
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Copenhagen comes to New York?

Original Reporting | By Brian Paul | Environment, NYC, Transportation

February 9, 2011 — Despite New York City's extensive mass transportation network, its streetscape was, for decades, distinctly car-centric. In April 2007, however, there was a seismic shift. Mayor Michael Bloomberg introduced his [long-term sustainability plan](#) and also removed Iris Weinshall, his commissioner of the Department of Transportation (DOT), [replacing her with Janette Sadik-Khan](#). The new commissioner upended the traditional order of the road with her vision of "[Complete Streets](#)" — the physical redesign of roadways to serve pedestrians, bicyclists, and buses, as well as the long-dominant private automobile.

New York has added [more than 250 miles](#) of new bike lanes and commuter cycling has more than doubled in popularity since that time. This sea change evoked remarkably little controversy or opposition for three years. But this past summer, the installation of a new bike lane on Prospect Park West in the Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn provoked some local residents, [including former DOT commissioner Weinshall](#), to organize and pressure the City for its removal. Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz (a Prospect Park West resident), led the charge, calling Sadik-Khan a "[bicycle zealot](#)" during a radio interview and speaking out against the DOT's "[anti-car ideology](#)."

The Prospect Park West controversy received considerable media attention and inspired other outer borough politicians to denounce proposed bike lanes. In Canarsie, a neighborhood in South Brooklyn, City Council Member Lew Fidler led a [successful campaign](#) to stop DOT's installation of two new bike lanes that would have connected a waterfront greenway with an existing network of bike lanes to the north.

Interviews with several bike lane opponents revealed what appears to be a striking unwillingness to recognize either the true demographics of their districts, or to imagine the possibility that current preferences about transit options could be malleable.

"It's not for us"

While stating support for recreational bike lanes along the waterfront, Fidler finds the idea that his district would benefit from integration with a citywide network to be "ridiculous." "My district is as far away from the CBD (Central Business District) as can be...nobody who lives in Canarsie is going to get on a bicycle and commute all the way to Manhattan" said Fidler. "It's a flight of fancy...it's Manhattan-centric people looking at the world from Manhattan-centric points of view."

City Council Transportation Committee Chair James Vacca, who oversaw a Dec. 2010 hearing on the bike lane program, criticized the value of the “trade-offs” that have accompanied the expansion of bike lanes, citing the loss of space on the streets for traffic, parking, and deliveries. “Bicycle riding within the Bronx is nowhere near what it is in Manhattan. I’m not against encouraging it but I want it understood that there are other needs here too,” he said.

Peter Koo, who represents Flushing, Queens on the City Council, was even more critical of the potential value of reallocating street space to bicycles. “Cars and buses are very important in Downtown Flushing...there’s over 100,000 people coming through to commute every day, it’s very crowded and there’s no space for bike lanes,” he said.

“We’re Not Copenhagen”

The inspiration for New York’s mission to decrease car use by promoting cycling lies across the Atlantic in Northern European cities such as Copenhagen, Amsterdam, and Berlin. In the 1970’s, these cities undertook major policy changes in urban transportation, de-emphasizing the automobile in favor of increased public transit and cycling. These changes resulted in a [substantial upsurge](#) in the use of bicycles by the citizens of those cities, both for work and recreation. According to [John Pucher](#), professor of urban planning at Rutgers University, the provision of bicycle lanes safely separated from car traffic by curbs, bollards, or parked cars, is a crucial aspect of these cities’ success in promoting bicycling as a viable mode of transport for the masses.

But opponents are highly skeptical of the relevance of the Northern European model in the New York context, doubting that New Yorkers would, like their European counterparts, switch from driving to cycling when provided with the option of a safe cycling network.

When asked if the construction of new bike lanes could, in itself, generate an increase in cycling and a decrease in driving, Vacca thought such change might only be possible in the distant future: “So far, it has not happened in my district. A bike lane was put in on 8th Ave. in Morris Park on the block of my predecessor ...and no one uses it. I was talking to her just the other day and she said ‘Jimmy, no one uses this bike path, why was it put here?’”

Vacca, presented with statistics showing an increase in bicycle ridership on streets with new bike lanes, did not become less skeptical. “I [had] asked the [Transportation] Commissioner, ‘How many

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people who are now using the bicycles to get to work used to take cars?’ And she could not answer the question...I don’t like adopting any model from another city, because New York is so unique.”

Council Member Fidler agreed that bike lanes or not, his constituents are not going to put aside the car keys anytime soon. “It’s not a failure of imagination on our part; it’s a failure by DOT to notice the reality here and think that people in Canarsie are going to do something that they’re never going to do.”

