

34th Street Transitway Community Advisory Committee Meeting #3 Summary

Tuesday, January 18, 2011, 6 – 8 PM
Hotel New Yorker, Gramercy Park Suite
481 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY

I. INTRODUCTIONS

Arnie Bloch of Howard/Stein-Hudson Associates (HSH) opened the meeting by welcoming the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) members and explaining the meeting agenda. Eric Beaton, Director of Transit Development of the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT) thanked the CAC members for their attendance and their participation to date. He then introduced Will Carry as the new Project Manager of the 34th Street Transitway project at NYCDOT.

II. PRESENTATIONS

Will Carry and Ted Orosz, the director of Long-Range Bus Planning for New York City Transit (NYCT) gave a PowerPoint presentation. The presentation included a summary of the 34th Street Transitway corridor and the project goals and objectives; the membership and role of the CAC; a review of the project schedule; and a summary of curb side activities identified along 34th Street to inform design, as well as the process by which these activities were conducted. (The latter included the Community Forums held in October/November 2010, as well as the surveys that were filled out both at the forums and via the NYCDOT website.) Following this presentation, attendees were asked to breakout into tables (divided into Community Boards 4, 5, and 6) for discussions on the curbside access findings. After the breakout discussions, Ted Orosz continued the presentation, identifying potential Select Bus Service (SBS) station locations between Fifth and Third Avenues. Mr. Orosz also discussed NYCT plans to introduce off-board fare collection along 34th Street this year (preceding Transitway implementation). Will Carry discussed the environmental review process for the 34th Street Transitway project, introducing Chris Calvert of the firm AKRF, which is leading the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the NYCDOT. Following that, Arnie Bloch facilitated a question-and-answer session.

III. ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

Attendees were asked to divide themselves into three groups according to Community Boards to discuss the findings of the curbside access outreach effort. Each group was assigned a facilitator and note taker from the project team. Participants were issued information packets that contained maps showing existing land uses and curbside activities. They were asked to review and comment on the curbside activities identified for buildings on each block. Large sets of maps for each block within each Community Board were provided and displayed on an easel near each table. Attendees were encouraged to mark up the maps with markers and/or post-its. Comment sheets were made available to participants to fill in at the meeting or submit subsequent to the meeting.

The following is a summary of points that were raised and discussed within the groups, as recorded by note takers at each table. *Italicized text illustrates responses from project staff.*

Community Board 4 (Eighth to Twelfth Avenues)

CAC members had both general and specific comments concerning curbside activities occurring on 34th Street along these Avenues. General comments were as follows:

- The list of curbside activities that can use streets other than 34th Street for building access is too generic; they should be examined on a building-by-building basis.
- Consideration needs to be given to the snow removal process in the future bus lanes.

- Clarify whether all buses operating on 34th Street are allowed to use the bus lanes.
- Additional activities classified as “frequently occurring on 34th Street” in the various land-use categories, include:
 - Emergency vehicle access needs to be among the list of activities.
 - Installation, repair, maintenance of individual apartment utilities (cable, telephone, etc)
 - Yellow school bus pick-ups
 - Renovations and construction deliveries (for large residential buildings) – move from regular activities
 - Moving vans and trucks (for large residential buildings) – move from regular activities
 - Shredding activities and file management for office buildings (during business hours)
 - Exterminators and health inspectors (for food establishments)
 - Cleaning/janitorial company vehicles
 - Funerals, weddings, and special events at houses of worship
 - Operations deliveries (production trucks for Manhattan Center)

Specific comments offered concerning block-by-block activities were:

- Eighth to Ninth Avenues
 - Add small private parking lot for B&H Photo on the north side of 34th Street between the indicated parking lot and 347 W. 34th Street building. *The maps were modified subsequent the meeting.*
 - A parking lot with a separate entrance on Ninth Avenue is located behind 432 Ninth Avenue and 365 W. 34th Street buildings. *The maps were modified subsequent the meeting.*
 - The service entrance access on 35th Street for 333 W. 34th Street is usually blocked by police cars (Midtown South) parked on the sidewalk. So there is no real access. Police cars take up the entire space on 35th Street between the rear of 333 W. 34th Street and 323 W. 34th Street.
- Ninth to Tenth Avenues
 - Garbage trucks usually pull up, park, and pick up garbage on the north side of 34th Street in between 433 and 455 W. 34th Street.
- Tenth to Eleventh Avenues
 - Time did not permit a discussion of the activities on this block.
- Eleventh to Twelfth Avenues
 - Time did not permit a discussion of the activities on this block.

Community Board 5 (Lexington to Eighth Avenues)

CAC members had both general and specific comments concerning curbside activities occurring on 34th Street. General comments were as follows:

- MTA Express buses lay over on 35th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues during certain hours of the day.
- Due to the high concentration of large office buildings on this stretch, any fire alarm will trigger a response of multiple fire trucks and other emergency response vehicles, not just one fire truck. The design of the Transitway should take this into account.

