



# FIVE REASONS

## Why It's (*finally*) Time for NYC to Wake Up from the Traffic Nightmare

Street traffic has reached a state of congestion and danger which now holds national attention. At a moment when New York is directing intensive study to the problem it becomes worthwhile to compare the experiences of other cities. . . . Hardly a city in the country except Los Angeles fails to report confusion, injury and discord over automobile traffic. The California City has adopted a plan of control which apparently works. . . .

—Many Are Rushing Work on New Highways and Wider Streets While Experimenting with Various Systems of Control, *New York Times*, pg. 5, Jan 9, 1927

**W**HAT CAN BE DONE TO SOLVE the problem of New York City's nightmare traffic? Expressways, the ultimate relief valve for gushing cars and trucks, impose too many economic and social costs. Sidewalks, already reduced to ribbons on many of New York's most bustling thoroughfares, cannot be narrowed any further. Only the tiniest increases in traffic capacity remain to be wrung from more subtle schemes to retime traffic signals, reroute traf-

fic, restrict pedestrians and ban turns. And all of these measures have only served to stoke more driving and make traffic even worse.

New York is now falling behind other big cities that have woken up from their traffic nightmares.

By reducing the demand for driving instead of appeasing drivers, cities as diverse as London, Paris, Seoul, Singapore, Copenhagen and Bogotá have improved transportation performance, reduced transaction costs and in so doing have enhanced that vital thing that

cities were created for in the first place: ease of commerce.

Now, after much dawdling and many false starts, there are strong signs that the time is here for the Mayor of New York to implement a new generation of proven traffic relief solutions: road pricing, parking reform and robust rights-of-way for bicycling, walking and transit.

### 1. Mounting evidence of the efficacy of demand-side traffic solutions

The success of London's congestion charge has surprised everyone. Since February 2003 when the London drivers began paying \$9 to drive into the city center, the number of vehicles entering Central London has decreased 18% and traffic delays have decreased 30%. Significantly and favorably, the number of actual people entering London's center only decreased by 2%.

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Londoners are still getting to the core to work and shop; they are just doing it more efficiently. Other benefits of the change: bicycling has increased 67%, London's air is cleaner, traffic noise has decreased and buses are running faster.

Paris, Bogotá, Copenhagen and other big cities have also successfully tackled traffic through a combination of private car use restrictions, parking reforms and transit improvements. As with London, these examples also hold lessons for New York, particularly parking reform.

New York City's abundant supply of free, cheap and municipal employee abused on-street parking both generates many car trips and more care miles travel as drivers search for that elusive free or discounted space. As a new T.A. study will soon show, the Manhattan destinations to which there is a high share of car commuting are clearly those with an abundance of free and low cost parking. A 1995 study estimate that 8% of all traffic in west midtown was from cars cruising for parking. By simply increasing the cost of on-street parking to a price competitive with private parking garages, drivers would drive fewer miles or not at all.

## 2. The rise of traffic-afflicted New Yorkers

Just as the rewards of taming traffic have become more tangible, so have the costs of doing nothing. A growing number of fed-up residents, health advocates, environmental groups and transportation activists are joining forces to demand that the City take action to reduce the number of cars and trucks being driven through their neighborhoods.

In a complete reversal from the erstwhile pleas for more provisions for drivers, the city's leading business groups, who are seeing heavy traffic affect their bottom lines, are also now calling on City Hall to reduce traffic rather than accommodate it. The Partnership for New York City has stated its public support for London style road pricing, and the city's leading business improvement districts, led by the Times Square Alliance and the 34th Street Partnership, are now clamoring for more sidewalk and pedestrian space at the expense of vehicular space.

In May, after the Columbia University Center for Children's Environmental Health released a study linking car and truck emissions to genetic abnormalities and cancer, a Transportation Alternatives led alliance of several leading environmental and health groups—including the American Heart Association and Natural Resources Defense Council—petitioned Mayor Bloomberg and Governor Pataki to reduce vehicular traffic volumes. While the response from the

Mayor and the Governor was underwhelming, the alliance did succeed in gaining the attention of the City Department of Health, which is rumored to be drafting an ambitious program to redress transportation induced health problems.

