

**NYC DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION TESTIMONY
ON DOT'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19 AND THE OPEN STREETS PROGRAM
BEFORE THE CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION
September 9, 2020**

Good morning Chairman Rodriguez and members of the Transportation Committee. I am Polly Trottenberg, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Transportation and I am joined by Eric Beaton, Deputy Commissioner for Traffic Planning and Management, Sean Quinn, Assistant Commissioner for Street Improvement Projects, and Rebecca Zack, Assistant Commissioner for Intergovernmental and Community Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, on behalf of Mayor Bill de Blasio, on DOT's response to COVID-19 and the Administration's Open Streets Program.

These last six months have been some of the hardest our City has ever faced. We have lost far too many family members, friends, neighbors and colleagues to COVID-19, including fellow workers in City Government and the MTA. And we have seen too many New Yorkers lose their jobs and too many beloved businesses close their doors.

As we all know, communities of color have been disproportionately hurt by this public health and economic crisis. And we have all experienced a summer of racial justice and police brutality protests sparked by the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others.

At DOT, we are engaged in the urgent and crucial work of ensuring our programs, projects, contracting processes, and agency culture and practices are more equitable. While this has been a focus of the de Blasio Administration from the outset, the work is far from over.

This summer, we worked with our employees of color on a number of new initiatives, including launching an Executive-level Equity in Planning Working Group that will be tasked with evaluating the impact of DOT's programs and services on communities of color, low-income communities, women, and people with disabilities, and identifying areas where we can do better.

And we are continuing our internal efforts to foster a workplace free from racial discrimination, harassment, and retaliation. Building on the work we have done already to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion at DOT, we are launching a Structured Hiring Guide consistent with citywide Equal Employment Opportunity regulations, with new oversight procedures for the hiring process. And this fall, we are expanding training on racial justice and implicit bias for all DOT senior managers.

We are proud of our work thus far, but know there is much more to do, both personally and professionally, to combat the structural racism that pervades our society and our city.

DOT's COVID-Response

I will now turn to our agency's response to COVID-19. When the virus overtook the City in March, DOT worked to keep its employees safe while fulfilling the agency's critical functions. We maintained the City's transportation system, making emergency repairs to roadways, bridges, sidewalks, and traffic operations infrastructure. We continued to run the Staten Island Ferry 24/7.

And, as some New Yorkers took advantage of newly empty streets to speed recklessly, we kept our speed cameras on and continued to expand the program. In fact, just last week we announced that we activated cameras in all 750 school zones, as authorized by the State, and lowered speed limits on nine of the City's most crash-prone corridors.

And we did all of this despite tremendous operational challenges: employees falling ill, quarantining and sadly, some losing their lives, transitioning many staff to teleworking, redesigning all our major operations for the COVID era, and working closely with our union partners to ensure that our workforce remained socially distanced, well-equipped, and fully supported.

As New Yorkers have shifted so many activities outdoors, demand for space on our City's streets has grown tremendously. And we at DOT have answered the call, working tirelessly to keep New Yorkers safe and moving, maintain our infrastructure, and quickly grow innovative programs for our streets.

But, as it is for all agencies, the current financial climate for DOT is very difficult, especially after so many years of steady growth. Between the Executive and Adopted FY21 Plans, DOT is implementing \$125 million in cuts, representing 12 percent of our \$1.1 billion Expense Budget. And we expect to face additional cuts this year, particularly if the federal government does not give the City additional stimulus funding or the State does not grant us long-term borrowing authority.

Further, after three years of a partial hiring freeze, we have had a nearly complete freeze since March, and are now also facing a sizable layoff scenario of existing employees. These staffing constraints are an enormous challenge for DOT, one of the most diverse and complex agencies in City government, with a list of popular programs and projects that has grown every year.

We now have an eight percent vacancy rate, with hundreds of positions unfilled, and that list is growing every month. I am so grateful to the current DOT staff, who are performing miracles of endurance and creativity to execute on our current initiatives.

