

# How to Improve Central Park Using Data, Design & Collaboration.



## Introduction

After the cars were removed from Central Park's loop road, one would have assumed that the park would abandon its motorized past and become the welcoming place for all recreational users that its designers intended. But in too many ways, auto-centrism still rules in the park, making it inhospitable and unsafe for cyclists, runners, walkers and other park users.

Over the past 30 years, Central Park's six-mile loop road has evolved into one of the most popular recreational spaces in the city. As the presence of car traffic gradually declined, the loop's popularity only increased among runners, cyclists, rollerbladers, walkers and other recreational users and tourists. With regular car traffic banned entirely in June 2018, recreational and active transportation use rose even more as throngs visited and used the park to enjoy the refuge from the urban din that Central Park had promised from its inception.

But popularity has brought conflicts among different user groups. Runners and walkers use a bi-directional lane that is adjacent to a cycling lane shared by cyclists of all skill levels, from tourists on rented bikes to competitive racers in training.

Current configuration on the majority of the loop.



Current configuration with road users.



Columbus Circle exit/entrance to the loop. During crowded times, it can be challenging for walkers to cross the loop road to reach other parts of the park.



A major contributor to the current conflicts is that those who operate Central Park have held fast to infrastructure that is a vestige of an era when regular car traffic dominated the loop road. Fully 47 traffic signals control recreational “traffic” on the loop – an average of one every 674 feet! In general, these signals cause more conflict than they prevent by creating unreasonable expectations for both cyclists and those crossing on foot. In addition, fully one-third of the loop road is still devoted to motor vehicles even though regular car traffic has been banned for two years. Cyclists pedal right next to runners and walkers, leading to occasional collisions. In 2014, Irv Schachter was struck and killed by a cyclist who suddenly swerved into the runners lane.

The loop road is not the only place where Central Park's car-centric bias makes the park less safe. Many city bicyclists need to cross Central Park to access the Upper East and Upper West Sides. But the current configuration is very car-friendly, with four vehicle-dominated transverses running under the park, and very cyclist-unfriendly. There is only one complete shared (pedestrians and cyclists) crossing within the park, at 72nd Street. Cyclists are also allowed to share a cross-park path at 97th Street, but the path is difficult to find, is in poor condition, and fails to connect to the East and West Sides. As a result, most cyclists who need to cross the park either illegally use walking paths or, worse, take their chances on the dangerous transverses.

96th Street transverse.  
Current condition of  
roadway and sidewalk.



In December 2019, a beloved pediatrician and father was killed using the 96th Street transverse to go to his work at Mt. Sinai Hospital. Had he known about the 97th Street park path or had that park path been a smoother, straighter connection to his work on the East Side, perhaps he would have taken it and would still be alive today.

Despite being a mecca for visitors and recreational road users, Central Park is quite safe. [This spreadsheet](#) from [City data](#) shows that crashes between cyclists and people on foot are extremely rare. But, even one crash in the park leads visitors to fear that their recreational space isn't as welcoming as it should be. We want all park users to feel (and be) safe.



## Central Park Advocates:

**We are Central Park Advocates, a group of people who all love the park.**

We are walkers, bikers, runners, parents, dog lovers, and bird watchers. We believe that changes must be made on the loop road and within the park to achieve a safer park where everyone's recreational and transportation needs are met.

The following are some of our ideas. Some of these ideas have been proposed before, whether at community board meetings or in letters to the Central Park Conservancy and the Parks Department; some are brand new. Some are based on tried-and-true traffic safety techniques used the world over; some are unique to the needs of Central Park's users. Regardless, these ideas are intended to be a starting point. As with many successful ventures, the powers-that-be should study the current conditions, implement changes and then study the effect of those changes. This should be an iterative process that eventually settles on the best design solutions. As a group dedicated to Central Park, we are available to help with data collection, outreach, education and idea generation.

**One thing we know for certain: the current design doesn't work for pedestrians, and it doesn't work for the users of the proliferating forms of wheeled vehicles -- the bicyclists, skateboarders, scooters, rollerbladers.**

Rather than pit these user groups against one another, design solutions could create an enhanced and safer user experience for all. We believe that design, not enforcement, will make the park safer and foster a culture of respect around this beloved shared space. Before jumping into our ideas, there are some basic questions and data that would help decision-makers and provide a more transparent process for advocates and other park users.

## Needed Data to Provide Context:

**Collect data on the most heavily trafficked pedestrian crossings in the park.** How many people? How are they using the park? Are they walking with young children? Are they pushing strollers? Are they mobility challenged in any way? How fast is their average walking speed? How much time do they need to cross the loop road?

**Collect data on the most dangerous areas of the loop road.** What makes these areas unique? How are they used by park visitors? Are there nearby attractions? Are there alternative ways to cross the loop road that visitors might not know about?

