



Feet in 2 Worlds

How NYC Dollar Vans are Adapting for The Future

Thousands of New Yorkers rely on an unofficial transit system to get around — a system entirely outside of the MTA. Dollar vans are a DIY immigrant innovation that have served riders for half a century, but their future is unclear.

Producer Andrés Pacheco-Girón speaks with riders, drivers, and entrepreneurs all navigating what comes next for these dollar vans.

Quincy Surasmith: This is Feet in 2 Worlds, telling the stories of today's immigrants. I'm Quincy Surasmith, managing editor.

Thousands in New York City rely on an unofficial system of public commuter vans to get around the city — one that is not part of the MTA. These vans, better known as Dollar Vans, have served riders across New York City for half a century, but their future is unclear.

The city's government has struggled to regulate them, and the growing operating costs of the vans pose challenges for both drivers and the riders who rely on them.

Feet in 2 Worlds Producer Andrés Pacheco Girón has the story.

Subway Sounds

Andres Pacheco-Giron: If you've ever visited New York City, you probably recognize these sounds

The New York City subway has some of the most iconic sounds you'll hear.

I grew up in Bogota, Colombia. And something you should know about Bogotanos is that we don't have a subway. We have desperately wanted one for a very long time. So when I first moved to New York, using the subway felt like a dream come true.

But the longer I spent in New York, the more I realized that the subway isn't a public transit utopia that serves everybody.

New York is considered one of the best cities for public transportation in the United States. But not everyone has the same access to reliable transit. Especially those who call the outer boroughs home. Like Brooklyn or Queens. Many of these people are immigrants. And kids of immigrants. Like Corey.

Corey: It's 2:30 in the morning. I just worked, uh, you know, a very late shift. I just want to get home. I just got off the train. Train took me an hour and a half because it's running local. Now here I am waiting for the bus and the bus is not coming for another hour.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Corey is a Panamanian-American videographer who was born and raised in Brooklyn. He is pointing out another New York City transit problem. If you're not riding the subway, you are probably riding a bus. And those can be very unreliable.

Corey: So man, I'm in a jam right now. I'm trying to figure out how am I going to get home? And little do I know, I look to my left and I see a dollar van fly by.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Dollar vans. They get you around the city when the bus or the subway doesn't. But there's a chance you don't know what they are.

You won't find dollar vans on an app like Uber or Lyft, at least not yet. Dollar vans are also not part of the city's Metropolitan Transportation Authority — the MTA. They're not official city-funded transportation.

A dollar van is not as big as a bus or a subway car, but it can carry up to 20 people. It takes passengers across fixed routes, just like a bus would, but it also looks very different.

Picture a small school bus with folding doors, but instead of yellow, a dollar van is usually painted white. Most have tinted windows, and some have stickers listed with the price or inspirational quotes on the sides.

If you are waiting for a taxi or a bus on the street, a dollar van might honk at you to grab your attention. And if you're trying to catch a ride, you signal the driver by raising your arm.

As you board, you will probably hear music playing on powerful speakers. You might see some decor hanging from the front mirror: flags, bobble heads, or posters. And then...

Corey: You want to jump in, grab a good seat and kind of wait for your, you know, destination to

arrive.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Like dollar pizza slices, or quarter waters, New Yorkers named dollar vans for their price.

But sadly, what happened to pizza prices also happened to dollar vans. A dollar per ride is a thing of the past. Now, the price varies depending on the route. In Brooklyn, most dollar vans charge two dollars.

There are many dollar van routes in New York. You can travel from the southern edge of Brooklyn all the way to downtown. Or travel through three Chinatowns — from Flushing, Queens to Manhattan to Sunset Park in Brooklyn.

To understand why dollar vans exist, we've got to look at an even bigger problem — transit deserts. That term describes a neighborhood without access to official public transit, like trains or buses.

If you look at the outer boroughs of the city, where immigrants are concentrated, you'll see that New York has a lot of transit deserts.

