



NEW YORK CITY COMPTROLLER  
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# Streets for People: Open Streets and the Future of Public Space Management in NYC

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# Executive Summary

Something thrilling happens when streets that are usually full of cars are occupied by pedestrians instead—for a summer block party, a street fair, weekend evening dining, a public plaza, or a permanent open street. These car-free streets improve street safety, support thriving neighborhoods, bolster the economic vitality of small businesses, and improve air quality.<sup>1</sup> New York City’s 6,300 miles of streets offer immense potential to unleash these benefits to confront New York City’s intersecting challenges of inadequate open space, poor air quality, and traffic violence.

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the City created an emergency Open Streets program to open more streets to people across the five boroughs, providing a lifeline for New Yorkers looking to safely socialize, exercise, and get outside during the height of the pandemic. Open streets near schools gave students safe places to play and learn outdoors. While successful open streets sites remain in place, the scale of the Open Streets program has shrunk significantly due to underfunding and poor management by the Adams administration. With further cuts to the Open Streets program looming, New York City risks losing an innovative initiative that has helped to revitalize neighborhoods, bolster countless businesses, and strengthen communities.

This report assesses how the Open Streets program has evolved over the last five years. The analysis traces the shift in the size, scale, and geographic distribution of open streets over time and documents the various challenges that operators face in effectively managing and programming open streets. A case study of the Neighborhood Plazas Program, a precursor of the Open Streets program, offers a model for equitable public space management. Informed by an analysis of publicly available data about the locations and operational details of open streets, along with over 30 interviews with Open Streets operators and public realm experts and a review of global best practices for public space pedestrianization, the report proposes strategic recommendations to strengthen the program into a thriving fixture of New York City’s urban landscape.

## Key Findings

- The New York City Department of Transportation’s (DOT’s) purview of public space management increased rapidly and dramatically at the outset of COVID-19: prior to the pandemic, DOT managed just 84 pedestrian plazas; over the course of just a couple of months in 2020, DOT added 129 new open streets with complex operational needs.
- At its peak in 2021, there were 326 open streets throughout New York City. Just two years later, the number of open streets had dropped by 40% to 202 sites.
- The City’s Public Space Equity Program reversed the decline of open streets modestly in 2024, growing the program to a total of 232 sites. However, these sites remain unevenly distributed across the city: there are more open streets in Manhattan alone than in the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island combined.

- The Open Streets program enjoys widespread support among neighbors and community stakeholders but community engagement is left solely to Open Streets operators with very little support from the City. The City's failure to provide partner organizations with the resources and support needed to navigate and address community concerns meant that even minor opposition led to sites shutting down.
- The Open Streets program does not adequately invest in early-stage capacity building to identify potential program partners and help them to apply to create new open streets, hampering expansion and broader acceptance of the program.
- The Open Streets program does not have a dedicated budget or funding source. The City has instead funded and executed the program through a patchwork of ad hoc procurement mechanisms, making it vulnerable to budget cuts and scope reductions.
- The Open Streets program provides insufficient support to even the most well-resourced partners, resulting in burnout and unsustainable operations. Inconsistent and declining amounts of City funding from year to year create instability for partners, some of whom have opted to leave the program altogether.
- The process for securing permits from the NYC Street Activity Permit Office (SAPO) is expensive, slow, opaque, and inflexible, posing a major bureaucratic barrier for partners seeking to activate their open street with programming. Partners must also cover the cost of up to \$1 million in liability insurance to indemnify the City when hosting events.
- The process of reimbursing open streets operators is extremely slow and difficult to navigate. Operators reported waiting two years after submitting invoices to get reimbursed, making it difficult to financially sustain their operations. Other operators struggled with the paperwork required to access funding and only received partial reimbursement for Open Streets-related purchases.

## Summary of Recommendations

The following recommendations are rooted in global best practices and the City's pre-pandemic Plaza Program which demonstrate that successful public space management programs require resources for early-stage capacity; financial and political support from City leaders; regular data collection and impact evaluations to build support for the program; transparent processes for community engagement; and the design and implementation of high-quality infrastructure upgrades.

**The City should expand and reform the Open Streets program to reach every New York City neighborhood, increase program flexibility, and establish permanent street redesign opportunities:**

1. Set a goal to create at least one open street in every neighborhood, with the aim of increasing the number of open streets citywide and giving every New Yorker access to one.