Specific comments offered concerning block-by-block activities were:

- Park to Lexington Avenue
 - Norman Thomas High School will be phased out and the Murray Hill Academy will begin to occupy this building. This change should be reflected on the map.

- Only entrance to the bank at 132 E. 34th Street building is on 34th Street. *NYCDOT personnel conducted a site visit and verified that there are entrances both on 34th Street and Lexington Avenue.*
- Madison to Park Avenue
 - 48 E. 34th Street is a Stern College dormitory – frequent activities will include moving vans and trucks during the school year.
 - 55 E. 34th Street Beth Israel Medical Group – verify that there is a service entrance on 35th Street. *NYCDOT personnel spoke directly with representatives of Beth Israel Medical Group regarding the operation of this building.*
- Madison to Fifth Avenue
 - Confirm the location of the multiple entrances for the 355 Fifth Avenue building. *NYCDOT personnel spoke directly with representatives of the CUNY Graduate Center and the Science and Industry and Business Library (SIBL) regarding the operation of this building.*
 - There are commercial offices within the 355 E. 34th Street building with 34th Street access only. *NYCDOT personnel have confirmed that all service functions for these offices take place through the 35th St entrances.*
- Fifth to Sixth Avenue
 - Concerned about emergency vehicle access.
 - Accommodation for tour buses needed.
 - Confirm the locations of service versus customer entrances to the multiple retail stores in the 1282 Broadway building. *NYCDOT personnel spoke directly with representatives of 1282 Broadway regarding the operation of this building.*
- Sixth to Seventh Avenue
 - Concerned about emergency vehicle access.
 - Retail store at 112 W. 34th Street building does not have access to 33rd Street.
 - Macys needs to accommodate tour bus drop-offs on 34th Street.
- Seventh to Eighth Avenue
 - 215 and 223 W. 34th Street are currently unoccupied. Consider that the next usage may involve some construction.
 - 206 W. 34th Street building has a very active driveway that cuts through 33rd Street.

Community Board 6 (FDR Drive to Lexington Avenue)

CAC members had both general and specific comments concerning curbside activities occurring on 34th Street. General comments were as follows:

- DOT needs to obtain detailed information about property use and building design (i.e., entrances, loading docks, etc.) for each building river-to-river along 34th Street.
- Regarding the configuration of the Transitway:
 - Consider a center median along the entire corridor or along sections of 34th Street where sidewalks are not at maximum capacity.
 - A center median could eliminate curb usage and access issues.
 - Consider using narrower buses so that a center median could be used.
 - Consider an elevated busway.
 - Consider a design that takes into account the distinct characteristics of the corridor east and west of Madison Avenue. A one-way traffic treatment from Madison Avenue westward could work given the street widths and primarily commercial use. The streets east of Madison Avenue are narrower and would be better served by maintaining a two-way traffic pattern. This would alleviate or avoid the serious impact on residents and local businesses.
- Concerning loading needs:

- Clarify whether residential loading needs would be accommodated at locations other than 34th Street.
- Verify whether loading zones would preserve or increase current loading spaces.
- Explain how curbside access and needs will be addressed in the proposed design.
- Vendors such as FedEx, UPS, Fresh Direct, etc., often block sidewalks with hand trucks, as drivers now park on First and Second Avenues and use hand trucks to make deliveries to mid-block addresses. Residents and vendors on 34th Street could incur additional charges due to these changes in delivery habits. *In response it was noted by NYCDOT that designated delivery times would be available on 34th Street. Also, the practice of vendors parking around the corner to make deliveries is very common throughout midtown and typically does not incur additional fees.*
- Verify whether sidewalks along 34th Street will be widened. *It was noted by NYCDOT that the sidewalks would be widened at locations along the corridor.*
- Consider that the volume of pedestrian traffic east of Fifth Avenue is not as high as the West Side.
- This project provides an opportunity to redesign the street. Consider removing some of the existing street furniture (newspaper kiosks, newsstands, telephone booths, etc.) to free up sidewalk space. *This will be considered along the corridor, however it was also noted that many residents and businesses consider these elements essential to the character of the neighborhood and do not wish to see them removed.*
- Explain whether the curbside usage findings support or provide any insights as to where traffic will be diverted with the construction of the Transitway.

Specific comments offered concerning block-by-block activities were:

- FDR Drive to First Avenue
 - No comments.
- First to Second Avenue
 - Driveway for St.Vartan’s Cathedral is very active.
 - Verify uses for buildings 314 to 320 E. 34th Street. *NYCDOT personnel has field verified the uses in these buildings.*
- First to Second Avenue
 - Confirm that traffic exiting the Queens-Midtown Tunnel would be prohibited from traveling westbound. *NYCDOT is still evaluating different designs for the corridor. This restriction could be included in a potential design.*
- Third to Lexington Avenue
 - A portion of the building at 155 E. 34th Street has a Duane Reade Pharmacy at the corner. Confirm curb usage here. *This Duane Reade has access to 34th Street and to Third Avenue.*
 - A westbound bus lane will inhibit westbound traffic from accessing the public parking garage at 155 E. 34th Street. This will harm this business.

