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The crash of the Staten Island Ferry *Andrew Barberi* that killed ten people should serve as a warning to New Yorkers that this icon of New York City travel and tourism is in desperate need of attention, and innovation.

Though the tragedy involved a single vessel, it paralyzed the entire ferry system for more than 12 hours. Can you imagine if the Midtown Tunnel or Grand Central Terminal were closed for such a long time? Train stations have numerous platforms and toll plazas have dozens of lanes but, incredibly, Staten Island is only served by a single ferry terminal and single ferry service. Operated by the New York City Department of Transportation, the ferry is an aberration, a municipal anomaly: There is no other transportation system anywhere in New York City that is actually operated by a city agency with city employees.

Other transportation agencies and authorities have had plenty of reason to neglect or ignore the Staten Island Ferry. They see themselves as competing with it, and they are clearly winning; it's barely a contest. The reality is that ferry ridership (In PDF format) between Staten Island and Manhattan has been declining in recent decades, mostly due to two factors. First, Manhattan as the center of gravity in the region's job market just isn't as strong as it used to be, because of the emergence of business districts outside Manhattan, as well as growing work opportunities on Staten Island. The travel patterns of island dwellers has changed, but the route of the ferry, unfortunately, has not.

The second factor in declining Staten Island Ferry ridership is because investments made by other agencies in highways and buses, etc. are paying off handsomely. For instance, in the late 1990s as subway fares were hiked throughout the city, the fares for express buses were cut by $1. This happened just after the ferry fare had been cut $.50 on July 4, 1997. Still, the increased savings on the bus trip has encouraged more riders to shift from boat to bus, leading to another five percent drop in ridership between 2000 and 2001 alone.

In some ways, the city's operation of the ferry has ignored important trends seen elsewhere in the region's ferry market. First, the dispersal of the region's job base to Brooklyn and Jersey City has spurred the creation of seven new ferry landings in these two places in the last decade alone. While Staten Island commuters are migrating to jobs in these places, the city has not

kept pace at either promoting or creating ferry linkages between Staten Island and these two growing business districts.

To the city's credit, there are three new boats on order, including the *Guy V. Molinari*, which was just launched from the Marinette Shipyard in Wisconsin shipyard last month, and new terminals are under construction at Whitehall Street in Manhattan and St. George in Staten Island. Yet, to its discredit, funding for these investments were not a part of the city's typical capital budgeting process. They were made financially possible only by a loan secured from the nationwide tobacco settlement of 1998. Had millions of Americans not died from smoking over recent decades, the capital stock of the Staten Island ferry would be still declining.

The city is failing to learn from private operators not just in routes but in ferries themselves. The ones the city is investing in are simply too big, behemoths that cost $40 million and carry 4,500 passengers. They do not help solve the key problems for the Staten Island ferry such as the need for improved night-time service (currently boats only operate hourly), or reduced waiting time between boats. A bigger fleet of smaller boats could give islanders the chance to depart to or from Manhattan every five or seven minutes, and they would surely vote with their MetroCards--if given the opportunity to do so.

To a degree, the service is a prime case of "you get what you pay for." Since 1997, Staten Island Ferry riders have been paying exactly nothing. It's the best free ride in the city. More of an accident of history than a conscious public policy, the change in the fare from 50 cents to nothing came with the advent of MetroCard. It would be too expensive, said then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani, to outfit the terminals with MetroCard turnstiles. It would be easier just to let everyone in for free. To critics, this lack of a stable revenue stream has made it too easy for the city not to continue to invest in the system as it should.

Making the Staten Island Ferry part of the MetroCard system may not be very easy. Because it is the only form of transportation that the City of New York itself operates, it does not enjoy the benefits of coordinated scheduling or economy of scale as if it were part of any larger system, such as the MTA.

Ironically, the MTA even uses the Staten Island Ferry in their promotional television ads known as “Going Your Way.” Viewers are treated to sleek trains winding along the bucolic Hudson River, quiet buses whizzing along an Expressway, rapid new subway trains racing across the skyline. The ad closes with a magical only-from-a-helicopter shot showing the big orange boats sliding across the Harbor. Suspiciously absent is the dark blue paint that says “New York City Department of Transportation” on the side of it.

This inclusion of the ferry is particularly ironic given the state of mass transportation on the island. Basically, a web of buses ring and criss-cross the island, while express buses carry passengers to the central business districts. Running north to south is the Staten Island Railroad, itself another stepchild of transportation history. Known as the Staten Island Rapid Transit, it is really anything but rapid, and includes virtually no express service. Particularly aggravating is the common occurrence of northbound trains arriving at St. George only a minute or two after the ferry has departed for Manhattan.

The Verrazano-Narrows Bridge is also operated by the MTA and is widely seen as the biggest cash cow in the MTA’s Bridges and Tunnels system, generating more than $300 million per year. Small wonder then that the MTA under-invests in all other forms of Staten Island transit, choosing instead to grab $7 in tolls from each driver, and pour that money into transit investments that maximize the number of $7 tolls it can collect from vehicles.

The crash of the *Andrew Barberi*exemplifies how far we’ve isolated ourselves from our greatest natural transportation asset, the waterways. The creation of regularly scheduled ferry service in 1642 launched two centuries of water transit innovation that led to the invention of steam power, the development of a network of canals and waterways that spanned the continent, and the creation of the Clipper ship, which together made New York into a city that is truly a beacon to the best and brightest in the world.

The Staten Island Ferry, as the last vestige of a vast harbor infrastructure which fueled four centuries of growth, could and should symbolize a turning point for the city in leading the way into a new age of innovation on our waterways.

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