

The End of an Error?



ETHAN KENT

The new DOT Commissioner should prioritize the needs of NYC's walkers and cyclists.

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MISSION STATEMENT: Our mission is to reclaim New York City's streets from the automobile, and to advocate for bicycling, walking and public transit as the best transportation alternatives.

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COVER PHOTO: Paul S. White (front), Lara Wechsler (back)

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■ WAS SITTING DOWN TO DINNER with my wife Zoë when I got the call. Iris Weinshall, DOT Commissioner for the past seven years, was stepping down.

It is no secret to readers of this publication that Commissioner Weinshall and Transportation Alternatives have often been at loggerheads. Most recently, she voiced her opposition to Intro. 199, a smart bill that would require the DOT to set targets for reducing driving and increasing transit, walking and bicycling.

To her credit, Commissioner Weinshall ran the agency better than her predecessors, and took steps to make walking and bicycling more viable. Nightmarish streets like Queens Boulevard were made safer for pedestrians and more recently she stepped up bike planning efforts.

These improvements, however, were only made ad-hoc, and only after enormous outside pressure—from T.A. and others—was brought to bear. In the end Weinshall's fundamental error was that she failed understand that in this day and age, transportation policy is about reducing motor vehicle use, not simply accommodating it.

To reduce the cost of congestion and meet the challenges of growth and global warming, New York City needs not just a new progressive-minded DOT Commissioner, but a new cadre of expert transportation planners who can institutionalize and apply modern street management practices that will shift driving trips to cleaner, more space efficient modes.

Road pricing, parking reforms and streets redesigned to maximize walking, biking and surface transit are solutions that the new commissioner needs to make happen if New York City's 6,000 miles of streets are going to perform better for residents and business alike.

Tasks that the new Commissioner should tackle:

- Adopt new universal street design standards that would make traffic calming, pedestrian, bicycle and bus improvements the routine rule, not the ad hoc exception.
- Expand annual data collection to better understand how New Yorkers travel, and what they need to drive less and walk, bike and take transit more.
- Begin a comprehensive study of how variable road pricing can be effectively and fairly applied.



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- Reform on-street and off-street parking policies to reduce unnecessary driving and traffic.
- Improve community based planning and outreach to make streets work for residents first and through-traffic second.

More specifically, the new commissioner could signal that she means business early by finally making our crown jewel parks car-free, by creating weekend pedestrian-priority streets in bustling shopping areas and by finally traffic calming streets around city schools and senior centers.

In the 20th Century, the streets belonged to drivers. Now, with the Earth warming, population exploding, and traffic costs rising, the new DOT Commissioner must remake the streets for their new rightful owners: passengers, pedestrians and cyclists.

Sincerely,

Paul Steely White
Executive Director
Transportation Alternatives