

Gridlock Ave vs. Green St Will the New DOT Turn the Corner?

“It has been an honor and a privilege to spend more than two decades serving the city of New York. During the last seven years we have taken great strides towards making our streets safer for pedestrians, cyclists and motorists, rehabilitating our historic and iconic bridges, bringing our famed Staten Island Ferry into the 21st century and balancing the many demands on the public space we all share.”

Iris Weinshall, DOT Commissioner

After seven long years, news that DOT Commissioner Iris Weinshall was stepping down broke quietly on StreetsBlog on the last Monday in January. Her reign of mediocrity is finally over. Now it remains to be seen whether the Mayor will be bold enough to appoint a successor who will change course and reapportion the streets to favor the most space-efficient transportation modes: walking, bicycling and surface transit.

Commissioner Weinshall surrounded herself with 20th century transportation engineers who believed that maximizing performance on New York City streets meant moving as many cars as quickly as possible, all other modes be damned. She and her deputies ignored signs that the system was not just out of balance, but in fact endangering the lives and livelihoods of New Yorkers.

In 2006, 311 New Yorkers were killed by motor vehicles, and 30,000 more were injured. A recent Department of Health study found that only one in four New Yorkers gets

enough daily physical activity, thanks in no small part to streets that are hostile to the everyday walking and bicycling that health experts now recognize as the best way to get fit. T.A.'s recent groundbreaking study, *Traffic's Human Toll* found that New Yorkers who live on high traffic streets harbor more negative perceptions of their block, know fewer of their neighbors and spend less time walking, shopping and playing outdoors with their children than those living on low traffic streets. An NYU study released in October linked sky-high childhood asthma rates in the Bronx to high levels of truck traffic and diesel exhaust near schools in that borough. Dr. Thurston, the head of the study, said that children's symptoms, like wheezing, doubled on days when pollution from truck traffic was highest.

The city's leading business group, the Partnership for NYC, recently released a groundbreaking study pegging the cost of traffic congestion to the city's economy at \$13 billion. In a world of increasingly mobile capital, New York City is losing investment and standing to other cities like London that have already reaped the efficiencies of new, people-oriented street priorities.

Weinshall also ignored the fact that New York City streets are the fastest growing source of the city's greenhouse gas emissions. Other cities like Seattle, San Francisco and even Los Angeles have gotten ahead of us by reducing their "rolling carbon" through major investment in light rail, bicycle facilities, pedestrian amenities and Bus Rapid Transit.

These are some heady challenges for Commissioner Weinshall's successor. A progressive thinker is needed to meet them. Furthermore this person will need to have a strong backbone to stand up to the powerful cultural forces and stubborn myths that stand in the way of reform.

These are the forces that Transportation Alternatives fights everyday, so as our gift to the next New York City Commissioner

of Transportation we present a field guide to these obstacles and some clever ideas for overcoming them.

Four Obstacles to Transportation Reform in NYC and How to Overcome Them

1 The Myth that Perfect Transit is a Precondition to Traffic Relief

“There are people in Eastern Queens and Staten Island and other parts of the city who are not near public transportation. I don't want to discriminate against those individuals,” [Eastern Queens Councilmember] Weprin said.

November 20, 2006, New York Sun

The powerful and popular myth that New York City drivers lack transit options is a major roadblock to reducing driving, as is the canard that major transit improvements must precede car restriction measures. In fact, most drivers have decent transit options,



DOT Commissioner Iris Weinshall and T.A. Executive Director Paul White in a rare photo-op at the opening of the Grand Street bike lanes in Manhattan.

away from protecting that interest. They beat back congestion pricing in the 1980's after then DOT commissioner Sam Schwartz deigned to make it a policy option, and in 2002 put an end to the successful "car pool rule" that was introduced to ease traffic congestion after 9/11. Most recently, the parking lobby has ramped up a preemptive campaign against congestion pricing and has hired one of Albany's most feared lobbying firms, the Parkside Group.

