

## **Speech by Commissioner Iris Weinshall at Borough President Scott Stringer's Transportation Forum – October 12, 2006**

Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Cathy, for that kind introduction. I see many familiar faces here today . . . and I'm encouraged that so many New Yorkers are concerned about the future of transportation in our City. I'd like to especially thank Borough President Stringer for graciously inviting me, and also Enrique Peñalosa for joining us...his accomplishments and success in Bogota have certainly preceded him. I would also like to thank two men who are not here... Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff and Mayor Mike Bloomberg whose leadership and support for our work at DOT has been tremendous.

As you know, I'm the Commissioner of Transportation for New York City. My department is responsible for, among other things . . . the Staten Island Ferry . . . nearly 800 of the City's bridges . . . and the sidewalks and streets in the city -- 6,000 miles of roads that contain over 1.3 million signs . . . 12,000 signalized intersections . . . and 65,000 parking meters. It is a transportation network that for the most part was put in place decades and even centuries ago . . . we have not built a new highway in nearly forty years . . . and we haven't added a major subway line since the 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue line in 1940. And unlike other parts of the country . . . where state and federal dollars are pouring in for new roads and transit lines . . . our infrastructure requires an enormous investment just to maintain a state of good repair. The four East River Bridges alone have required nearly \$3 billion for their rehabilitation.

The magnitude of our facilities and the investment they require is only part of the story. New York is one of the densest cities in the world. While Chicago has a population density of about 13,500 people per square mile . . . London 14,000 and Mexico City 15,000 . . . our City has about 26,000 people per square mile, and Manhattan has nearly 67,000. And that's just the people who live here. Over 2 million people from outside Manhattan enter the Central Business District every day.

And not surprisingly the space we are responsible for is teeming with activity . . . pedestrians . . . cars . . . cyclists . . . trucks . . . construction . . . and commerce. So while we're not building new capacity . . . every day we're making changes to how this space is used . . . and these decisions have an enormous impact not only on how we travel but on how we work . . . how we play . . . and how we live. Today I would like to highlight some of the initiatives we have completed or begun . . . and also describe some new efforts we will be focusing on in the weeks, months and years to come. .

As many of you know, DOT in fact shares responsibility for the transportation network with many other agencies – from the Port Authority. . . to the MTA. . . to the Taxi and Limousine Commission. Often the lines of responsibility overlap . . . and nowhere is this more apparent than the City's buses. While the MTA provides the service, the ability of their buses to serve New Yorkers is dependent on their ability to move through our crowded streets. We are working more cohesively with the MTA than ever before and over the past two years, along with State DOT, we have been working hand in hand on our Bus Rapid Transit initiative.

As part of this project we will introduce a package of measures to allow buses to move more quickly – including colored bus lanes . . . improved bus lane enforcement . . . signal prioritization . . . wider bus stop spacing . . . next bus information . . . and quicker fare collection. Very shortly, we will be announcing five corridors to pilot bus rapid transit and are developing more detailed plans for these rapid routes... We also expect to accelerate implementation on two of the corridors to fall of 2007. Ultimately, we believe our program can be one of the most extensive in the country...

Buses are not the only mode we are trying to make more viable in New York. Last month, DOT along with the Parks and Health departments, took significant steps toward better safeguarding New York's cyclists . . . and promoting bike riding in the City. This administration's study of bike fatalities and injuries in New York was called "the most thorough analysis of cyclist serious injuries and fatalities undertaken in the United States" by a leading bicycle advocacy group. Right, Paul? The report confirmed the importance of motorist and cyclist education . . . bike helmets. . . and bike lanes . . . and it justified a plan that we had already been developing this year to add 200 new miles of bike lanes, paths and routes over the next three years. In addition we will be placing new share the road signs and markings . . . installing more bike racks . . . and working with a coalition of agencies and advocacy groups to conduct a bicycle safety advertising campaign aimed at cyclists...and motorists.