But experts and academics say “transit desert” is an imprecise concept when talking about New York. I spoke with Eric Goldwyn, the director of the Transportation and Land Use program at NYU's Marron Institute of Urban Management. He also knows a lot about dollar vans because his PhD research focused on dollar vans in Flatbush.

Eric Goldwyn: Technically in New York, there are no transit deserts, you know, like buses are everywhere.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Dr. Goldwyn says there are no transit deserts in New York, because the MTA is everywhere. Where there is no subway, there are buses.

But I know how annoying it is to wait for the bus in the freezing cold winter. I check Google maps but the schedules are rarely accurate. Buses can be very unpredictable.

Historically, neighborhoods without subways — where buses are dominant — are also where people of color and immigrants live. When those New Yorkers couldn't rely on official transportation, they needed to get creative. And that is precisely what immigrants did.

They brought to New York City a service they were familiar with: un-official public transportation; colorful decorated vans with different personalities. Like: Tro-Tros in Ghana. Dalla Dallas in Tanzania. Jeepneys in the Philippines. Chivas in Colombia. You get the point.

And you can get a taste of the roots of New York's dollar vans through the music that plays on their sound systems. Or the flags hanging from their windows. Or, like Corey says, the voices of the people who ride them.

Corey: The minute you step in the van, you hear the accent, it brings you back home.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Corey's neighborhood is Flatbush in Brooklyn, which is also home to several immigrant groups from the Caribbean. As of 2022, almost half of the people who live in Flatbush are immigrants.

And the dollar vans in this neighborhood reflect that.

Hilltop Boss: The dollar vans come from the Caribbean, the islands, the West Indies, Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, Guyana, Grenada, even in Haiti.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: That's a dollar van driver who goes by the name "Hilltop Boss."

Hilltop Boss: We call it mini buses. So you want to go to the town, you got to take a minibus. You want to go to the country, you got to take a minibus. So that's how it crossed over from the islands to America.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Hilltop is the son of Jamaican immigrants and has been driving these vans since the early 2000s.

Hilltop Boss: So, that's why in New York, or even Brooklyn, the West Indian community could relate to what's going on. So, they see the dollar van, they'll take it. 'Cause it reminds them of back home.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Hilltop's dad rode minibuses in Jamaica. And when he moved to New York, he decided to drive one himself.

Hilltop Boss: Foundation, they call him. He ended up getting a vehicle from my grandmother and said he was going to hustle with it and run some taxi, things in that nature.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Hilltop's dad eventually swapped out his taxi for a van. And he was nicknamed "Foundation" because...

Hilltop Boss: He's actually the founder for Dollar Van, you could say.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Well, Foundation wasn't exactly the founder, but he was definitely one of the first dollar van drivers in New York.

According to Dr. Goldwyn, New York dollar vans originated around that time.

Eric Goldwyn: The very first reference I ever found was there was a newspaper article in the '70s about a van in the Bronx bringing people into Manhattan.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: It was around that time when Hilltop Boss became familiar with dollar vans himself.

Hilltop Boss: My mom would have to go to work. You know, somebody had to watch me and my sister. So my dad would take on that responsibility and he took us on the road.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: You could say that's when Hilltop's career began.

Hilltop Boss: When I started to get a little bit bigger, I started to actually work the door and collect the money from when I was about seven, eight years old.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: But if little Hilltop Boss were to work the door today, his shifts would be much busier.

Back in the '70s, there were fewer dollar van drivers in New York. But the industry really started to grow after that.

Specifically after April 1980, when New York's official public transit shut down.

[Archival News from WNYC]

Jerry Miller: Good morning, it's day number three of the 1980 New York City Transit Strike. New Yorkers should get a lot of exercise this week if predictions by union officials hold up. The union leaders say the mass transit strike, which has idled subways and buses for the past two days, should last at least a week.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: It was a bad time for transit riders and workers. The city was failing to update infrastructure and provide maintenance...and city authorities said the funds just weren't there.

