

Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day in NYC with a Car-free 42nd Street

Cars and trucks are major contributors to NYC's carbon footprint, a key cause of the climate change that may doom all the Earth's inhabitants to extinction. Reducing motor vehicular travel on NYC's 6,000 miles of streets is a small, but critical step in cutting the city's carbon footprint. Importantly, cutting car and truck use on these crowded streets will also greatly improve the city's livability for pedestrians, cyclists and surface transport users.

A very effective way to call attention to this critical environmental upgrade would be for NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio to close 42nd Street to motor vehicles, river-to-river in the core of the city, to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day, on Tuesday, April 22, 2020. This busy crosstown thoroughfare already has six times as many pedestrians as vehicles; yet the lion's share of the street space is devoted to cars and trucks. This grossly unjust allocation of our city's priceless asset takes place right at the front door of the Ford Foundation, whose new President Darren Walker has called for "creating a more just world".

NYC, the center of the nation's theater industry, has the showmanship capability to do it right! The plan could be to start with a temporary Earth Day installation on 42nd Street, which if done well, could become a permanent feature in the core of the city. Adequate resources can be marshaled to make an interim car-free 42nd Street appear like a permanent street closing. The three Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) that encompass most of 42nd Street are in an excellent position to oversee interim placement of landscaping and other amenities. The NYCDOT has already recently demonstrated that it can close a similar segment of 14th Street, where the Mayor used his authority and full-throated support to limit traffic. This could be an opportune time for him to take a similarly ambitious action for the 50th Anniversary of the upcoming Earth Day.

Earth Day is a global celebration, and what better place to call attention to the climate crisis gripping our planet than by creating a car-free link between the "Crossroads of the World" – Times Square – and the "headquarters of global cooperation" -- the United Nations at 42nd Street and the East River. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has already called for a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions generated by the UN's activities. An "interim" higher-quality surface transit access system, with a vastly upgraded bus, but with detailed planning for a modern light rail, for staff and visitors to reach its East 42nd Street headquarters, would send a global environmental message.

The authors of this note have spent many years advancing vision42 -- a proposal for an auto-free, landscaped light rail boulevard on 42nd Street, and have commissioned numerous technical studies, including a financing study that finds that the cost of the project could be fully captured by the value created by the light rail line and the pedestrian enhancement. (see www.vision42.org).

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