

Manufactured Congestion

Almost one month ago, we [posted](#) commentary stating that some looked at the City “plaza” plans as almost a conspiracy to create congestion to encourage a constituency to clamor for the congestion tax to keep cars out. Now, this plaza story raises another concern. And maybe another. First, why impose measures that slow transit – yes congestion that the plaza schemes induced, SLOW surface mass transit aka buses. And note the study looked at the routes along the immediate corridor. No data got released – was it even looked at? – that analyzes the scheme's impact on interborough bus transit – aka express buses. One can see some folks facing longer rides looking again at using a car if the trip becomes overbearingly long; or maybe they take a pass altogether. And remember this involves not just workers but folks who come to shop, patronize our museums and culture or take in shows. Second, well look at when the data got released and look at when the decision on the Broadway plazas becoming fixtures got announced. Would the plaza scheme have been less defensible if the bus trip data were released last fall after the study's completion? Hmm....

[The New York Times](#) [N.Y. / Region](#)

Times Square Plazas Slow Many Bus Trips

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The pedestrian plazas in Times and Herald Squares have been promoted by the Bloomberg administration as a marquee achievement in its quest to create a safer and more pleasing streetscape, friendlier to tourists and merchants alike.

For some bus riders, however, the results have not been as positive.

Riders trying to get downtown through the Times Square area have experienced longer travel times on four out of five affected bus routes, according to a report from [New York City Transit](#), which operates the city's bus system.

In the worst case, the M6 bus took more than 10 minutes longer to complete its route from



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

The M6 bus, rerouted because of the pedestrian plazas, takes more than 10 minutes longer in the evening rush to go from Central Park to Union Square. Three other routes are also slower.

Central Park to Union Square in the evening rush, meaning riders had to spend about 25 percent more time to finish the trip.

The report attributed the slower rides to increased congestion, longer routes and new turns required by the closing of several blocks of Broadway. It also said that the rerouting of buses and other traffic onto Seventh Avenue “appears to have caused congestion,” an assertion that the Bloomberg administration rejected.

Buses that travel north on Avenue of the Americas were not rerouted. They benefited from the city’s simplification of the intersection at Herald Square, shaving an average of 14 percent, or 90 seconds, off their travel times between 14th and 34th Streets, the report said.

The bus data was collected by New York City Transit in October and provided to the city’s Transportation Department. The report was not made public until this week, after repeated requests from The New York Times.

In February, when Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg announced that the plazas would be made permanent, the Transportation Department distributed its own report on the project’s impact on traffic. In it, the city noted that bus travel speeds around Times Square had “fallen slightly.”

The city’s report emphasized GPS data from taxicabs in measuring traffic flow.

In a paragraph describing the impact on buses, some routes were described generally as having “encountered larger delays and reduced speeds due to the introduction of more turns, which are subject to pedestrian interference.” No route-by-route breakdown was provided.

[Janette Sadik-Khan](#), the transportation commissioner, said in an interview that the extended travel times did not reflect the average experience of a rider.

“You don’t take the M6 from the beginning of the line to the end,” Ms. Sadik-Khan said. “A lot of trips are for just a few blocks.”

Furthermore, she said, the consolidation of bus routes along Seventh Avenue meant that riders in that corridor did not have to wait as long for a bus to arrive, offsetting any delays onboard. “Buses now come every minute, which is a huge improvement for passengers,” she said.

To accommodate the changes to the street grid, five bus lines were rerouted and some were made longer. The average increase in travel time on those routes ranged from one to seven minutes. One route, the M20, was three minutes faster between 42nd and 14th Streets but about a minute slower above 42nd Street.

Ms. Sadik-Khan, who supervised the pedestrian plaza project, pointed to the new, longer routes as a culprit. “I take exception to the claim that the rerouting has caused congestion,” she said. No major complaints from the public about the changes in bus service were received by New York City Transit, its report said.

The pedestrian plazas have received positive reviews for the aesthetic improvements to an area once known for gridlock and crammed sidewalks.

But the project, primarily intended to improve traffic flow, has fallen somewhat short of its anti-gridlock goals: Traffic speeds slowed on Eighth and Ninth Avenues and on many crosstown streets. Over all, vehicular traffic sped up along Seventh and Sixth Avenues, but less than the city had hoped.

Told of the bus report, the city’s public advocate, Bill de Blasio, said he was concerned that the data was not shared sooner.

“Communities cannot be engaged if they are kept in the dark about reports like this,” he said.

Business leaders said their constituents remained pleased.

“I measure these things on utilitarian grounds,” said Dan Biederman, the president of the 34th Street Partnership. “Is the 34th Street district better on behalf of the city’s work? Yes.”

Mr. Biederman marveled at the traffic improvements on Sixth Avenue, noting that before the changes, “I could have crawled north faster.”

Still, he said that congestion at 32nd Street and Seventh Avenue, where buses must now turn left to reconnect with Broadway, required attention. “It’s a bad situation,” he said. “The owners do not like having a bus depot in the middle of a retail block.”