As a result, MTA workers hadn't seen a wage increase for years. New York's major transit union tried negotiating with the city. The union asked for a 30% wage increase to match the current cost of living. But on the morning of April 1, 1980, MTA management offered only a six percent wage increase for the next two years.

Workers were fed up — this was not enough. So they went on a massive strike that left New York without public transportation for 11 days.

Eric Goldwyn: And that is seen as sort of like the catalytic moment that gave rise to these vans, because as one can imagine during a transit strike where there's no bus or subway, people still need to get places. And so. Entrepreneurs would just pack people into their vans and bring them into Manhattan.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Foundation, Hilltop's father, was one of those entrepreneurs.

And although most people think dollar vans are a product of the MTA strike of 1980, Hilltop says that's only part of the story.

Hilltop Boss: They were already around, you know. They wasn't being looked up upon like that until probably after the strike, how we played a big part on still commuting people back and forth to work.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Dollar vans became bigger and bigger in the outer boroughs throughout the years. They became part of the daily lives of many immigrant New Yorkers. Adults would use dollar vans for things like going to work or running errands. But it was a different story for teenagers.

If you grew up in the suburbs or in other cities in the U.S., you might know the excitement of getting a driver's license when you turn 16. You become a little more independent, you experience a little more freedom.

But for kids like Corey, who grew up in Flatbush, taking a dollar van was their version of that rite of passage.

Corey: So growing up, I remember when I was about 12, 13 years old, and we crossed the line of, you know, our parents allowing us to go out on our own.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: And teenagers like him used the dollar vans to get to the coolest place in town...

Corey: Kings Plaza. A big mall on Flatbush Avenue.

That was like one of the main hangout spots for us growing up. And to get there, we would have to take a dollar van.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Dollar vans became a part of the community. And riding them could ease culture shock for newly arrived immigrants.

Hilltop Boss: Let's say I meet somebody and they're from, like, China, and they ask me, Oh I need to get downtown.

So, you know, if you're new to America or New York, it's going to be hard to explain. Well, you got to get on the B12 bus, and then you got to get off on this stop, and you got to get on another bus.

So it was more easier to say, oh, just get on the dollar van, take it there to the last stop downtown. It'll be right there.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: And things get even easier if the driver actually speaks your language. Or if the people who are riding the van do. Because that means you can ask questions.

But even beyond cultural or language barriers, people have also been riding dollar vans because...

Eric Goldwyn: Currently in New York traffic has just been getting worse and worse. And so the reliability of buses can be problematic.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Part of Dr. Goldwyn's research concluded that dollar vans are just more reliable.

Listen, he did a whole study about this, and some math is involved. But all you need to know is that if you take a dollar van, and you're late, you will probably never be as late as if you take the bus.

But dollar vans are this efficient because they serve very specific communities.

Eric Goldwyn: It's a very homogenous population.

The vans in Brooklyn, they're predominantly operated and patronized by West Indian black populations.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: And that matters. A lot. Historically, both immigrants and people of color have been segregated to the outer boroughs of the city, where there are more transit deserts. Dollar vans don't need to stop in every neighborhood because for example, their passengers are going from the city straight to the outer boroughs or vice versa.

Eric Goldwyn: You can think about the B41 as it goes along Flatbush Avenue, it's going to stop every couple of blocks.

But as you're going from Atlantic and Flatbush on a dollar van, you might not stop until Church Avenue. Because the people that ride the vans just don't live in Park Slope.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: While dollar vans are an immigrant innovation, racism and xenophobia in New York played a big role in shaping the dollar van business.

And not just for the passengers. The drivers themselves were experiencing discrimination on their routes.

Take Hilltop's dad, for example.

Hilltop Boss: Coming from another country and doing something like this and people telling you to get out of here. They don't want you to do this and...