Manhattan's parking garage owners are not fans of policies that move drivers out of their cars. Even the proudly independent Mayor Bloomberg is not impervious to the political pain of the flush parking lobby and their hired lobbyists. But it might be possible to placate the parking kings. The Mayor should pursue extensive curbside parking reforms prior or concurrent to congestion pricing. These reforms would bring curbside parking rates more in line with garage rates, eliminating motor vehicle traffic trolling for parking spaces and creating more business for parking garages. In 2007 T.A. is working with

the business community to win market rate curbside parking (see pages 14-15) and to flip vehicular parking spaces to wider sidewalks, bike parking and bus lanes.

3 Government Car Culture

"Curb space is a valuable public resource. There may be as many as 100,000 on-street parking permits issued to city, state and federal employees, judges, diplomats, the press, etc. The fact that no one knows the exact number points to

an aspect of this problem.

Privileges should be rescinded unless there is a demonstrable need for on-street parking. If the average person doesn't have special parking privileges, why should those who work for us or write about the traffic "mess" have them?"

July 11th, 2001 Mayor Bloomberg

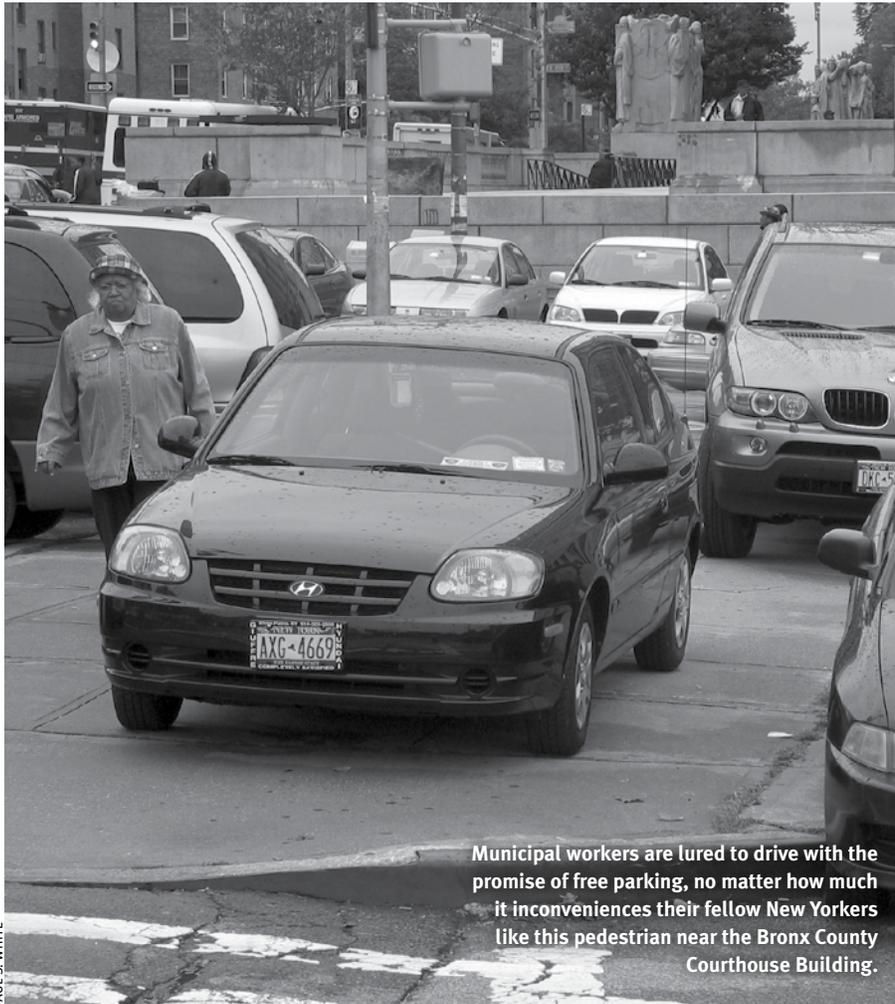
On average, government workers in New York City commute to work at twice the rate of the city's general population. In Manhattan alone, this disparity of car dependence puts 17,000 additional cars onto the streets and puts a large swath of powerful New Yorkers at odds with the supermajority of transit dependent New Yorkers who would clearly benefit from parking reforms, congestion pricing, and other traffic relief measures.

