

Where to Live When the L Train Shuts Down

Here are some alternatives for renters looking for neighborhoods with a similar vibe.

By C. J. HUGHES MAY 26, 2017

Anywhere but by the L train.

That's what you hear from residents of north **Brooklyn**, as the main underground link between Manhattan and neighborhoods such as Williamsburg and Bushwick is scheduled to be shut down in less than two years' time, or within the span of a two-year lease that might be up for renewal about now.

So some tenants along the corridor, where there are few subway alternatives, are packing their bags for places from which they can commute more easily.

Likewise, some who might have been considering moving to Williamsburg and Bushwick are now exploring other areas, according to brokers working with them.

To be fair, the trickle away from the L train corridor is not yet a flood. And, in an area where prices are already softening, some renters say they plan to stick it out till the project starts in April 2019 with the hope that better deals will come along as the date approaches.

Others say that ferries, buses, bicycles and motorcycles should tide them over just fine during the project, which officials have estimated will last 15 months.

But still others worry about the prospect of hundreds of thousands of daily L-train riders suddenly spilling into clogged streets, scrambling to get to work.

“I think it will be chaotic,” said Danny Gannon, an accountant who lives on Ainslie Street in Williamsburg and works in Manhattan’s financial district. Next month, Mr. Gannon, 29, will move from his one-bedroom, which he shares with his girlfriend, to a place on the Lower East Side of Manhattan even though it’s smaller and pricier. “We don’t want to deal with the hassle.”

Prospective Williamsburg expats who are looking for new neighborhoods that are similarly packed with millennials, chock-a-block with restaurants and that exude an artsy vibe can find sanctuary elsewhere in Brooklyn, on the Lower East Side, and in the Bronx.

Housing in these areas is often cheaper than in Williamsburg, where, according to the real estate firm MNS, the typical studio rents for \$2,690 a month, and one-bedrooms for \$3,014. And any savings could be spent on cab fare for trips back to Williamsburg.

South Williamsburg, Brooklyn

Renters don’t have to venture far to find an alternative that has the look and feel of Williamsburg with continuous subway service. In particular, developers seem to be zeroing in on the blocks around the Marcy Street stop of the J, M and Z lines, near the base of the Williamsburg Bridge.

Already, the Williams, a 13-story, 82-unit rental that opened last fall, is enjoying an L train bounce, said Mehul Patel, the chief operating officer of Midwood Investment & Development, the building’s developer.

About half of the leases at the charcoal tower are for two years, about double the typical number, Mr. Patel said. He thinks that some of these renters may have wanted to lock in current market rents, because, he said, “they know that options will be limited, when the L train shuts down.” Studios at the building, at 282 South Fifth Street, start at \$2,545 a month.

Rising a stone’s throw away, at 263 South Fifth Street, is an even more ambitious project, the Dime, a mixed-use development that will include retail space, offices and 177 studio and one-bedroom apartments in a terra-cotta tower designed

by Fogarty Finger. The centerpiece of the \$250 million project will be a 1908 Beaux-Arts building, the current Dime Community Bank, which will become a store or restaurant after the interior is restored and renovated.

Projects involving subways “always get delayed, so it will probably go on for much longer than they say,” said Sam Charney, the president of Charney Construction & Development, which is developing the Dime with Tavros Development Partners and 1 Oak Development. It’s to open in spring 2019, just about when the subway shuts, an event that Mr. Charney predicts will be a “real driver, for sure.”

But those seeking trendy Williamsburg-type bars and shops may be disappointed, for now. Under elevated subway tracks, Broadway, the nearest major commercial strip, is dim, loud and a bit dirty, and sidewalk racks sell \$4 bath mats. But Dotory, a four-year-old Korean restaurant at No. 353 that is popular for its food and offbeat décor, hints at changes to come.

Flatbush Avenue, Brooklyn

Until recently little more than a thoroughfare between the Manhattan Bridge exit and other parts of Brooklyn, a section of Flatbush Avenue, which touches Fort Greene and Boerum Hill and is often considered part of Downtown, now gleams with theaters and concert halls, amid a thicket of glassy towers.

Apartments in those towers, which offer lavish amenities like indoor pools, rooftop picnic areas and outdoor movie theaters, are on a par with Williamsburg properties. Studios here average \$2,607 a month, according to MNS, while one-bedrooms are \$3,271.

