

# DRIVEN TO EXCESS: Needless Driving & How

**T**HE ENORMOUS COST OF NEW YORK City's high level of vehicular traffic can be measured in many ways: The number of New Yorkers who have asthma (one million); the cost to New York City's economy (\$13 billion); the carbon it generates (3,500 metric tons per year, more than the entire annual carbon output of most countries); the number of New Yorkers killed or injured in traffic crashes (300 and 11,000 respectively).

And if you happen to live on a high-trafficked street, studies find your quality of life will be much lower (*Traffic's Human Toll*, Transportation Alternatives, 2006) and you are more prone to upper respiratory ailments (*All Choked Up*, Environmental Defense, 2007). Then there are the hidden costs, such as lost opportunities for wider sidewalks, buffered bike lanes and parks, due to the huge priority we place on moving and storing cars on some of the most valuable real estate in the world.

## Like Greed, Is Traffic a "Necessary" Evil?

Why do we put up with nightmare levels of traffic? The assumption has been that while traffic can, like greed, be ugly at times, it is necessary to make the economy hum. Echoing Gordon Gekko in the movie *Wall Street*, the prevailing perception is that traffic, like greed, is good. As recently as August 2006, Mayor Bloomberg, responding to reporters' questions about growing citywide concern about worsening traffic, said, "We like traffic, it means economic activity, it means people coming here." Big streets like Flatbush Avenue are not called "arterials" for nothing. Streets carry what New York City mayors, DOT commissioners and especially traffic engineers perceive as the lifeblood of the city: cars and trucks.

This past January, (now former) DOT Commissioner Iris Weinshall testified in opposition to legislation that would have required her agency to set targets for reducing driving and increasing transit, bicycling and walking. Her claim was that "New York City does not have a traffic problem," and that traffic con-



gestion, "is an indication of the vitality and growth of the City of New York."

For years pro-auto groups have linked restrictions on vehicular traffic with restrictions on the economy. As Seymour P. Gline, President of the Metropolitan Garage Board of Trade, said in 1976 in response to the commonsense calls to hem in automobile traffic: "It is illogical and even dangerous for New York to adopt auto-restricting measures that

could speed the city's economic decline."

To be sure, some vehicular traffic is essential to New York's economy. Oftentimes the only way to deliver a good or a service is by truck, and sometimes a car is the only way for New Yorkers to get to a job or get a job or an errand done. But how much traffic is really necessary? Recent research suggests that New York City's economy would function better if as much as half of it disappeared.

# 3 Types of to Reduce It

Eliminating excess auto traffic can clear the way for express buses, bike lanes and wider sidewalks, especially in areas that are congested with pedestrian traffic like Times Square in Manhattan.



PAUL S. WHITE

## Good Traffic vs. Bad Traffic

Long ago the Department of Sanitation realized that it was better to manage waste at its source instead of just accommodating it and throwing everything into the landfill. Unfortunately, the Department of Trans-

portation has not come to the same realization. As “Gridlock” Sam Schwartz, former DOT commissioner and arguably New York City’s leading traffic expert, has said on many occasions, “as a profession, traffic engineers have failed.” The traffic engineers at the City DOT are still treating traffic the same way that sanitation professionals used to treat garbage: do not bother sorting it out or reducing it, just accommodate it.

Traffic engineers have focused on the vehicle while ignoring pedestrians and passengers. Traffic engineers have failed to build second-order effects into their models, such as the higher demand for driving that materializes whenever they widen a road or create more parking. And traffic engineers have, until very recently, virtually ignored bicyclists and buses, failing to give them due priority in the street network.

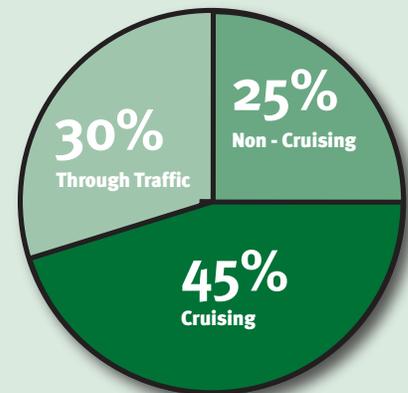
But perhaps the traffic engineers’ biggest shortcoming, and the one that underlies many of their other failings, is that they have utterly failed to “sort” traffic, to distinguish between good traffic and bad traffic. In short, traffic engineers view traffic the same way that sanitation engineers used to view garbage before the age of recycling: all of it is the same.

Of course, not all traffic is the same. Some of it is critical, and some of it is just getting in the way. Over the past two years, original research conducted by Transportation Alternatives has uncovered a startling truth about New York City traffic: a significant amount of it—as many as half of all vehicles on some streets—is completely unnecessary. Even just in terms of raw economics—health and quality of life aside—a significant portion of New York City traffic is doing much more harm than good.

How is some traffic unnecessary, how much of it is out there, and what is Transportation Alternatives doing to eradicate it from New York City streets?

## 1 Cruising for Parking

A recent T.A. study found that 45% of cars in Park Slope were cruising for parking, 30% were passing through and only 25% were headed for a local destination.



