

Curb Enthusiasm Episode 18 Transcript

00;00;00;00 - 00;00;03;05

Emily Weidenhof

Welcome to Curb Enthusiasm. I'm Emily Weidenhof.

00;00;03;07 - 00;00;19;01

Commissioner Mike Flynn

and I'm Mike Flynn, New York City DOT Commissioner.

Emily Weidenhof

We could not be more enthusiastic to welcome today, Sam Schwartz, our guest and commissioner, back when this agency was known as the Department of Traffic.

00;00;19;03 - 00;00;20;26

Sam Schwartz

Thank you. Delighted to be here.

00;00;20;28 - 00;00;24;13

Commissioner Mike Flynn

Wonderful. Well, let's start with the really important stuff.

00;00;24;15 - 00;00;27;15

Commissioner Mike Flynn

How did you get the nickname *Gridlock Sam*?

00;00;27;18 - 00;00;49;06

Sam Schwartz

Okay. It goes back to the old traffic department, which was in Queens, of all places, not in Manhattan. And we were working on midtown traffic, and we were talking about the grid and how the streets might lock up as more and more traffic came into an area as we close the street.

00;00;49;08 - 00;01;14;19

Sam Schwartz

But we never said the word gridlock. We said the grid would lock up until the 1980 transit strike, and then the 1980 transit strike. We knew it was going to happen. It was imminent. And I was worried that the police department would take control, which they did in 66, 14 years earlier. And I knew we needed a hook.

00;01;14;21 - 00;01;37;24

Sam Schwartz

So that hook was in our report to the mayor, said that we had something called the grid, two words, Grid Lock Prevention Plan. And once City Hall saw the Gridlock Prevention Plan,

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they said what is that? We need the doctor of gridlock. Who was the doctor of gridlock? That was me, and I soon became Gridlock Sam.

00;01;38;24 - 00;01;44;21

Emily Weidenhof

You, also going back, you were involved in the first bike lane, correct?

00;01;44;24 - 00;01;55;02

Emily Weidenhof

Which is kind of hard to imagine given we're at a little over 1300 miles of bike lanes at this point. Can you talk a little bit about that first lane?

00;01;55;04 - 00;02;08;11

Sam Schwartz

Yeah. The, the very first physically separated lane was an ambitious project. It went from Washington Square Park to Central Park, and it went up Sixth Avenue the entire length.

00;02;08;13 - 00;02;32;21

Sam Schwartz

And coming out of Central Park, it went down, Seventh Avenue, Broadway, Fifth Avenue to Washington Square Park. And we did it after the transit strike when people said you guys were heroes. Why don't you do more of this? So we put it in the bike lane, and we were really proud of it. And we thought that by the year 2000, remember this was 1980.

00;02;32;24 - 00;02;57;04

Sam Schwartz

They'd say, boy, these guys were geniuses for seeing the revolution of biking in the city. Didn't turn out that way. It was barely used. Storekeepers didn't like it. Pedestrians just stood in the middle of it, not knowing what it was. There weren't a lot of bike riders around at the time. During the strike, there were plenty. After the strike, there weren't so many.

00;02;57;06 - 00;03;21;00

Sam Schwartz

And one day I get called into the mayor's office, Ed Koch. And he said, "take out those freaking bike lanes!" I said, "Mayor, why?" And he goes, "I can't go anywhere in the city without somebody complaining about it. I was in the back of the president's limousine, President Jimmy Carter, with Hugh Carey, the governor, and Hugh Carey, we're riding up Sixth Avenue.

00;03;21;01 - 00;03;31;26

Sam Schwartz

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Hugh Carey says, "Mr. President. Look out the window." And he's pointing at the bike lane. And he said, "see how Ed is pissing away your money." After that, I knew

00;03;31;29 - 00;03;44;24

Sam Schwartz

we were dead in the water. And the bike lane ended about one month after it was completed. So built in October of 1980. Came to an end in November of 1980.