While we must try to increase cycling . . . bolster our transit system . . . and reduce auto use, truck traffic is likely to increase in the years ahead. Our City's population is growing dramatically and with the lack of rail access, nearly 99% of our goods arrive by truck. That is why the steps recommended in DOT's Truck Study to limit the number of trucks in residential neighborhoods are so important -- including better education of police officers . . . new and increased signage . . . and nighttime delivery restrictions in residential areas along with off-hour delivery incentives in business districts.

We have also been focused on how the delivery of goods utilizes our curb space. For years, traffic engineers and economists have proposed the idea of creative curb space pricing as an efficient solution for goods movement. Our midtown parking program does just that. It encourages truckers to rotate out of legal parking spots quickly, giving others an opportunity to load and unload – and cutting down on both illegal parking and the number of vehicles circling the block to find a parking spot.

The program combines three elements - charging for commercial parking, placing multi spaced muni-meters to free up more curb space and using a value pricing schedule to encourage truckers to get in . . . and get out within an hour.

This fiscal year we are expanding our successful and vitally important commercial parking program south from 33<sup>rd</sup> Street to 23<sup>rd</sup> Street from Second Avenue to Ninth Avenue. We have also increased our use of technology to help solve parking problems. We have added credit card payment in midtown and muni meters in more parts of the City. Looking ahead, we will be expanding our muni meters to more neighborhoods . . . and looking to better regulate curbside access for commercial vehicles. But there is clearly more we need to do. In lower Manhattan we have undertaken a comprehensive curb space study, the largest study of this type undertaken in

the City. This study will include a block-by-block survey of curb activity that will tell us where people are parking, where they're coming from, and how long they're parking for. We are hopeful this analysis can help inform new strategies for how we manage this valuable real estate.

But perhaps the most important step we have taken involving parking meters. . . was in the interest of improving safety for pedestrians on queens boulevard. A few years ago, we decided to narrow the service road available to motorists using this corridor by adding meters – an action that almost every Queens elected official said would be a mistake claiming it would slow down traffic. Well you know what? It did slow the cars down. But along with improved signal timing, the installation of fencing and other safety measures, this traffic calming dramatically reduced the number of accidents and pedestrian fatalities on the boulevard – from a high of 18 in 1997 to one in 2004 and two in 2005.

But as I've always said, one pedestrian fatality is one too many...Efforts to better protect pedestrians are, in my mind, DOT's most critical mission. Though I noted earlier our road space is shared by many users . . . New York is above all a walking City. Under the leadership of Mayor Bloomberg, we've pursued many initiatives to better provide space for and protect pedestrians . . . from traffic calming in downtown Brooklyn . . . to safety improvements on pedestrian bridges throughout the City . . . to the incorporation of leading pedestrian intervals at many signalized intersections to provide more conflict-free crossing time. And the numbers speak for themselves. In each of the last two years, pedestrian fatalities hit an all time low since 1910.

But there is much more we have to do . . . to reduce fatalities . . . to provide better access . . .and to make us all feel secure when we are walking on our streets. Today I want to describe a number of initiatives we will be undertaking to better protect and serve those on foot in our city – and highlight three key principles these programs point to:

- Focusing safety efforts first where there is the greatest need.
- Thinking of our public space beyond just parks and roads.
- And making changes to our streetscape by challenging the old paradigms.

As some of you recall, in 2004, we announced our Safe Routes to School initiative, a program to focus on safety improvements for those who are most vulnerable...our children. After studying the areas and accident histories around the city's 1400 public, private and parochial elementary and middle schools, we came up with a list of 135 priority locations. Our consultants have now completed reports with specific recommendations for over 90 of the 135 and we have begun to make improvements at these sites. These measures include adjusting signal timing, adding school crosswalks and installing speed reducers. Most important, the plans call for a substantial amount of capital work on the streets and sidewalks around these schools. When all 135 studies are complete at the end of the year, we expect to have plans for over 750 new neckdowns and 70 pedestrian medians. In the years ahead, we will also perform similar work for the next 135 schools and also 40 of the City's 400 High Schools. I should note however that we have not neglected work around other school locations. We have, for instance, installed 69 speed reducers around other schools over the past four months.