He experienced a lot of "Go back to where you came from. We don't want you out here. You're not going to be out here doing this long."

And then you got police enforcing it too.

The police was very rough back then.

Sometimes you didn't even have to do nothing.

Once they see the vehicle and knew what the vehicle represented, they automatically would pull the vehicle over, for no reason, ask for documents, write unnecessary tickets, to kind of break, uh, your spirit from coming out here, do what you gotta do, you know, and then try to make you put all the money back into the city.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: As dollar vans grew in numbers and clientele, the authorities worked to regulate the system.

The city passed a law to regulate commuter vans, the official term for dollar vans, in 1993.

But even after 50 years, they still haven't figured out laws and policies that work.

In the eyes of the city, there are two types of dollar vans out there:

Those regulated by the Taxi Limousine Commission of the city, or the TLC, which means they get inspected and have insurance, among other things, just like cabs.

And then you have the vans that are not registered. Some call them pirates.

And things get even more complicated because regardless of whether a dollar van is licensed or not, according to New York City laws, stopping a dollar van on the street is illegal.

Eric Goldwyn: So the thing about the vans, is that it's illegal to hail them. That was a privilege reserved exclusively for yellow taxis.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Alongside a driver's license, dollar van drivers need to get a TLC permit.

And on top of that there's the most expensive thing: insurance.

If you are a driver you probably want to have insurance in case something happens when you're driving through the city.

But all of those things cost money. So, those requirements are a huge financial burden for most drivers who are trying to make ends meet.

During the pandemic, things became even more challenging for dollar van drivers. Dr. Goldwyn says that:

Eric Goldwyn: Post COVID has been really tough, for the industry in general.

Operators who had been licensed for a decade or decades. Just were like, no, I'm not going to continue paying for this stuff.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: So instead of the city formalizing more vans over the years, the opposite has happened. In the years since Covid, the number of licensed commuter vans has substantially decreased.

To give you a better picture of how much they decreased, in 2019, there were 215 vans licensed by the TLC. But, according to the TLC commissioner, as of October 2024, there are only 35 commuter vans licensed by the city.

Just 35 vans in all of New York are working with all the required paperwork. But I bet if you go to Flatbush or Utica Avenue for just a couple hours, you will spot a lot more than just 35 vans.

And that's just one area in Brooklyn. There are also vans operating in the Bronx, Queens and Manhattan.

Whatever the city is doing is not working. Can this unofficial public transportation that is desperately needed and widely used, become official? What does the future for dollar vans in New York City look like?

After the break, we are going to hear two different visions for the future of dollar vans. One from the founder of a startup and one from the drivers themselves.

[Break]

Andres Pacheco-Giron: As city officials struggle to find a way to regulate commuter vans effectively, other people are trying to come up with their own plans to make dollar vans better.

Su Sanni is one of them.

Su Sanni: My name is Su Sanni. I'm the co founder and CEO of Dollaride, which is a mobility company that develops clean transportation projects in urban cities and in particular in underserved markets.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Dollaride is a relatively new player in the dollar van market.

Su founded it in 2017. Part of its funding comes from an initiative in New York to transition from gas-powered vehicles to electric ones.

That's what Dollaride does. They transform traditional dollar vans into vans powered by electricity. And they play by the book. Which means they work with drivers who have all of their professional licenses.

The CEO, Su, was born in New York and raised by Nigerian immigrant parents. When he was a kid, he lived in Jamaica, Queens.

One day, his uncle, who owned a dollar van fleet, made a suggestion.

Su Sanni: He said, instead of taking the bus, you should walk a few blocks and catch a dollar van.

And then I asked him, all right, well, what do you mean a dollar van? What's that? And then he explained how their system of dollar vans work.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: That's how Su got to know dollar vans. He started riding them to go hang out with his cousin and to go to Kings Plaza Mall with his sister.