00;03;44;29 - 00;04;14;15

Commissioner Mike Flynn

Well, one thing is true. You truly were ahead of your time. But here we are today. And, the city's transformed thanks to that early work. So let's talk a moment about, congestion pricing. Congestion pricing has been implemented here in New York after many years of advocacy, opposition, politics. I would just love to hear more about your history advocating for big ideas like congestion pricing or others.

00;04;14;18 - 00;04;24;03

Sam Schwartz

Yeah. So, congestion pricing was an idea conceived by William Vickrey, Columbia University professor, went on to win the Nobel Prize in 1906.

00;04;24;06 - 00;04;32;25

Sam Schwartz

When John Lindsay became mayor, he hired William Vickrey and Ted Kiehl to put together a study on Manhattan traffic.

00;04;32;28 - 00;04;55;28

Sam Schwartz

And they recommended tolls on the bridges. They recommended, higher tolls on the T B T A bridges, which are now MTA bridges and tunnels, and revenue going to transit. But it went nowhere until the 1978 Clean Air Act, which finally included mobile sources, cars.

00;04;56;01 - 00;05;08;15

Sam Schwartz

And so, at the old traffic department, I worked on plans to reduce traffic. That was the goal. The tail-pipe emissions, were 95% higher than they are today.

00;05;08;18 - 00;05;20;10

Sam Schwartz

And so, I worked on that. In 1973, it was approved by the mayor, John Lindsay, approved by the governor and accepted by the federal government.

00;05;20;13 - 00;05;43;19

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Sam Schwartz

A new mayor came in, Abe Beame, and he said, no way am I implementing tolls on the on the bridges. Now, just a little backdrop. There were tolls on the bridges until 1911. And a lot of people think they've always been “free”. They're not free, as you know, at the Department of Transportation knows. It costs you a lot of money just to maintain those bridges.

00;05;43;25 - 00;05;55;12

Commissioner Mike Flynn

Sure does.

Sam Schwartz

So, Beame wouldn't implement it. I—environmental groups went to court, sued in federal court. They won at the first level.

00;05;55;14 - 00;06;00;09

Sam Schwartz

The Supreme Court refused to hear the case. We were all home free.

00;06;00;12 - 00;06;18;29

Sam Schwartz

There was nothing that could stop it short of an act of Congress. We were already designing the toll plazas. I was working on the toll plazas! I still have those designs for all the bridges somewhere in my files. Well, sure enough, an act of Congress stopped it.

00;06;19;02 - 00;06;34;09

Sam Schwartz

then after the 1980 transit strike, Ed Koch said, why don't you try some of the things you did besides the bike lane? And we did occupancy restrictions to come into Manhattan. So, we said a smaller version of that.

00;06;34;09 - 00;06;42;15

Sam Schwartz

We'll do occupancy restrictions on the free bridges. If you want to drive by yourself, you pay at the three toll East River crossings.

00;06;42;18 - 00;06;53;13

Sam Schwartz

We introduced a city traffic regulation to do a three-month test. We were promptly sued by the Garage Board of Trade, which practices congestion pricing.

00;06;53;19 - 00;07;11;08

Sam Schwartz

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And we were sued by the Automobile Club of New York, the local AAA, and we lost that time. Over the next 20 years, there was a little bit of raising of congestion pricing again. Mike Bloomberg was running for mayor.

00;07;11;10 - 00;07;39;18

Sam Schwartz

I was his transportation advisor when he was candidate, introduced him to the concept of congestion pricing. His reflex reaction was quite negative. But, about 6- or 7-years in, Janette Sadik-Khan was appointed commissioner. And she is a very persuasive person. And she convinced him of congestion pricing to try it. The Bloomberg administration went pretty far in developing a plan.

00;07;39;21 - 00;07;55;24

Sam Schwartz

But what they didn't count on was the state legislature, which did not like working with Bloomberg or his people, and they didn't even have a discussion. They didn't bring it up for a vote. So, it was dead, dead in the water.

