



Bad transportation is keeping us poor (editorial)

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Staten Island is one of the toughest places for youth to break out of poverty, and a poor transportation infrastructure may be to blame. *(Advance file photo)*

Staten Island Advance Editorial By **Staten Island Advance Editorial**

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Staten Islanders have long bemoaned how difficult is it to get around the borough.

The Island's road and highway system wasn't designed to carry the sheer volume of vehicles that we have here. There is endless congestion, turning what should be short trips into long, aggravating journeys. Everywhere you turn, traffic abounds. It seems that the Staten Island Expressway, in particular, is never not congested.

Those who want to get out of their cars and take public transportation face a different kind of problem: The Island doesn't have nearly the same menu of mass transit options found in the other boroughs.

We don't have a subway system, and it's unlikely that we'll see one built here anytime soon. The Island is served by just a single rail line, going up the east side of the borough and leaving vast swaths of our residents completely un-served.

Bus service is lacking, particularly when it comes to express bus service for those commuting into Manhattan.

We have the free Staten Island Ferry, of course, but South Shore residents for years have cried out for fast ferry service. It's a call that has gone unheeded, even as Mayor Bill de Blasio has pitched putting a fast ferry dock in Stapleton (and even as the city has increased Staten Island Ferry service).

Car service can be an expensive option for many, and yellow cabs are still a rare site here.

It all adds up to one of the longest commutes in the country, a commute that studies have said can take years off of our lives.

But there's another hidden consequence to the lack of transportation here: It could be killing whatever chance that many poor Staten Islanders have of pulling themselves out of poverty.

A study of economic mobility by a pair of Harvard economists found a disturbing fact: Richmond County **is one of the worst counties in the country for poor kids trying to climb up the economic ladder.**

In fact, growing up here in the forgotten borough might actually be detrimental to achieving a higher standard of

living for children from poor families, the study found.

The study said that a poor boy loses about \$170 from his annual household income at age 26 for every year he lives on Staten Island. That adds up to \$3,450 less that he'll make by that age because he grew up on Staten Island instead of in an average American county.

That negative impact also applied to average-income and even to wealthier kids on Staten Island, the study found. Only kids who are born into the top 1 percent of families get an economic boost from growing up here.

And there's this: Only 3 percent of counties in the nation are worse than Staten Island when it comes to helping poor males climb the income ladder, the study found. Just 6 percent are worse for average-income males.

The study found that the detrimental impact on future earnings was more pronounced for boys than girls.

Researchers said it's hard to pinpoint the reasons why Staten Island youth find themselves in this financial predicament.

But College of Staten Island finance professor Jonathan Peters said the borough's wanting transportation infrastructure and a dearth of quality local jobs could play a role.

"The region is pretty poorly connected for low-income households," Mr. Peters said.

He pointed out that residents who can't afford a car are often limited to finding work in their neighborhoods, where decent paying jobs can be hard to come by, or enduring a lengthy commute via public transit.

With about twice as many workers as there are jobs on Staten Island, even residents with cars often must travel off-Island to find work, Mr. Peters said. At more than 42 minutes each way, Richmond County residents have the fourth-highest median commute time in the country, according to 2013 Census data.

"We indeed find that areas that improve upward mobility are characterized on average by shorter commute times," said Augustin Bergeron, of the Harvard study. He added that, "in general we find that places that have worse commute times have a negative impact on the mobility of kids."

Staten Island is currently engaged in a major conversation about the future of transportation and economic development in the borough. Should we build light rail on the West Shore, which some want to see become the Island's "Jobs Coast"?

Should we devote resources to Bus Rapid Transit on the North Shore to take better advantage of the coming development there?

All is overshadowed by the multi-billion dollar deficit in the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's capital budget, and by the looming bankruptcy of the Highway Trust Fund.

But as lawmakers, advocates and transit officials frame what's possible, they must keep one thing in mind: The debate over transportation isn't just about getting from Point A to Point B.

Real lives are in the balance.

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