**Understand the technology of the traffic lights in Central Park.** Can they be individually turned to blinking yellow lights? Was there data behind the decision to make some of them pedestrian push-buttoned? Can they be timed differently? Are they all going to be pedestrian push-buttoned eventually? Are all 47 lights really necessary?

An unnecessary traffic light on the West Side in the 100's.



## Keeping Pedestrians Safe in the Park:

The following are ideas to increase pedestrian safety as they use the loop road and cross the loop:

**Create physical barriers (fences) at the busiest and most dangerous intersections of the park.** This prevents bicyclists from passing another cyclist on the left and swerving into the pedestrian space. It also slows bicyclists down as it creates a pinch point.

The Delacorte Theatre intersection on the west loop in the 80's. Notoriously difficult intersection to navigate for pedestrians and bikers alike.



**Understand the data on pedestrian flow and the busiest intersections and consider pedestrian bridges at these locations.** Use signage, volunteers and Parks personnel to direct pedestrians away from the most dangerous intersections and to use nearby bridges and tunnels where possible (such as at The Delacorte Theatre). This could be part of a larger campaign to create more **historic archways and bridges** in the park.

The Winterdale Arch at 81st Street on the West Side could help pedestrians safely navigate around the Delacorte Theatre intersection. Park signs could encourage people to use this beautiful, scenic route.



**Use treatments in the roadbed to alert bicyclists of upcoming heavily-trafficked intersections.** These could include bright paint, pavement markers, LED lights and signage.

**Create ADA-compliant and stroller-friendly pedestrian islands at the busiest intersections to shorten pedestrian crossings.**

## Keeping Bicyclists Safe in the Park:

**Central Park is a bicycling mecca in the city and should be a welcoming place for cyclists of all abilities.** Yet, for years, cyclists haven't felt completely welcomed or wanted in the park. Over the years, **NYPD has used sting enforcement** of red-light running to target bicyclists, with no regard to whether or not there was a failure to yield violation. Cyclists crossing the park on park paths receive tickets, even those riding slowly and responsibly. Bike groups have tried to work with Central Park officials and previously engaged with them at Recreational Roundtable meetings.

Dismount signs line park paths. The message to bicyclists and others on wheels: You are not wanted in this park.



**Signage in the park and surrounding the park fails to provide clear instructions on how to access various points in or through the park.** Nor is the signage welcoming or sometimes even visible. In January 2020, Community Board 7, which abuts the park's western edge, **passed a resolution** asking for a task force to study and recommend safe, direct cross-park paths for bicyclists.



## Ideas to Increase Bicyclist Safety and Access in the Park:

**Create shared cross-park paths, such as were recommended in 2010 by the CPC and Parks Department, at 85th Street (on the path just south of the 86th Street transverse), 66th Street, and 102nd Street.** Use bright paint to indicate that this is a shared path. If this isn't feasible, create dedicated bike-only paths across the park. Erect signage that is welcoming and clear.

**Create a bi-directional bike path along the southern end of the Bridle Path,** connecting to West 86th Street on the west side and the East 85th Street exit/entrance to the park on the east side. This path would displace some of the NYPD and Parks parking along this stretch of the path.

**Create wayfinding signs for cyclists** both outside the park (welcoming them in) and inside the park (helping them navigate to various points within and outside the park).

**Allow cyclists to share the path/not dismount at Columbus Circle.** This would encourage commuting cyclists to connect to the Broadway bike lane and other citywide cycling infrastructure. Paint and pavement markings would encourage cyclists to proceed slowly and respectfully. Flexible bollards could also help delineate space for walkers and bikers.

**Columbus Circle**  
-- bicyclists and walkers can coexist peacefully. Parks could insert bollards or use pavement paint to delineate the space.



**Alternatively, create a separate bike-only path to connect Central Park cyclists to the city bike network.**

**Improve the condition of the current shared path at 97th Street**, including better signage, repaving, painting the path, and allowing cyclists to access (not dismount) 5th Ave and Central Park West.

Shared Path at 97th and West Loop. The green sign on the left is too small to see and provides inadequate visual information.



Shared Path at 97th Street; Current pavement condition.



**Work on bike education campaigns with Bike NY, Open Plans, Transportation Alternatives and other advocates** to teach basic bike riding, skills for riding in city parks and education around fostering a culture of safety and respect.

**Work with CitiBike and bike rental companies** to ensure that their riders know the rules and culture of sharing the space on the loop and pathways of the park.

**Get NYPD out of traffic enforcement in Central Park.** PEP officers should be responsible for enforcing the park rules. NYPD cars should not be idling on the loop road or the roads leading into the loop.

## Keep All Park Users Safe:

**Consider eliminating some or all of the 47 traffic lights.** In many cases, crosswalks such as the one at West 85th and the loop road (without a traffic light but with clear signage and a space for pedestrians to stand) allows cyclists and people on foot the opportunity to use eye contact and body language to navigate the crossing. At many intersections, this could improve safety and the experience for all park users.

Pedestrian crosswalk at West 85th and Loop Road; No traffic light.



