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NY POLITICS

## New York-Area Officials Take Hit on Closing Roads, Trains

Subways and Interstates Were Closed, Forcing People to Miss Work in a Middling Storm



New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, right, speaks about the Northeast snowstorm while transit chief Tom Prendergrast listens during a news conference in New York on Tuesday. *PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS*

By **JOSH DAWSEY** and **ANDREW TANGEL**

Updated Jan. 27, 2015 9:17 p.m. ET

In the end, the blizzard facing New York area officials was the blizzard of criticism for shutting transit options for millions of commuters.

As the storm approached late Monday, politicians and transit officials in New York and New Jersey closed the city's subway system, halted commuter rail and blocked off

interstates.

“They talk about history and record,” said Michael Link, general manager of the Belvedere Hotel, where staff members couldn’t get to work. “It’s record-breaking that we closed down the city for 6 inches of snow.”

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio faced a challenge as severe weather bore down on the region Monday: striking the right balance between unnecessarily closing down and keeping people safe.

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with less than perfect forecasts.

A National Weather Service meteorologist in New Jersey said his predictions were wrong, and New York meteorologists said they didn’t expect the storm to veer as far east, where it dumped snow on Long Island.

On Tuesday, politicians and transit officials reversed Monday’s decisions, quickly opening roads and restoring train service. They noted that the weather forecast looked far worse Monday—24 or even 36 inches of snow—when they made their decisions.

Mr. de Blasio said it was best to prepare for the worst.

“We got lucky,” he said, adding that areas just east of the city were slammed with snow.

Mr. Cuomo said the state would create its own weather-forecasting model.

Mr. Christie said he took advice from the same people in the media now likely to question him.

“We were listening to all of you,” he told a television reporter. “You know, the fact is that you were working off the same information we were working off.”

Weather has long challenged politicians: Make a decision too early, and the forecast changes. Make it too late, and people don't have enough time to react. Close businesses, and people lose money. Keep them open, and people are in dangerous positions to commute.

“Everyone is jumping on, saying the city overreacted,” said Mitchell Moss, a New York University professor who served as an adviser to former Mayor Michael Bloomberg. “This decision is related to the experiences gained in [Hurricane] Irene and [superstorm] Sandy and other snowstorms.

“It's convenient to say we overdid it. But we had no one stranded on the highways because we closed them,” he said. “People were safe.”

Mr. Bloomberg was in Bermuda during a snowstorm in December 2010 and was lambasted for the city's slow cleanup.

And the then-mayor was criticized in 2012 after Sandy, when officials waffled for days before canceling the New York City Marathon.

New York officials came under fire for overreacting in 2011 to Irene downstate and not doing enough upstate, where it made its landing.

In November, Mr. Cuomo was criticized for not closing roads in Buffalo; many drivers were stranded in seven feet of snow.

Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed and Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal saw their popularity suffer last year after thousands of commuters were stranded on highways, with some stuck for days, during an ice storm.

“People were just trapped, thousands of them, trying to get home,” said Merle Black, an expert on Southern politics at Emory University. “The people had to abandon their cars. It was a huge debacle.”

But he added: “It's also a judgment call, and about the accuracy of the forecasts.”

Atlanta officials said that they had purchased additional equipment since last year's storm and that the city's public transportation system never went down during last year's snowstorm.

“We should be conservative, and we will respond to the public in that fashion,” said Michael Geisler, the city's chief operating officer, of policy changes after last year.

The decision under the most scrutiny Monday was Mr. Cuomo's call to close the city's subway system, which has never been closed for a snowstorm, New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority said.

In recent years, officials have closed the subway for Irene and then Sandy, which did inundate parts of system.

In other blizzards, like one in 1996, it stayed open.

"People needed to go around the city. It was the lifeline of the city," said Virgil Conway, then the MTA chairman.

Howard Roberts, who headed the MTA's New York City Transit division from 2007 to 2010, questioned whether shutting down the system was necessary, saying even aboveground subway service might have remained operational.

"I think it's a tremendous overreaction," he said.

