A THREE-YEAR

Five things Bloomberg can do to transform the streets

COURTESY JAN GEHL ARCHITECTS

If there is one thing that New Yorkers agree on, it is that traffic is out of control. There are more vehicles circulating in the city than ever before. City buses blocked by double parked cars have average speeds that are barely faster than walking. Pedestrians faced with inadequate sidewalk space spill into the street. Bicyclists are squeezed on the margins, forced to contend with opening car doors and turning trucks. In July, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign released a citywide poll showing that Bloomberg's poor job reducing traffic was only matched by his failure to provide affordable housing. And the traffic problem is poised to get worse.

By 2015 the Mayor is projecting 200,000 more jobs and a total of 50 million visitors per year. By 2025 the mayor and others are predicting that the city will have one million additional residents. Clearly, New York's streets are headed towards Bangkok-style dysfunction unless some major changes are made to how they are organized and managed.

In a city as large, diverse and dense as New York, is there any hope for fixing our streets? What can a big-city Mayor really do to solve the traffic problem? What have others done within one mayoral term?

From 1998 to 2000, Enrique Peñalosa, Bogota's now world-famous Mayor, built the best Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system in the world, instituted a rush-hour restriction on car use, reclaimed dozens of main streets for pedestrians and built 200 miles of well-used bicycle lanes. From 2001 to 2004, London's Mayor, Ken Livingstone, implemented the world's first congestion pricing scheme, reducing traffic congestion by 30%, increased average bus speeds by 15%, increased bus ridership by four percent and thanks to tens of millions of pounds in new funding for bike facilities, doubled the rate of cycling. And since taking office in 2002, Paris's Mayor Betrand Delanoë has constructed 200 miles of protected bike and bus lanes and pedestrianized large swaths of main arterials. While controversial at first, Delanoë's street reforms reduced traffic by 10% and are now supported by 80% of Parisians.

These extraordinary accomplishments were by no means easy. Peñalosa was almost impeached before his street reforms started to bear fruit, and Livingstone and Delanoë surmounted fierce opposition and widely held beliefs that their transportation reforms would cause commercial chaos.

Even more staggering than these impressive accomplishments is the fact that all were achieved within one mayoral term.

Can Mayor Bloomberg attain similar transportation heights is his last term in office? He has a lot going for him: a proven track record of effectively managing the previously "unmanageable" (think city schools and the budget), the help of other first class cities which have already shown that traffic can be brought under control, proof that the short term political liability of angering drivers is well worth the payoff. By tackling transportation reform, Bloomberg can satisfy multiple aims: curb air pollution and asthma, makes streets more amenable to active transportation to prevent obesity and slow global warming. And best of all for Bloomberg, New York City has characteristics that should make progressive transportation reforms a hit; compared to London and Paris, New York City has a higher urban density, shorter trip distances and a lower rate of car ownership.

On the other hand, there is a lot standing in Bloomberg's way. This is, after all, New York City, where political gridlock is more fearsome than its automotive counterpart thanks to the unfortunate fact that the mayor must share control of New York City's transportation system with a notoriously dysfunctional state legislature. Put another way, the Mayor of London did not have to get the approval of Assembly

PLAN

By finally completing the 10-year old bike master plan, Mayor Bloomberg can begin putting NYC's streets on par with Copenhagen's.

Speaker Sheldon Silver and Governor Pataki to implement its congestion charging scheme or to make dramatic improvements to the city's transit system. And, some argue, the large amount of political capital required to make significant progress on transportation would mean that Mayor Bloomberg might have to abandon other priorities.

But even with these limitations, there are real opportunities for Mayor Bloomberg to take control of the streets, reduce driving trips, and promote more biking, walking and transit use. Through a series of measured, incremental changes that build on efforts already underway, Mayor Bloomberg could build a legacy as the leader who turned the traffic tide.

1 Give the DOT New Goals

The NYC Department of Transportation's policy on driving is like the United States government's policy on oil: maintain status quo supply; do not question or attempt to manage demand.

In short, the DOT is still focused on giving the priority to vehicles. By setting transportation goals based on the movement of all passengers, not just the movement of automobiles, the DOT and the Mayor can help ensure that more priority and space will be granted to bus passengers, pedestrians and bicyclists.

