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T.A. Lauds the NYC Department of Transportation's New Strategic Plan; Recommends Three Ways to Improve It

In aiming to “reduce private auto use” and grant New Yorkers greener transportation options through collaborations with communities, the [DOT's new Strategic Plan](http://nyc.gov/html/dot/html/about/stratplan.shtml) [nyc.gov/html/dot/html/about/stratplan.shtml] represents a long overdue departure from decades of top-down planning and car-centric priorities.

New Yorkers' calls for traffic relief have grown louder and louder, and this plan sets the wheels in motion to answer them and turn the tide of cars, trucks and pollution from washing over neighborhoods across the boroughs. The Bloomberg Administration's work over the last 18-months to develop and release PlaNYC has engaged communities and raised the level of discussion about transportation to an unseen level of priority. The DOT's Strategic Plan builds on this dialogue, and the agency must ensure that the plan continues to build momentum to carry these livable, green streets initiatives far beyond Mayor Bloomberg's tenure.

The plan's crux is commendable—to make New York City streets designed to better accommodate walking, bicycling and surface transit—and it could be made more convincing were it presented within a “transportation hierarchy” that clearly establishes the primacy of pedestrians, buses and bicyclists over private motor vehicle users. These modes deserve priority not just because most New Yorkers do not drive, but because, due to their low emissions and small street footprint, they shorten travel times and enhance health and quality of life for all New Yorkers. By omitting this critical supporting rationale, the city is missing another opportunity to build public and political support for necessary transportation reforms.

Additionally, many of the plan's initiatives that can and should be tackled now are postponed to future years or decades. Other elements of the plan lack details about when, where and to what degree new street design, management and parking policies will be applied. Finally, the plan should be changed so that bicycle and bus lanes are separated from mixed traffic with physical barriers, not just paint.

But these critiques are not to diminish the welcome and significant shift that this plan represents in our age of global warming, high oil prices, and greater understanding of the causes and costs of traffic congestion. The 70-page document, aptly titled “Sustainable Streets,” heralds dozens of thoughtful initiatives, some adapted from other world cities, others born right here in NYC and destined to be replicated elsewhere. Highlights include bus priority measures, making pedestrian plazas and walkable destinations on Broadway and other streets from underused road space, increasing the use of sidewalk widening and traffic-calming, and new goals to triple bicycling and halve traffic fatalities. The plan also makes mention of new bike-, pedestrian- and bus-inclusive “complete street” design templates, weekend pedestrian and bicycle priority streets, reducing car use in major parks, and new performance parking policies to reduce the sizable amount of NYC traffic that is generated from vehicles cruising for parking.

“This great plan can be made even better,” says Paul Steely White, Executive Director of Transportation Alternatives, “To ensure that this great vision is realized today and work on it continues in future administrations, the DOT should add a supporting ‘transportation hierarchy’, accelerate the deadlines and protect bus and bike lanes from vehicular traffic.”

To enhance the plan, Transportation Alternatives recommends that the DOT:

1. Detail a clear street user hierarchy (pedestrians, bicyclists, bus riders, commercial vehicles, shared vehicles, single occupancy vehicles) that will help the agency consistently negotiate and communicate decisions about street design and management. While the DOT’s plan focuses on some of these priorities, it does so in an ad hoc fashion; we encourage the DOT to adopt a hierarchy as agency policy.
2. Accelerate the timetable. Though the plan alludes to car-free parks and new parking policies, there is no stated intent to immediately accomplish these and other low-cost actions that would catalyze larger improvements. Making Central and Prospect Par car-free, adopting variable pricing at all city parking meters, and installing life-saving “leading pedestrian intervals” at all city intersections— not just a small percentage of them—are all examples of improvements that can and should be made immediately. By pushing the completion of many key goals off to 2030, the DOT is underestimating its own ability and making it much harder for T.A. and other watchdogs to hold the next two administrations accountable. Even with current rates of progress, there is no reason why the DOT cannot halve traffic fatalities, complete the bike network, and traffic-calm streets around city schools by 2015.
3. Protect bike and bus lanes. Though the DOT plans to add hundreds of miles of new bike and bus lanes, 90% of these lanes will be unprotected from vehicular traffic. Paint alone is not sufficient to ensure their rights-of-way; bus and bike lanes need self-enforcing traffic-protection in the form of physical barriers to keep transit moving and cyclists safe.

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