“...a surprising amount of traffic isn’t caused by people who are on their way somewhere. Rather, it is caused by those who have already arrived. Streets are clogged, in part, by drivers searching for a place to park.

-- Dr. Donald Shoup, “Gone Parkin,” *New York Times Op-Ed*, March 27, 2007

Much to the chagrin of residents and business owners, Park Slope is infamous for chronically scarce parking and associated traffic. Depicted in films like *The Squid and the Whale*, circling block after block for parking is a rite of passage that local drivers and pedestrians alike endure on a daily basis. The endless search is maddening for the 43% of area households that own cars.

For several days in February 2007, Transportation Alternatives researchers conducted “driver intercept” surveys on Park Slope’s main street, 7th Avenue. While they were stopped at red lights, drivers were asked a short series of questions. A startling 45% of all drivers interviewed answered that they had in fact already arrived at their destination but were circling the block in search of a parking space. Using similar techniques, a Schaller Consulting study conducted on Prince Street in Soho in November 2006 found that 28% of all drivers were searching for a parking space. Multiplied across the entire city these studies suggest that by tackling the parking problem we can eliminate an enormous

# In Focus

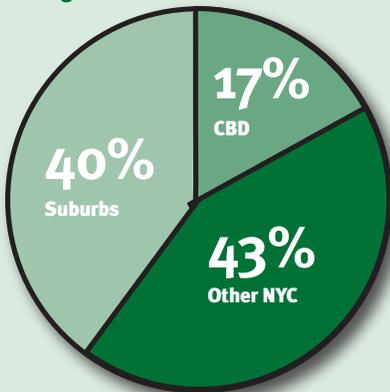
amount of unnecessary driving.

The root cause of cruising traffic is underpriced curbside parking. Because the curbside parking ranges from free to fourteen to twenty times cheaper than private garage rates, curbside spots are in very high demand. And it is that demand that makes curbside spaces so scarce. The solution is to apply what parking expert Donald Shoup calls the “Goldilocks principle,” which entails setting the price of curbside parking at the “just right” price that will lead to one or two vacant spaces per block.

To put the Goldilocks principle into practice, Transportation Alternatives is working with local Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to convince the City of New York to raise curbside parking rates on commercial streets until some spaces become vacant. BIDs are natural allies for such a policy, for local businesses have long understood how parking scarcity and its associated cruising traffic keeps customers away and delays deliveries. If the experience of other cities holds true, then this approach will eliminate a large share of the “cruising” traffic. Taking it a step further, T.A. is also working to convince the City that the increased parking revenue generated by market priced parking should be applied to local pedestrian improvements that will show drivers that their parking money is well spent.

## 2 Shunning Transit

**It's not the suburbs: Most auto commuters to Manhattan's CBD are driving in from the boroughs**



**“...driving is a matter of choice and not necessity for most auto users.”**

**-- Bruce Schaller, Necessity or Choice Transportation Alternatives, February 2006**

Lacking transit options, many New Yorkers have to drive. Or so it was thought until January 12, 2007 when the story, “Cars Clogging New York? Most Are From the City” exploded this myth on the front page of the New York Times. The story, based on research conducted by Schaller consulting for Transportation Alternatives, found that 80% to 90% of Manhattan-bound drivers have a viable, time-competitive transit option that they are not taking.

Why would so many drivers ignore their transit option and choose to drive instead? A month later, a follow-up T.A. study uncovered the answer: 57% of drivers get free parking in one form or another, including government employees abusing their parking permits.) Free parking, as any transportation professional knows, is the main inducement for commuters to choose to drive.

To encourage drivers to exercise their transit options, Transportation Alternatives is working on many fronts. T.A. is leading the push for London-style congestion pricing, which would give drivers a strong incentive to save money by taking their transit options. While there is widespread support for pricing among citywide community groups and business and health sectors, there is much resistance in Brooklyn and Queens, where some commuters have grown accustomed to driving even when transit options are available, and a smaller share are without decent transit.

For residents of outer Brooklyn and Queens who lack transit options or lack access to reliable transit, T.A. is working with the Regional Plan Association, Brooklyn and Queens councilmembers and community groups like the Queensboro Hill Neighborhood Association to identify a package of transit improvements—like expanded Bus Rapid Transit, express bus service and park-and-ride facilities. These improvements could be installed before congestion pricing was implemented and funded by revenues from the congestion charge. And they would make pricing attractive to the small fraction of Manhattan-bound commuters who are currently without transit options.

To eliminate the free parking inducement, T.A. is working to bring curbside parking prices more in line with garage rates and stem the rampant abuse of government-issued parking permits that cause tens of thousands of city and state workers to drive when they could be taking commuter rail, subways or buses (see page 16).

## 3 Short Trippers

**Data show that most automobile trips throughout NYC are five miles or less**



Most Manhattan-bound drivers have transit options. What about drivers who travel within the boroughs? Are these people driven by necessity? As it turns out, many driving trips are short enough to be walked or biked. According to the most recent census data, 22% of citywide driving trips are one mile or less in length, and a whopping 56% are three miles or less. Clearly, many driving trips could and should be switched to walking and biking.

