not going to be like other snowstorms,” the mayor told reporters on Monday.

Across the Hudson River, Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican considering a run for president, trumpeted his experience with weather emergencies. On Sunday, while he was at his son’s hockey game in Bayonne, a resident asked if he was worried about the storm, he said. “We’ve had Hurricane Irene, we’ve had Hurricane Sandy,” Mr. Christie said, recalling the conversation on Monday. “For better or for worse, we know how to deal with these situations.”

For New York State officials, though, recent missteps loomed. Mr. Cuomo cited the seven feet of snow that recently hit Buffalo, a storm he said the state had underestimated because of sliding forecasts. Meteorologists also criticized Mr. Cuomo, a Democrat, for second-guessing their projections at the time.

On Tuesday, the governor was more measured — “forecasters do the best they can, and we respond to the best information that they have,” he said — though he noted that the state had announced plans to create its own weather system that would deliver more precise information on impending storms.

By early Monday afternoon, Mr. Cuomo had prepared residents for the possibility of road closings and limited transit service. But though officials had warned of a possible subway shutdown, Thomas F. Prendergast, the transportation authority chairman, suggested that underground service was likely to continue. “We’d be able to run trains,” he said.

Hours later, Mr. Cuomo, saying the forecast had worsened for some parts of the region, announced the subway shutdown. Amid questions over whether the governor had ordered the move himself, Mr. Prendergast later said he had recommended it, citing the 2010 blizzard that left many trains and buses stranded in the snow.

Noting that many subway lines go both above and below ground, Mr. Prendergast said Tuesday that it would have been unwise to run fractured service, potentially stranding passengers along the way. “For somebody who knows an awful lot about this system, as I do, I’m a little surprised I said what I did,” Mr. Prendergast said of his initial comments on keeping service running. He also said regular service was able to return more quickly because of the shutdown.

The announcement, though, mirrored an episode from the fall, when Mr. Cuomo and Mr. Christie introduced a mandatory quarantine policy for those who had come into contact with Ebola patients. City Hall, overseeing the care of an Ebola patient at the time, was not notified in that case, infuriating health officials.

Discussing the subway shutdown on Tuesday, Mr. de Blasio said such “an unprecedented decision” was “certainly something we would have liked to have some more dialogue on.”

While the mayor did not criticize the subway decision itself, many residents were less kind.

Across the city, tales of commutes upended and Tuesdays disrupted — a doorman on a graveyard shift with no way to travel, tourists from Tuscany barred from Central Park — predominated. “I woke up this morning and I was like, that’s it?” said Kamolnadda Thumrongluck, 25, carrying a snowboard through Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Mitchell L. Moss, the director of the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy & Management at New York University, joked that the storm in the city was a triumph of government.

“They were able to conjure a snowstorm that didn’t occur,” Mr. Moss said, praising local officials for overpreparing. “We won a battle without an enemy.”

Reporting was contributed by Emma G. Fitzsimmons, Michael M. Grynbaum, C. J. Hughes, Kristin Hussey, Marc Santora, Tatiana Schlossberg, Nate Schweber, Nikita Stewart and Kate Zernike.

A version of this article appears in print on January 28, 2015, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Leaders Defend Shutdown for a Blizzard That Wasn’t.