

From Potholes to Planning: Will the City's Transportation Agency Changing Routes?

By Paige Cowett

Transportation initiatives are central to New York City's long-term sustainability agenda outlined in PlaNYC. Even though Mayor Michael Bloomberg's proposal for congestion pricing failed (at least for the time being) the debate brought into focus the environmental and social costs of traffic in the city. And for the first time transportation policy is being talked about in terms of its long-term sustainability – that is, whether it solves today's problems without compromising the interests of future generations. Only one year after the release of PlaNYC, and partly inspired by that plan, the city's Department of Transportation (DOT) came out with its first-ever strategic plan, *Sustainable Streets*, which outlines a new agenda for streets as public places.

Advocates for pedestrians and bicyclists such as Transportation Alternatives (TA), founded in 1973, have looked towards the DOT with promise ever since the appointment of Janette Sadik-Khan as commissioner in April 2007. The new DOT chief has an impressive resume in the transportation field, including a stint as Senior Vice President of Parsons Brinkerhoff, a leading global engineering firm, Deputy Administrator of the U.S. Department of Transportation, and President of the National Association of City Transportation Officials. But she is perhaps the first commissioner to be seen often on a bicycle and leading bike rides such as the 2008 Tour de Brooklyn. She speaks not only of filling potholes and moving traffic but, with PlaNYC2030 as a mandate, creating better urban spaces for New Yorkers.

But even with DOT's new leadership and strategic plan, and PlaNYC, the question remains whether transportation policy in the city will change directions in practice? Can a few visionary leaders transform an agency with 4,000 employees that have for decades been imbued with the mission of moving cars? While there are many positive initiatives in the new strategic plan, how many will really be implemented? Will the strategic vision ensure a sustainable transportation system for all residents of New York City and not just the Manhattan business districts? How much input will communities have in these projects? A look at the city's bicycle initiatives, informed by interviews with people in DOT and TA, may help answer these questions.

Streets for Bicycles and Pedestrians?

PlaNYC and *Sustainable Streets* implicitly value and encourage increased bicycle ridership and pedestrian friendly streets through a variety of initiatives. But neither of them set clear priorities for organizing the transportation system and allocating street space among different modes of transportation such as cars, buses, bicycles and pedestrians. The city seems to be encouraging people to use cars less, thereby reducing congestion and pollution, but how much are they able to make other modes of transportation real options?

Major goals outlined in *Sustainable Streets* include the following:

- Double bicycle commuting by 2015 and triple bicycle commuting by 2030
- Cut the 2007 rate of traffic fatalities by 50% by 2030
- Create more people-friendly boulevards in key corridors across the city
- Implement Bus Rapid Transit
- Manage parking to control congestion
- Develop a new public plaza in every community district
- Cultivate knowledgeable community leaders through the DOT Academy

Sustainable Streets states that safety for motorists, cyclists, transit passengers and pedestrians is the first priority. But in a situation where safety measures for one mode necessitate reducing street space for another, how does the DOT make decisions about which modes get priority? How will the DOT balance the use of street space and accomplish a broad set of goals for all modes?

Because of the high density and limited street space in New York City, each mode of transportation competes for space. Currently, automobiles use most of the street space and still seem to get the highest priority. Congestion reduction is on the agenda, but why isn't reducing car trips explicitly part of the agenda?

Are More Miles of Bicycle Lanes Enough?

If we look specifically at bicycling, it is not clear that the city is truly moving toward changing routes. Doubling and tripling the bicycle commuting rate, while positive, would still yield a marginal number of bicycle trips, accounting for less than one percent of the total and a long way from, for example, Copenhagen's 30%. Where there are striped bicycle lanes, they usually take up no more than 20% of street space (and usually much less). They are not protected from vehicular traffic and one of the greatest fears of urban cyclists is getting "doored" – knocked off their bikes when drivers in parked cars open their doors. Cars and trucks habitually park in bicycle lanes, forcing cyclists to swerve into moving traffic. Should the city start reversing its priorities in the allocation of street space and make much more of it available to bicyclists and pedestrians? And how will the city make tough policy decisions about its priorities?

Ryan Russo, director of the Alternative Modes office and the School Safety Engineering office in the DOT, oversees all bicycle initiatives and some of the pedestrian initiatives. He and his staff are responsible for keeping the mayor's promise to provide 200 additional miles of new bike lanes as part of the city's Bicycle Master Plan, creating a continuous network of bike lanes throughout the city. The Master Plan was created over 10 years ago as a collaborative effort between the DOT, the Department of City Planning, and a task force of planners, cyclists and advocates. Completion of the plan's 1,800 miles of bicycle lanes appears to be DOT's priority with respect to bicycling.

But according to Paul Steely White, Director Transportation Alternatives (TA), the master plan could use a major overhaul and updating. And while TA is hopeful about the

new surge of attention being paid to alternative modes of transportation and is trying to cooperate and help the DOT in their efforts, they argue that the DOT and the City should raise their bar higher and push the agenda further. “They’re delaying the delivery of many of these reforms until 2015 and many until 2030 when in fact it is within their power to deliver on these much sooner – in fact before the mayor leaves office.”

In a new political climate with an ambitious mayoral commitment to sustainable transportation, TA sees an opportunity to push for deeper transformative changes. “We know much more than we did 10 or 12 years ago about what it takes to get people riding – not just experience from here in New York but also experience abroad, and there are really three things that a revamped, updated master plan should include that it doesn’t now.” These are, according to White: quality protected bike lanes, secure bike parking, and a bike share program.

