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Plazas Require A Review First

Testimony by Corey Bearak to City Council Committee on Transportation chaired by Council Member James Vacca

Thank for this hearing to review the “plaza program” of the NYC Department of Transportation. While it remains important to review how DOT’s plaza program impacted traffic, pedestrian safety, and commerce in New York City, even more important the approval process fails and that failure requires as much attention.

Everyone supports and expects the Department of Transportation to take all reasonable measures to ensure pedestrian and traffic safety. Yet the zeal to act sometimes results in questionable and perhaps patently unsafe schemes such as what occurred in Marine Park.

The program and many of the plazas created out of the city's street scape merit more than this serious discussion. The discussion must include the need for a full environmental review which includes not just traffic and safety but economic impacts and should have occurred first.

No emergency existing as the City asserted during the 1980s when another administration illegally used the subterfuge of license agreements to site boarder homes without first following the City Charter's community review process. But even in those cases, the city followed its Uniform Land Use Review Procedure after the fact. With the plaza program, plazas often implemented as so-called pilots, never faced this hallmark review procedure. What does DOT fear?

The City announced its plans to reconfigure 34th Street no longer include a pedestrian mall from 5th to 6th Avenues. The process there includes many meetings but never included any intention to follow the City Charter's community review process despite its plans to essentially close off more than 50% of 34th Street between 5th and 6th Avenues. The plan still involves the loss of a lane and sidewalk extension throughout much of 34th Street's length. DOT needs to explain how closing a street or part thereof triggers no City Charter mandated community review, including community board and City Council approvals.

Like with a misdirection play, The DOT lets the community and businesses believe they have real input. That's what they did with the top down PlaNYC 2030 that produced the congestion tax; they invited us in and let us speak and even serve as rapporteur but then failed to included substantive community input that offered better ideas in a host of policy areas.

Following the City Charter's community review process avoids sham reviews.

In many ways, these plaza kill business, inconvenience residents and create further congestion on other Manhattan Streets.

New barriers and other roadway changes to accommodate and “secure” the plazas and bicycle paths may have unanticipated impacted. During the winter's worst storm, the ability of plows to clear sufficient roadway lanes, especially in that storm accompanied by winds creating snow drifts. In such circumstances, three lanes (that before roadway changes were five) can easily become one/ one and half lanes.

Looking at the impact of plazas involves more than snow removal. We question why impose measures that slow transit – yes congestion that the plaza schemes induced, SLOW surface mass transit aka buses. And note the MTA NYC Transit study from last year looked at the routes along the immediate Times Square Plaza corridors. 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 unbearably 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. We also need to look at when this 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? Again, how might following the City Charter community review process improved the likelihood of relevant information getting considered earlier in the process – when it mattered?

The Community Review process also relates to dollars. A pedestrian plaza may be nice but placed in context, why spend \$1.5 million when transit needs exist and persist. Would not that sum of dollars be better spent including increasing the city's expense or capital subsidy to mass transit? Following the City Charter gives voice to a discussion on priorities; we ought to value such opportunities.

The Council must seriously review its obligation not just to provide oversight but assert its City Charter authority to review projects that trigger the application of the Charter's community review provisions.

One final thought. One queries whether the City Hall focus on so-called pedestrian plazas and cycling comes at a cost. What keeps NYC so vibrant remains the ability to get around; not just via pedestrian and cycling modes; buses, subways, rail, ferries and vehicles remain important parts of intercity and intracity transportation. But while the MTA cut bus and subway service, we see an administration that cuts its own contributions to mass transit and offered no planning in terms of bus and subway routing apart from the #7 line extension that likely benefits connected folks with properties and sites in a certain portion of Manhattan. City Hall appeared not to weigh in on bus line opportunities that could enhance service and made sense (Look at some of the lines cut and their terminuses and the proposals from civics and electeds for those lines.). Wouldn't it be nice if City Hall and DOT devoted some energy to keeping existing mass transit in place and enhancing those lines. Thank you.