

Introduction 199: “The Traffic Relief Bill”

Landmark Study Makes Headlines and Debunks Old Myths about Driving

It is a familiar argument: steps to limit traffic and reshape streets to favor pedestrians, bus riders and bicyclists will hurt business because New Yorkers must drive to work and to shop.

Transportation Alternatives' February release of the landmark Schaller Consulting study “Necessity or Choice: Why People Drive in Manhattan,” won some new converts to the cause and touched off a flurry of debate about the likely economic impact of pro-pedestrian street redesign and auto restrictions such as congestion pricing.

Here is a sampling of what the media had to say about the report:

The New York Times

Op-Ed: Smart Streets
March 26, 2006

And every year, the daily number of cars creeps upward by the thousands — some 13,500 annually, according to a study conducted by Bruce Schaller, a Brooklyn-based consultant. Transportation Alternatives, the group that commissioned the study, is one of several organizations pointing out what should be obvious — that the city is choking in traffic...

Newsday

It's time: Fee for Midtown Driving Makes Sense
March 1, 2006

The idea everyone seems to love at the moment is the London plan. Were New York to steal this move from the Brits, it would charge motorists a flat fee — \$7 perhaps — for the privilege of motoring into the most frantic parts of midtown at the busiest times of the day. The logic behind this idea is solid, I'm afraid...

DAILY NEWS

N.Y.C. is Too Good to Car Drivers

February 26, 2006

The majority of us get around without cars. Why should we have to cede them valuable street space? Why can't we have wider sidewalks and smoother sailing for our buses?

For a full press round-up on this and other Transportation Alternatives campaigns, go to transalt.org/press/media/index.html

THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT of Transportation is responsible for ensuring that our 6,000 miles of streets function properly.

But no matter how you choose to assess “proper street function” the agency is not measuring up to expectations. Traffic moves at a crawl. Buses take longer than walking. And our dysfunctional streets are making us sick: the US Environmental Protection Agency recently reported that belching traffic makes our air the nation's worst.

The saddest part of the situation is that 90% of drivers have time-competitive transit options and 56% of all New York City driving trips are so short (three miles or less) they could be walked or biked, if only it were safe and comfortable to do so. Converting more trips to walking and biking would make driving much more pleasant and efficient for those who truly need to drive.

On March 22nd Councilmember Gale Brewer introduced a landmark transportation bill that could change the skewed priorities of our city DOT and usher in an era of better transportation and street performance. The bill, Introduction 199 would finally require the DOT to set goals to reduce driving and increase walking, bicycling and transit use. The bill would also require the City Department of Health to work with the DOT to set additional goals for reducing traffic crashes and traffic-related pollution.

As DOT Commissioner Iris Weinshall has pointed out on many occasions, the agency's current overarching goal is to “keep the traffic moving.” To gauge its progress towards this goal, the DOT has long used a yardstick called “vehicular level of service” that measures how fast and easy it is for cars and trucks to move along New York City streets.

“Level of Service” or “L.O.S.” assigns streets grades A-F, with ‘A’ indicating the ideal of free-sailing traffic and ‘F’ denoting gridlock, to be avoided at all costs. Before the DOT installs a speed hump around a school, before a bus or bike lane is marked or before a sidewalk is widened the DOT does an L.O.S. study to make sure that cars and trucks will not be slowed. Too often, if the study predicts any downgrade in L.O.S., the DOT will nix

pedestrian, bike and transit improvements even those proposed by its own bicycle and pedestrian department. For example, recently on 8th Avenue north of 23rd Street in Manhattan, the DOT refused to narrow traffic lanes to make room for a proper (wide and protected) bicycle lane because they said it would adversely impact vehicular L.O.S.

Intro. 199, the traffic relief bill, would require the DOT to make decisions using a different yardstick: the modal target.

Until recently, virtually every city in the world judged its transportation success by

how quickly traffic was moving. This led to more and wider roads and inevitably, more traffic congestion. Today, cities as diverse as London, Paris, Bogotá and Portland, Oregon are instead using “modal targets” that aim to reduce the proportion of driving in the overall transportation mix and convert drivers to more spatially efficient transportation modes like walking, bicycling and transit.

Modal targets work because they smartly redefine the transportation problem: the problem is not that traffic moves too slowly. The problem is that too many people are driving. By focusing on the problem, not the symptoms, controversial solutions such as congestion pricing, parking pricing and converting car lanes into bus and bike lanes become more desirable, especial-

ly to business interests that understand that travel will not be suppressed, but switched to more spatially efficient modes.

This redefinition primes cities for growth because, with a lesser proportion of driving trips, more trips and commerce can be accommodated. London's business community, for this very reason, is supportive of the city's aim to shift 20% of current driving trips to walking bicycling and transit trips by 2010.

Intro. 199, the “Traffic Relief Bill,” tasks the DOT with devising their own modal targets, submitting them to the Mayor and the City Council on January 15th of each year and reporting on progress against them every July 15th. In a significant departure from current DOT policy, these targets and reports, under the bill, must be posted to the DOT website for all to see. □

TakeAction!

Get your Council Member to Support Int. 199, “The Traffic Relief Bill”

Call your City Councilmember and tell them to support Int. 199, “the traffic relief bill,” or if they already support it, tell them thank you. nycouncil.info/constituent/

Next, call the office of council speaker Christine Quinn and ask her to do what she can to pass Int. 199, the traffic relief bill.

Why The Traffic Relief Bill is Good for New York

- Would focus the DOT on switching driving trips to transit, walking and bicycling
- Cleaner air and healthier, more active transportation
- More efficient transportation so that new growth can be accommodated

For more information about the Traffic Relief Bill, and what you can do to help pass it, visit trafficroelief.org