Most recently, parents in the Bronx have made news for their efforts to gain traffic calming around all Bronx schools (see page 14) and the bicycling community, in response to the recent spate of traffic deaths, is rising up to demand that streets be reengineered to increase the space and priority allotted to cyclists (see page 6).

## 3. The surge in demand for walking and bicycling

As neighborhoods develop into diner's paradises and shopper's heavens, the sidewalks are turning into a walker's nightmare. As recent pedestrian and bicycle counts prove, there are more pedestrians and bicyclists filling the streets of New York than ever before.

The amount of street space devoted to driving versus bicycling and walking, however, has not expanded sufficiently to accommodate these increases. As a result, "pedlock" is on the rise, especially on retail intensive streets like Canal Street, 8th Avenue and in Times Square in Manhattan where pedestrians are spilling into the street. While bicycling congestion is not yet a problem, the lack of adequate bike lanes in the face of New York's increasing number of cyclists is exposing more and more cyclists to unacceptable hazard.

Given New York City's current high demand for driving and parking, reallocating driving and parking space to favor bicyclists and pedestrians would require the DOT officials to change the way the agency analyzes and weighs the relative importance of bicycle and pedestrian needs versus drivers' desires. Currently the top agency officials fear that ceding more space and priority for wider sidewalks and bike lanes will only worsen traffic congestion.

The trend towards decreased demand for driving could tip the balance at DOT in favor of more and wider bike lanes and sidewalks both of which would give cyclists and pedestrians more space and priority.

Even modest reductions in traffic volumes could make the difference in the city's decisions about making Central and Prospect

Parks car-free, moving to a new standard for wider and better protected bicycle lanes and increasing pedestrian space at key locations such as Times Square, Astor Place, the greater area of Canal Street in Manhattan and Bedford and Vanderbilt Avenues in Brooklyn.

## 4. The transportation implications of development and upzoning

The only way for New York to meet future demand for travel induced by development and upzoning is to wring more performance out of the existing street network. This will require a radical reduction in the capacity allotted to private vehicles.

With the Second Avenue Subway costing about \$2 billion per mile, New York City can no more afford build new subways than it can afford to build new expressways. As a result, New York City is now faced with one option: to squeeze more transportation capacity from the existing street network.

Even without the ambitious new upzoning and development projects underway in downtown Brooklyn, Williamsburg-Greenpoint and Long Island City, Queens, transportation

demand in the five boroughs is on the rise, and will increase even more in the coming years. In downtown Brooklyn alone it is estimated that in the next 10 years, there will be demand for an additional 294,000 trips every weekday.

New York City's transportation network is simply ill-equipped to handle this increase. Existing subway lines feeding areas that are slated for upzoning and development are running near, at or over capacity, as are parallel streets.

The most cost effective solution is to move people out of spatially inefficient private cars and into high capacity buses running on busway corridors, aka "surface subways." These systems cost a fraction of the cost of a subway, and can move almost as many passengers. The city is already moving in this direction with the new \$21 million Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project, but this is only a small first step. The success of this project and future BRT efforts will ultimately depend on converting some regular travel lanes to bus lanes. Bogotá's TransMilenio system, for example, moves 45,000 passengers per hour per direction, as many passengers as New York City's busiest subway lines. They are able to achieve those massive flows because the



Since 2002,  
London driving  
is down 18%  
and bicycling is  
up 67%

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city makes the political decision to reclaim two traffic lanes per direction to create the busway.

Instead of merely reallocating street space to high capacity buses to create the busways, instituting congestion pricing and parking reforms first would buffer the impact to the transportation system.

## 5. Transit terror

While less traffic would not likely lead to a reduced risk of terrorist attack, less traffic would lessen the potential impact of an attack and enhance city functioning in the aftermath.