Mayor Bloomberg has, on several occasions, spoken publicly about his desire to minimize driving and encourage the use of alternatives. But while the mayor exhorts, the DOT is still focused on maximizing "vehicular level of service" and "parking level of service" (outdated measures of how easy it is to drive and park a car in the city). It is fear of compromising these metrics that has kept the DOT from embracing protected bus lanes, bike lanes and wider sidewalks.

Transport for London, for example, recognizing that switching drivers out of their cars is a much smarter way to improve street performance, aims to "increase the proportion of personal travel made by means other than car." To that end, they have adopted a number of specific targets that they aim to achieve in the next five to ten years:

- Increase the share of travel by public transport from 36% to 39%
- Increase the share of travel by bicycle at least 80%
- Increase of at least 10% in journeys made on foot per person
- Achieve an absolute reduction in weekday traffic of 15% in central London, zero growth across the rest of inner London and a reduction in growth in outer London by a third, with the goal of achieving zero growth in outer London town centers
- Reduce the number of children killed or seriously injured by 50%
- Reduce bus wait time by 28%.

Chicago has recently adopted similar goals. Under Mayor Daley's leadership, the Chicago DOT is now focused on "increasing bicycle use so that five percent of all trips less than five miles are by bicycle." And by 2015 it aims to complete a 500-mile bike network that would put every Chicagoan within half a mile of the bike network

A number of Canadian cities have also adopted smarter transportation targets. Ottawa, for example, is striving to decrease driving and increase transit, walking and cycling by 30%, 10% and three percent respectively by 2020.

There are encouraging signs that the Mayor is moving in this direction. After years of virtual transportation stagnation, both the Mayor's Office of Operations and the DOT recently started hiring for a number of new "long-term and strategic" transportation planning posts.

And if the Mayor does not right the DOT, the City Council will. Intro 199, introduced in March by Councilmember Gale Brewer, would require the DOT to submit London-style transportation targets to City Council each and every year. Hearings on this bill, dubbed the "Traffic Relief Bill" are scheduled for this fall.

While retraining the DOT's focus on smarter goals will not yield an immediate improvement, it will change the DOT's decision-making process so that options to improve walking, biking and bus service will be exercised much more often than they are now. Also, these new goals will have the effect, as they did in London, of placing controversial solutions like congestion pricing, reapportionment of streets and parking reform in a more logical and convincing context.

2 Institute Two Simple Parking Reforms that Eliminate Unnecessary Traffic

With a simple edict ending the personal abuse

WILEY NORVELL

Cracking down on city employees who flout parking laws would ease street and sidewalk congestion.

of city issued "for official business only" parking permits, the Mayor could convert thousands of city employees into transit riders, take thousands of cars off the road during peak commute times and align the powerful municipal unions with the interests of the majority of New Yorkers who already take transit.

Simultaneously Mayor Bloomberg could increase curbside parking rates in commercial districts. This commonsense move would increase parking turnover (and revenue), increase curbside vacancy, reduce lane blockages caused by double parking and reduce the number of cars that incessantly troll for elusive curbside spots.

Free and underpriced parking generates a lot of unnecessary traffic and encourages tens of thousands of workers who have existing transit options to commute by car. A recent study by Schaller Consulting found that if government workers (whose parking permits make them the worst offenders) were to com-

NYC DOT should fast track bus improvements, and bring the city's 2.4 million bus riders in from the cold.

MASSAMI ADACHI

mute to work at the same rate as private sector workers, 19,200 cars would disappear from Manhattan alone. Furthermore, as Transportation Alternatives' two "Uncivil Servants" studies have shown, government workers are doing more than just clogging streets and taking up spots that could be used for truck delivery: they are also blocking fire hydrants, crosswalks and sidewalks.

By drastically reducing the number of government parking permits issued to the NYPD, the Department of Transportation, the Department of Education and other city agencies, thousands of daily car trips could be converted to transit trips and hundreds of acres of parking and sidewalk space would be freed for more efficient use. What is more, converting all of those municipal workers into transit riders will strengthen the already growing constituency of city subway and bus riders who are demanding better service.

