

Aid for Baffled Weekend Subway Riders

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Have trouble figuring out the subways on weekends? Get ready for a little help from an old friend.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority will unveil on Friday an online-only map that portrays the subway as it actually appears on the next tangled, jumbled weekend. And in a retro twist, the map is modeled on the 1970s-era guide by Massimo Vignelli, a much-missed city icon that now hangs in the Museum of Modern Art.

The Weekender, making its debut on Friday, is based on the 1972 subway map designed by Massimo Vignelli. Blinking lights flag trouble spots, and riders can search by line, borough or station.

The stylish digital map will be customized each weekend to reflect the myriad service changes that regularly bedevil straphangers on Saturdays and Sundays. Currently, rerouted lines and shut stations are noted only in stiffly written prose that sometimes compounds riders' confusion.

The interactive map is searchable by line, borough and station, and it flags trouble spots with blinking lights. Click, and the site will reveal a rundown of what woe awaits, whether a closed platform or an unexpected station stop.

Named The Weekender, the map will dominate the front page of the agency's Web site each week from Friday afternoon until early Monday morning.

"The idea here was: 'How do you show people at a glance what's really happening?'" said Margaret Coffey, a marketing executive at New York City Transit, an arm of the transportation authority.

Right now, she said, "you've got this comprehensive poster that says all that is happening this weekend, but you still have to stand there with a map to be able to figure it out."

The Weekender does not redraw the usual map so much as annotate it. The A train, for instance, has an irritating habit of running along part of the F line on weekends. But the map, rather than repositioning the A's blue trail onto the orange F route, simply flags the bypassed stations and offers a written explanation. (Officials said a more dynamic map would be logistically difficult to execute.)

Still, the online map has appealing features, including a line-by-line view, which highlights, in vibrant colors, the entire length of an individual subway route while fading out the others, like pulling a strand of spaghetti from a knotty pasta. Riders can quickly find out about changes on their own route while ignoring the rest.

The site also allows users to toggle between the subway diagram and detailed neighborhood maps, which list local attractions.

Nostalgists and art enthusiasts may be most excited, however, by the triumphant return of Mr. Vignelli's design, long considered the most artful guide to the New York system.

When the Vignelli map made its debut in 1972, critics maligned it for a lack of geographic verisimilitude: Central Park was portrayed as a gray, squarish blob, and stations were placed misleadingly close to one another, leaving some riders disoriented upon ascending to the street.

But its abstract design, similar to the subway maps of London and Paris, has a streamlined beauty, and its yielding to the current, more literal map (blue rivers, green parks) has long been lamented by purists.

Mr. Vignelli's atelier, which also designed the subway's signature signage system, had already been in talks with the transportation authority about developing a 40th-anniversary edition of his map.

The Weekender is a tweaked version of Mr. Vignelli's original, with updated colors and routes and some small corrections, like restoring the 50th Street C stop to the west of its neighboring No. 1 stop. (Notoriously, the 1972 version had the two reversed.) Kennedy Airport is denoted by a perfect circle, representing the AirTrain.

Weekend ridership is at its highest level in decades, but transit workers still perform most maintenance and repair work on Saturdays and Sundays; the L train, for instance, has been entirely canceled along much of its route on two weekends this month.

Subway officials spent about six months designing the digital weekend guide, a recognition, they say, of riders' increasing reliance on the Web and smartphones to navigate the city.

The Weekender is not a panacea. Its landing page is not quite intuitive, and some users may at first have difficulty navigating it. But officials say that The Weekender is a work in progress, and that they will integrate users' comments as they make adjustments.

By coincidence, a preview of the site this week showed most subway lines looking relatively undisturbed for the coming weekend.

That is likely to change.

Referring to the blinking trouble lights, Paul Fleuranges, the head of the authority's corporate communications division, said that on some weekends, the map might be "lit up like a Christmas tree."

(The New York Times)