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# The Great Society Subway: A History Of The Washington Metro (Creating The North American Landscape (Paperback))



## Synopsis

Drivers in the nation's capital face a host of hazards: high-speed traffic circles, presidential motorcades, jaywalking tourists, and bewildering signs that send unsuspecting motorists from the Lincoln Memorial into suburban Virginia in less than two minutes. And parking? Don't bet on it unless you're in the fast lane of the Capital Beltway during rush hour. Little wonder, then, that so many residents and visitors rely on the Washington Metro, the 106-mile rapid transit system that serves the District of Columbia and its inner suburbs. In the first comprehensive history of the Metro, Zachary M. Schrag tells the story of the Great Society Subway from its earliest rumblings to the present day, from Arlington to College Park, Eisenhower to Marion Barry. Unlike the pre-World War II rail systems of New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, the Metro was built at a time when most American families already owned cars, and when most American cities had dedicated themselves to freeways, not subways. Why did the nation's capital take a different path? What were the consequences of that decision? Using extensive archival research as well as oral history, Schrag argues that the Metro can be understood only in the political context from which it was born: the Great Society liberalism of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. The Metro emerged from a period when Americans believed in public investments suited to the grandeur and dignity of the world's richest nation. The Metro was built not merely to move commuters, but in the words of Lyndon Johnson, to create "a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community." Schrag scrutinizes the project from its earliest days, including general planning, routes, station architecture, funding decisions, land-use impacts, and the behavior of Metro riders. The story of the Great Society Subway sheds light on the development of metropolitan Washington, postwar urban policy, and the promises and limits of rail transit in American cities.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book was recently loaned to me by a retired urban planner who has lived in DC through his whole career. As a regional urban planner, transportation planner, and history buff, I thought this book was an extremely informative and well-written story of:- the planning and construction of one of the most significant public works projects in American history;- the social, political, and economic history of Post-WWII DC metro area;- the interface between urban land use and transportation planning, and one of the major success stories of public transit in the modern era;- the battle between Congress and the community over self-government in post WWII DC;- the challenges of funding and operating public transit, even when the construction of the project is heavily subsidized by the federal government. This book should be required reading for any graduate student in urban planning or transportation planning, and is a great read for anyone who is interested in the modern history of our nation's capital.

I first read this history of the Washington Metro for a class in my transportation policy masters program. But this is far more than a textbook for urban planners or transportation policy wonks. This is a well-written, entertaining book about one of the most visible and important projects of the latter-half of the 20th Century. The Metro is more than simply a subway for the nation's capital. It represents all of the challenges, successes, problems, and benefits of major transportation networks. The construction of the system demonstrated all of the political, social, and economic debates inherent with publicly-funded projects. Schrag captures it all and writes in a manner interesting to even the most casual of readers. The Metro fascinates people. Its growth and influence defines many communities in and around DC. Schrag brings to light so much of the history of the planning, political battles, and construction of the system. For those interested in anecdotes and urban legends this book will help answer many of those perpetual questions such as why there is no station in Georgetown or why the escalators are so long on the Red Line.

That question, posed in slightly different form by Mid-City activists in Washington, DC during the

construction of the Metro, is posed near the end of this fine history of "America's Subway." Jonathan Schrag spends the 376 pages preceding it demonstrating that urban transportation is about more than moving people from point A to point B by chronicling the people and passions that shaped the most successful of the Second Subway Era systems. As the book's title suggests, the Washington Metro is also the product of a singular era in American politics, when the liberal idea that government could be a force for building a better society reached its zenith, but it is also the product of a worldview that reinforces the importance of the dense city as a desirable human habitat. Urban freeway building undermined that worldview, and Washington was almost unique in reasserting it in the face of powerful forces arrayed against it, including members of Congress in whose hands the fate of the national capital as a city rested. Even though the moment for grand projects like the Washington Metro has long since passed, lovers of cities can take as much inspiration from this well-written story as lovers of trains can, for it shows what is possible when the planets align just right.

This is very good book about an important piece of infrastructure in the Washington, DC area. The work covers every aspect of every neighborhood and also the politics behind the metro better than anything currently available. I wish there were books about other transport systems worthy of this one.

During the earliest stages of building this line, I actually lived in the Suburban Virginia area, and while very interested in the construction, I saw very little, except test borings on Wisconsin avenue, as I had to work. Now, having read this book, I know much more about the process, and in 1977 we actually rode on the downtown portion. As expected, there were many, many roadblocks to construction, thrown up by local politicians, just plain mean spirited people who had the power to do so. This book provides an interesting overview of the behind the scenes action in trying to build a subway system, only to be constantly delayed, and to see costs skyrocket as the years went by. Recommended reading for those who not only are interested in the actual construction, but also those who want to know more about the dysfunction that often attends the hyper-political atmosphere of nearly anything done in Washington, DC

This book is incredibly well researched and thought out. Its thesis is proved not by beating you over the head but by the historical record. Moreover, it's quite a page turner. My only quibble would be the organization in the middle; in my opinion it tended to bounce between chronological and topical.

That is a small price to pay for this great read. I recommend this book.

I am an engineer currently working for WMATA. This book does a great job explaining the roles of the various agencies involved in the planning of metro and the formation of WMATA. It properly puts into perspective how difficult a political problem it was to plan and construct the system in the face of highway proposals, protests from other agencies and locals, and the inherent problem within tri-jurisdictional control. If you live in DC and are genuinely interested in public transit, read this.

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