An Office of Public Space Management is needed to equitably manage NYC's Public Space

Good afternoon, my name is Jackson Chabot, and I am the Director of Public Space Advocacy at Open Plans, an over 20-year-old non-profit dedicated to safe and livable streets. Thank you for this opportunity to speak. I would like to voice Open Plans' full support for Int. 258. 291, and 293 and speak on “Managing the City’s Public Space.”

Streets and sidewalks are much more than just places for drivers to drive and park; they are public spaces where life happens - where neighbors meet, children play, commerce occurs and people pass the time. By creating a new Office of Public Space Management, the City can oversee the equitable day-to-day operations of our streets, prioritizing care and activation.

However, right now, 27% of New York City is streets and 75% of that space is allocated towards the movement and storage of vehicles when most New Yorkers don’t own or use a vehicle. This distribution and use of space is not equitable, nor proportional. Far too much of our city is asthma-inducing, traffic-jammed, and dangerous to walk and bike. Most concerning is our epidemic-level rates of traffic violence. People are dying as a consequence of our continued car-dominant culture. We know public space with no vehicles is the safest space in the city; an Office of Public Space Management to manage car-free space would enable the city to scale and create a network of Open Streets and Plazas.

In 2020, the city went into lockdown and launched the Open Streets and Open Restaurants programs. Many people suddenly appreciated, some for the first time, the vast potential swaths of the public space that are right before our eyes and in front of our homes.

In some areas, volunteers created systems to make their Open Street a colossal success -- some with 100’s of volunteers and a robust schedule of community activities. But this model relies on extensive volunteer labor and organizing - communities are responsible to manage barricades, program activities, develop relationships with businesses, and clean the street.

We are encouraged by the DOT’s Public Space Unit's unwavering commitment to iterating and expanding the program as shown by their collaboration this year with Street Lab and the recently released Public Space Programming Catalog. Equally, community partners are exhausted, burnt out, and carrying the lion’s share of the responsibility to plan and execute events, manage Open Streets and Plazas, and keep people safe from traffic violence while doing so.

We need a framework that supports and empowers volunteers while fundamentally equitably providing the care, maintenance, and management of our streets and sidewalks. As I wrote in a Gotham Gazette Op-Ed yesterday, “Every Open Street, block party, or neighborhood safety initiative is the product of intense volunteer effort, organization, and coordination. Too often, city agencies and departments are working in isolation instead of focusing on collaborative problem-solving.”

We need an office of Public Space Management. Thank you.