IV. QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION

The following is a summary of questions, comments, and answers (shown in italicized font) that were raised and discussed during the general question-and answer session following the presentation. Italicized text illustrates responses from project staff.

Station Locations & Transit Operations

- Concerning the location of stations:

- Identify the location of stops west of Seventh Avenue. *Stops will be located at the intersection of every Avenue along 34th Street west of Seventh Avenue.*
 - Consider locating the proposed new bus stops at the signalized intersections along 34th Street in order to consolidate the number of stops along the Transitway. This will reduce stop-and-go times along the Transitway.
 - Identify the specific placement of the Tenth Avenue station (near or far side of the Avenue). *This will be considered as one of multiple issues as the design is evaluated on this block.*
 - Identify the location of the M34 stop near the Jacob Javits Convention Center. *This location is to be determined.*
 - The distance between the proposed Transitway stops east of Sixth Avenue poses a problem for the elderly and disabled. Consider having the M16 and M34 stop at intersections not covered by SBS. Madison Ave makes sense as a transfer point, for example.
 - Identify connections to the #7 subway line station currently under construction. *This location is to be determined.*
 - Community Board 4 welcomes a discussion with NYCDOT regarding the placement of stops within their jurisdiction.
- Members wanted to understand the overall operations of transit along the corridor, including:
 - How the various buses which operate along 34th Street would be affected by the Transitway, including school buses, tour buses, Mega, and Bolt buses.
 - The use of signal prioritization for buses along 34th Street.
 - Clarify the types of buses to be used on the Transitway.
 - The specific route of the M34 on the west end of the corridor.
 - Types of amenities to be added to the bus stations. *Amenities such as well-lit shelters, benches, fare collection machines, etc., will be added to stations.*
 - The use of fare collection machines, particularly on the M16 bus route north on Eighth Avenue where ridership is low. *Fare collection machines may not be installed at locations that have very few boarding. It is possible that these stops would become “drop off only” stops.*
 - The design, operations, and actual placement of the fare collection machines at the stops.
 - Would remote purchasing be available? *No, because receipts must be used within an hour of purchase.*
 - Consider eliminating the swipe for unlimited Metrocards.
 - What percentage of speed increase is expected? *A 10-15% speed improvement from off-board collection alone is expected.*

Environmental Review

Members wanted to understand the environmental review process, including:

- The differences between an Environmental Assessment (EA) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process and whether there would be a need to conduct an EIS.
- Traffic Analysis
 - Provide a list of roads and arterials being examined in the traffic analysis.
 - There was misunderstanding about when the traffic analysis for the Build Year would occur. *Traffic analysis for the Build Year will be conducted in 2011 and will represent conditions in 2012.*
 - Explain how turning restrictions on First and Second Avenues affect traffic flow and diversions. *These turning restrictions will be considered as part of the proposed design on 34th Street and therefore considered in the traffic analysis.*

- Clarify whether the traffic analysis will take into account through-traffic for trucks. *Most truck traffic on 34th Street is for local access. However, an analysis will be conducted to assess the impacts of the Transitway on through-truck traffic.*
- Would the transit analysis be released the same time as the traffic analysis? *The goal is to release them at the same time.*
- What is meant by traffic impacts of the project and impacts from improvements?
- Public outreach process
 - Identify the designated times in the process for public feedback. *There will be a number of opportunities for the public to provide feedback throughout the process.*
 - What type of public meeting will be held on the draft EA? *A public meeting will be held on the EA. The format is to be determined.*
 - Is it necessary to obtain feedback from all the buildings on the corridor? *Project outreach efforts obtained information from a variety of sources on 34th Street. The profile of each building was created from this information.*
- Is the pedestrian mall still being considered for 34th Street? *Yes, this is only one of multiple design options being considered for 34th Street, and will be evaluated based on public feedback on the concept.*
- Would 34th Street impacts be examined in the EA along with impacts with the primary study area? For example, impact on real estate values. *Yes, for each subject the study area will be chosen appropriately to show potential effects without "diluting" those effects over too large a study area. All analysis will follow appropriate city and federal guidelines.*
- Schedule
 - Will the preferred design option be available when the preliminary design is revealed? *The proposed design will be presented at the next CAC meeting.*

Other

- Consider studying the impacts on bus operations from installing the off-board fare collection machines in 2011.
- While 34th Street is a prime candidate for BRT, do not attempt to make it a "complete street." The priorities should be: pedestrian safety and efficiency, rapid public transit, efficient vehicular flows from tunnel to tunnel, and accommodating emergency vehicles.

V. ADJOURNMENT

The CAC Meeting adjourned at 8:00 PM.