To help drivers make the switch, there is an array of street improvements that should be applied. For example: wider sidewalks; traffic lights timed to speed walkers and protect them from turning traffic; adding key bike routes to the emerging bike network and protecting bikers from dangerous traffic with traffic-protected barriers.

In cities like Chicago and London, city government has set targets to switch short distance driving trips to bicycling and walking. These “modal targets” then create the incentives for Department of Transportation to make the necessary street improvements. T.A. is currently working with both City Council and the DOT to set modal targets for New York City.

Not all traffic is equal. Some of it is absolutely necessary, but to make New York City a sustainable and livable metropolis, much of it can and should be avoided. The tools for eliminating needless traffic are at the ready: parking reforms, congestion pricing, and improvements to surface transit, bicycling and walking can all be applied to significantly reduce cruising traffic and driving trips that could be taken by bus, subway, walking or bicycling. □

## Measuring Up: Cities Use Targets to Pave the Way for Change

Cities around the country, like Chicago and San Francisco and around the world, like London and Stockholm, are committing to reducing excess traffic. One thing these cities have in common is their approach: they have all set targets for reducing vehicular traffic and switching people to transit, bicycling and walking. These targets provide the incentives for city officials to stop talking about traffic and actually do something about it. Here is how our city Department of Transportation can reduce all of that needless traffic and the congestion, emissions and hassle that it imposes on New Yorkers:

### 1 Measure

While the DOT collects a lot of information about “vehicular level of service” (how easy it is to drive), it does not collect annual data on the percentage of traffic that is cruising for parking, the number of drivers who are shunning their transit options or the share of short driving trips that could be walked or biked. The DOT should follow the example of other big cities like London, Chicago and San Francisco that are collecting this information at key locations throughout their cities on an annual basis.

### 2 Target

Armed with this information, the DOT should then set annual targets for reducing cruising traffic and the share of driving trips that could be taken by transit, biking and walking. Chicago, for example, aims to switch five percent of short driving trips to bicycling and San Francisco is setting a parking vacancy target of 15% to reduce the percentage of traffic that is cruising for parking.

### 3 Accomplish

The DOT has a good record of achieving the targets that it sets for itself. Targets to improve crosstown vehicle speeds in midtown, fill more potholes and build more bicycle lanes, for example, are all meeting with success. Once traffic reduction targets are set, the DOT has no shortage of means to accomplish them including: congestion pricing; raising parking pricing will reduce cruising traffic; devoting more street space to biking and walking will reduce short distance driving trips; and improved bus service and enforcing parking permits and regulations will move more drivers to transit.

# Breaking News: The Mayor’s Green Transportation Plan



GRAHAM BECK

**A coalition of environmental, labor, business and community groups joined together as the Campaign for New York’s Future on the steps of City Hall to support the Mayor’s PlaNYC**

ON EARTHDAY (APRIL 22ND) MAYOR Bloomberg announced his long-term sustainability plan, *PlaNYC: A Greener, Greater New York*. The plan lays a solid foundation to improve New York City and ensure the good health, safety and prosperity of its citizens for years to come. Here are some highlights that are the direct result of Transportation Alternatives’ and our partner organizations’ years of tireless advocacy. To read the full plan and submit your comments, visit [nyc.gov/2030](http://nyc.gov/2030).

## Congestion Pricing

- See [nyc.gov/2030](http://nyc.gov/2030) for full details
- Motorists driving to Manhattan south of 86th street will incur \$8 charge M-F between 6 am and 6 pm
- All net revenues will be dedicated to transit projects including expanding transit service to neighborhoods currently underserved and improving existing service
- Only five percent of commuters who live in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and the Bronx commute to the CBD by auto. The other 95% use public transportation to reach CBD jobs or work outside the congestion pricing zone.
- No toll booths will be necessary to implement this program

## Promote Cycling

- Complete 200 new directional lane miles

of bicycle routes by 2009, another 620 miles by 2015 and a total of 1,800 lane miles of bicycle facilities by 2030.

- Install 1,200 new on-street bicycle racks citywide by 2009 and 400 new racks annually until there is “adequate bike parking” in every neighborhood
- City will pursue legislation to require that large commercial buildings make provision for bicycle storage either on site or reasonably nearby

## Pedestrian Improvements

- Create a new car-free public plaza in every community (31 are currently planned or underway to be completed by 2009)
  - New sites and design, construction and programming plans for the plazas will be identified and created in consultation with community groups
  - Four new or enhanced plazas will be completed per year until every community board has at least one
- Re-open the historic High Bridge pedestrian span, providing a valuable linkage between Harlem and the Bronx

## Transit Improvements

- Improve and expand bus service (including bus rapid transit)
- Dedicated Bus/HOV lanes on the East River Bridges
- Improve local commuter rail service
- Improve sidewalk access to transit
- Develop congestion management plans for nine key outer borough growth corridors over the next two years

## Transit Oriented Development

- Make 95% of new housing transit-accessible
- Promote growth around existing transit centers

Transportation Alternatives commends the Mayor and his sustainability team on the ambitious agenda and looks forward to working with his office and City agencies to make the streets more inviting to those who use them most efficiently: walkers, bus riders and bicyclists. □