

## TUT-POL CASE STUDY

# New York City: From Congestion Charging Failure to Reimagining and Reconfiguring City Streets



## Summary

Over the last ten years and under two different mayors, New York City has made its streets safer, more attractive, and more appealing for pedestrians and bicycle users. Since 2007, New York City's Department of Transportation (NYC DOT) has converted more than 40 acres of city streets into more than 70 new pedestrian plazas in locations that range from world-famous commercial centers to little-known neighborhood business districts. Since 2007, NYC DOT has also built more than 400 miles of interconnected bicycle lanes and launched Citi Bike, the world's largest unsubsidized bike-share system. While NYC's efforts drew heavily on approaches pioneered in European cities, the speed and scope of the city's efforts are noteworthy. The Bloomberg Administration (2002- 2013) only took up these ideas from the latter half of its second term while the de Blasio Administration (2013-present), which had significantly different priorities, not only continued many previous policies but also launched an ambitious effort to greatly reduce the number of pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists killed or seriously injured in crashes. All these policies represent a marked shift for NYC DOT, which until the mid 2000s generally focused on optimizing the flow of motor vehicles on the city's streets. While pressure for such changes had been building for several years, the Bloomberg Administration did not embrace them until the release of PlaNYC, a comprehensive long-range plan released in April 2007. That plan's transportation components also included a call for imposing congestion charges in Manhattan (and

using the revenue to upgrade and expand the city's transit system). While the pricing plan had strong support from businesses and residents in the city's core, vehement opposition in the city's outer boroughs and nearby suburbs convinced leaders of the state legislature – which had to approve the plan – not to bring it up for a vote. In the wake of that defeat, the NYC DOT focused on the pedestrian and bicycling elements of PlaNYC, which did not require state authorization or funding.

**This is a story of how and why a public agency expanded and changed its institutional mandate and operations from a narrower preoccupation with traffic management to a wider range of transit concerns, thus allowing for new arenas of intervention and policy action that ultimately transformed city streets. Although the newly reconfigured DOT's initial concern was to prioritize pedestrian and cyclist uses of repurposed city streets, these small-scale changes served as the first steps towards implementing a comprehensive long-range plan to promote the city's urban growth and economic development.**

## Strategic Actions

**Moving beyond conventional definitions of transportation in ways that made urban livability concerns as important as traffic flows in the management of street spaces, and in ways that connected these priorities to the city's overall branding strategy and global aspirations.**

In New York, pedestrian and bicycle-friendly policies were codified into PlaNYC, the city's first comprehensive long-range plan with a stated goal of reducing the city's carbon footprint while accommodating another 1 million residents by 2030. The plan strongly emphasized the importance of maintaining the city's global competitiveness and economic growth through urban infrastructure improvements and redevelopment projects that would make the city more vibrant, livable, and attractive to creative talent. It was further unveiled by Mayor Michael Bloomberg on Earth Day (April 22, 2007), a highly symbolic date for environmentalists.

## Tactical Actions

**Borrowing successes from other world cities with reputations as global leaders in quality of life indicators, and modifying these templates to fit the local context.**

NYC DOT gained many of its ideas from European cities and countries—Copenhagen's street re-makings, London and Stockholm's congestion pricing, Paris' beaches along the Seine and bike share program, and Sweden's Vision Zero program—as well as external consultants such as the Danish urban designer Jan Gehl and the eminent American architect and urban planner Alexander Garvin—but adapted them to the local context.

**Using smaller-scale prototypes and trials to overcome political and bureaucratic inertia.**

NYC DOT initiated the liveable streets initiative constructing a series of pedestrian plazas using cheap and makeshift materials such as paint, planters, and removable street furniture. The temporary nature of the changes allowed them to cut through bureaucratic red tape, temper resistance and build public support, and enable policy learning and adaptation.

**Distributing responsibilities and opportunities for implementation across various neighborhoods so to generate step-by-step community buy-in while also slowly building a constituency for citywide policy change.**

NYC DOT structured a competitive application process whereby local Business Improvement Districts and other neighborhood-based organizations would plan and maintain the plazas with the support of the DOT and respective Community Boards. Neighborhood groups were then encouraged to propose the reallocation of certain street spaces from motor vehicle to pedestrian plaza uses, and to raise private financing for the upkeep and management of such plazas. Neighborhoods that so preferred, on the other hand, could ignore the plaza policy.

**Promoting new institutional mechanisms for identifying and connecting planning and policy priorities across various government agencies.**

In redefining DOT's mission and approach, the Deputy Mayor for Economic Development and Reconstruction, Dan Doctoroff, structured an interdepartmental planning effort under the direct guidance of his office and with input from key civic leaders.

Both Mayor Bloomberg and the NYC DOT Commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan, encouraged risk taking and policy experimentation among city staff to the extent it was based on evidence and data.

**Using data and evidence to gauge and/or strengthen the case for the introduction of new policies.**

The Bloomberg administration repeatedly made use of polling data to gauge voter preferences and public sentiment on various policy issues and debates, as did partner organizations like Transportation Alternatives. Ultimately, the latter's determination that safety was the preeminent resonating factor with the public and ensuing reframing of pedestrian and cycling initiatives to emphasize safety helped sustain policy changes under the de Blasio administration.