Our safety efforts particularly around schools have clearly intensified. But it is important to remember that our work for pedestrians extends beyond safety. We're also looking to boldly reimagine how our street space is used with open space. This past spring in Brooklyn, we created the Willoughby Street Pedestrian Plaza....In an area with low vehicular volumes and rampant illegal parking, we closed off streets and added tables, chair and planters. We took away some roadway space, but in doing so we created a street that now caters to the high pedestrian volumes and large lunch crowds, providing additional safe and pleasant space to walk around or enjoy a meal...Next month, we will create a similar space in front of Stuyvesant Town on 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue...and we have also developed plaza plans for Astor place and for Louise Nevelson Plaza.

But these are just the beginning. We need to create more Willoughby Street Plazas. We need more Astor Places. And we at DOT are thinking of public spaces as neither parks or streets...we recognize there are so many more ways that we can tap into our shared space. In the years to come, DOT, working with communities and other city agencies, plans to reallocate street space in neighborhoods in all five boroughs to create many more of these public plazas . . .and in the next six months, we hope to develop a framework to create neighborhood plazas in every community in the City. Our goal is to make places with overlapping users and uses...in natural centers of pedestrian traffic...and exposed to sunlight. These open spaces will make walking more enjoyable, preserve neighborhood character, and can serve as the heart of a neighborhood through which all activity can pulse. A newspaper in 1898, the year of our city's consolidation, recognized that this is the true potential of New York's streets. It said "A few hours spent in walking about the streets of New York will disclose to an observing person more novel sights and a larger variety of entertainment than can be found in any museum or theatre. The ever-changing street scenes afford a continuous performance of the deepest human interest by the most realistic of actors"...

Willoughby Street is one example of how a small regulatory change on our street space can have a dramatic impact. Recognizing DOT's commitment to the pedestrian, later today I will be announcing a traffic adjustment in Midtown Manhattan with great potential benefit to pedestrians. . . a directional change made on just a few blocks . . . a change that on its face is very simple . . . but one that reverses a key decision made over 40 years ago in the center of this borough . . .

Anyone who's walked down Broadway around 42<sup>nd</sup> Street knows that walking there often means standing, squeezing, and twisting your body to get through the crowds. As many of you know, to help mitigate this pedestrian congestion, we've extended sidewalk space in both Herald and Times Squares – and will soon be making those improvements with permanent materials. Later today, along with the Times Square Alliance, we will announce another crucial improvement for the area. Back in 1964 . . . when I was...lets just say . . . very, very young . . . DOT created the Times Square "bow tie" that gave traffic on Seventh Avenue at 45<sup>th</sup> Street the option of staying on Seventh or switching to Broadway. Now, traffic on Seventh will have to continue onto Broadway while traffic on Broadway will have to continue onto Seventh – what we are calling the Times Square Shuffle. We're making this change for pedestrians. Because of it, we will be able to expand pedestrian islands between 45<sup>th</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> Streets. We will also push the curbs out and expand the sidewalks at several locations...and add three new crosswalks. These steps will

help relieve the pedestrian congestion and make the sidewalks safer, more navigable, and more welcoming. As circumstances change, we are willing to rethink what we've done in the past. By reversing one decision from a few decades ago, we can make a big difference in today's world.

But to find the other Times Square Shuffles . . . and the other Willoughby Streets, while we undertake enormous day-to-day operational responsibilities isn't easy. That's why we've created a new Office of Strategic Planning, headed by Steve Weber who is here today. This unit is also participating in the Mayor's Long Term Planning and Sustainability initiative...which is considering what New York City must do now to preserve – and improve – our high quality of life as the City grows to a population of nine million.

This long term planning effort is carefully considering a wide range of strategies to shift travel away from the automobile and onto transit. Some of the efforts I've spoken about today . . . bus rapid transit . . . improved opportunities for safe cycling . . . more efficient movement of goods. . . and an aggressive pedestrianization agenda will be addressed in this plan. And I expect that the recommendations will include some big ideas . . . and pose some challenges to the way we've dealt with our public space in the past. I commend the Borough President for organizing today's forum and I hope the discussions today will contribute to the public discussion about these critical issues.