

OPINION

Miracle of the subways: on July 4 they performed as they should — why not all the time?

BY ROBERTA BRANDES GRATZ

GRIDLOCK, the result, simply, of too many cars on the city's streets, threatens to become a permanent way of life in the Big Apple.

The problem, basically, is that more and more of the people who work here are settling farther and farther from their jobs, and they'd much rather drive to the office or shop than depend on the nightmare that is the city's subways.

City Transportation Commissioner Ross Sandler may be on the right track in trying to inhibit vehicular traffic with such limitations as midtown driving by permit only, even if there are enforcement nightmares.

But the only realistic hope rests with that nightmare mass transit system, much maligned now but once the world's most efficient people mover, carrying passengers farther, faster, than any other such system.

It is the best alternative today to vehicular strangulation in New York.

It's fashionable to pooh-poooh any notion

that the subways can be renewed, to chastise the MTA and Transit Authority as "not being able to spend the money they have" and to rationalize self-defeating express buses that succeed in keeping riders off subways and clogging streets and polluting the air.

Lessons of 1986, especially the experience of Liberty Weekend, dramatically prove otherwise. Regrettably, not one official is heard boasting of transit's achievement, or of the hope that lesson offers for the future.

On that remarkable 3½-day weekend, seven million passengers rode the subways without incident. More impressively, the system moved about one million people out of lower Manhattan after the July 4th fireworks in less than two hours.

Officials chalk it up to the spirit of the event, to unique and intense planning appropriate only for a special event and to a public relations effort uncalled for under normal conditions. Nonsense!

An internal TA memo notes that the "well met" objectives for Liberty Weekend were "a sufficient level of service . . . on all rapid and surface routes, access . . . maintained to all stations, [and] . . . no major service

disruptions." Those objectives should not be reserved for special occasions.

A Straphangers Campaign report last fall also noted: "The TA had one of its finest hours during the Liberty Weekend celebration . . . underscoring the central and positive role transit should be playing in the lives of New Yorkers."

A seasoned rider these days cannot help notice an improved level of cleanliness, more car doors that close, more trains identified by number or letter, a better record of completed trips without having to vacate a disabled train, and, best of all, an increasing number of new or refurbished cars.

Liberty Weekend provided a spectacular illustration of the system's enormous unrealized potential. It proved that when people are asked to exchange their automobiles for good service and to forsake highway traffic and city gridlock for clean, reliable, speedy transit, they respond.

Instead of explaining away the transit achievement of Liberty Weekend, public officials should trumpet their triumph, and to learn from it.

Noted one MTA official: "We worked hard to convey specific transit information, tar-

getting people not familiar with the system, passing out brochures everywhere, telling people to leave their car at home and how to get anywhere without it. We plastered the place with information." Sounds like a good place to begin.

What ex-Parks Commissioner Thomas Hoving did for the parks in the 1970s, leading the public to their rediscovery, Mayor Koch can do for the subways in the 1980s.

Public relations, grandstand-style, is the mayor's strongest suit. If he were to inspire the public to use the subways more and at the same time increase service, improve reliability, cease thoughtless talk of service cutbacks and call constant attention to completed improvements, the strangulation of our city by the internal combustion machine might begin to abate.

If it does not, gridlock of the city's economy will follow the gridlock of the city's streets.

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