

Designing a Fit City

THERE ARE 3.2 MILLION NEW Yorkers who are overweight or obese and 800,000 who suffer from diabetes. At T.A., we believe that the greatest opportunity to address these health epidemics is to design streets that encourage walking and bicycling instead of driving. And in recent years, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOH) has awakened to this possibility and begun to see the potential of streets and public space to improve public health. Nevertheless, they struggle to find a formal channel to influence transportation decisions in New York City.

A recent example highlights what is possible when the DOH collaborates with other City agencies to shape the built environment. In 2006, the DOH worked with NYCDOT, Parks and NYPD to publish the report *Bicycle Fatalities and Serious Injuries*, a study that examined the causes of near-fatal and fatal bicycle crashes from 1995 to 2005. The study resulted in a multi-agency pledge to install 200 miles of new bike lanes by 2009 and 40 miles of new greenway routes by 2010, provide more bicycle parking citywide and launch a number of education- and enforcement-related cyclist initiatives. This was a huge victory for the 19 groups that make up the NYC Bicycling Coalition, as well as for all cyclists citywide. This collaboration, however, failed to establish a formal role for the Health Department in improving pedestrian and bicyclist safety.

Since the release of that report, the Department of Transportation under the leadership

of Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan has actively looked for ways to improve the built environment for physical activity and active travel. Some of this has been accomplished by fulfilling the aforementioned commitments. Additionally, the DOT has also launched a public plaza program to reclaim under-utilized street space and it will host Summer Streets (see page 12), an event for which Park Avenue will be closed to vehicle traffic and opened to pedestrians, bicyclists and recreational users on three consecutive Saturdays in August. Community health advocates are cognizant of these changes and are eager to bring similar programs and improvements to their communities.

As part of the NYC Food & Fitness Partnership, Transportation Alternatives is working in three areas of the city with disproportionate levels of obesity, diabetes and other health problems (East & Central Harlem, the South Bronx and Central Brooklyn) to achieve a higher standard of safety for walking and bicycling. On the map, these neighborhoods are more inclined to be adjacent to industrial uses or to lack open green space. They also experience high pedestrian and bicyclist crash rates. The partnership sees streets that are designed for walking and bicycling as central to achieving their goal of getting residents more physically active. Increasingly, they are looking to the DOH to influence street design decisions within City government on behalf of their communities.

Our work with the NYC Food & Fitness Partnership has helped T.A. envision the great potential contribution that the DOH

can have to creating healthy streets. Despite all its great achievements of late, the Department of Transportation cannot transform New York City's streets on its own. But the DOH has the research capabilities and community relationships that the DOT needs to move forward with redesigns that will help New Yorkers lead healthier lifestyles:

- Through outreach efforts, the DOH should prioritize increasing public awareness of how street design affects physical activity.
- The DOH should seek executive-level mandates that would call for simple safety improvements such as painted crosswalks and lower speed limits in neighborhoods that are shown to be both dangerous and have low rates of physical activity.
- The DOH has incredible research capabilities that it should make use of to document the negative impact of street design on community health and to support the proliferation of bicycle- and pedestrian-priority street designs and temporary street closures. Furthermore, the DOH should take the lead on evaluating many of the great initiatives currently being implemented by the DOT.
- The DOH should take a stand on major citywide transportation policies, such as congestion pricing and Bus Rapid Transit.

Our street network fundamentally determines the ability of New Yorkers to be physically active and improve their overall health.

And while initiatives at the DOT have opened up new opportunities for New Yorkers, the massive resources at the DOH should also be brought to bear on the built environment to maximize the change being wrought on NYC streets. □

TakeAction!

If you want to see better streets for biking and walking become a priority for the DOH, write to:

Dr. Karen Lee
Deputy Director for Chronic Disease Prevention and Control
DOHMH
2 Lafayette Street
20th Floor
New York, NY 10007



The Health Department recently unveiled an initiative encouraging New Yorkers to walk up the stairs. T.A. is pushing them to take on the challenge of building walkable streets.

WILEY NORVELL