But Su has a different relationship to dollar vans than most of the people who drive one. Both of his parents have college degrees and had jobs outside the dollar van industry.

And although two of his uncles were part of the business, owning a fleet of vans is different from working a van on the streets.

Su never worked driving a van, but he has worked for his uncles as a business advisor. And that proximity to the business helped him come up with the idea of Dollaride.

Su Sanni: Hearing from lots of drivers and fleet owners like my uncles, um, how much money they spend on gas and how much that was actually impacting their businesses and making it harder for them to make ends meet.

That's what got us at Dollaride interested in clean transportation.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Dollaride and other dollar van drivers agree that the high costs of insurance and gas are challenging.

But Su thinks it's more than just a challenge.

Su Sanni: The business model for commuter van service is not profitable today. It used to be profitable in the '90s, or maybe in the early 2000s, but it is no longer profitable today.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Dr. Goldwyn has a different take on this.

Eric Goldwyn: So, you know, the vans are profitable. Obviously, these people that drive them have been driving for, you know, decades, make money, otherwise they wouldn't do it.

Now if you want to create a fleet of app hailed fancy electric vans, yeah, that's going to cost you more money.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Whether electric vans cost more money or not is unclear. We'll get to that in a minute.

But it's true that the business is not doing well. Fares have increased one dollar since the '80s.

That is not a significant change if you consider how much inflation has also increased in the last 50 years. Despite that, dollar van drivers refuse to increase their fares.

Su Sanni: So they have this level of allegiance and empathy for their community, but it's unfortunately not in their favor from a business perspective.

Something has to give here. Either the operating costs of the vehicle need to get lower, somehow, somehow. And/or, the amount of money a driver earns needs to get higher.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: So what Dollar ride proposes is to change the business model. They say it's more profitable to work as contractors providing transportation for private events.

Su says that a dollar van like Hilltop's can transport 150 passengers on a busy day. But on slower days, drivers end up carrying less than 30 people.

Su also says that electrifying dollar vans can save drivers some bucks.

Su Sanni: So the difference is like 70 percent cheaper. Um, so that's a lot of money that the driver can keep as take home pay if he's in a vehicle that's just more energy efficient.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: Expert opinions on this topic are divided. It's unclear if electrifying buses in urban areas will actually lower the operation costs. Dollaride says it's around 70% cheaper to operate an electric van than one powered by gas. And that same logic applies to owning an electric car, as some studies suggest.

However, other studies show the costs of operating larger vehicles, like buses, in urban areas could increase costs significantly.

But, the case for electric vehicles doesn't only depend on the money. Electricity-powered vehicles produce about half the greenhouse gas emissions compared to a vehicle that burns gasoline or diesel.

And marginalized communities in the outer boroughs of New York are getting the worst of the climate crisis and urban pollution.

Su Sanni: So, we see a big opportunity in electrifying the vehicles that drivers own because they're

inevitably operating in the same communities that not only have transit deserts, but higher percentages of air pollutants and therefore lower air quality. So we think that, you know, you can ultimately kill two or three birds with one stone.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: But Su's ideas don't sit well with the rest of the dollar van drivers I spoke with. Some said Dollaride is trying to change their business without understanding their true needs. And some of them even got upset when I mentioned Su and refused to talk to me.

Dollaride is not the only one working toward a different future for dollar vans.

Some have decided to fight by legal means. For example, the Commuter Van Association of New York, has been working hard to negotiate new policies to lower the high costs of insurance.

And Hilltop Boss, alongside other drivers who work in Flatbush, have been organizing. They want to keep the two dollar fare, while expanding their clientele.

Here's Hilltop Boss again:

Hilltop Boss: During the pandemic, I was trying to figure out a way to, you know, get people back on supporting the dollar vans because MTA was giving free rides. A lot of people wasn't working.

I decided to talk to one of the guys and we were sitting down one day on Rutland. And I was talking to him like, "Hey, what you think if we, if we do a giveaway, a dollar van giveaway to bring more awareness to the people that we still around, we still doing what we doing."

