

A Car by Any Other Fuel: Still Bad for NYC



With nearly 100,000 petition signatures in hand, New Yorkers rallied this October for a three-month trial closure of the Central Park loop drive. **Page 9**

Provocateur	2
Publisher's Letter	3
Cycling News	4
In Focus: Car Free Parks Then and Now	9
Reclaiming the Streets	12
Sensible Transportation	15
Around the Boroughs	16
Safe Seniors	17
World News	18
Metropolitan News	19
Volunteer Profile	21
Commuter Profile	23
Bike to Transit	24
Letters	25
About T.A.	26

THE PRICE OF GAS IN THE New York City metro area has increased 50% over the past year. If the brisk sales of hybrid cars and commuter-style bicycles are any indication, car commuters are now looking for alternatives.

It remains to be seen how many drivers will merely trade up to more fuel efficient automobiles versus ditch driving altogether and make full switch to bicycling, walking and transit. For the sake of our ever-densifying city, let us hope for the latter.

The reason is that automobiles, whether powered by petrol, bio-diesel, electricity or hydrogen, take up more than their fair share of our city's most valuable, limited and hotly contested resource: space. What makes driving attractive — a comfy cocoon of upholstery, glass, metal and electronics—also makes it spatially inefficient. The street space required to move one car through the city, can accommodate tens of bus riders, pedestrians or bicyclists.

If just 5% of car commuters were to make the switch to more spatially efficient modes, it would free up enough street space to widen hundreds of miles of city sidewalks, complete our city's much belated network of planned bike paths and create world-class public squares from space currently being used to move and park cars.

To illustrate how a decrease in driving would benefit New York, consider the opposite scenario in which 5% of today's supermajority of Manhattan-bound transit, walking and bicycling commuters make the reverse switch to driving.

Assuming 1.5 passengers per car, Manhattan would be inundated with an additional 166,000 cars. These extra cars would represent a whopping 20% increase over the 832,000 cars that currently swamp Manhattan on a daily basis. It would take the equivalent of two Central Parks just to park these 166,000 cars, let alone move them about the city.

Unfortunately, a significant increase in driving is not just a hypothetical. Our city's dangerous streets, crowded sidewalks, pokey buses, crowded and dirty subways and new parking-rich land use developments are giving New Yorkers strong incentives to drive. And while the rising price of gas may hold



T.A. FILE

Cars are the most inefficient users of NYC street space: cars use 1292 square feet of space per traveler, buses 129 square feet, bicycles 97 square feet and pedestrians only 22.

some drivers at bay, expensive gas will remain only a fraction of the cost of owning and operating an auto in New York City, particularly as more fuel efficient models hit the market.

Decreasing the number of cars on our streets and addressing increasingly unsustainable oil consumption is going to take more than high gas prices and new fuels. It is going to take a Mayor as committed to better performing streets as better performing schools and law enforcement. And it will take a Mayor who is willing to stand up to the privileged and powerful class of car-dependent city employees who resist change at every turn. (Because of the parking privileges that they have come to expect as their birthright, our city's municipal employees drive at twice the rate of the average New Yorker.)

With the right leadership, however, high gas prices could catalyze a host of long overdue transportation reforms, from slashing municipal parking privileges to instituting congestion pricing to changing the design of our streets so that they reward rather than punish bicyclists, walkers and transit riders, who by far are the most efficient users of some of the most valuable land in the world.

Sincerely,

Paul Steely White
Executive Director
Transportation Alternatives

Transportation ALTERNATIVES

MISSION STATEMENT: Encourage bicycling, walking and public transit as alternatives to automobile use, and reduce automobile use and its attendant environmental and social harms.

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