By Tuesday morning, the system was running again, albeit slowly, and some riders were back in the city.

Lou Carta, 56 years old, a communications specialist who lives in Middlesex County in Connecticut, was forced to stay overnight in the city.

Dennis Green, 61, closed his Manhattan dental practice and went there Tuesday to do paperwork.

"It was an over-call for New York City, but I guess they had to. You can't predict this stuff," Mr. Green said.

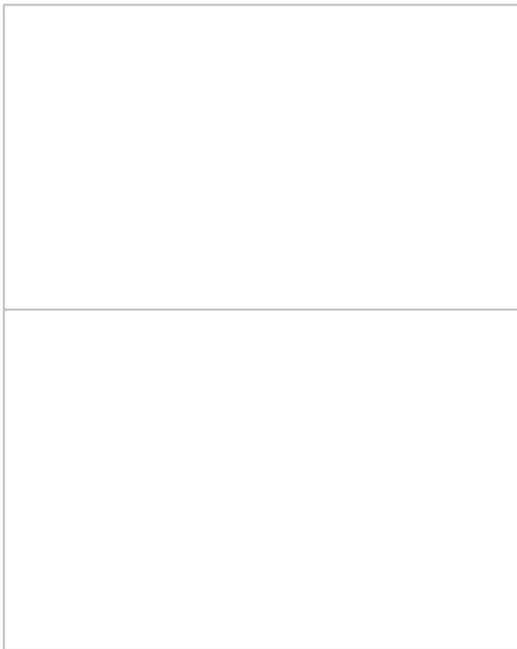
— *Laura Kusisto, Mara Gay and Joe Jackson contributed to this article.*

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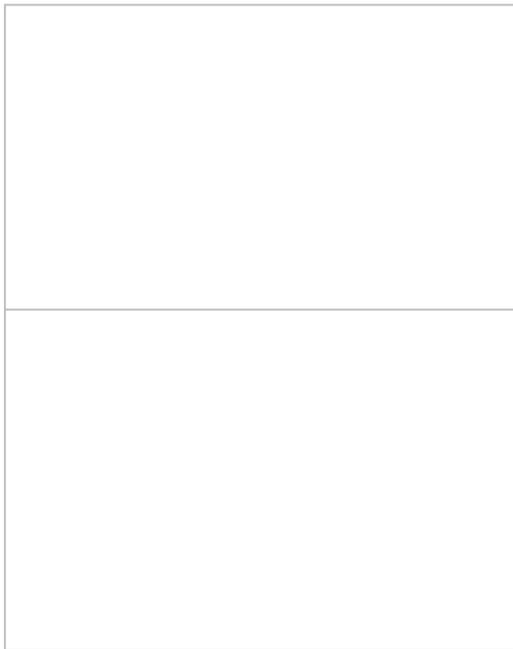
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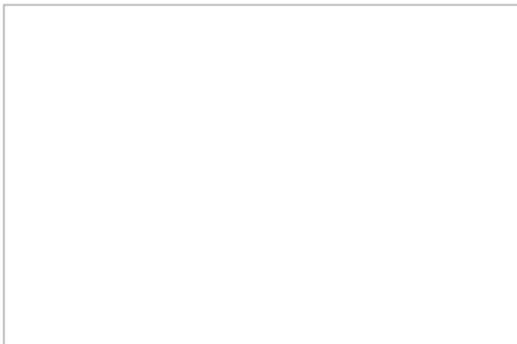
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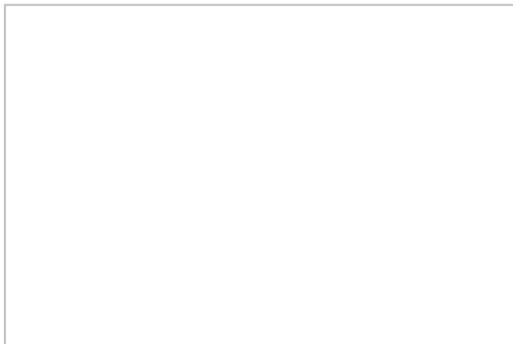
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