

The New York Times

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY



February 11, 2010

New York Traffic Experiment Gets Permanent Run

By **MICHAEL M. GRYNBAUM**

New York's ambitious experiment that closed parts of Broadway to vehicles last spring will become permanent, city officials said on Thursday, even though it fell short of achieving its chief objective: improving traffic flow.

Mayor **Michael R. Bloomberg** said that a reduction in injuries to pedestrians and motorists, along with a warm response from merchants and tourists, had persuaded him to retain the eight-month-old pedestrian plazas in Times Square and Herald Square, a marquee initiative for his administration that re-engineered the Midtown street grid.

But traffic speeds slowed on many crosstown streets, as well as on Eighth and Ninth Avenues, according to data from more than 5,700 test runs conducted by the Department of Transportation.

There were some improvements, but they mostly missed the city's targets. Traffic along Seventh Avenue, for example, moved 4 percent faster, but the city had hoped for a gain of up to 17 percent.

Mr. Bloomberg, however, declared the project a success, emphasizing the improvements to pedestrian safety and foot traffic, along with the aesthetic enhancement to an area once associated with exhaust and gridlock.

"It's fair to say that this is one of those things that has succeeded," the mayor said. "Not in every way we thought, but in some ways we hadn't thought about. Not as much in certain areas, but more than we expected in others."

The change, which banned vehicles on Broadway from 47th to 42nd Streets and from 35th to 33rd Streets, was **pitched last February** as an innovative way to fight congestion. It quickly became a fascination for tourists and New Yorkers alike, drawn to the curious sight of a pedestrian mall, complete with picnic tables and folding chairs, under the neon lights.

The mayor's office promised "reduced travel times throughout Midtown," including an improvement of up to 37 percent along Avenue of the Americas. Travel times along that avenue improved by 15 percent, according to the city's data.

But Mr. Bloomberg played down the Transportation Department's test runs and said he was more trusting of separate data collected from GPS devices in yellow cabs. Those numbers encompassed 1.1 million Midtown taxi trips taken between Fifth and Ninth Avenues in Midtown. Of those trips, northbound travel times improved by 17 percent, and southbound trips slowed by 2 percent, but a street-by-street breakdown could not be calculated.

Some transportation experts said the city might have been unrealistic in its goals.

"This is the hub of the incredible demand to be in Midtown New York; the demand for volume to be there is always going to be high," said Robert E. Paaswell, a traffic consultant and the interim president of City College.

The project, Mr. Paaswell said, "serves the public good, but it doesn't necessarily reduce congestion."

Asked about the traffic results, [Janette Sadik-Khan](#), the transportation commissioner, noted that the city's original projections did not account for tweaks to the plan, like the addition of a right-turn lane on 45th Street that was requested by a group of Broadway theater owners.

Advocates for the project said it had vastly improved safety in the area, pointing to a 35 percent decline in pedestrian injuries and a 63 percent reduction in injuries to drivers and passengers, according to city data. Foot traffic grew by 11 percent in Times Square and by 6 percent in Herald Square, and a survey of local businesses found that more than two-thirds of the area's retailers wanted the project to become permanent.

Jeffrey M. Zupan, the senior fellow for transportation at the [Regional Plan Association](#), an advocacy group, said that critics could always find fault, but he believed "there was much more gained than there was lost."

The [Times Square Alliance](#), a business group, surveyed residents and office workers and found that about 75 percent were "satisfied with their experience" in the area, up from less than half in 2007. Although some property owners objected to the design of the plazas, asking that the furniture and pavement be replaced, the majority of businesses said the plazas should be continued.

"It's shifted the paradigm for what a street and sidewalk experience is supposed to be like in New York City," said Tim Tompkins, the president of the alliance.

The Bloomberg administration had vigorously guarded its data, even from many of the city's highest-ranking politicians, and those outside of City Hall scrambled on Thursday to get their first glimpse at the results of one of New York's most radical experiments in a generation.

"I find it disturbing that nobody outside of the mayor's office got to take a look at the data or the report before the decision was made," said State Senator [Liz Krueger](#), who represents the Times Square area. "It leaves one with the suspicion that they didn't want the public to have time to take a serious look."

Several city officials — including the comptroller, the public advocate and the chairman of the [City Council's](#) Transportation Committee — all said on Thursday they would review the city's findings.

"Too often we have seen this administration decide for the people, instead of engaging them in the process of making our city better," [Bill de Blasio](#), the public advocate, wrote in an e-mail message. "I believe that while this project has some benefits, we cannot make such a fundamental change to Times Square without first giving the community a greater say in the process."

Mr. Bloomberg, whose administration has been criticized as too imperious in its social engineering, said the mixed results from the Broadway project would not discourage him from future experiments. "If something doesn't work, that doesn't mean you're not going to try new things," he said.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: February 15, 2010

A picture credit on Friday with an article about New York's decision to keep parts of Broadway closed to vehicular traffic misidentified the photographer. The picture of people along a stretch of the pedestrian plaza in Times Square was taken by Damon Winter of The Times, not by Ozier Muhammad.

- -