In addition to ending privileged parking for government employees, the Mayor should empower local Business Improvement Districts to raise curbside parking rates. Many BIDs now understand that under-priced curbside parking is the enemy of commerce because it discourages turnover, stymies efficient delivery and creates traffic: a 1995 study estimated that eight percent of traffic in west midtown consists of cars and trucks trolling for a spot. By raising parking rates to ensure a 15% vacancy rate, much of this trolling traffic would disappear. In some commercial districts in Los Angeles, curbside rates have been raised until a critical vacancy rate (15%, or about two spots per block) is achieved. While motorists are certainly paying more to park, turnover is higher, double parking is lower and customers and delivery drivers do not troll the streets incessantly in search of that elusive spot. All of this has added up to happier merchants and more parking revenue to fund sidewalk and bus stop improvements.

3 Make More Bus Improvements

The Mayor should accelerate bus improvement plans to make life much easier for New York City's 2.5 million daily bus riders. He should also give the DOT clear orders to claim the street space necessary to give city buses protected rights-of-way and more efficient bus stops that protrude from the sidewalk to meet the bus. This reallocation of space would speed travel for millions of bus commuters and encourage more to take transit.

With New York City buses being the slowest in the nation, there is certainly a lot of room for improvement here, and at $2 billion per mile for the Second Avenue Subway, the city can ill-afford to rely on subway expansions to meet the city's growing travel demand. Before Mayor Livingstone introduced congestion pricing, he made massive improvements to London's bus service. Here in New York City we should adopt a method pioneered in Curitiba, Brazil and Bogotá, Colombia: transforming streets into high performance transit corridors that have all of the hallmarks of a subway: stations for quick boarding and exiting, protected rights-of-way (as opposed to mere bus lanes) and special signaling.

Bus Rapid Transit is not new to Mayor Bloomberg. Indeed, rolling out "Subways on the Surface" was a key part of the Mayor's transportation improvement strategy when he took office in 2002. But the joint DOT and MTA "Bus Rapid Transit" (BRT) project has been stymied by the DOT's reluctance to cede inefficient car and parking lanes for protected bus lanes and bus stations. The project, which was supposed to yield a BRT corridor in each of the five boroughs, is already more than a year behind schedule. The slow pace of New York City's project is in stark contrast to BRT systems in Los Angeles, Mexico City and Bogotá. Each of these went from conception to full operation in less time than it is taking New York to produce a study.

The Mayor should make sure that the MTA capital plan includes more funding for BRT, and he should instruct the DOT to cede the parking spots and car lanes necessary to make bus transit as efficient as possible. To help pay for bus improvements, the Mayor should increase the city's annual contribution to the MTA's capital program from its current and paltry $70 million a year (the lowest since the Koch era) to at least $200 million a year.

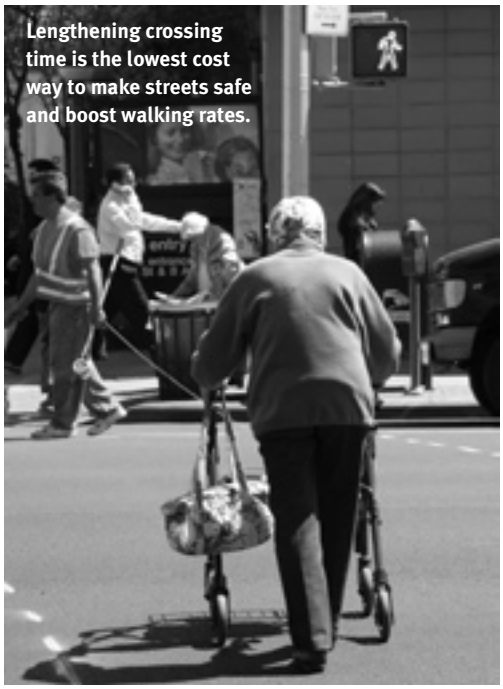
4 Provide more crossing time and calm traffic for pedestrian safety

Virtually overnight and with minor expense, Mayor Bloomberg could change citywide traffic signals to give pedestrians more time, and more exclusive time, to cross the street free from turning vehicles. Moreover, the Mayor could traffic calm the streets around city schools, Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) and high-pedestrian commercial districts to favor pedestrians.

The effect would be reduced pedestrian injuries and fatalities, more walking and the elimination of thousands of short-distance driving trips.

The City Department of Transportation makes two flawed assumptions when it calibrates the timing of traffic signals.

One, the DOT assumes that pedestrians


Lengthening crossing time is the lowest cost way to make streets safe and boost walking rates.

