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NYC

# As Builders' Grand Visions Dissolve, So Does Our Faith

By [CLYDE HABERMAN](#)

The governor and the mayor used the phrase “a vote of confidence in New York’s future,” or similar words, at least half a dozen times the other day. They were gushing over the billion-dollar deal in which the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#) gave Tishman Speyer Properties the development rights to the Hudson railyards on the Far West Side.

Would that most New Yorkers had that much confidence. Even allowing for the fact that pessimism is often this city’s default position, people have had ample reason of late to be skeptical.

Broken promises are piling up, quite a few of them involving the transportation authority.

We were promised improvements in subway and bus service as a sop for enduring the higher fares that just went into effect. This week, citing bleaker finances than anticipated, the authority said: Not so fast. There will be no improvements till summer, if then.

A delay of at least a year is expected for completing the first leg of the Second Avenue subway. (Then again, what’s a year for a project that has been kicked around since the days of Prohibition?) The impressive glass-and-steel dome planned for a transit hub at Fulton Street seems unlikely now. The westward extension of the No. 7 line has moved at a tortoise pace.

On other fronts, plans to expand the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center were hurled into limbo by the administration of Gov. [Eliot Spitzer](#). (Remember him?) Have you noticed proposals for a new Pennsylvania Station going anywhere? Much of the [Atlantic Yards](#) project in Brooklyn now seems about to be put on hold — not that everyone will mourn.

For the ne plus ultra of development delays, we have only three words for you: World, Trade and Center.

IT is not surprising, then, that many New Yorkers are skeptical about some of the grand visions dangled before them.

Doubts seem to be flourishing about the promised benefits of the mayor’s congestion pricing plan, even assuming it is passed by the City Council and wins the blessing of Albany’s Dr. No, Assembly Speaker [Sheldon Silver](#). In a new [Quinnipiac University](#) poll of 1,528 New York State voters, fully half deemed it unlikely that the money taken from drivers entering Manhattan would be used, as announced, to improve mass transit.

With the Hudson Yards plan for a dozen commercial and residential towers, one complaint — hardly the only one — focuses on provisions for “affordable housing.” That’s the meaningless term of art for subsidized apartments for low- and moderate-income residents. All housing is affordable if one has the money.

“Affordable housing” is supposed to account for 379 of the 3,200 or so units contemplated for Hudson Yards. But should that number shrink, few would be shocked. Developers have routinely promised low-income housing to win political support, only to make those apartments disappear, like the hidden pea in a shell game, in order to preserve profit margins.

Ester Fuchs, a political science professor at [Columbia University](#), sees Albany’s gnarled hand in the stalled projects. “The state’s role is primarily obstructionist,” said Professor Fuchs, who was a special adviser to Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) in his first term. “When the city controls the land, things move more quickly.”

Andrea Batista Schlesinger, executive director of the Drum Major Institute for Public Policy, a nonpartisan research center, said that many proposals were simply “not thought through.” Had they been vetted more thoroughly before being announced, she said, they “would not have seen the light of day.”

A similar point was made by Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at [New York University](#), who has also advised Mr. Bloomberg. Take transportation, he said; politics encourages big ideas but not the wherewithal to pay for them.

“As a result,” Professor Moss said, “we have lots of projects that are able to get a few million dollars for planning and design work, but not enough to ever get built.”

But let’s not totally despair. Optimism being our default position, we will end on a more hopeful note, this from John H. Mollenkopf, a political scientist at the City University Graduate Center.

None of this is new, he said. Battery Park City took forever to come into being. So did the revitalization of Times Square. There are phases to development in New York, Professor Mollenkopf said. It often starts with what he called “the First Big Plan,” followed by its collapse. That is often good.

Plan No. 2 or No. 3 “may actually be a good bit better or more sensible,” he said, adding: “New York will come back, and we will get another crack at all these things.”

See? All you have to do now is make sure you live another 20 or 30 years.