

Senior Activists Fight for Safer Streets



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FROM WASHINGTON HEIGHTS to Harlem, Transportation Alternatives' Safe Routes for Seniors program wins improvements to the safety and accessibility of our City streets for seniors. But we have not won these improvements on our own. In each neighborhood we work in we are joined by dedicated advocates for the elderly. These advocates have opened numerous doors, spread the word and helped us get hundreds of City seniors involved in our campaign. The same is true on the Upper West Side, the site of our most recent effort to change a number of dangerous corridors into elder-friendly streets that encourage walking. T.A. sat down with three advocates who have been instrumental in our Safe Routes for Seniors program to discuss their perspective on the most pressing transportation, safety and quality of life issues for New York City seniors.

What is the mission of your organization?

EB: The Manhattan BoroughWide InterAgency Council on Aging is an umbrella organization for the eight interagency councils that represent a diverse coalition of consumers, providers and advocates that deliver and oversee services to elderly New Yorkers in their communities. The three major components of the mission are: education, advocacy and empowerment.

SP: Started in 1949, the Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center's mission is meeting the social, educational, recreational and cultural needs of the people of the West Side, particularly the residents of the Amsterdam Houses and the Addition which comprises 14 buildings spanning 61st to 65th Streets and Amsterdam to West End Avenues. There are 2,727 people living in the 14 buildings.

BL: The Coalition for a Livable West Side,

formed in 1981, is a grass roots all-volunteer, community-based environmental organization whose members care about the city and protecting a healthy environment.

What are the main issues facing senior citizens you work with?

EB: Housing, cost of living, healthcare, safety and isolation. The older you get, the more your screen disappears and the anger comes out on these issues. In terms of pedestrian safety I find myself yelling at trucks that try to cut in front of me all the time. People are just unaware.

SP: Quality of life for seniors living in public housing is a major issue. There are always issues of safety, sanitation, having elevators that work, having unresponsive management. Transportation and pedestrian safety is high on the list here because there were two seniors from the Center hit and killed by cars. This had a big impact on the seniors.

BL: Development that doesn't serve the community, transportation, and lack of assisted living facilities that are truly affordable. The senior population is being reduced in this city when seniors don't feel like they have a voice. Seniors are still powerful, sometimes they just don't know it.

What should the City do to make walking safer and more enjoyable for NYC's seniors?

EB: Enforcing traffic laws would be a good start. There is generally an indifference in government about pedestrian safety issues. Once you've lived long enough and been in advocacy you see that things do go in circles; it is a tug-of-war to get officials to do something on this, but they will come around.

BL: Enforce the bus lanes. There should be cameras on the buses to photograph motorists violating the bus lane laws. The tickets for these violations should be "mega-tickets."

Politicians don't ask seniors what they need for their block to make it safer to cross. It is a simple thing, but it would bring street safety concerns into focus.

What kinds of physical changes to city streets would you like to see to improve safety and quality of life for seniors?

EB: Make the streets and sidewalks even. Fix the utility cuts, fill in the holes around the grates, and fill the potholes. And of course any kind of physical improvement that would force drivers to yield to pedestrians and slow down when turning.

SP: First, changing the lights so that people have enough time to cross the street, that is a big problem on the Upper West Side. Second, anything that can be done to slow down motor vehicles, especially turning motor vehicles. Speeding is a huge problem.

BL: Mr. Bloomberg could take several million out of his pocket and fix every curb-cut ramp, including the drainage at curbs. More time to cross the street. There are streets like Broadway that are just almost impossible to cross, so anything that can make places like that easier and safer.

Do you have any other thoughts on the relationship between your advocacy for seniors' quality of life and transportation?

EB: As we have an aging population these transportation and pedestrian safety issues become more of a community issue. We have to get out of this encapsulated mentality where care in humanity is lost.

BL: The issue of accessibility is central for senior citizens. We're making people prisoners in their own homes when we don't have the streets and curbs accessible. It is what livable means. The Mayor needs someone in his administration who understands common New Yorkers. □