But the current fiscal reality means that every public dollar must be put towards the highest priority programs and projects. This means that while we focus on our core charter-mandated operations and critical responses to COVID, we face challenges in implementing the many new programs enacted in recent years, including the Streets Master Plan, the Reckless Driver Accountability Program, and the shared e-scooter pilot program.

These new programs would collectively require roughly 20 additional staff and cost nearly \$9 million in FY21. In FY22, they would scale up dramatically to 300 additional staff and cost almost \$200 million, as the programmatic work for the Master Plan is scheduled to be underway fully. These new programs were all knowingly enacted without the necessary budgetary resources and, unfortunately, unless the City's fiscal situation improves, these new programs will have to be greatly reduced in scope or delayed, or funding and headcount will have to be shifted from other priorities.

That being said, let me discuss some of the incredible work our agency has been doing to reimagine and repurpose our streets.

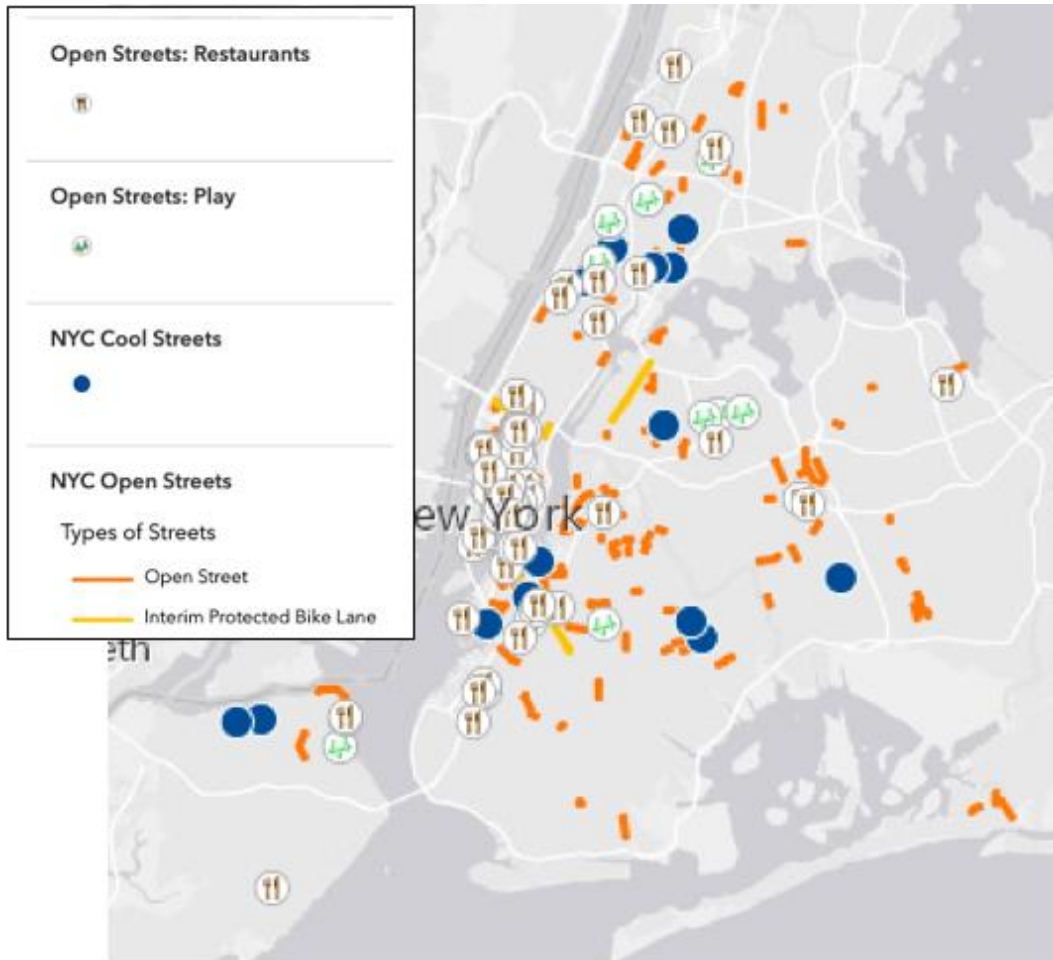
1. Giving New Yorkers Space to Social Distance