But the concessions that some developers are dangling, including a few months of free rent, can make the neighborhood seem less expensive, said Mollie Miller, 29, who in June will reluctantly move here after five years in Williamsburg.

“I just love how you can roll home from some of the best bars in the city” to Williamsburg, said Ms. Miller, 29, a handbag designer in Midtown.

But the L train closure will be a pain, she said. As it is, she already leaves for work a full hour early to avoid the throngs on the L train's Bedford Avenue platform. "There's been so much anxiety, and people are already freaking out, that I want to avoid the whole situation," Ms. Miller said.

In Downtown Brooklyn, she and her fiancé, Paul Glenn, have found a one-bedroom, one-bath unit on the 12th floor of **the Hub**, an elegant 600-unit spire at 333 Schermerhorn Street that opened in March.

And while the area, which is dotted with fast-food restaurants and pawn shops, is not as lively as what she has known, Ms. Miller will have access to the **Gotham Market at the Ashland**, a new gourmet food hall on the ground floor of a rental tower a few blocks away at 590 Fulton Street. Inside are spots like **Mason Jar BK**, which serves a Rob Roy, with Scotch and bitters, for \$13.

"The street life is not going to be ideal" for Williamsburg refugees, said Hal D. Gavzie, the executive director of leasing for Douglas Elliman Real Estate, which is not affiliated with those projects. "There will be a trade-off. But it will be good for die-hard Brooklynites who don't want to leave the area."

And there are always the theaters, including the four-year-old Polonsky Shakespeare Center on Ashland Place; the Brooklyn Academy of Music and its various stages; and the Mark Morris Dance Center on Lafayette Avenue, which offers jazz, ballet and hip-hop classes.

Plus, getting to and from Manhattan should be a snap. The Atlantic Avenue-Barclays Center subway stop offers an alphabet's worth of train lines, as well as Long Island Rail Road service.

Mott Haven, Bronx

This part of the South Bronx across the Third Avenue Bridge from Manhattan has a grittiness and artistic bent not unlike that of Williamsburg a few decades ago. The average rent for one-bedrooms is between \$1,300 and \$1,500 a month, according to Zumper.com.

Mott Haven may have battled bad press for years, and its police precinct, the 40th, had 14 homicides in 2016, high for New York. But the scene inside Filtered Coffee on a recent morning featured a woman in a Nirvana T-shirt serving people hunched over phones and laptops. “Being creative is not a hobby. It is a way of life,” was spray-painted on a wall a few blocks away.

And in the compact neighborhood, where night life is focused south of the Major Deegan Expressway, restaurants are arriving more quickly these days, locals say. La Grata, an Italian place known for its pizza, with photos of the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat on its walls, opened in the shadow of the highway last fall.

“We have discussed the subway shutdown, and we think it will be a positive for our area,” said Joshua Weissman, the president of JCAL Development Group, which has constructed a half-dozen market-rate buildings in Mott Haven, most midsize. Tenants in those buildings are usually between 25 and 40, Mr. Weissman added, and 50 percent hail from outside the borough.

Larger and splashier projects are planned for the area, including a 1,279-unit waterside mega-development from the Chetrit Group and Somerset Partners. Critics have slammed the market-rate project as being out of reach for local residents of the area, which has high poverty rates.

Scott Armstrong, 26, who moved to a studio in a three-year-old building in Mott Haven this winter after graduating from the State University of New York Maritime College in Throgs Neck, also in the Bronx, didn’t consider Brooklyn because he figured it was too expensive.

But Mr. Armstrong, who works for a real estate company on hospital construction projects, is glad he won’t have to contend with the L train shutdown like some of his friends. “They definitely will have to adjust,” said Mr. Armstrong, who has a degree in transportation. “I got lucky, I guess.”

Sunnyside, Queens

Since the city rezoned large parts of Williamsburg in 2005, tall towers have replaced low-slung factories, giving it a sort of Mutt-and-Jeff profile. Blocks lined

with squat rowhouses are interspersed with hulking high-rises.

For those Williamsburg renters who enjoy living several floors up, Long Island City would seem a natural fit. For years, the neighborhood, which begins just over the border from Greenpoint, Brooklyn, has been creating its own skyline, an effort that has ramped up in the last couple of years. Prices still seem a hair more affordable. Studios average \$2,343 a month, and one-bedrooms are \$2,722, MNS says, though buildings coming online this year are charging more.

