

## PARKS SPECIAL

## Cars Out Now!

IT IS THE MOST EGREGIOUS example of the auto-mania that chokes our city: cars are allowed to honk, speed and pollute their way through the city's two most beloved parks.

Central and Prospect Park, the lungs of New York City, are more than the magnificent centerpieces of their boroughs; they are symbolic centers of a much larger struggle between New York City and the automobile.

If cars can run rampant in our urban sanctuaries then where are we safe from their stink?

Transportation Alternatives' campaign for a Car-Free Central Park has achieved some major milestones of late, including reaching the 99,999 mark in the petitioning effort (we are saving the 100,000th spot for the Mayor) and winning the support of several new civic, environmental and health groups.

Indications from inside City Hall are that a three-month trial closure of the loop drive could very well happen this summer, especially if public support continues to swell.

Prospect Park's Car-Free Campaign is not far behind. There are now only twenty hours each week that cars can use the park's three and a third miles of road. We plan to work with local neighborhood groups and parks advocates to convince the city to halve that figure by the end of 2006.

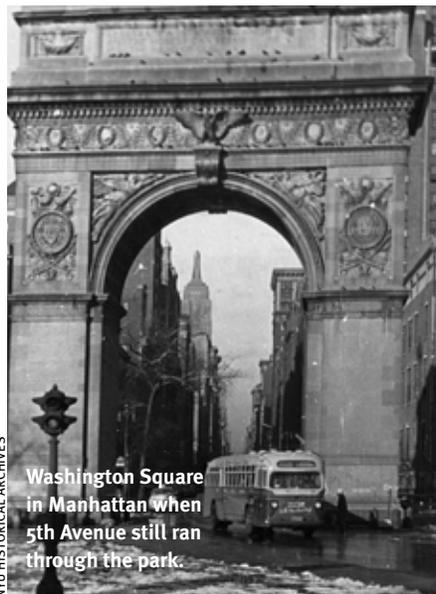
This special section examines the current states of these two campaigns and takes a look back at how far we have come.

# It Can Happen Here: What Ensued When another New York City Park Was Closed to Cars

**I enthusiastically endorse the campaign to close Central Park's loop drive to regular automobile traffic.** We had the same sort of fight in Washington Square Park in the late 1950s and in my neighborhood here in Toronto a couple of years ago: same prediction of traffic chaos, same result of no chaos, diminished traffic counts and no counts increased elsewhere in consequence. Isn't it curious that traffic engineers are so loath to learn something new even after repeated demonstrations?

Both in Washington Square Park and in my Toronto neighborhood we got our way by pressing for an experimental trial period. A trial, with traffic counts on the Central Park perimeter streets, will be more persuasive than any amount of talk, letter-writing, resolutions, and other endless wheel-spinning. Good luck!"

—JANE JACOBS, author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, and *Systems of Survival*.



NYU HISTORICAL ARCHIVES

**I**T WAS A ROAD THROUGH A PARK. ONCE a carriageway, the path was opened to automobile traffic that disrupted the experience of the park for thousands of users. Residents of the community began organizing to make the park drive car-free. City officials declared that this was madness—traffic on surrounding streets would become intolerable.

Sound familiar? The park was not Central Park but Washington Square Park, and the year was 1958. Fifth Avenue did not terminate at the park as it does today; instead, a drive carried traffic through the park to the roads south of it.

In her classic book on urban renewal published in 1961, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, the writer Jane Jacobs recounts the fears and realities surrounding a car-free Washington Square Park.

*"The city officials insisted that if the roadway were closed—a step they appeared to think insane—the only possible alternatives must be to widen the streets at the park perimeter, or else bring them to a state of frantic and frenetic congestion ... The traffic commissioner forecast an immediate annual increase of millions of cars in the nearby streets.*

*{T}he community, by exerting rather tough political pressure abruptly, got the road closed, first on a trial basis and then permanently. None of the predictions of increased traffic around the park were borne out ..."*

Every traffic count taken around the park perimeter since the closing has shown no increase in traffic; most counts have shown a slight reduction.