00;07;55;26 - 00;08;14;09

Sam Schwartz

And I decided to take my own money and use the resources of my own company to develop a different congestion pricing plan that I was writing about. I was, write—I had a column in the Daily News, and I wrote a quite a bit about it.

00;08;14;11 - 00;08;21;13

Sam Schwartz

We were lone voices in the wilderness. But we kept the concept of congestion pricing alive.

00;08;21;16 - 00;08;31;07

Sam Schwartz

And finally, after, for me, it was 55 years of working on this. Congestion pricing was implemented.

00;08;31;10 - 00;08;38;10

Sam Schwartz

First year results are terrific. And I'm very pleased that we finally got it.

00;08;38;13 - 00;08;43;00

Commissioner Mike Flynn

Give some real perspective on what it can take to get big ideas, to make them a reality here.

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00;08;45;13 - 00;08;55;23

Sam Schwartz

Yes. I tell my class they're at Hunter College. They're in their 20s. I said by 2075, some of the ideas you have right now may be implemented.

00;08;55;25 - 00;08;57;23

Commissioner Mike Flynn

Well, that's why we're moving with urgency.

00;08;57;25 - 00;09;00;08

Sam Schwartz

All right. That's what we need.

00;09;00;11 - 00;09;16;17

Emily Weidenhof

I had the privilege of being at event, an event last night, where Mike talked a little bit about you as a mentor and of the many things he said, one of the things, he, spoke about was, you as a lifelong learner.

00;09;16;24 - 00;09;34;02

Emily Weidenhof

And so, you certainly go back and have a deep history in transportation, but you're always, look, learning and moving forward. In 2025, you founded the Transportation Research Program at Hunter College. Could you talk a little bit about that program and some of the findings from that work?

00;09;34;04 - 00;09;39;19

Sam Schwartz

Sure. Yeah, and thank you, Michael. Michael was terrific.

00;09;39;20 - 00;10;00;29

Sam Schwartz

You know, I didn't have to do much to have him emerge as one of our leaders and great thinkers. And he's right. I'm always trying to learn. There were so many things that I learned. You know, if you had asked me when Janette Sadik-Khan came in about putting cars out in the middle of the street and creating a bike lane, I'd say that wouldn't work.

00;10;01;02 - 00;10;23;16

Sam Schwartz

Or bike share. I thought that all the bikes would be stolen. So, I'm always learning. And, when I see the things that DOT is doing now and the mayor is doing and Mike is implementing, I am so impressed that you're going ahead with projects like Flatbush Avenue that were unthinkable Flatbush Avenue bus lane years ago.

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00;10;23;19 - 00;10;45;24

Sam Schwartz

We're doing research on lots of topics. Of course, we did a report on year one of congestion pricing. We're doing a report right now which a lot of people are interested in. Should we be monetizing the streets and how much money there is in the streets. And I'm sure it's something that people have been asking you about.

00;10;45;24 - 00;11;14;28

Sam Schwartz

I know I got several media calls recently on it. Somebody from University of California said it's worth 7 or 8 or \$9 billion. The crazy numbers that are maybe impractical, Fellows of Shoup. It was UCLA that came with that, that number Donald Shoup, who has a relationship to William Vickrey, which I found out. Oddly, Donald Shoup's father was at Columbia and worked with William Vickrey.

00;11;15;04 - 00;11;17;15

Sam Schwartz

So some connection there.

00;11;17;17 - 00;11;20;06

Emily Weidenhof

Donald was on the, the podcast.

00;11;20;08 - 00;11;20;17

Sam Schwartz

Yeah?!

00;11;20;17 - 00;11;22;00

Emily Weidenhof

Before he passed away, we got to speak with him

00;11;22;01 - 00;11;23;04

Sam Schwartz

Oh, you did?!

