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Extreme Weather Is Only Getting Worse. Can Cities Protect Public Transit?

Climate-resilient public transportation is crucial to meeting our climate goals and ensuring mobility for vulnerable communities.

Last September, New York City was so thoroughly inundated by Hurricane Ida that some commuters waded through water up to their waists just to get in and out of the subway station. Across the country, extreme heat battered the West Coast, melting Portland's streetcar power cables. This summer is seeing similar headlines, with heatwaves warping the BART train tracks in San Francisco and sudden rainfall interrupting Northeastern commutes.

These extreme weather events, which are increasing in severity and frequency due to climate change, pose a problem to the millions of Americans who rely on public transit to get to and from work, school, the grocery store, the hospital and social events. According to Maria Sipin, a former Transportation Justice Fellow at the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO), public transit is a "lifeline" for many groups of people that already face disproportionate challenges due to historic discrimination or marginalization — think disabled individuals, low-income communities where private car ownership is rare, and Black and Brown communities that are less likely to have access to a car and more likely to live further from their jobs and rely on public transit for their commutes (thanks in part to the legacy of redlining and ongoing disinvestment in minority neighborhoods). When extreme weather impacts public transit, it has the potential to deepen existing inequalities.

It also threatens the country's ability to meet climate goals: Transportation is responsible for 27% of U.S. carbon pollution, and public transit is a key tool for bringing those emissions down. If train and bus service is disrupted by extreme weather, people may turn to more emissions-intensive ways of getting around, creating a negative feedback loop that fuels the global temperature rise that caused the disruptions in the first place.

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