Open Streets

First, under the Mayor's leadership, with the Council, advocates, and others urgently calling for more space for pedestrians and cyclists to social distance, DOT, NYPD, Parks, and community partners created the largest Open Streets program in the country, with over 75 miles of streets citywide. Nearly 50 percent of Open Streets are in zip codes with the highest rates of COVID-19 in the City, mostly communities of color, and nearly 60 percent are in census tracts that are low-to moderate-income.

This summer we implemented two programs to help children play and everyone stay cool. Our Play Streets initiative provided families with safe, structured activities on 14 Open Streets in neighborhoods most impacted by COVID-19. We also designated 16 Open Streets in the most heat burdened communities as Cool Streets, locations in DEP's Cool Hydrant and spray cap program.

All of this could not have been possible without the support of many BIDS and community groups, and I want to thank them all for their commitment to the program. To improve the program for communities of color and COVID-impacted neighborhoods going forward, we are still actively seeking additional community partners, and we encourage Council Members to refer interested groups. And, of course, we value your input as we plan for the program's long-term future.



[*Map of Open Streets, Cool Streets, Play Streets, and Open Streets: Restaurants*](#)

Open Restaurants

Implementing Open Streets taught us a lot and enabled us to continue to creatively rethink how we use our streets, including helping our City’s struggling restaurant industry. Under the Mayor’s leadership, and as codified in Council Member Reynoso’s bill to allow outdoor dining, the City put forth the Open Restaurants program at record-speed. The program allowed restaurants to self-certify and begin taking advantage of the sidewalk and street space outside of their establishments in time for Phase Two of the City’s reopening.

To date, over 10,000 restaurants have applied to take advantage of the program and serve customers outdoors, making Open Restaurants, we believe, the largest program of its kind. This enormously popular program has supported jobs for approximately 100,000 people, a diverse workforce from all five boroughs, and generated much-needed economic activity and tax revenue.

We are grateful to all our partners in this monumental effort, which required creativity, problem-solving, and breaking down agency silos. I want to thank our sister agencies, including SBS, MOME, the Office of Nightlife, as well as BIDS and industry partners like the NYC Hospitality

Alliance, the NYS Latino Restaurant Bar and Lounge Association, Rockwell Group, Melba Wilson, the Chinatown Partnership, and many others.

And we have successfully combined the two popular programs with Open Streets: Open Restaurants, allowing New Yorkers to visit some of their favorite restaurants as they safely dine outdoors on car-free streets. We look forward to discussing with the Council ways to make elements of the Open Restaurants program a permanent fixture in our City, and the Mayor has already announced its return next summer.

Outdoor Learning

And now, we are once again answering the call to use our City's streets to help our kids learn and exercise outdoors. Together with DOE, Parks and other agency partners, we have identified and approved outdoor learning space for almost 800 schools across the five boroughs, including on almost 160 streets. We have worked hard to quickly identify and assess these spaces, prioritizing schools in communities of color and those hit hardest by the pandemic.

Now, I will turn to the agency's work to keep New Yorkers moving, and freight flowing, during this crisis and to help the City recover.

2. Keeping New Yorkers and Goods Moving

Buses

First, buses have served a critical role in transporting essential, front-line workers and members of communities hardest hit by the pandemic. In June, the Mayor announced the Better Buses Restart program, with nine major busway and bus lane projects in all five boroughs to give New Yorkers safe, reliable, and fast public transit options as the City reopens.

Since then, we have already completed four bus projects: the busway along Jay Street, bus lane extensions on East 14th Street in Manhattan and Malcolm X Boulevard in Brooklyn, and a major bus lane on 149th Street in the Bronx. In addition, DOT is currently constructing bus lanes on E.L. Grant Highway in the Bronx and Hylan Boulevard in Staten Island, as well as bus improvements on Rockaway Beach Boulevard. By the end of the year, we will have installed more mileage than we have ever completed in a single year, and many in communities of color throughout the City.