Andres Pacheco-Giron: With other drivers from Flatbush and Utica, Hilltop Boss has been organizing an Annual Back to School Drive for five years now. The event is a block party in Amersfort Park in Brooklyn. With a DJ playing music, free food, bouncy houses for kids, and a school supply giveaway.

The drivers are paying for most things out of their pocket. Even if times are tough for business.

[Ambi Music]

Andres Pacheco-Giron: This year was the 5th annual back to school drive.

I went to the event and that's where I met Corey...the passenger you heard from earlier.

Corey: We're on East 38th street and Avenue I in Amersfort Park, and it is Labor Day weekend. So you see a lot of colors, a lot of flags, a lot of people just in general.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: People were having fun. So as a nosy reporter would do, I interrupted their fun and asked them about their thoughts on dollar vans. Here's Tawanna, who is a regular passenger.

Tawanna: You know, because they are doing a lot and it does mean a lot to people. You see more of what they're doing other than just riding up and down the street, taking passengers to work, taking the parents to work so they can afford to buy certain things. And...

Andres Pacheco-Giron: I followed Hilltop Boss around that day. He seemed to be THE neighborhood celebrity.

[Scene]

Hilltop: *It's one person by the bench.*
Woman: *What, what cologne you have on?*
Hilltop: *Is Polo Ralph Lauren. The red one.*
Woman: *You smell good.*
Hilltop: *Thank you.*

Andres Pacheco-Giron: At the event, I witnessed a tight-knit dollar van community. But I was skeptical that organizing this gathering would solve all the problems dollar van drivers have. So I asked Hilltop what he hoped to achieve.

Hilltop Boss: It was more to build more clientele to see that we're giving back.

'Cause, without them, we wouldn't even be out there.

You know, um, we're, we're, we're somebody too.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: After he gave me his answer, I realized not everyone chooses to solve their problems at city hall. For now, the drivers aim to build trust with the community that has been riding dollar vans for years.

Hilltop says that the Utica and Flatbush Avenue drivers are coming up with ideas to provide a more organized service for the community. Plus, the Commuter Van Association of New York is pressuring the City to pass laws that will make things easier for them.

After I interviewed Hilltop, he offered to drive me down Utica Avenue to the closest subway station. FYI, it took a while to get there.

[Dollar van drives through the street]

Hilltop Boss: It's kind of quiet right now on the road because of the time. Everybody's at work. Uh, there's a few people that be on the road going to certain local places. But it's not so busy, but it's okay. In the meantime, like, we might get some people who might not...

Hello, Mama. How you doing? Let me hold this for you up front here. Okay. Come. Thank you.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: As I hopped off Hilltop's van, I couldn't stop thinking about how much easier it is for me to get around the city because of the fact that I live close to the subway.

Dollar vans have been in New York for half a century. But their future is unclear. Will they embrace a corporate profit-driven model? Or will the community figure out a way to keep vans affordable and accessible to the people who need it most? And where does climate change and air quality fit into the mix?

Whatever happens in city hall, and whatever the future is for dollar vans, I hope people that rely on them, as riders and drivers, get a say in it.

For now, whether you are a New Yorker or just visiting, like Corey says...

Corey: You can always count on your dollar van, mans. For sure, for sure.

Andres Pacheco-Giron: For Feet in 2 Worlds, I'm Andrés Pacheco-Girón.

Quincy Surasmith: This story was produced for Feet in 2 Worlds By Andrés Pacheco-Girón. To read more about dollar vans, you can visit our website at Fi2W.org. That's F I the number 2, W, dot org.

This story was engineered by Kojin Tashiro. Lushik Lotus-Lee, Mia Warren and Quincy Surasmith edited the story.

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Visit our website at Fi2W.org to listen to more stories about immigrants. I'm Quincy Surasmith. Thank you for listening.

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