

New Yorkers Want Car Free Summer in 2007



Car-free parks are a great place for the City to start making NYC better for biking and walking.

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In an early September press conference New York City Department of Transportation Commissioner Iris Weinshall announced the DOT's plans for the construction of 200 miles of new bike lanes and 40 miles of new greenways in the next four years. Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, standing at her side, smiled a big smile, crossed his arms and surveyed the scene in Central Park that day.

It was 11 am. Dozens of cyclists, hundreds of walkers, rollerbladers, tourists and an array of New York City visitors and residents passed in front of the Commissioner, passed Tavern on the Green and continued along Central Park's loop drive to another destination or just another few minutes of serenity in the middle of New York City.

It was a wonderful moment for many reasons: the historic announcement, the unprecedented partnerships, the weather, the smiles, the people and more, but in the background of all of those things was a Central Park suitable for such a sight and such a day. In the background was a Central Park free of cars.

Each year more and more people come to Central Park and less motor vehicle traffic travels on the loop road. This summer was no exception. The Mayor's fractional closure

brought more car-free hours and more people to Central Park without impacting traffic volumes on surrounding streets. At a recent press conference in Central Park, Commissioner Benepe said, "We'll continue to do that" and even more recently, at a panel discussion at the Museum of the City of New York, he suggested that that Central and Prospect Parks would adopt the fractional closure schedule full time after the DOT's annual "Holiday Traffic Mitigation" plan ends in January.

This sensible decision lays the groundwork for a completely car-free summer in 2007. Every reduction in the hours and places that cars can drive in New York City's crown jewel parks has brought more people to the parks without impacting the traffic volume on surrounding streets. At the same time it is becoming increasingly clear that traffic keeps New Yorkers out of their parks and away from exercise.

Preliminary survey results from a joint T.A. / Manhattan Borough President study of Central Park users show that 89% of respondents would use the park more if cars were completely banned and 78% would exercise more if cars were completely banned from the loop drive. This is no surprise. T.A.'s Prospect Park user survey from 2006 had similar

results. What is really shocking about this new survey is that preliminary data shows that nearly 20% of all respondents had sustained an injury from being struck by a car or nearly being struck while exercising in the park and nearly 20% of respondents had sustained an injury due to overcrowded conditions in the recreation lane due to the presence of cars. This fact, coupled with the third speed study in three years showing an average motor vehicle speed on the Central Park loop drive of over 35 mph and ever increasing park user numbers, highlights the need for more car-free recreation space in New York City.

It is not just about encouraging people to use the park and exercise more (although the studies show that would happen). This new data, the chronic speeding and the increasing user numbers all join to paint a picture of a preventable tragedy waiting to happen.

The tragedy is obvious and so is the solu-



The partial loop closures were a big hit and advocates are gearing up for a fully car-free summer in 2007.

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tion. The tragedy is another park user injured or killed for no reason. The solution was the background of the City's bike announcement press conference, it was what Commissioner Benepe looked out upon and smiled at and it is a great place for the City to start making New York safer, healthier and more sensible for walking and biking. The solution is a car-free Central Park. □