But not everyone will cotton to a former business district that still lacks many residential amenities. Better, some brokers say, to head east a few more stops on the 7 train to Sunnyside, an established residential enclave. Its tight cluster of shops and restaurants along Greenpoint Avenue recall pre-gentrification Bedford Avenue in Williamsburg.

“It doesn’t have a hipster vibe. It has a neighborhood vibe,” said Andrew Hatch, a salesman with Douglas Elliman who frequently works in Sunnyside and lives in next-door Long Island City, which he said “doesn’t have the mom-and-pop feel that Williamsburg has.”

The area has many restaurants offering dishes from Colombia, Paraguay and Peru, like the ceviche-centric Dayboat, which opened last year.

Newly built apartments are rare. One exception is at Greenpoint Avenue and 48th Street, where AB Capstone is at work on a four-story retail and residential building, according to city records.

Prewar apartments are to be found, especially south of Queens Boulevard, where one-bedroom rents average \$1,800 a month, said Mr. Hatch, who currently has a two-bedroom with a galley kitchen in a walk-up on 49th Street for \$2,200 a month.

Lower East Side, Manhattan

With its cafes, raucous bars, vintage buildings, art galleries and bohemian soul, the Lower East Side can seem a cousin of its East River counterpart.

After years when people streamed to Brooklyn from Lower Manhattan, there's now a "reverse migration," said Raymond Gani, a salesman with Misrahi Realty, a local agency. "It is the closest area in Manhattan to Williamsburg."

Along the Lower East Side's narrow streets, eclectic seems the order of the day. Galerie Perrotin displays sculptures in a 1902 textile factory on Orchard Street, while Two-Bit's Retro Arcade offers Ms. Pac-Man and pinball machines on Essex Street.

Inside the nearby Essex Street Market, a neighborhood fixture since 1940, well before food halls were all the rage, caviar is sold from under the watchful eye of a caribou head.

But if an old-time air pervades, the neighborhood is also adding massive new towers, courtesy of the Essex Crossing mega-project. With nine sites and 1,079 apartments to be built in phases, the project, from the team of BFC Partners, L and M Development Partners and Taconic Investment Partners, will swell the low-rise area's housing stock.

People looking to move soon might focus on the project's 145 Clinton Street, a 15-story tower designed by Beyer Blinder Belle, where 107 of 211 units will be market-rate. Leasing begins this summer at the building, which is to open in October. In 2018, the Essex Street Market will also get a new 40,000-square-foot home in the project.

Mr. Gannon's new one-bedroom on Orchard will be more expensive, at \$3,200 a month, than the \$2,200 he paid in Williamsburg. But "the fact that there is a lot going on" in his new neighborhood, he said, "compares favorably."

Williamsburg, Brooklyn

Starting in April 2019, L trains will stop running between Eighth Avenue in Manhattan and Bedford Avenue in Brooklyn, but will continue to serve other Brooklyn stops to the east. The L is going offline to allow the repair of century-old tunnels damaged by Hurricane Sandy, a \$477 million project.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority has not yet announced what kinds of alternative services might be offered, but at least one affected agent says he's optimistic.

"The L train will get us to work harder, but it will not beat us," said Andrew Barrocas, the chief executive of MNS, which is about to open a new Williamsburg rental building, the 554-unit Level at 2 North Sixth Place. The building, from Douglaston Development, near the Bedford Avenue L train stop, will probably run shuttle buses to the Marcy stop of the J, M and Z trains, he said.

"Renters are not opposed to be taking multiple trains to get to work," Mr. Barrocas added. "A lot of them were transferring anyway at Union Square."

Already, an L effect may be kicking in. Rents declined after last summer, when the closure was announced, by about 10 percent, though prices seem to have since recovered, said Mr. Gavzie of Elliman. Still, he expects the actual shutdown to rattle the market again.

"Landlords will feel it," he said. "But it will also help out some of the city's up-and-coming neighborhoods."

Correction: May 29, 2017

An earlier version of this article misstated, at one point, the year that the L train is scheduled to be shut down. As noted correctly elsewhere in the article, it is April 2019, not 2017.

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