2. Establish a clear, transparent process for community engagement with robust City support that is proportionate to the size, duration, and purpose of different kinds of open streets. The public engagement process should better support Open Streets operators in addressing community concerns and improve design and implementation.
3. Partner with community organizations and neighborhood groups to dramatically scale up block parties and other temporary events that cultivate broader support for open streets, with a particular focus on open space deserts.
4. Provide technical support for the envisioning, planning, and designing of capital projects to permanently pedestrianize streets and plazas.

**DOT should offer partner organizations robust financial support and technical assistance to create, operate, and program open streets:**

5. Increase citywide funding and support for Open Street operators through new requests for proposals (RFPs) to secure and expand technical, operating, and programmatic assistance. These RFPs would expand the services provided to open streets partners through formal contracts to include:
  - a. Recruitment and capacity-building for new and potential Open Streets partners in high-need communities;
  - b. Support for maintenance, community engagement, and programming activities;
  - c. Designing and envisioning long-term infrastructure improvements for individual sites; and
  - d. Annual advance payments to ensure service providers can afford costs upfront.
6. Make it easier for Open Streets partners to access funding by connecting partners to fiscal sponsors and compiling and distributing a list of supplemental financial resources available to partner organizations, including philanthropic grants and discretionary funding from City Council Members.
7. Baseline operational funds for Open Streets to ensure the continued longevity of the program.

**The City should cut red tape to strengthen management of the Open Streets program and make it easier for partners to do their work**

8. Reform the burdensome reimbursement process to ensure Open Streets partners can more easily receive public funds by:
  - a. Launching a portal that allows Open Street partners and City agencies to track the status of reimbursements and provides a direct communication channel for updates and inquiries.

- b. Providing clear guidance on the requirements for successful reimbursement and guidelines for obtaining proof of purchases.
  - c. Allowing for partial payments of invoices, disbursing funds for the items that comply with the City's proof of payment requirements.
  - d. Establishing deadlines for paying Open Street partners and contractors on time.
- 9. Reform the onerous SAPO permitting process:
  - a. Launch a portal that allows Open Street partners and City agencies to track the status of permits and provides a direct communication channel for updates and inquiries.
  - b. Establish a clear timeframe for permit application review.
  - c. Tailor the application process to match the scale of the proposed event, offering a variety of templates and forms that differentiate between event size.
- 10. Develop an Open Streets Handbook that outlines best practices for managing, programming, and maintaining Open Streets.
- 11. Empower the Chief Public Realm Officer to oversee interagency coordination to better support the Open Streets program.
- 12. Conduct regular evaluations and publicly track data on open streets usage and economic impacts, as well as progress toward expanding and pedestrianizing open streets.

# Open Streets Program Overview

## Program Benefits

While Open Streets initially began as an initiative designed to meet specific outdoor social distancing needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, the permanent Open Streets program has demonstrated a host of benefits that can support diverse neighborhood needs, as illustrated by interviews conducted with Open Streets partners. A partner located along a commercial corridor may see open streets as a tool to boost foot traffic and support local businesses. In such cases, active programming—frequent, consistent, and high-quality events—can significantly enhance the value of the open street. Conversely, a partner managing a residential street already bustling with activity found that simply keeping the street free of cars is the most impactful intervention and did not need formal programming to activate the space. In this instance, a more passive, scaled-back approach better aligns with the community's needs. The many benefits of open streets provide community-based organizations with flexibility to program and activate the spaces based on the unique needs of their communities.

- **Improving Traffic Safety:** Open streets have been found to significantly reduce crashes and injuries. A 2021 study by Transportation Alternatives found that cyclist injuries declined 17% on open streets, even as they increased citywide.<sup>1</sup> After the City redesigned Broadway between 42<sup>nd</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> Streets to be fully pedestrianized and closed to cars in 2009, pedestrian injuries decreased 40% and car crashes went down by 15%.<sup>2</sup> A Streetsblog analysis of 34th Avenue after two seasons of open streets found crashes dropped by 77% and injuries by 89%—even outside the open street hours.<sup>3</sup> Other partners' experiences support these findings, with reports of reductions in speeding when barriers were in place, a decrease in crashes caused by trucks speeding off the highway onto a school street, and smoother traffic flows. A Brooklyn resident quoted in a DOT report shared that the wide, car-free open streets introduced during the pandemic gave him the confidence to start biking.<sup>4</sup> In Manhattan, a neighborhood group tracked street usage on their open street and compared current patterns with snapshot data from a pre-pandemic weekend.
- **Boosting Local Economies:** Open streets generate foot traffic, increasing business visibility, patronage, and opportunities for growth. Numerous partners and studies credit open streets for helping small businesses to survive at the height of the pandemic, including a DOT report which found that restaurant and bar sales on open streets were 19% higher than pre-pandemic levels, while nearby areas saw a 29% decrease in sales.<sup>5</sup> Today, open streets are still proven to deliver economic benefits. According to a report by Prospect Heights Neighborhood Development Council (PHNDC) and DOT, restaurants on the Vanderbilt Avenue Open Street reported an average increase of 54% in customers served, a 45% increase in revenue, and a 45% increase in staff in 2020.<sup>6</sup> During the 2022 holiday season, the pedestrianization of Fifth Avenue in Times Square boosted sales along the open street to \$3 million, a 6.6 percent increase according to a Mastercard study