And in August, along with the MTA, we announced the expansion of the bus lane camera enforcement program, with stationary cameras activated on nine new corridors, and MTA bus-mounted cameras on three new routes. Finally, DOT has been rolling out Transit Signal Priority (TSP) to bus corridors faster than ever before, and we have already exceeded our 2020 goal of 300 intersections. We will continue to add more TSP corridors throughout the rest of this year.

Cycling

Next, we have seen a cycling boom as many New Yorkers shift trips from public transit. Since April, on average we have seen 26 percent more cyclists on protected lanes and bridges throughout the City than in the same period last year, with weekend cycling up 57 percent. In response to this boom and building on safety improvements and guiding principles laid out in our Green Wave Plan, DOT is installing protected bicycle lanes with a focus on closing important

gaps in the bike network, supporting trips made by essential workers, facilitating interborough trips, and encouraging neighborhood access to parks and open space.

To date, DOT has installed nine miles of permanent and temporary protected bike lanes during the crisis, with several more temporary lanes underway. In fact, we expect to install over 25 miles of permanent protected bike lanes this year, more than the number installed in previous years, despite being unable to work fully for the first half of our usual construction season due to the pandemic.

And in June, we celebrated the 100 millionth Citi Bike ride, and the system's 1,000th station since the launch in 2013, which was installed in the South Bronx. In addition, Citi Bike's Critical Worker Membership Program has provided 18,000+ critical workers with more than 500,000 free Citi Bike trips to date.

3. Planning for the Tough Road to Recovery

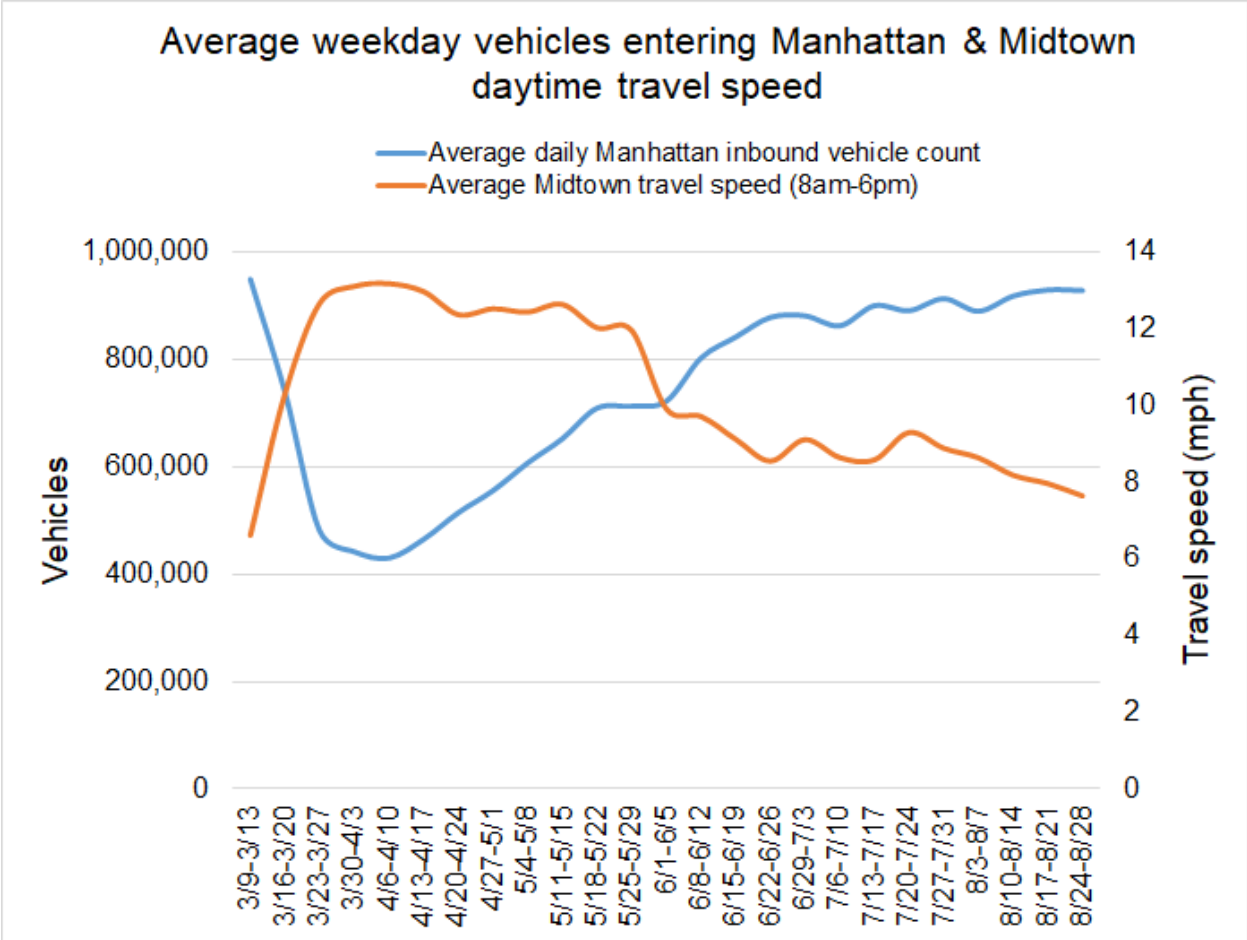
While much of our attention during these last few months has rightfully been on addressing the COVID-19 crisis, our agency has continued to look ahead at the City's transportation needs for the recovery and beyond.