Emily Weidenhof

Yes. Yeah, Amazing, Amazing.

00;11;23;06 - 00;11;39;09

Sam Schwartz

Oh, that's great, that's great. And, and so we're, we're looking at issuing a report card on transportation in the city. You know, some of them are related to DOT, some are related to the MTA.

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00;11;39;11 - 00;11;48;25

Sam Schwartz

How well or how poorly we're doing, Port Authority, putting all those agencies, there is no one that really puts all the agencies together.

00;11;48;28 - 00;12;26;13

Sam Schwartz

We're looking at, fatalities right now, pedestrian fatalities by state. And we, you know, we found that between 1980 and 2010, every single state did better, meaning fewer pedestrian casualties. Since 2010, pedestrian casualties have soared, and every state did worse except for 13, including New York. So, we're really trying to drill down why did pedestrian fatalities double in such a short period of time?

00;12;26;15 - 00;12;59;13

Sam Schwartz

And while other traffic fatalities are not going up, where we're looking at autonomous vehicles. And I have a novel coming out on autonomous vehicles, but I wrote a book, *No One at the Wheel: Driverless Cars on the Road of the Future*, which still holds true even though I wrote it 5 or 6 years ago. *Auto Kill* will be out in August, and it's to reach a broader audience to think about how autonomous vehicles work, the limitations of autonomous vehicles.

00;12;59;16 - 00;13;19;06

Sam Schwartz

And they are not the saviors of cities. There is a right way to do it, and there is a wrong way. And if history holds, we're going to do it the wrong way. We did that with the automobile. And if you get me started on the history of the automobile from 1900 and what we did, we will be here for another couple of hours.

00;13;19;08 - 00;13;40;12

Emily Weidenhof

Hey, listeners, we hope you're enjoying this episode of our podcast. For those of you who are as enthusiastic about transportation and planning as we are, we'd like to hear from you. You can submit topics and questions that you'd like us to cover at NYC.gov/curbenthusiasm. And now back to our conversation.

00;13;40;14 - 00;13;46;00

Emily Weidenhof

So, what do you think the right way is to deal with autonomous vehicles?

00;13;46;02 - 00;14;06;08

Sam Schwartz

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The right way is not to believe everything the autonomous vehicle lobby is saying. And first decide what kind of city do you want to be? Do you want to be a walking city? Do you want pedestrians at the top of the hierarchy, which is the way I like to view cities.

00;14;06;14 - 00;14;36;09

Sam Schwartz

Walking should be encouraged. You want biking, you want, other forms of transportation. We're seeing a lot of Micro Transit. You want transit vehicles to move faster, then you can superimpose autonomous vehicles that match that. Should the autonomous vehicles be allowed to go everywhere in the city? Probably not for a long time, because they can't figure out the pickup and dropoff.

00;14;36;12 - 00;14;38;05

Sam Schwartz

So, we need transparency,

00;14;38;05 - 00;14;48;02

Sam Schwartz

number one, anyone that comes in has to share with us transparency. Number two, whatever the city rules are, they have to obey.

00;14;48;02 - 00;14;56;11

Sam Schwartz

If the city said the speed limit is 15 or 12 or five or you cannot go into a pedestrian area,

00;14;56;13 - 00;15;16;16

Sam Schwartz

Cars cannot go in there. If you're on a school street, they have to do ten miles an hour. Will they agree to all of that? And there are some streets that you don't want them to go on at all. So, the first thing is figure out the city that you want.

00;15;16;19 - 00;15;34;21

Sam Schwartz

I harken back to the 1950s, as, you know, and a Volvo engineer invents the three-point seatbelt that has saved countless lives. Volvo could have made a ton of money on that.

00;15;34;24 - 00;16;01;23

Sam Schwartz

Volvo said every car manufacturer can use this no charge. We're allowing you to use that because lives are the most important thing. If you hear the rhetoric of the autonomous vehicle companies, they talk about saving lives. They will not share what technologies they have that may save lives with another company.