AMY PEIFFER

walk at four feet per second while many of our most vulnerable citizens—seniors, children, and the disabled—walk at two-and-a-half to three feet per second. The result is that walking in the city is needlessly dangerous for too many, and too many are stuck in the path of vehicles when the signal changes.

Two, the DOT assumes that drivers, as the law states, will yield to pedestrians when in the crosswalk. As anyone who walks in New York City knows, this is simply not the case.

The upshot of this double-trouble is that New York City's 14,000 intersections cause many preventable pedestrian injuries and deaths. And because walking is so hazardous, many people would rather drive a short distance than walk (22% of driving trips citywide are one mile or less in length).

The Mayor could go a long way towards reducing pedestrian tragedies and encouraging more walking with two easy strokes: 1) instruct the DOT to promptly build the traffic calming and pedestrian safety measures detailed in the Safe Routes to School program, and 2) get behind brewing legislation to establish the nation's first safe street "Elder Districts" in areas around the city where there are high concentrations of senior citizens. (See pages 16-17.) Because of New York City's density and design, traffic calming these specific areas would have an impact on a good portion of overall intersections as well as a ripple effect on nearby ones.

Finally, the Mayor could identify streets and public squares in the city's increasingly vibrant commercial districts that are ripe for wider sidewalks or complete pedestrianization. There is certainly no shortage of locations to consider. (See page 8-9.)

Two recent T.A. studies have found that over 90% of Manhattan shoppers access stores by walking, not driving. (See page 14.)

5 Finally, the Mayor should insist that DOT finish the City's ten-year-old Bike Master Plan, and update it with safe bikepath designs.

The City's "Bicycle Master Plan" is ten years old and only 15% complete. It has no targets or timetable for completion, benchmarks for increasing cycling, or modern bike lane and path design standards—all hallmarks of exemplary plans recently put forth by cities like London and Chicago.

New York City has had the right idea for ages, but lacked the political will to make it happen. Both Livingstone and Daley have spoken out for cycling improvements, praised the bicycle's efficiency and pledged to make biking easier, safer and simpler in their respective city, and they have done so.

Exclusive crossing time is another low cost solution to protect peds from turning traffic.

AMY PFEIFFER

If City Hall wants to get serious about encouraging cycling and preventing future tragedies, Mayor Bloomberg needs to do the same. He must speak out for biking and modernize New York City's bike plan to include modern strategies for making cycling a safe and viable mode of transportation:

- A new updated "New York City Bicycle Master Plan"
- An aggressive timetable to implement it
- Specific targets to increase the rate of bike riding and reduce the number of bicycle crashes
- Modern street design standards for the safest types of on- and off-street bike paths
- Heightened enforcement of laws against drivers who endanger cyclists
- Specific targets to put every New Yorker within a half-mile of a bike lane or path
- Increased street hazard inspection on heavily-cycled streets by bike-borne DOT inspectors
- Proactive safety measures like "anti-dooring" stickers in taxicabs to remind drivers and passengers to look for cyclists before opening their doors
- Adequate outdoor bike parking and bike access to buildings
- The reinstatement of a public bicycle advisory committee.

By adopting a modern bike plan that includes these tenets, New York, like London and Chicago, could make giant leaps forward in a relatively short period of time.

By updating and modernizing NYC's bike network, Mayor Mike can make greenways accessible to every New Yorker.

Coda

The five changes detailed above are not flights of fancy. In fact, all of them already exist in some form or another. Bills are on the books, funds are in the coffers and strategies are in the works.

What it will take to turn these strategies, studies, plans and monies into realities is political will and dedication: exactly the same type of political will and dedication it will take for New York City to seamlessly absorb the growth and development that constantly pushes us forward, same type of political will and dedication that it has taken our competitors around the world to modernize and adapt to the growth and development that propels them.

Livingstone, Peñalosa, Daley, Delanoë and countless others know that stasis is not an option when it comes to governing a City, and so does Mayor Bloomberg. He has focused his management skills on significant sectors and brought real results. He can do the same with our transportation policy; examples abound are writ large across the globe. Our city is growing and our transportation strategy needs to grow with it. How we grow it is a matter of thoughtful planning, political will and, ultimately, what kind of legacy our Mayor chooses to leave behind. ❑