

Manhattan Community Board Five

Vikki Barbero, Chair

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June 10, 2020

Honorable Bill de Blasio
Mayor
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor de Blasio:

Manhattan Community Board Five's Transportation and Environment Committee met on Thursday, May 28, 2020, to discuss and address the effects of both the ongoing pandemic—as well as the city's response to the crisis—on the environmental and transportation needs of our district. The crisis has in some ways temporarily upheaved the way we use our public space, and in other ways simply laid bare accelerating trends in our street use that our city was rushing to adapt to even before the crisis. Indeed, many of the proposed and implemented responses to the crisis coincide with some of our long-term priorities for our district.

First and foremost, we agreed that the City's responses and mitigations should be rooted in facts on the ground and solid reporting of the latest in the quickly-changing conditions. As such, we discussed the need for continuous data and reporting of the current street use situation and ongoing changes to it. The situation now is very different from three months ago and will change yet again as mitigation factors like lane reconfiguration and street closures are implemented. The only constant will be change, and we must be prepared to iteratively assess and respond at each step of the way.

We also discussed the general understanding that all proposals and mitigations must be understood to be connected to each other. Reallocation of street space for any purpose necessarily takes it away from another. Already-implemented adjustments and further proposed changes, including street closure for pedestrianization, street closure for outdoor dining, the addition of protected bike lanes, the addition of expedited bus lanes, and similar proposals, are responses to changing patterns including the unavailability of indoor space, the difficulty of travel by subway, etc. While conditions will continue to change and rebalance continuously, it will be critical to see each proposal as part of an evolving interconnected network, with the need to take other forms of transportation into account at the same time and balance accordingly as conditions evolve.

The changes to our underlying assumptions require us to thoughtfully question any immediate reversion to the norm. For example, curbside intercity bus operation has been mostly suspended, but could return soon. However, the undesirability of bus passengers queueing unorganized on the sidewalk during the need for social distancing, as well as the current low usage of the Port Authority Bus Terminal (a facility whose overcapacity was the reason intercity buses must pick up curbside in the first place), should cause us to question returning each industry and mode of transportation to business as usual. The City should

examine restarting these services not on the sidewalks, but in the Terminal, and each resumption of service should be assessed not in a silo, but as part of our connected multi-modal network.

Lost among this should not be the environmental factors, including not just access to space, but externalities including pollution, noise levels, and access by all demographics to basic resources like sunlight and air. Once again, constant data and assessment will be necessary to maintain quality of life.

This is an unprecedented crisis and will require our city to respond both faster and with greater effect than ever before. Long-term plans like congestion pricing and emergency needs like outdoor dining will interact with each other unpredictably. Adaptability and the willingness to refine iteratively will define our success. We must remain thoughtful and nimble and, if we do, we are confident that New York City will, as always, come out of this emergency not as it was before or worse off, but as an evolved and better city.

Sincerely,



Vikki Barbero
Chair



E.J. Kalafarski
Acting Chair, Transportation/Environment Committee

Cc:

Hon. Corey Johnson, Speaker of the City Council
Hon. Keith Powers, New York City Council
Hon. Carlina Rivera, New York City Council
Hon. Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Dermot Shea, Commissioner, NYPD
Polly Trottenberg, Commissioner, NYC DOT
Sarah Feinberg, Interim President, MTA-NYC