## Where have the traffic commissioner's annual millions of cars gone instead?

*"...They have not noticeably gone anywhere else instead. The through avenues east and west of Fifth Avenue, and parallel to it, which might have been expected to take the brunt of the diverted load, did not seem to receive an extra load.... {T}hese cars—or some cars—disappeared into thin air. Their disappearance is no more mysterious, and no less to be expected, than the disappearance of ... bus riders. For just as there is no absolute, immutable number of public transportation riders in a city, so is there no absolute, immutable number of private automobile riders; rather, the numbers vary in response to current differentials in speed and convenience among ways of getting around."*

As Ms. Jacobs recently commented in reference to Central Park, "Isn't it curious that traffic engineers are so loath to learn something new even after repeated demonstrations?" □

## Parks

Hundreds of New Yorkers rallied for a car-free Central Park on a damp October night.



### Cars Out For Summer!

ON OCTOBER 24TH, HUNDREDS OF NEW Yorkers from all walks of life marched down Central Park's West Drive and rallied in front of Tavern on the Green. These heroic supporters urged City officials to instate a three month trial closure of the Central Park Loop Drive in the summer of 2006.

Armed with thousands of petition sheets signed by 99,999 New Yorkers, rally participants sang it loud: Cars Out for Summer!

Each attendee appeared in their traditional park attire: spandex and bikes for some, shorts and running shoes for others, and plenty of folks in business attire accessorized with dogs, strollers or just their PDAs. The celebration showed that T.A. and the car-free park campaign can unify disparate sectors of this city and use the power of that synergy to effect positive change.

The speeches of Scott Stringer, Gail Brewer, Stacy Creamer, Cecil D. Corbin-Mark Ken Coughlin and Paul White inspired the crowd with their visions of safe and serene recreation in a car-free Central Park.

Watch a video of the event online: [homepage.mac.com/trorb/T.A./iMovieTheater86.html](http://homepage.mac.com/trorb/T.A./iMovieTheater86.html). □

# Central Park Drivers Not Playing by the Rules

ON JANUARY 3RD, 2005 THE Department of Transportation officially lowered the speed limit on Central Park's loop road from 30 mph to 25 mph. This was a great victory for Transportation Alternatives and a boon to all New Yorkers.

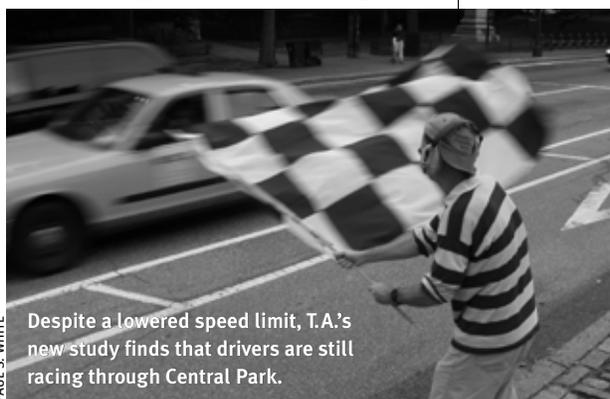
Slower motorists not only generate less pollution and noise, but are also far less dangerous to the millions of recreational users who enjoy the park each day: 5% of people die when struck by motorists traveling 20 mph; 45% at 30 mph; and 85% at 40 mph. The

West Drive just south of the 25 mph speed limit sign at the West 89th Street marker. A speed gun handler crouched behind a large beech tree, out of view from the oncoming traffic, and clocked drivers in the west lane with a Stalker Radar Gun. After each car they would shout out the speed to their partner ready with pen and paper. Most sessions lasted about an hour.