within a DOT report.<sup>7</sup> A 2024 Department of City Planning study found storefront vacancy rates on open streets to be notably lower than citywide vacancy rates.<sup>8</sup>

- **Establishing School Streets:** City crash data reveals that there are 57% more crashes and 25% more injuries on streets near schools on days when school is in session.<sup>9</sup> Over 70% of traffic injuries among youth occur within 250 feet of a school.<sup>10</sup> The Open Streets program helps mitigate this problem by allowing any educational establishment in New York City to limit vehicle traffic on the street in front of or near a school building. “School streets” provide students with new outdoor learning and play spaces and enable safer access to schools during pick-up and drop-off times. In 2024, there were 105 school streets at public, charter, and private schools throughout the city. Schools that established open streets reported that children had fewer accidents and conflicts, accessed more forms of play, and felt a greater sense of neighborhood belonging. In Brooklyn, a public school hosts a bike education program on its open street, which they reported resulted in the percentage of second graders who can ride a bike jumping from 35% to over 90%.
- **Expanding Play Opportunities:** Multiple partners report their open street filled a critical gap in a neighborhood lacking adequate recreational space, becoming a dedicated and safe venue for play. A small BID described their open street as a “natural playdate,” making it easier for parents to congregate, bridging language barriers and diverse cultural norms in their neighborhood. In a Staten Island Hasidic community where the nearest park is beyond walking distance, children had no outdoor play space besides their busy street, creating a chaotic and dangerous environment especially during the Sabbath. The creation of an open street—the introduction of traffic barricades in this case—transformed safety conditions for organic street activation.
- **Enhancing Public Safety:** Several Open Streets operators shared that street activation and beautification enhance perceptions of community safety. One Bronx nonprofit documented this transformation by tracking usage of an alley that was once dominated by public drinking, drug use, violent conflict, public urination, and illegal dumping into a vibrant space. To improve public safety, the nonprofit activated their open street, designed programming, and collaborated with partners to address local needs. The nonprofit provided on-the-street staff with cohesive, branded t-shirts to increase team visibility and signal legitimacy, and developed a safety protocol staff could follow to de-escalate conflict. Over time, the nonprofit observed a dramatic shift in street usage, as the open street transformed a once-dangerous alley into a safe and welcoming public space. Another restorative justice nonprofit in Brooklyn highlighted their open street initiative as part of the solution to gun violence, emphasizing how these spaces allow neighbors to look out for one another and engage in healthy community interactions.
- **Increasing Access to Services:** Open streets have offered opportunities for nonprofits and City agencies to deliver public services including childcare services, nutrition education, farmer’s markets, clothing distributions, and workshops to assist people with school enrollment, housing, and language learning. As free spaces for all members of the public,

open streets have expanded opportunities for service providers to reach and engage communities.

