

THE SLOW BURN

Winning Livable Streets through Community Boards



WILEY NORVELL



Teresa Toro is Transportation Chair of Brooklyn CB1, which represents Greenpoint and Williamsburg. She oversaw the installation

of a neighborhood bike lane network, the first-ever conversion of car parking to bike parking and dozens of small-scale pedestrian safety improvements.

Richard P. Toussaint served as Chairperson of both the Public Safety and Transportation Committees on Manhattan's Community Board 11, representing East Harlem, from 1986-1999. Richard is now a member of the Harlem River Park Walk taskforce where he is Chairperson of the subcommittee on art projects.



Ian Dutton is the Transportation Committee Vice-Chair for Manhattan CB2, representing Greenwich Village and SoHo.

They have approved innovative bike lanes on Prince and Bleecker Streets, but recently rejected a DOT proposal to close Prince Street to all but pedestrians on Sundays this summer.

ONE DAY AFTER CONGESTION pricing died a quiet death in a closed-door Albany conference room, a packed meeting of Brooklyn Community Board 1 did something unprecedented: they approved a section of the Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway, requiring the removal of dozens of parking spaces. It's a sign in which we can all take heart; elected officials come and go, but community boards have the potential to be the long-term standard bearers for the livable streets movement.

Every week, T.A. Street Activists turn out to community board meetings to speak up for bike lanes, parking reform and safer streets. Sitting through two dozen liquor license renewals is enough to test even the stoutest advocate's patience, but the pain is worth it. As the clock runs out on Mayor Bloomberg's term, the DOT is looking to advance the PlaNYC agenda along the path of least resistance. And that usually means the path of community board approval. Below are three past and current board members with pointers on making the most of the community board process.

We often ask T.A. Street Activists and members to show up at various board meetings. Is it worth it?

TT: Even five people speaking positively about a project makes a real impression on the board members. For the Brooklyn Greenway vote, I think it was critical that community members took the time to attend the board meeting and spoke in favor of the greenway, and specifically stated why they wanted it.

ID: All five of our transportation committee members actually spoke in favor of the Prince Street pedestrian plan last April. But none of us could go against the overwhelming personal opinions expressed by the members of the community who attended the meeting. That led us to write a resolution that asked the DOT not to proceed with the plan. Likewise, had those 150 people who showed up supported it, there would have been a different outcome.

There are dozens of meetings happening every week. How can you best make an impact?

ID: A community board meeting is like a trial by jury. You hear from witnesses, and

who those people are affects how you consider their testimony. People who are most immediately impacted hold more weight. They have to be considered much more carefully than someone who's just speaking out on principle.

Since a lot of good transportation projects still won't be completed when our current DOT commissioner leaves the job, what role do community boards have in making these reforms stick?

RT: The problem with any capital project is that one has to keep knocking on the door to make sure the politicians in office understand how valuable the project is. You have new administrations that are coming and going. To see a goal fulfilled, you need those [community boards] coming back, again and again, asking, "When is this going to be completed?"

It seems like community boards often care more about process than anything else. Talk about this.

TT: No community likes it when 'outsiders' come in and start telling them how to do things. If you come to a community board and start making demands, without building that relationship and trust, your proposals are going to get voted right out of the window!

ID: Even if the plan has merit, if members feel left out or not valued, it leads to a resistant feeling. It's not just about a thumbs-up or thumbs-down vote. The best projects start with a City agency saying they understand a problem and want to work with us. We see that happening in Gansevoort Square, where the DOT took our input and implemented something based on it. That's something the board overwhelmingly supports.

Where are T.A. members needed most?

TT: It's important for T.A. members to fully join their local community boards and get involved—and not just in transportation committee meetings, but in land use and environmental committee meetings as well. Various committees still have trouble seeing how bike/pedestrian amenities should be part of every conversation with developers. It's only by making people realize how important transportation is that we'll really get progressive policies and projects to move forward. □

NYC COMMUNITY BOARDS 101

The Back Story

IN 1963, MAYOR BOB WAGNER established community planning boards (eventually shortened to community boards) throughout the five boroughs. Community boards were intended to play an advisory role in neighborhood planning and served as the original 311. Back in the day, if you needed help navigating City bureaucracy, your CB was the first step.

Each board is charged with making recommendations on long-term community planning, land use, business permits, street closings and district financial needs. The presiding Borough President and the local City Council Member each appoint half of each district's community board members, respectively.

The Basics

NYC has 59 community board districts. Each board has 50 members who live, work or have other significant interests in the community. Members serve staggered, two-year terms. Full Board meetings are held once a month, with committee meetings throughout the month.

Their Role

While the DOT can implement projects without community board approval, it often seeks board support and input. Community boards make advisory decisions about important street reforms such as:

- Bike lanes
- Car parking to bike parking swaps
- Parking regulations
- Pedestrian plazas
- Street closures
- Traffic Calming

Contact Info

To find your community board call 311 or go to nyc.gov/html/cau/html/cb/directory.shtml.

Become a Street Activist!

Be there when it counts. As a Street Activist, you will receive dedicated action alerts that keep you up to date about important community board meetings in your neighborhood, so you'll always know where and when to show up. Join to win safer streets, better bike parking, car-free parks, and other important improvements to NYC's bicycling and walking environment at:

Transalt.org/StreetActivistNetwork

Working the Community Board Hierarchy

Step 1: District Manager

Each board has a paid staff member who is approved by the board and is responsible for providing information to community members, resolving neighborhood complaints and acting as a liaison with the board. Some District Managers also organize events to benefit the neighborhood. The DM should be your first step in identifying the appropriate committee for your issue and getting contact information for the committee members.

Step 2: Committees

The Transportation and Land Use Committees are the typical bodies that review issues that affect the streetscape like bike lanes (although it's important to have a transportation perspective at other committees as well). If you are trying to pass a resolution in favor of a project, it will go through a committee first, and following approval can move to the full board. Because these meetings are smaller, a proportionately small number of speakers can often have a big impact.

Step 3: Full Board

Every board holds a once-monthly meeting where motions approved by committee come for a full vote. Each meeting has a public comment portion, where you can speak on an issue raised earlier, or speak freely on any topic for two or three minutes. Because most board members do not come with a transportation perspective, this is the critical stage to show public support.

3 Ways to Get Involved

SHOW UP

The best introduction to your local board is to attend a monthly full board meeting. To find out when and where meetings are held, call your local board and request a monthly calendar. Tech-savvy boards post agenda items on the web, so this is a good way to track meetings as well. T.A. also tracks important board meetings on bike and pedestrian issues for Street Activists (see left panel).

SPEAK UP

When community boards are brought in at the beginning of a campaign, they are more likely to support and become advocates for your plan. Whether you have a great idea for a new bike lane, need help making an intersection safer or want any other improvements to make your streets more livable, take your ideas to your community board first. Call your board and ask to speak to the District Manager. The District Manager can help you submit your proposal to the appropriate committee so you can get on the agenda.

JOIN UP

For Pete's sake, join! The best way to see change in your neighborhood is to sit on a community board and have a vote. As a board member, you will also have many opportunities to share your perspective with other board members and present new proposals for review. Because every borough has a different deadline and application procedure, it's best to just contact the office of your Borough President (call 311 for the contact information) and ask for an application.