Why are government workers driving in such large numbers? Research suggests that it is because a majority of drivers receive free or discounted parking. A 1980's study (that T.A. is currently updating) found that over half of Manhattan-bound drivers receive free or discounted parking. It is the availability of cheap parking, according to Bruce Schaller and other transportation experts, which determines whether people choose to drive or to take their trip by other means.

After Bloomberg's tough talk in 2001, he managed to reduce Agency Business Parking Permits (ABPP) by about 3,000 and limit the number of permits issued by the Mayor's office (from 170 to 137 since 2004). While he deserves credit for his actions, these reductions barely impact the total number of permits on the streets and represent an insignificant fraction of the illegal permits found in T.A.'s acclaimed 2006 parking permit studies.

Today over 150,000 government employees have access to free parking in the form of valid government-issued parking permits (including the more than 30,000 NYPD "Self-Enforcement Zone" permits and 75,000 teacher permits). Thousands more illicitly enjoy the same privileges by photocopying permits or by minting their own.

The current commuting habits of the city's hundreds of thousands of government employees (not to mention the elected officials that live in fear of them) are more in line with Los Angelenos than their fellow New Yorkers. It is both a "windshield perspective"



Municipal workers are lured to drive with the promise of free parking, no matter how much it inconveniences their fellow New Yorkers like this pedestrian near the Bronx County Courthouse Building.

PAUL S. WHITE

and simply reducing the number of cars on the road will improve transit dramatically. But in truth, most New York City drivers already have time-competitive transit options. A recent study by Schaller Consulting showed that 80% of those who drive to Manhattan's Central Business District have transit alternatives that would take no longer than 10 additional minutes.

The vast majority of New York City is currently well-served by subway and the five pilot Bus Rapid Transit routes being implemented by the City Department of Transportation and the MTA will boost coverage in sections of Eastern Queens and Brooklyn, Staten Island and the Bronx. To further extend transit coverage, the City could within just a few ears expand the BRT routes from five to 15. These routes should be complemented by creating more dedicated lanes and better enforcing existing lanes for express buses. The routes for BRT and express buses should certainly cover eastern and northern Queens to better serve the transit-poor neighborhoods in this area.

Straphangers worried that reducing driv-



The Straphangers Campaign and T.A. present the 2006 Pokey Awards for the city's slowest and least reliable buses. Simply reducing traffic would make buses faster and more efficient.

ing will lead to overcrowding on the subway can take comfort in the knowledge that after London's congestion charge was put into place, 15% of downtown bound drivers switched to transit. Because auto commuters represent a minority of current commute trips to Manhattan, if 15% of Manhattan bound auto commuters switched to transit,

then transit commutes to Manhattan would only grow by 3.2%, hardly the transit overload that some predict.

Reducing the number of drivers on the road will actually make some forms of transit faster, creating a virtuous cycle. Taking cars off the road will greatly increase bus speeds and reliability without investing a dime. A recent study by Kenneth A. Small at the University of California found that car restriction measures like congestion pricing are one of the best ways to improve the capacity and speed of transit because fewer cars means that buses can go faster and make more trips, thus boosting capacity.

This in turn attracts more people out of their cars, boosting bus efficiency, ridership and revenue even more. Specifically, Small's study found that in London, congestion pricing alone sped buses by 9% while boosting service by 23%.

T.A. is working in partnership with other members of the Citywide Coalition for Traffic Relief to educate current bus riders (particularly those in eastern Queens and Brooklyn) about the major service improvements that they can reap from congestion pricing, parking reforms and traffic relief measures.

2 The Parking Lobby

"For Greg Susick, senior vice president of Central Parking, which operates 230 garages in Manhattan, the car ban is an attack on something as American as apple pie... "I think it's destroying the fabric of New York." Mr. Susick said. "People don't drive into New York because they like to. They come here to work and shop. I think it's hurting a lot of people who are trying to make a living."