The average speed recorded was 36.6 mph, more than 10 mph over the posted limit. 99.9% of vehicles exceeded the limit and 99.9% of vehicles exceeded the posted speed

limit by 5 mph or more. The fastest car recorded was 48 mph, nearly double the legal rate of travel. Only six of 694 cars were clocked below 30 mph and only one of the 694 was traveling at or below the speed limit.

What does this new data mean? It shows that even after concessions and encouragements from health, transit and safety advocates, motorists using



Despite a lowered speed limit, T.A.'s new study finds that drivers are still racing through Central Park.

5 mph reduction in speed limit should have made park users at least 25% more likely to survive a reckless driver's deadly action.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. A new speed study masterminded and implemented by T.A.'s Car-Free Central Park Committee shows that all the reduction in speed limit has brought to Central Park is an increase in the number of speeders.

The study was done on several September weekday mornings from 7-9 a.m. along the

Central Parks loop drive do not and will not respect the park and its rules. After countless efforts to live with the sickness of motorists in the lungs of New York City, officials should stop trying to accommodate the symptoms of a disease that chokes and endangers its lungs and treat the illness head on. This study confirms, as many before it have, that cars should be banned from the park. After all, if drivers can not play by the rules they should not be allowed to play in the park. □

## A Traffic History of Central and Prospect Parks

In 1906, *The New York Times* ran an editorial that characterized the typical Central Park motorist, "is taking the park, not as a lovely work of art, to be slowly tasted and enjoyed, but only as a shortcut to his possibly lawful but certainly loud and odiferous occasions." Why has it taken so long to get the cars out of Central and Prospect Parks? Here is a brief history of the movements.

**1859:** Central Park opens to the public

**1867:** Prospect Park completed

**1899:** Winslow Buzby sues the city to stink up Central Park with his new-fangled automobile. Prospect Park soon follows suit.



**1906:** The "loud and odiferous" nature of autos in Central Park is acknowledged by *The New York Times*

**1955, 1960:** Bike races close the Central Park loop road to autos for a day or two. Word is that this was great.

**1966:** Car-free summer weekend hours given a trial in both parks by

Mayor Lindsay and Parks Commissioners Hoving and Heckscher. An unsubstantiated report claims that the statue erected in their honor is

promptly toppled by a speeding car.

**1967:** Due to the enormous popularity of the previous year's measures, weekend car-free hours are implemented year round in both parks

**1968:** Car-free Tuesday and Wednesday evenings in Central Park help New Yorkers get over the hump on those long summer days

**1969:** Saturdays are confirmed as the week's best day in Central Park with car-free hours from sunrise to 7 p.m.

LEFT TO RIGHT:

# The Case for Car-Free Evenings in Prospect Park

**O**N AN EARLY WEEKDAY EVENING, Prospect Park is filled with a different demographic than in the early morning or late evening hours. The post-work crowd has yet to arrive and the pre-work masses dressed for the dawn chill have long since finished their exercise routines. Instead of these hearty user-enthusiasts, the walks and fields of Brooklyn's 585 acre emerald expanse are inhabited by more vulnerable groups: students and seniors citizens.

In the afternoon and early evening, elderly Brooklynites from the area, including a large group from Castle Senior Living facilities at Grand Army Plaza, enjoy the calm of Prospect Park. They stroll for exercise and adventure, for a break from the routines of their days and to enjoy the splendor of Olmstead and Vaux's urban sanctuary.

Students from the surrounding schools travel the trails of the park on their way home from school. They play in the borough's backyard, granted enough green space for a pick-up game and a sense of landscape drastically different than one of stoops and sidewalks.

Prospect Park from 5-7 p.m. is a liminal space signifying and setting the bound between different users and diverse intentions. It is a realm where community members young and old enjoy much needed space and their parents, children, friends and neighbors follow suit.

