



September 24, 2020

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

RE: Removal of Streets from DOT’s “Open Streets” Program

Dear Mayor de Blasio,

We are writing to convey our disappointment that your Open Streets Program – which has provided indispensable outlets for exercise, recreation, and safe outdoor dining during the pandemic – is already being scaled back without warning in some areas and is scheduled to be closed down entirely by the end of October. It makes no sense to forfeit these vital public spaces, especially as the pandemic and the need for social distancing continues. Open Streets and Open Streets: Restaurants should continue not just for the duration of the pandemic, but permanently, in consultation with neighborhood stakeholders across the five boroughs. Beyond facilitating social distancing, Open Streets have served as a case study in how we can add vibrancy to our neighborhoods and transform our streetscapes from thoroughways for cars into lively civic spaces. Indeed, we urge your administration to instead double down on the program by opening up larger swaths of City streets, reopening streets that have been returned to automobile use, and allowing for more kinds of small business, including retail, to participate in the program.

Open Streets have been a lifeline to New Yorkers and our small business community. Following our City’s lockdown, New Yorkers turned to Open Streets as safe spaces to run, walk, bike, play, and dine outdoors. According to your Administration, Open Streets: Restaurants has succeeded in saving 90,000 jobs and allowed more than 10,000 restaurants to open and provide a semblance of normal life.

However, despite the clear success of the program, it seems that DOT has begun to systematically return streets to automobile usage. Removing segments of Open Streets — such as Margaret Corbin Drive in Fort Tryon Park, 50th Avenue in Sunnyside, and the miles of others like them which have been either explicitly pulled from the program or are not functional due to improper and inconsistent set up — leaves neighborhoods stranded. In some cases, these reversions of street space have been undertaken without warning to the community, leaving families unprepared for the sudden influx of dangerous automobile traffic in places previously

limited to bikers and pedestrians. These actions send the wrong message to communities and deprive New Yorkers of the accessible outdoor space that they crave now more than ever.

Further, your plans to close the Open Streets: Restaurants program at the end of October will needlessly imperil struggling restaurants and deprive New Yorkers of safe outdoor dining experiences. New York has already lost more than 2,800 small businesses to the pandemic and could risk losing tens of thousands more. With foot traffic in New York City still down by a third,¹ it is crucial that our City think creatively about how to support our small businesses-- 62% of which are immigrant-owned and 73 percent of Small Business employees being Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). That conversation should include how to make outdoor dining safe during the winter months, with clear guidance issued around heat lamps and other ways to extend the program indefinitely for restaurants.

More broadly, the benefits of Open Streets should be extended to other small retail and personal services businesses -- including clothing stores, bodegas, and nail salons -- by allowing them to provide some products and services along the sidewalk, the adjacent curb lane, or in the "open street." There are simply no good reasons why small businesses across the five boroughs could not be afforded the same benefits as our restaurants when it comes to leveraging outdoor space in a way that is safe and effective for customers and business owners alike.

Now is not the time to retreat from the necessary goal of equitably providing every neighborhood with outdoor space. Instead, we should be seizing every opportunity to radically reimagine our streetscape for the benefit of all communities. Existing Open Streets have served as places where small businesses and restaurants could drastically rethink their offerings outdoors, children could freely and safely play, bicycle riders could comfortably travel, and people could finally come together after months apart. They have offered opportunities for new volunteer groups, like the Loisaida Open Streets Community Coalition and the North Brooklyn Open Streets Community Coalition, to form with the sole mission of providing neighbors with open space. We are heartened that so many restaurants and civic groups have taken up responsibility for Open Streets, but believe they deserve the full support of the City. Open Streets should not be considered a temporary response to the ongoing pandemic but should be embraced as permanent re-designs for New Yorkers to enjoy.

Sincerely,



Scott M. Stringer
New York City Comptroller



Jessica Ramos
State Senator

¹ <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/ba953db7d541423a8e67ae1cf52bc698>