- **Building Support and Momentum for Permanent Street Safety Improvements:** The visible, tangible benefits of open streets have inspired street safety advocacy, laying the groundwork for additional street redesigns. On Berry Street, for instance, local enthusiasm around the open street led to the transformation of Banker’s Anchor into a protected plaza and the creation of a formal two-way bike lane. Spurred by open street success, permanent redesigns are also underway along 34<sup>th</sup> Avenue’s “Paseo Park,” which is slated for a \$89 million capital construction project, and on 31st Avenue, where DOT has proposed a protected bike lane, additional pedestrian space, and traffic diversions. On Vanderbilt Avenue, the Prospect Heights Neighborhood Development Council has galvanized local advocates to push for long-term, sustainable street improvements.
- **Strengthening Community Relationships:** Nearly all Open Streets operators interviewed list the cultivation of community as one of the top benefits of their open street. As the chair of a Brooklyn nonprofit and Open Street partner organization noted, while the program’s economic success may be most quantifiable, the impact of open streets on community identity that has been transformative.<sup>11</sup> Open Streets partners report that the collaborative management of public space paired with the introduction of a safe, vibrant social hub fosters deeper bonds among business owners, schools, families, nonprofits, and residents. In Queens, a public school principal explained how daily pick-up and drop-off interactions on the open street turned into moments of connection that built trust and long-term relationships with families. One Brooklyn nonprofit recounted how initial resistance to their open street became an opportunity: through door-to-door outreach and open group discussions, they built trust and re-engaged long-time residents, who had once felt disconnected and disillusioned. By the program’s end, an abandoned church had been reimaged as a weekly gathering space, resulting in the revival of the neighborhood’s block association. By creating a venue for gathering and organizing, open streets galvanize community engagement, spark civic energy, and build neighborhood pride and ownership.

## The Origin of Open Streets

At the urging of advocates and the New York City Council at the outset of the pandemic, the City quickly transformed underutilized street space into dedicated pedestrianized open streets. In May 2020, DOT granted permission to establish open streets where partner organizations demonstrated their ability to operate, maintain, and program these spaces. Through its new Open Streets program, the City invited Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), community-based organizations, local businesses, and other private entities to apply to manage open streets in their neighborhoods. Once in the program, partners were eligible for City funding and other forms of support, including potential permanent infrastructure upgrades.

To get the program up and running quickly, DOT leveraged its existing contract with the Horticultural Society of New York (also known as the Hort), a nonprofit which already provided

plaza partners with horticultural and maintenance support, to assist Open Streets operators with a wide range of operational and administrative tasks, like setting up and removing barricades each day and navigating bureaucratic City permitting processes to host community events and programs. The Horticultural Society received funding from the City Cleanup Corps to hire 100 new employees and extend its plaza maintenance services to the new and rapidly growing open streets network.<sup>12</sup>

Open streets provided a quick way to create new pedestrianized public spaces in neighborhoods across New York City. No street design changes were needed for implementation. Instead, operators could create car-free street segments by using moveable barriers. However, the labor required to set up barriers and maintain open streets proved to be complex. The City quickly found that well-funded Open Streets operators, primarily BIDs and local development corporations located in Manhattan and Downtown Brooklyn commercial corridors, were better equipped to maintain open streets. Smaller Open Streets operators that relied heavily on volunteer labor faced more challenges in carrying out the day-to-day tasks of open streets maintenance.

In 2021, a report by Transportation Alternative found that white, high-income neighborhoods lived near the highest rated open streets, which were significantly more likely to be fully car-free.<sup>13</sup> To address this disparity, the City Council required DOT to ensure the equitable distribution of open streets in its legislation making the City's Open Streets program permanent.<sup>14</sup> In 2023, DOT established the Public Space Equity Program (PSEP) to fulfill that mandate. The PSEP was designed to replace and expand the City's existing Plaza Program, which provided support for high-need plazas. The PSEP now provides services to 100 public space managers across the five boroughs.

In 2024, DOT allocated \$30 million to fund the PSEP partners in high-need areas with maintenance and programming support for their open streets – a key element in expanding the program to reach more communities in the city.<sup>15</sup> DOT awarded the Horticultural Society with a new three-year \$27 million contract to expand its plaza support to open streets by delivering maintenance, horticulture, and technical assistance support (including administrative support, community outreach, event programming, and fundraising). DOT awarded the remaining \$3 million to Klen Space to provide sanitation services. DOT supplemented the initial \$30 million allocation with a \$500,000 subcontract to Street Lab to cultivate new open streets partners; build their capacities as public space managers with technical, programming, and operational support; and provide assistance to groups working to implement permanent street redesigns on their open streets. Despite the expansion of support through the PSEP, on-the-ground public space management needs still exceed the resources that the City has allocated, even for existing streets. According to open streets partners and advocates, expanding the program requires strategic investments in the early-stage work of recruiting, cultivating, and supporting new open streets partners.

# NYC Plaza Program: A Case Study of Public Space Management

The NYC Plaza Program model formed the basis of today's Open Streets program. Now, both plaza and open street management fall under the umbrella of DOT's Public Realm unit. Notably, the original Plaza Program enabled organizations and neighborhood groups based in high-need communities to create and manage their own open spaces. The history of the NYC Plaza Program provides an instructive case study offers insights into how the City can better support and expand the Open Streets program.