November 26, 2001, New York Times

The parking lobby has a vested interest in maximizing the number of people driving into Manhattan, and they have not shied



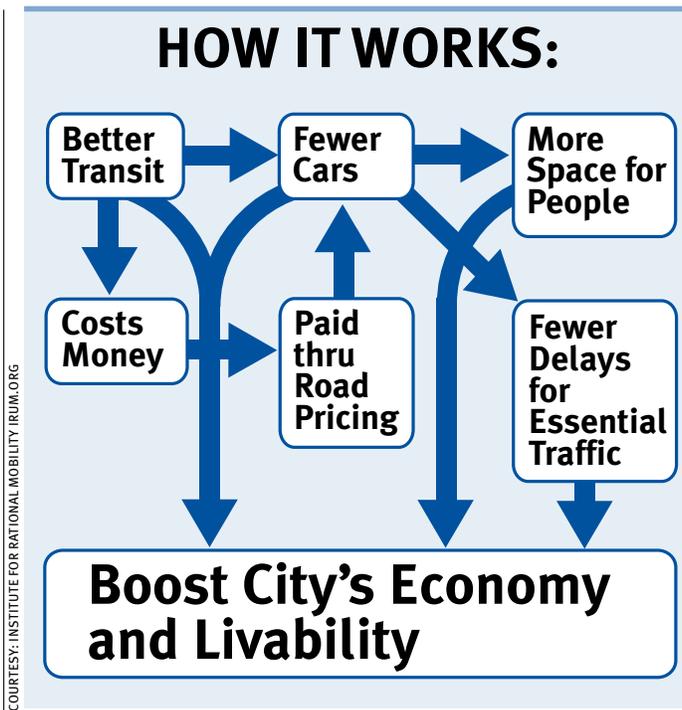
The parking lobby punches above its weight in political power, hindering transportation reform.

DANI SIMONS

and the fear of a municipal backlash that has kept many city politicians from leading significant changes to city streets. The way through this roadblock is simple: the Mayor and City Council must drastically reduce the issuance of city parking permits and at long last properly enforce their use.

Until city workers have common cause with New York City's transit and walking majority, any politician who backs significant changes to city streets will incur tough political pain.

In 2007, Transportation Alternatives will work to bring the transportation priorities of city workers more in line with average New Yorkers by continuing to expose the underbelly of parking abuse, notably via a new web site that will enable citizens to submit permit abuse information that will be automatically geo-coded to position it on a map and uploaded to the site (see pages 14-15). In addition, T.A. will work with city elected officials to dramatically reduce parking permits and establish a new standard for enforcing their use.



with buses, five times as much as bicyclists and two and a half times as much as pedestrians. And even the cleanest cars have the power to maim or kill pedestrians and cyclists.

By reducing our automobiles dependence and putting our resources into making cycling, walking and transit safe and convenient for residents of all ability levels we are also setting a positive example for urban and dense suburban areas nationwide. It is impossible to solve large scale ills from global warming to obesity by address-

4 The False Promise of Clean Cars

“Just a few years ago, when car buyers wanted to do their part for Mother Earth, it meant trading the conveniences of a sport utility vehicle or minivan for something smaller but with better fuel economy. Today, U.S. consumers no longer have to make those kinds of sacrifices...”

Houston Chronicle, January 29, 2007

Cleaner cars are certainly good news for some places in the U.S. (whether Houston is one of them is debatable) where urban and suburban sprawl have ruined walking, bicycling and transit as viable transportation options.

With asthma rates four times the national average in neighborhoods like the South Bronx, there is no question that reducing air pollution will benefit New York City

residents. But in a dense urban environment where car use clearly hampers walking, bicycling and public transportation, should we merely switch to cleaner cars or reduce the number of autos altogether?

No matter how clean, cars take up more valuable public space than other modes of travel. Whether powered by gas, hydrogen, or grass, automobiles use ten times as much space per person-mile of travel as compared

ing symptoms individually.

The days of deferring traffic relief measures, cowering to private and public parking interests and counting on clean cars are over. The short term political price to be paid for moving beyond these obstacles is much smaller than the economic, environmental, health and quality of life costs of continuing to allow our transportation policy to be shaped by them. □