The "car pool rule" or restriction on single occupancy vehicles entering Manhattan below 62nd Street between 6am and 10am on week-

days, proved to be a tough traffic restriction that helped New York City weather the shock and disruption in the months after 9/11. The car pool rule reduced traffic congestion, sped busses and emergency vehicles, and improved air quality.

Permanent traffic relief measures in the form of congestion pricing or parking reform would provide New York City more transportation resiliency in a timelier fashion than the car pool rule. Moreover, congestion pricing would be more flexible than the car pool rule, so that the system would be able to respond to fluctuations in conditions and travel demand. The technology required to enforce a road pricing system will also make it easier for New York City to monitor poten-

tial bomb laden vehicles. Finally, increases in sidewalk and pedestrian space enabled by traffic reductions would allow for more space between vehicles and high value targets, thus reducing the impact and damage of a vehicle bomb blast.

## What are the obstacles?

Despite these trends, winning real traffic relief will not be easy. For one, there is still a general perception that serving the minority of car-driving New Yorkers is vital to the thriving of New York City's economy. While it is true that some car and truck traffic is necessary to keep New York City's economy functioning, most drivers have viable alternatives. As a recently released Schaller Associates study found, of the 800,000 cars entering Manhattan everyday, only a fraction do so out of necessity. And out of those who do drive, only a tiny fraction do so to shop.

Measures like congestion pricing and parking reform will actually speed commerce by reducing congestion. For a plumber making \$50/hour, a \$10 toll to cross an East River Bridge is worth it to save 15 minutes that would otherwise be spent stuck in traffic.

Without question the powerful parking garage lobby will mobilize against measures that decrease the number of vehicles entering Manhattan. However, if a congestion charge system is accompanied by parking reform measures that raise on street parking costs on par with rates charged by the garages, it will likely decrease their opposition to congestion pricing.

The paramount obstacle, however, will be those who will oppose traffic relief on the grounds that it is unfair to the car dependent residents of Brooklyn and Queens. The fact is that Brooklyn and Queens are not as car dependent as they used to be. Car ownership is on the decline citywide, but especially in Brooklyn and Queens, where they fell a whopping 16% between 2000 and 2004.

Moreover, according to a 2003 study, 80% of the traffic reduction from East River bridges would be reaped by residents of Brooklyn and Queens residents and only 2% of Brooklyn and Queens residents would pay more than \$50 a year on tolls.

While nobody thinks tackling New York City traffic will be easy, and everyone agrees that some eggs will need to be broken, the omelet of traffic relief is looking ever more enticing: quicker commutes, cleaner air, more space for walking and bicycling, and healthier New Yorkers. And to top it off: attractive shopping districts, a steady stream of revenue for a new generation of transit improvements and a hero's legacy for the Mayor bold enough to do it. □



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**T**o date, most traffic relief efforts in New York City have focused on increasing the supply of street space and signal priority available for driving. This supply-side strategy has not solved NYC's traffic problem, but only stoked more driving demand while reducing the space available for bicycling and walking.

Rather than attempting to appease driving demand by increasing the supply of roads and parking, congestion pricing and parking reforms reduce the demand for driving. If applied uniformly, congestion pricing and parking reforms would also eliminate the market distortions that currently lead to cut through traffic and cruising.

## Congestion Pricing (aka Value Pricing)

- Motorists are charged a fee to use roads during peak congestion hours

- Could be implemented via EZ-pass type tolls on motorists entering Manhattan via the East River Bridges
- Successfully implemented in London

## Parking Reform

- Aligning on-street parking pricing with garage pricing
- Modify zoning codes that require excessive amounts of off-street parking for new buildings
- Relocate on-street parking to centralized locations, equally accessible to desirable destinations as public transit stops
- Encourage employers to offer cash or other perks instead of free parking spaces
- End abuse of municipal parking privileges
- Successfully implemented in Paris, Bogotá and Copenhagen