[Flushing Community Board](#) District Manager, Marilyn Bitterman, also argued that bike lanes won’t win over outer borough drivers. “I drive and I will still continue to drive, I won’t take a bike,” she said. “The mentality of Queens is ‘I want to go to a store, I want to park right in front of the store.’ I don’t know if you can overcome that mindset...we’re not Copenhagen and our modes of transportation are not like Europe.”

Stereotyping one’s own constituents

In defending the intransigence of drivers and the paramount importance of the car to their communities, these and other outer borough politicians may be ignoring the reality of their own districts.

Statistics from the American Community Survey show that the portrayal of the outer boroughs as “car country” presents only part of the picture. In Canarsie, Flushing, and the Northeast Bronx — the areas that Fidler, Koo, and Vacca represent — nearly half of all residents commute by public transit rather than drive. Depending on the particular neighborhood within these districts, anywhere from 30 percent to 42 percent of households don’t own a car at all. And the majority of commuters actually work within their own borough rather than commuting to Manhattan.

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Caroline Samponaro, the Director of Bicycle Advocacy at Transportation Alternatives, cites these statistics, and argues that cycling is faster than public transit and competitive with driving for trips of three miles or less. “It’s just not true that people in these areas don’t cycle and will never cycle,” she said. “Local politicians are responding to drivers because they tend to speak the loudest, even though it’s really their job to be speaking on behalf of all their constituents.”

After Remapping Debate told Fidler about the statistics on car ownership, his view of cycling’s potential in his district remained negative: “Let me say to you that 95 percent of households in Canarsie have no adults with a bike. You can take a statistic for [proving] anything,” he said.

Singing a new tune?

In Flushing, Canarsie, and similar neighborhoods, cycling may have particular promise to help ease the trip to the subway. Located at the end of subway lines, most transit commuters have to take one or more buses to get to terminal subway stations like the [Flushing # 7](#) or [Rockaway Parkway L](#). Buses add significant time and effort to the commute as the majority of transit commuters are forced to travel [over an hour](#) to get to work. (Despite this, the City's Department of Transportation has no current plans for bike lanes oriented to transit stops in the outer boroughs, despite the [recent cuts](#) in service that have made the trip by bus even more difficult).

The three Council Members interviewed each expressed interest in the idea of “lanes to the train.” Fidler agreed that all transportation “needs to coexist in a cooperative fashion,” and Vacca said that he would seriously consider bike lanes to transit for his district “even if helps a small amount of people.”

Complaints about DOT's approach

Much of the outer-borough resistance to bike lanes appears to be based in entrenched attitudes that prohibit local politicians from imagining the possibility of change. But in order for DOT to achieve its goal of establishing cycling as a viable transportation option for all New Yorkers, it, too, may have to change.

Our interviews with outer-borough bike lane opponents suggest that DOT might be exacerbating reactionary sentiment by failing to work with outer borough communities to design a cycling network responsive to their needs.

The “Bicycle Master Plan,” with a citywide network of bike lane routes already planned and drawn on the DOT's maps, is a particular source of anger for the outer-boroughs. “I was very upset when I noticed the proposed bike lanes drawn across our community” said District Manager Bitterman. “They should consult us before they propose.” Council Member Vacca also expressed frustration at the pre-planned routes. “Knowing my district the way I know it, some of those routes do not make sense to me...that map raises a lot of questions,” he said.

Council Member Fidler is even more outspoken in his criticism of how the DOT came to his Community Board with a “fait accompli” instead of asking the local community where lanes would be appropriate. “If DOT had come in with a constructive process, I think they would have gotten a productive dialogue...There are different neighborhoods with different needs in different parts of the city and in my neighborhood if you want to encourage cycling as commuting, you got to at the very least take us to the subway station” said Fidler.

The DOT says that it has heard this critique and is planning to expand its community outreach efforts when cycling season begins again with the warmer temperatures of spring.

Whether words are followed by action remains to be seen. Council Member Fidler admitted that he had not publicly proposed the idea of bike lanes to subway stations (Vacca and Koo haven't either), and Vacca remained focused on the idea that bike lanes could only proceed if they did not result in what he described as "negatively impacting others." Vacca concluded that he could "never envision" a day when a significant proportion of his constituents will commute by bike.

Are New Yorkers actually so different from, say, Berliners? There, bike usage has [increased several-fold](#) since 1975 when its transportation policy began to encourage cycling via safe, separated bike lanes — and this in the home of Mercedes Benz, BMW, and the Autobahn.

This content originally appeared at <http://remappingdebate.org/article/copenhagen-comes-new-york?>