**Use full-lane paint to color the pavement to differentiate road users and indicate the proper lane for each type of activity.** The innermost lane would be painted one color and dedicated to people on foot. The middle lane would be painted another color and dedicated to slower wheeled vehicles. The outer lane would be painted yet another color and would be dedicated to faster wheeled vehicles, including faster cyclists, emergency vehicles and Parks Department vehicles.

**Transition Parks, CPC, PEP, and NYPD electric vehicles and encourage the use of cargo bikes and bikes for PEP.**

**Require any motor vehicle entering Central Park to travel at or below the speed of nearby bicyclists and discourage honking.**

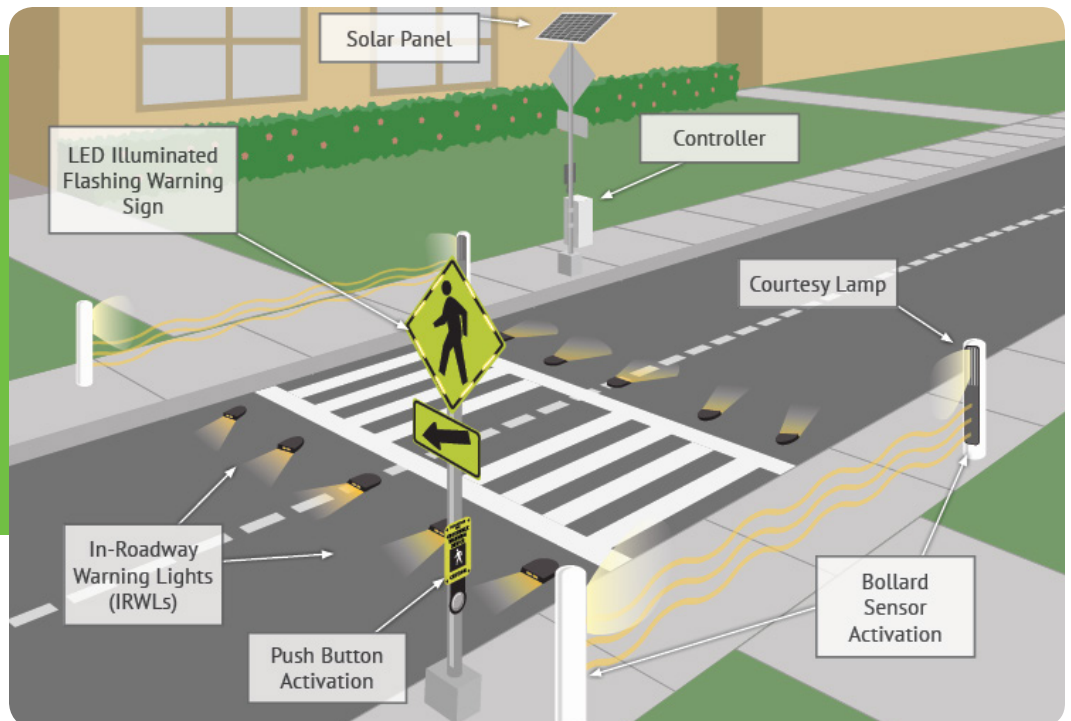
**Install retractable bollards at all entrances to Central Park to prevent unauthorized vehicles from purposely (or not) entering the park.** Consider the 4-6 entrances of the park that require entry by vehicles and target these for retractable bollards. Permanently close the other entrances.

Entrance/Exit at 100th and Central Park West.



**Install LED-embedded, permeable pavers at pedestrian crossings,** which would create more visible lights for pedestrian safety and environmental benefits as the permeable pavers reduce run-off.

This LightGuard System provides an embedded/illuminated warning system, which could be used at any difficult intersection or blind intersection. LaneLight is a company that also has lighting systems that include permeable pavement.



**Eliminate parking perks within Central Park’s boundaries.** No space within Central Park should be used for parking private vehicles. Reduce the number of official Parks vehicles and NYPD vehicles. If vehicles aren’t part of routine work, they should be parked somewhere else or eliminated altogether.

**Where applicable, encourage those on foot to use bridges (Arches) and tunnels to cross the loop road,** such as near the Delacorte Theatre on the West Loop and 81st Street. This can be accomplished with clear signage and maps.

**Instead of the beeps and the jackhammer sound at crosswalks, use more pleasant music or park-like (bird) sounds.**

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## Conclusion:

We are hopeful that with some ingenuity, creativity and willingness to experiment, we can improve Central Park and make it as welcoming and safe as possible. We have a treasure in the middle of Manhattan, but as the Park has increased in popularity, the potential for conflict has also increased. We honor the fact that Central Park is an urban oasis but also recognize that Central Park is unnecessarily difficult for bicyclists to cross and, at times, for pedestrians to access. By working together, advocates, city officials and the Central Park Conservancy can continue to improve both the physical infrastructure and design of the park and the experience of navigating within and through the park.

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