

Make An End, Already by Dan Jacoby

Among Charlton Heston's wonderful, awful movies is the lesser-known *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, in which he plays Michelangelo to Rex Harrison's Pope Julius II. The movie revolves around the seemingly interminable painting of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (it actually took Michelangelo four years to finish the job). A running joke in the movie is the Pope constantly asking when it will be completed. His increasingly frustrated question, "When will you make an end?" is always answered, "When I'm finished."

After spending the last 19 years riding the #7 train, and being delayed by the seemingly interminable track work, I find myself wanting to ask the workers, "When will you make an end?"

Since 1988, scarcely a week has gone by without some track work being done on one mile-long stretch of track, from just outside the Hunter's Point station to the 33rd Street station. Near the end of this past winter, service was shut down for six consecutive weekends, but the real problem is during the weekdays, when trains are slowed or stopped due to the work crews doing ... well, who knows what they're doing?

In 19 years they could have rebuilt the entire line. From scratch.

To his credit, Councilmember Eric Gioia has garnered quite a bit of press over the continual delays due to track work. And some of the work has been explained. The recent six-weekend shutdown, for instance, was in order to replace signal lights with a new, high-tech system. Of course, the trains now take longer to get to their destination than they did in 1988, but the New York City Transit Authority (NYCTA, a subsidiary of the infamous MTA) insists things are getting better.

A better example of what the NYCTA is doing may be the complete replacement of the tracks along the entire line in the 90s. After completing that work (and it took four years, coincidentally the same amount of time it took Michelangelo to paint one ceiling), the NYCTA announced that they had to tear up some of the track to fix the viaduct underneath it. They knew when they began the work that the viaduct was crumbling, but wasted \$90 million and four years on a job that had to be redone.

What other work have they had to redo? How much has that cost us, both in money and in time lost?

Unfortunately, all the publicity generated has not had a long-term, tangible effect on NYCTA. The work blithely continues, with no end in sight. Clearly, this "public" authority cannot – or will not – police itself. Unfortunately, there is no reason to believe that any action will be taken at the state level. If we are to find out what NYCTA is truly up to, and how they are spending our money and wasting our time, we need to find out right here in New York City.

The time has come for a real investigation and public hearings. Fortunately, the same Councilmember Gioia, who has been so strong in demanding accountability and change from NYCTA, chairs the City Council's Oversight and Investigations subcommittee. As such, he is in the perfect position to investigate NYCTA and then conduct those public hearings, putting NYCTA managers and employees under oath and demanding records.

These hearings will not happen overnight. Before any public hearing can be held, a thorough investigation must be instituted to determine what needs to be made public. Again, we are fortunate that the City Council has time, since the next elections are over two years away. A thorough investigation can be done.

In an era of increasing demands for reform and openness, with Governor Spitzer vowing to make the “public” authorities more public, these hearings could jumpstart that effort. In addition, we might find out just what is taking so long and costing so much – and when the job will finally be done.

I suppose I could simply ask NYCTA, “When will you make an end?” but I suspect I already know the answer.

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