Why then would these hours welcome



MASAMI ADACHI

**TakeAction!**  
 Take the Prospect Park access survey: [transalt.org/parksurvey](http://transalt.org/parksurvey)  
 Join T.A.'s Brooklyn Committee: [transalt.org/campaigns/brooklyn/list.html](http://transalt.org/campaigns/brooklyn/list.html)

**Banning cars in Prospect Park from 5-7 p.m. would make evenings safer and more relaxing for park users.**

cars? Why when the most precious parts of the family unit are about would politicians not ban cars from Prospect Park? They don't need to be

there, the volume of traffic is relatively low in the evening, and the cars that endanger users and sully their experience would have a negligible impact on the surrounding streets.

This year T.A. will pressure our newly elected officials and the ones who have been around for ages to get the cars out of Prospect Park in the evenings. A car-free park is an excellent opportunity for these politicians to take a positive stand on an issue that is at its core about family values. After all, a car-free Prospect Park is a safe place for Brooklyn residents to enjoy healthy recreation and family-friendly socializing. In the coming months we will make this case to politicians around the park and around the city. We will demand what we deserve: a safe respite that accommodates those members of our families and communities who need it most. □

## The Future of Prospect Park: A Conversation with Tupper Thomas



TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVES and thousands of Brooklyn residents are calling on the City to make Prospect Park a true refuge from traffic and make access

to the park safer by bike and foot.

We sat down with Tupper Thomas, chairwoman of the Prospect Park Alliance to discuss her thoughts on cycling in the park and the potential for a car-free Prospect Park.

**T.A.: Tupper, what do you say to the rumors that you have started cycling mornings in the park?**

**TT:** Cycle (*laughs*). I bicycle, big tires, comfortable seat. Cycling is those people who pass me in the morning. I bicycle with my daughter who rollerblades.

**Do you leave before the cars come in?**

Yes. I'm out before seven, before the cars come in.

**Do you find it nicer to use the park without cars?**

It is nicer. I think we're doing very well balancing neighborhood needs and recreational user needs. Cars are in the park for only twenty hours each week

**How has the park changed in the years you have been involved?**

When I first started, no one was using the park, not like today anyway. It has been great to bring back recreational users. The loop drive is the most popular place for recreational users.

**What will it take to make the loop drive car-free?**

A car-free park would be fabulous for park users, but it can't come on the back of surrounding neighborhoods. In order for the park to have fewer and fewer hours, the studies would have to show that this change wouldn't affect the neighborhoods around the park in a negative way. □

**1972:** "Parks Week" brings the first weekday 11 a.m.-3 p.m. car-free hours to Central Park. Famous "Best week of '72" t-shirts fly off the shelves.



**1974:** Prospect Park closed to motor vehicles on weekends and holidays. Brooklyn momentarily pulls ahead in the race to a car-free park.

**1975:** 11am-3pm weekday hours in Central Park are made a mainstay of NYC summer life.

**1978:** Car-Free summer hours in Central park extended from May 1st to October 22nd. Parks and DOT convert the innermost traffic lane in Prospect Park to a recreational lane.

**1979:** Central Park catches up as weekends are made car-free full time. 'Recreation' lane added. Weekday car-free hours reduced.

**1981:** Cars invade Central Park's lower loop during weekday car-free hours

**1992:** West 110th Street, West 106th Street and 5th Avenue entrances closed to cars.

**1994:** Central Park summer hours extended to ten months of the year.

**1999:** Car-free weekday period extended by three hours per day from April to October in Prospect Park.

**2002:** Car-free weekday hours in Prospect Park extended to full year. The park is now closed to cars Monday

through Friday 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and 7-10 p.m.



**2004:** Speed limit on Central Park's loop drive reduced from 30 mph to 25 mph. W. 90th and E. 102nd Street entrances and exits closed to cars. W. 77th and E. 90th entrances closed to cars. W. 72nd street slip-ramp closed to cars. People reclaim overnight

and early mornings in the park. Cars get to enter 7-10 a.m. and 3-7pm. HOV 2+ rule on West Drive during morning rush hours.