The DOT has already implemented successful projects that continue to increase bicycle safety and ridership, namely the 9th Avenue protected bike lane and the West Side greenway, both in Manhattan. These are the type of quality projects TA wishes there were more of, because protected lanes are much safer than painted lanes. Perhaps more importantly, protected lanes are perceived to be safer by non-cyclists, and would encourage significantly more ridership within the non-cycling population. But just 15 of the new 200 miles of bike lanes are going to be of the protected variety. Since DOT states that safety is its priority, it should follow that protected lanes would also be a priority. The guiding principle, according to DOT’s Ryan Russo, is that “making it more safe will meet the goal of mode shift.” In other words, more people will bicycle if bicycling is safer. But if painted unprotected lanes aren’t perceived as safe, will this kind of incremental change really encourage people to get on bikes?

DOT has promised to increase secure bike parking, especially along heavily trafficked routes. But substantial increases in bike parking will still be needed around transit hubs and in off-street facilities. DOT recognizes the success of protected lanes and bike share programs (Paris’ Velib Bike Share increased ridership by 200% in less than one year). But the agency argues that the focus first and foremost should be on completing the bike network before taking on these other measures. They say that the bicycle infrastructure set out in the Master Plan needs to be in place before a bike share program can be considered. In an interview on *All Things Considered*, Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan stated, “Paris spent many years putting together their bike network, actually getting their routes in place out on their streets, and that’s in fact what New York City is doing right now. We’re rolling out an additional 200 miles of bike lanes throughout the city and so that’s our first down payment on setting up a world class city for biking.”¹

Safety For Who?

Another safety goal of PlaNYC and the DOT is to reduce traffic fatalities by 50% by the year 2030. While TA sees the reduction of fatalities as an important goal, the group argues that the city should set the bar higher and aim to accomplish this reduction much

¹ May 15, 2008 broadcast, <http://www.wnyc.org/news/articles/99069>.

sooner. TA says that there is nothing standing in the way of meeting this goal in the next 5-10 years except for the political will to take a few seconds away from drivers at signaled intersections. Leading Pedestrian Interval (LPI) is a system that gives pedestrians a few seconds head-start while crossing an intersection. According to one expert, LPIs “have been shown to reduce vehicle-pedestrian incidents in New York City by 26% and the severity of pedestrian injuries by 36%. They have been used in the city for 30 years and exist in a multitude of locations. They are simple to install, as most signals are now computerized.”² The tradeoff is that automobile traffic loses a few seconds; but some traffic engineers from DOT’s pothole era say these few seconds would exacerbate congestion. By not utilizing this LPI tool, an inexpensive and easy-to-implement way to significantly reduce fatalities, the DOT appears to prioritize the convenience of drivers over pedestrian safety. TA argues that this LPI issue provides a good example of how an explicit rationale and hierarchy of priorities would help the DOT implement simple solutions in its everyday operations that significantly increase safety and bicycle ridership.

Planning with Communities

DOT’s experts may be reluctant to promote anything more than the most incremental change because they know they run the risk of facing community opposition. For example, DOT recently lost a community board vote to close Prince Street in Manhattan to traffic on Sunday. According to DOT’s Russo, there is already plenty of resistance from communities that oppose pieces of larger projects that run through their districts. The Bicycle Master Plan is a citywide plan but often DOT faces opposition from communities that do not want specific routes going through their neighborhoods. The DOT has to make an argument that while the route may not seem ideal to individual community members, route choices are made with the larger network in mind. PlaNYC and the backing of the Mayor can really help DOT make its case. According to Russo, “a network is on a scale of the city, and communities are inherently on a different scale... so there’s a tension there at play in trying to do this citywide project in essence and engaging communities....Their response to us varies all over the city. It’s a core part of our work going in front and facing, as our commissioner said the other day, the slings and arrows of people who are sort of scared of change.”

But what might happen if there were to be a more interactive and collaborative relationship with communities? Paul White argues that the DOT is learning their lesson, and learning that exchanging ideas and interfacing with communities really works. White uses the example of community workshops the DOT ran to discuss residential parking permits during the congestion pricing debate: “It was useful in eroding the historic mistrust and cynicism that both sides have towards that kind of public process and I think that if the DOT invests more in that kind of process, then a lot of this stuff can succeed and they can actually strengthen a lot of these plans rather than watering them down as they’re doing now in many cases.”

² Michael King, “Calming New York City Intersections,” *Urban Street Symposium*, Transportation Research Board, Dallas, 1999.

In *Sustainable Streets*, the DOT seems to have understood the need to cultivate and educate community leaders about transportation issues. The agency has launched a DOT Academy that aims to educate community leaders, not on a project-by-project basis but in a general way, about DOT's programs and how communities can contribute to the planning effort. It will require, however, an approach that truly invites community leaders to join a dialogue about improving the quality of street life, and not one that lectures or talks down to people in a way that only encourages more resistance to change.

Why Priorities Are Important

Through PlaNYC and *Sustainable Streets*, it is clear that the city is interested in encouraging bicycling and other modes of transportation besides cars. There is no doubt about the DOT concern with safety. The problems of limited resources and a change-averse public are clearly present. But when the DOT fails to outline clearly their priorities and seems to be making conflicting decisions about whether to prioritize bike and pedestrian safety, the public gets mixed messages. The DOT has to make their rationale clearer, while at the same time valuing the importance of establishing consensus with communities. Finally, the DOT should look to European and other U.S. cities to push the agenda even further in the right direction. Educating and cultivating community members makes it possible to push the envelope, and if we're serious about getting people on their bikes and out of cars, the city will have to move beyond painting bike lines on the pavement.

Paige Cowett has a Masters in Urban Planning. This working paper was completed while a Fellow at the Hunter College Center for Community Planning and Development.

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