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00;16;01;26 - 00;16;06;09

Sam Schwartz

So, we have to rely on them to tell the truth.

00;16;06;11 - 00;16;15;04

Commissioner Mike Flynn

Wow, there's so many layers to it. And hearing you talk about it just illustrates, all the complexity. So, there's a lot of food for thought there, I appreciate it.

00;16;16;04 - 00;16;50;08

Commissioner Mike Flynn

So, Sam, we have some questions from our listeners. First up, burning question here, is a roundabout superior to a standard intersection?

Sam Schwartz

That's a great question. In terms of safety statistics, yes. Yeah. Far superior in the 70 to 80% safer. However, for much of New York City, we don't have enough room for roundabouts. Secondly, it gets very confusing for pedestrians that can't walk in a straight line with a roundabout.

00;16;50;10 - 00;17;09;29

Sam Schwartz

They have to walk in a 'U' just to get across the street. And third bikes. Bikes are somewhat problematic. A bike wants to make a left turn, has to take control of the roundabout. I'd say in outer areas of the city where you do have plenty of room and you have very few pedestrians, they make a lot of sense.

00;17;10;02 - 00;17;35;27

Commissioner Mike Flynn

Great. And then we have a question about parking. I think the specific question is "what would it look like to remove parking, in large parts of the city?" Maybe I would ask more broadly for your thoughts, just, you know, on how we regulate parking, how we approach parking in the city, hasn't changed a lot, I think, in years.

00;17;35;29 - 00;17;57;28

Commissioner Mike Flynn

You know, if you could wave a magic wand, what do you think we should be doing when it comes to on street parking?

Sam Schwartz

Yeah, and I've studied on street parking and, and, couldn't go back to into the 1800s, when the magistrate in England said the king's highways should never be used for the storage of your vehicles.

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00;17;58;00 - 00;18;26;26

Sam Schwartz

What an odd concept. And in New York, we didn't legally allow for on street parking, which is kind of bizarre. You're taking possession that's worth \$50,000 or more and leaving it out in the public. We don't put our couches out there. We don't put anything else out there. Until 1950, it was against the law. Ultimately, after World War two, somehow it got passed that you could park anywhere.

00;18;26;28 - 00;19;08;20

Sam Schwartz

Not only that, we allowed double parking in some communities for street cleaning rules. I would, a lot of our streets were widened, sidewalks narrowed to make room for traffic and for parking. And I would love to see a reversal of that. I know DOT is looking at designs for Park Avenue, Spectacular! They're looking at other streets. I remember going on 23rd Street and finding out that the rooms of the stores went right under the lanes of traffic, because the street was so much narrower.

00;19;08;23 - 00;19;39;28

Sam Schwartz

What an opportunity we have. If we can widen sidewalks all over and get rid of on street parking, chipping away at on street parking is terrific because it's not going to be done overnight. But I would say pricing, even more pricing than we do now, although I think some of the ideas of raising 7 or \$10 billion from, monetizing the streets may be a bit high, but nonetheless, there are opportunities there.

00;19;39;28 - 00;20;09;20

Sam Schwartz

The city I envision of the future is one with wider sidewalks, more foliage and a greater pedestrian ambiance. To me, the pedestrian is the king and queen of New York City.

Emily Weidenhof

Here here! And now, Sam, we want to ask a couple questions that we ask all of our guests. What is your biggest breach of transportation etiquette?

00;20;09;23 - 00;20;34;11

Sam Schwartz

Well, I certainly am, And I hate the word, and I think it's wrong, jaywalking. You know that there was a traffic engineer, Hans Monderman, who sadly passed away at, I think, age 60, who used to walk. He removed every traffic control device and used to walk through his town, I think somewhere in Scandinavia, blindfolded. And he didn't die from being hit by a car.

