

September 23, 2008, 10:48 am

Google Transit Expands to New York

By SEWELL CHAN



Susan Hassell, left, and her sister Katie Hash, both of Virginia, watched a demonstration of Google's new transit mapping feature in Grand Central Terminal. (Photo: Michael Nagle/Getty Images)

A number of public officials and the founders of [Google](#) assembled at Grand Central Terminal this morning to announce the start of New York's version of [Google Transit](#), an online feature that they said would transform the experience of navigating New York City's transit system, the nation's busiest.

"It is a very complicated transit system, and it just got less complicated today with the advent of Google Maps for transit," Gov. [David A. Paterson](#) said, noting that the subway system opened with 9.1 miles of lines in 1904, and that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority now serves a territory of 5,000 square miles.

The array of public officials present reflected Google's economic might, particularly at a time when Wall Street's convulsions have left the city and state economy reeling. Not only did the governor and leaders of the M.T.A. attend the Grand Central news conference, but so did Deputy Mayor Edward Sklyer, representing the Bloomberg administration, and officials of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and of New Jersey Transit.

"It just gives me great personal pleasure to be able to help even in a tiny way this fantastic public transportation system," [Sergey Brin](#), one of Google's founders, said at the news conference. The company's other founder, [Larry Page](#), said he even hoped the tool would "help congestion, help the economy over all."

Google has already presented [online maps for several transit systems](#) around the world, and several New York companies have provided similar services, like [Hopstop.com](#), but the new Google tool has support from public officials. (The M.T.A. even posted a [link to Google Transit](#) on its Web site, along with a Google [training video](#). And the M.T.A. allowed Google to install 10 demonstration kiosks where users can try out the new tool, until 5 p.m. today.)

The tool — which encompasses the M.T.A.'s subways, buses and two commuter railroads, along with the PATH and New Jersey Transit commuter lines — appears far more sophisticated than existing online trip planners like [Trips123](#), a site that was built with public financing.

It also seems to offer a key distinction from other, prior services: Users do not need to search specifically for transit information. Instead, they are shown transit routes, stations and stops even if are merely searching for,

say, a bagel store.

H. Dale Hemmerdinger, chairman of the M.T.A., said that Google Transit Maps will “reflect online what is clear on the ground: the M.T.A. is critical to the region’s mobility, economy and environment.”

Elliot G. Sander, chief executive and executive director of the M.T.A., said the partnership with Google “builds upon” other customer-oriented initiatives, including real-time text alerts informing riders of “planned and unplanned service disruptions” and cellphone service in the subways.

Marissa Mayer, Google’s vice president for search products and user experience, said that Google and the M.T.A. had some unexpected similarities.

Both organizations are committed to “getting people where they need to be as efficiently as possible,” she said, even noting that Google has a free shuttle system that transports more than 1,000 employees on about 30 routes within 50 miles of its headquarters in Mountain View, Calif., in the San Francisco Bay Area.

John Hanke, the founder of Google Earth, said the New York project started with a small group of employees who wanted to “promote the use of public transit as an alternative to people driving cars.” Google employees are allowed to spend 20 percent of their time on self-directed projects, and these employees used that time to pursue their passion for public transit, he said.

Mr. Hanke said that Google had already introduced the tool for transit systems in cities like Austin, Portland, and Los Angeles, but that the truer test of the feature was whether it could also serve the world’s largest transit systems, like London, Paris, Tokyo and New York. (Google Transit covers Tokyo, but not yet London or Paris.)

Tom Sly, a Google business development manager who demonstrated the new tool using a mobile devices, showed how the transit feature worked with Google’s street view tool. Google Transit plans itineraries, using transit schedules supplied by the M.T.A. to provide estimates for how long a given subway or bus ride would take.

Christopher P. Boylan, the M.T.A.’s vice president for external affairs, said that the authority had made its extensive data on route schedules available to Google — but that it was available to other software developers as well.

“Google has taken our raw data, so we haven’t interpreted it specifically for them,” Mr. Boylan said. “That data is available to other map entities also.”

Ms. Mayer, one of Google’s top executives, said that “a lot of people come to me to show their 20 percent time projects,” and offer a demonstration of their efforts.

Ms. Mayer said the initiative was the brainchild of two California-based employees, Avichal Garg and Chris Harrelson, who approached her with the idea in 2005. Portland, Ore., which had its schedule and routing information readily available, was the first city available on Google Transit, starting in November 2006.

At one point, when the volume of the New York data became apparent, “Avichal said, ‘We’re not ready yet for all the data they’re going to send us,’” and Ms. Mayer urged him to press on, even though “obviously New York is far more comprehensive and vast” than other cities with transit systems. “Take the data,” she told him.

Mr. Hanke added, “A lot of our work ended up being done in our Zurich office,” saying, “We’re the first major online mapping company to embrace public transportation.” He said that Google employees in Europe and Japan helped push along the initiative

caption: people push along the sidewalk.