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, we were seeing some challenging trends, with vehicle ownership and midtown congestion rising, more deliveries, and a continued decline in transit ridership. These past six months have shown just how critical our transportation system is in keeping the City running: helping essential workers get to their jobs as well as accommodating increased freight activity.

To help DOT and the City meet these critical needs and plan for the recovery, Mayor de Blasio named members of a Surface Transportation Council in May. We thank these members for their service, and are proud to have partnered with them as we led the nation in operationalizing many of their key recommendations—from Open Streets and Open Restaurants to Outdoor Learning and the dramatic expansion of busways and bike lanes. We know that some members of the Council hope to hear more from us and we will continue to engage with them in the coming months.

Of course, our work is far from over. This fall, as the City continues to reopen and the school year begins, we are closely monitoring traffic and transit ridership trends. Our experience from previous crises, including the 1980 and 2005 transit strikes, 9/11, and Hurricane Sandy, shows the necessity of strong traffic management strategies during significant shifts to driving.

Despite much lower levels of economic activity in the Manhattan CBD, vehicle traffic volumes into Manhattan have been steadily increasing since April, and are now within three percent of pre-pandemic levels.



Average weekday vehicles entering Manhattan and Midtown daytime travel speed.

As the Mayor said, we need to be ready for every eventuality. Thus, we are evaluating potential traffic management strategies to respond to increased congestion, including HOV and license-plate based restrictions. We would not take implementing such complex strategies lightly, but as we saw following 9/11 and Hurricane Sandy, such measures can successfully counter gridlock, and may once again be necessary to help the City recover.

Intros. 2051 and 2052

Now, I will briefly touch on two bills before the Committee today, Intros. 2051 and 2052, on mapping and other requirements for new private streets in Staten Island, as well as maintenance requirements for the paving, signage, and plowing of all private streets in the borough.

While we are still in the process of reviewing the bills, we understand that there are many concerns around the issue of private streets, and look forward to discussing the legislation further. I will say that new agency reviews of private street plans as well as inspection and enforcement of maintenance requirements, which the legislation as drafted would create, cannot be done without additional resources. And as we all know, resources are extremely tight amidst the current fiscal crisis the City is facing, particularly for non-COVID related needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, COVID-19 has transformed our City in ways that were unimaginable only six months ago. I am proud of the work DOT has done to meet the changing needs of New Yorkers and the many demands for our streets. I look forward to continuing to work with the Council to help our City recover, as we know it will. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I welcome any questions.