

Reclaiming the Streets

Three Traffic Solutions* for City Hall to Tackle Now

MANY NEW YORK CITY TRANSPORTATION experts view London-style congestion pricing and its variants as the most effective traffic panacea. And for good reason: According to a study by the Regional Plan Association, congestion pricing could reduce morning traffic by up to 17% in and around Manhattan.

But there is no indication that City Hall is warming to the idea. “[Congestion pricing] isn’t on the mayor’s second-term agenda,” said Edward Skyler, a former Bloomberg spokesman. And even if congestion pricing were a priority for Bloomberg’s second term, most transportation policy watchers agree that the institutional cooperation and state legislature and city council approval necessary to make it happen would take a few years.

Until congestion pricing is closer to reality, many transportation experts are looking to the New York City Department of Transportation and MTA’s joint Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) initiative as the best hope to move people out of their cars and onto speedier and more convenient buses akin to “subways on the surface.”

In addition to Bus Rapid Transit, here are three immediately achievable alternative traffic relief measures that would thin traffic, clean the air and make New York City more livable and productive.

1. End Lawless Parking

As a recent Schaller Consulting study “Top Ten Drive to Work Census Tracts” showed, city government workers are three times more likely to commute to work by car as compared to professional and management services industry workers. The reason: they are allowed to park—for free—anywhere they please, including on city sidewalks.

By enforcing the existing law that requires city employees to follow the same traffic laws as the general public, by cracking down on parking permit forgery (which is rife) and by eliminating profligate parking privileges, city worker commuting habits can

be brought into line with average New Yorkers.

If government workers commuted by car at the same rate as finance, insurance, real estate and professional workers, there would be 14,000 fewer cars coming into Manhattan’s Central Business District daily. Fourteen-thousand fewer cars clogging streets and bridges, taking up valuable curbside space and blocking walkers on sidewalks.



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Top: Sidewalk parking “perks” lure City employees to drive to work. Bottom: Nearing the Brooklyn entrance to the Manhattan Bridge drivers get two lanes, cyclists get none.

Plus, city workers who take transit, walk and bike have first hand experience about the good and bad aspects of these modes. By successfully eliminating their parking and driving privileges, the city’s powerful municipal unions will, virtually overnight, become powerful allies in the fight to improve the city’s slow buses, crowded subway cars, “ped-locked” sidewalks and unsafe streets.

2. Convert Driving Space into Bicycling and Walking Space

To old-school traffic engineers like Robert Moses, it was the insatiable demand for driving that necessitated the creation of more

driving lanes to accommodate it. To a more modern breed of traffic engineers and urban planners who have witnessed the disastrous effects of decades of car-oriented transportation policy, however, it is the very creation of more driving space that stokes the demand for driving.

According to the City DOT—which still clings to the old notion that streets must be molded to match driving demand—converting driving lanes into bikeways and wider sidewalks will only make traffic worse, as the same number of drivers will be forced to vie for less driving space. Existing proposals to make Central and Prospect Park car-free, to widen midtown sidewalks and to create wide bike lanes and on-street greenways on 20th Avenue in Astoria, Jay Street in Brooklyn and 8th Avenue in Manhattan have gone unimplemented by the DOT for this very reason.

What the DOT still fails to acknowledge is “mode switching.” That is, drivers, when faced with a reduction in driving space and an increase in space for alternatives, will make the switch from driving to alternative modes. Considering that 22% of driving trips in the five boroughs are one mile or less in length and 72% of driving trips in the five boroughs are five miles or less, there is an enormous potential to switch current driving trips to walking and bicycling trips.

3. Raise the Cost of On-Street Parking

Because open on-street parking spots are so cheap and scarce, drivers drive until they can find a spot. A 1996 study estimated that nine percent of traffic in west midtown Manhattan consisted of vehicles searching for parking. When drivers cannot find a spot, they double park, greatly exacerbating traffic congestion.

“Parking cruising” and double parking can be significantly reduced by simply raising the price of on-street parking. Currently, the price of on-street parking on most streets ranges from free to 15 times cheaper than garage rates. If curbside parking rates were competitive with private garages, then drivers would be much more likely to find a spot the first time around the block instead of the fourth.

These traffic taming alternatives to congestion pricing are, of course, not without their political price. The municipal unions will not give up their parking privileges without a fight, and any reapportionment of street space will raise the ire of the minority of drivers who already feel squeezed by the rising cost of driving. But the alternative—wasting ever more time, money and quality of life on traffic congestion—is far worse. □

*Besides congestion pricing