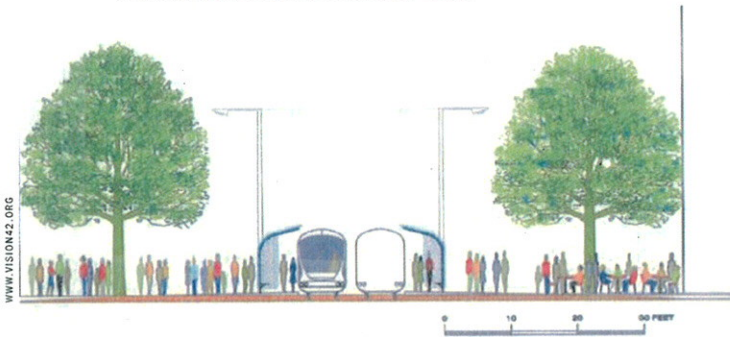


Support Grows for Car-Free, Light-Rail Boulevard for Manhattan's 42nd Street

The traffic-heavy thoroughfare known as 42nd Street in Manhattan is a slow-moving tangle of cars, taxis, trucks, and buses. Pedestrian traffic paths, likewise, are so clogged that people step off the sidewalk and into the street just to make some forward progress. Now, some 31 years and four mayors after the idea was first proposed, a new study is reviving interest in turning the street into a 2.5-mile (4-km), automobile-free, light-rail boulevard stretching from the Hudson River to the East River, and connecting disparate parts of the city's transit and ferry systems.

Pairs of light-rail stops would be placed at each typical 800-foot (240-m) avenue, resulting in 12 pairs of stops along the length of Manhattan's 42nd Street, plus several at the far western and eastern ends along the Hudson and East rivers. With automobile traffic diverted to nearby crosstown streets and avenues, curbs could be eliminated and space allowed for outdoor restaurants, cafés, and other pedestrian amenities such as benches in front of shops.



The plan, vision42, released earlier this year by the nonprofit Institute for Rational Urban Mobility (IRUM), suggests that light rail on 42nd Street would speed crosstown travel, reduce air pollution, ease pedestrian and traffic congestion, and provide significant economic benefits to the city. The upper estimate of hard and soft costs for building the light-rail system is estimated today at around \$583 million.

"The major stumbling block now seems to lie in City Hall," says architect Roxanne Warren, vision42 chair, who has spent more than three decades researching and writing on transportation issues. "With stakeholders in all sectors supporting the light-rail proposal, we're disappointed that the mayor has yet to sign on. As far as we can tell, he [Michael R. Bloomberg] feels that vision42 is somehow in competition with the subway extension, which has been a cornerstone of his transit initiatives.

"As we see it, light rail will complement existing and future subway service in midtown Manhattan," continues Warren. The light-rail system proposed for 42nd Street will connect the Javits Center and the 39th Street ferry terminal on the Hudson River, include stops at every north-south avenue and connecting subway line as it runs east and west, pass the United Nations campus, and end at the 35th Street ferry terminal on the East River.

"Right now it takes about 40 minutes to make the two-mile [3.2-km] crosstown trip on 42nd Street by bus," says George Haikalis,

vision42 cochair and IRUM president. "Light rail will cut travel time at least in half," adds Haikalis, a civil engineer, transit expert, and author of the region's first comprehensive transportation plan for the Tri-State Regional Planning Commission in 1976. "On top of that, we know from other cities' experience that surface rail costs one-third as much per passenger to operate as buses and is quieter, cleaner, and more comfortable."

Bloomberg is not the only civic leader to oppose the project. The city council has yet to back the plan, and several community board members in districts to be served by vision42 have expressed dismay over changing the character of 42nd Street. Some have said that buses could move as easily as light rail on an automobile- and taxi-free boulevard, and still others endorse the rail proposal, but would rather see room on the street reserved for cars. Still others are wary of a plan with the potential to increase traffic on nearby crosstown streets, a point vision42 proponents concede while maintaining that additional traffic on side streets would be minimal. A lane for emergency vehicles will be maintained on 42nd Street during and after light-rail construction.

"It's taken time, but we're seeing a shift in attitude among the city's elected officials and transit administrators as light rail is increasingly seen as necessary for further growth along Manhattan's midtown heart," says Warren.

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