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IMMEDIATE

William J. Ronan, MTA's First Chairman, Dies at 101

Notable Public Transit Advocate's Tenure Included Start of Second Avenue Subway

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) is saddened by the death of William J. Ronan, the MTA's first chairman, who died Wednesday at the age of 101.


Ronan was appointed chairman of the agency – then known as the Metropolitan Commuter Transportation Authority – in 1965 by New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller. A well-known advocate of public transportation, Ronan was key to the expansion of transit options in the New York metropolitan area during his tenure at the MTA and his later work as head of the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey.

"Bill Ronan was a legend in the field of public transportation and an inspiration for everyone who understands that mass transit is the engine that powers New York," said MTA Chairman and CEO Thomas F. Prendergast. "His vision of how an integrated transportation system can improve the region, and his skill in turning that vision into reality, have made life better for millions of our customers every day. We at the MTA send our deepest condolences to his family, and remember his service fondly."

Ronan was born in Buffalo, N.Y., on Nov. 8, 1912, and attended schools in upstate New York, including Syracuse University, where he graduated in 1934. He received a doctorate from New York University in international law and diplomacy. He later became a professor and dean at NYU, where he established what is now NYU's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. He met Rockefeller two years before the latter became governor of New York, and became his private secretary in 1958.

Under the Rockefeller administration, Ronan helped set up the Tri-State Regional Transportation Commission, which was created as a transportation group to serve the commuting needs of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. In 1965, Ronan had been the governor's representative at negotiations to purchase the Long Island Rail Road from the Pennsylvania Railroad. Ronan served as the head of the MTA from March 1968 to April 1974, when he became chairman of the Port Authority.

The MCTA became the MTA in 1967 after the governor gained voter approval on a bond issue and legislative support to form the agency. The MTA assumed control of public transport agencies and eventually took over privately run commuter lines as well. During Ronan's tenure, the MTA created the Metro-North Railroad by acquiring separate commuter lines.

With Ronan at the helm of the agency, the MTA embarked on a number of ambitious improvement and capital projects, such as new subway lines in Queens and the Second Avenue Subway. In one farsighted move, the agency built a two-level rail tunnel under the East River at 63rd Street – one level now carries an expansion of the  subway line, and the other is being used for the East Side Access project to bring LIRR trains into Grand Central Terminal.

The elevated transit lines that ran along Manhattan's East Side began closing in the 1930s, with the Third Avenue elevated line closing in 1955. Yet with the city's economy booming after World War II and the elimination of the elevated lines, increased commercial and residential development in the area led to a need for more transit options.

"You can't go on building office buildings, apartment buildings, without planning for adequate transit," Ronan said in proposing the Second Avenue Subway.

When the Second Avenue elevated line shuttered in 1942, a subway replacement had been promised, and Ronan declared that it was time to start construction in 1972. He presided over its groundbreaking at 103rd Street and Second Avenue on Oct. 27, 1972. The project was halted five years later due to New York City's fiscal crises, but resumed in 2007. Nearly 40 years later and thanks to Ronan's forward thinking, his dream of a Second Avenue Subway is becoming reality. The MTA estimates the first phase of the Second Avenue Subway will open for service by the end of 2016.