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00;20;34;17 - 00;21;05;07

Sam Schwartz

Died of a heart attack, sadly. But, when I look at the statistics of absolute numbers of pedestrian casualties in New York, which is too high. Versus the absolute number in Los Angeles, with far fewer pedestrians, greater adherence to anti-jaywalking, I hate the word jaywalking, Regulations. They—more people are killed on Los Angeles streets than they are on New York streets.

00;21;05;09 - 00;21;31;10

Sam Schwartz

There is a theory that chaos makes you drive more slowly. Many years ago, when I was writing another book called *Street Smart: The Rise of Cities and the Fall of Cars*, I met with the Commissioner of Transportation. At that time, they called it the Department of Mobility in Barcelona, and they had fewer than ten pedestrian fatalities. And it's a big city.

00;21;31;12 - 00;22;05;21

Sam Schwartz

And I said, how do you achieve that? And it kind of leaned across the table and he said, I make the lanes very, very narrow. He even made some seven feet because when people face narrow lanes, they drive more carefully. We learned that at DOT when the Williamsburg Bridge was shut and we had no money to rebuild it, and the federal government wanted us to build a new bridge into the blighted neighborhoods of Williamsburg in the Lower East Side that weren't worth saving,

00;22;05;21 - 00;22;32;11

Sam Schwartz

They would never be worth anything, big, gorgeous highways, spaghetti ramps. They said it's substandard. You have at the towers, the lanes are narrower than nine feet each, and you have trucks. Well, what we found was the safest part of the bridge was that part of the bridge where the lanes with the narrowest. So, you know, that is a big factor.

00;22;32;14 - 00;22;39;23

Sam Schwartz

Chaos in traffic actually works, makes people drive more carefully.

00;22;39;25 - 00;22;55;28

Sam Schwartz

So that's why I jaywalk.

Commissioner Mike Flynn

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I love that. I sometimes say that traffic engineering is as much a social science as a hard science, right? Because so much of it really is about human nature and human psychology. And sometimes you have counterintuitive things like that.

00;22;56;01 - 00;23;01;15

Sam Schwartz

Yeah, yeah. And nobody can point to exactly where the 12ft lane came from.

00;23;01;15 - 00;23;21;03

Sam Schwartz

Some people say it's from the tanks that were 12ft wide. But there is no science to a 12ft lane being safer than an 11 or 10 or nine, or even, as you heard on the Williamsburg Bridge. They're less than nine feet at the towers.

00;23;21;06 - 00;23;42;12

Commissioner Mike Flynn

All right. Well, thanks for all of your time with us. One last question. Last but not least, what are you most enthusiastic about for the future of transportation?

Sam Schwartz

You know, I'm very enthusiastic for the Mamdani Administration taking on some really tough projects that I just didn't envision I would be seeing.

00;23;42;12 - 00;24;15;02

Sam Schwartz

in, in this, this near a future such as Flatbush Avenue, bus lanes with center running busses and, with wider, platforms for people. McGuinness Boulevard going back to the plan, of practically Oak Street and making it into a very calm street, advancing congestion pricing even more. I'm hoping to see that, that, we have a more dynamic system right now

00;24;15;02 - 00;24;37;29

Sam Schwartz

it's what I call in quotes, a dumb system. You enter and go one block, you're charged as much as going 100 blocks. So, there are a number of things that are hoping in the near future. And I am really pleased with the new commissioner at DOT, because he knows all this, he knows all this good stuff. He taught me some of this stuff.

00;24;38;01 - 00;24;48;04

Sam Schwartz

So, I'm enthusiastic about this new DOT. And someday we'll even tackle the BQE Triple Cantilever.

00;24;48;06 - 00;24;57;10

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Commissioner Mike Flynn

Haha, well, I'm really grateful for the kind words. And, yes, lots of, lots of big, big things coming.

Sam Schwartz

Great. Thank you.

Emily Weidenhof

Thanks for your time.