## The Origins of the NYC Plaza Program

DOT first experimented with converting underutilized street space into pedestrian plazas through a 2007 Bloomberg-era pilot program that used tactical urbanism principles to swiftly transform street space into seven new plazas. To forgo the costly and lengthy capital reconstruction often associated with pedestrianization, DOT and its plaza partners used temporary materials like paint and posts to design and implement them. In addition to delivering immediate benefits to communities, the pilot allowed City officials and local partners to test design and programming concepts, creating a foundation for a more permanent program. In 2008, as part of Mayor Bloomberg's PlaNYC goal for every New Yorker to live within a ten-minute walk of open space, DOT established the NYC Plaza Program to allow private entities to propose new pedestrian plazas if applicants also committed to maintaining and programming the space.<sup>16</sup> At some of these sites, DOT implemented permanent capital upgrades.

The Plaza Program created an innovative bottom-up approach to the creation of new pedestrianized public spaces. Plaza sites were on average half an acre in size. The Plaza Program's initial partners were mostly BIDs and Local Development Corporations located in commercial areas, like Gansevoort Plaza in Manhattan and Pearl Street in Dumbo, that managed plazas with minimal support from the City.<sup>17</sup> In some instances, non-profit partners proposed their own plaza sites, while in other cases, DOT identified potential sites (often ones recently primed by plaza-friendly street redesigns) and tapped local non-profits to manage them.

The process of plaza implementation followed a three-stage process: a one-day plaza, an interim plaza, then finally a permanent plaza.<sup>18</sup> This progression from temporary activations to permanent plaza design allowed DOT to first use temporary materials, while holding public workshops to allow for participatory design and assuage community concerns, ultimately streamlining the design and construction process.

## Neighborhood Plaza Partnership

The program's reliance on private partners for ongoing management and maintenance proved challenging, particularly for partners with fewer resources in the outer boroughs. The Plaza Program model was not feasible for some nonprofit managers in high need areas, even with community support and investment. This dynamic resulted in inequities of plaza locations. To



address these inequities, the Horticultural Society launched the Neighborhood Plaza Partnership (NPP) in 2013 in collaboration with DOT.<sup>19</sup> With a mission of creating equitable green spaces, the Horticultural Society was a natural partner to improve equity outcomes of the Plaza Program. The Horticultural Society established the NPP using a private subsidy model with an annual project budget of about \$1.5 million, funded through philanthropic grants, City Council funding, and heavily subsidized fees from plaza partners.<sup>20</sup> The NPP was designed to provide partners in low-income neighborhoods with affordable, high-quality maintenance and horticulture care. The NPP helped to expand and sustain plazas in lower-income neighborhoods, create workforce development opportunities, and build the capacity and expertise of local partners in the following ways:

- The NPP created a partnership with ACE NYC to train and hire formerly homeless and justice-involved workers to maintain the space, while creating high-quality jobs and career pathways.
- To enable plaza partners to focus their limited resources on programming and community-building activities, the NPP provided a full suite of operations services:
  - Sanitation: trash removal, power washing, snow removal, and twice-daily sweeping seven days per week.
  - Horticulture: watering, weeding, pruning, and seasonal plantings four times per year.
  - Street infrastructure installation and maintenance: setting up and taking down plaza furniture, monitoring sites for theft and vandalism, assisting DOT in installing and maintaining temporary infrastructure, including street furniture, planters, and protective bollards.
- NPP provided custom capacity-building and technical assistance across a broad spectrum of plaza partner types, including all-volunteer organizations, small BIDS, social service providers, civic groups, and merchants' associations. This support involved engaging communities throughout the Plaza Program application process, assisting with navigating City bureaucracy, plaza design, and program planning; local fundraising; concessions revenue modeling; organizational development; and facilitating peer learning across the Plaza Partner network.
- The NPP also developed a "quality of life" handbook to connect groups to the right agency for any given problem and, for a period of time, maintained contacts at the Department of Sanitation (DSNY) and local New York City Police Department (NYPD) precincts.

The NPP's support made it possible for many smaller organizations in outer boroughs to sustain plaza management. In Kensington, the NPP provided significant capacity-building support to an informal group of enthusiastic neighbors in creating and managing Avenue C Plaza.<sup>21</sup> In the South Bronx, NPP provided Youth Ministries of Peace and Justice (YMPJ) with workforce training to manage Morrison Plaza. While YMPJ was experienced in organizing and advocacy, they lacked experience managing public space and approached the NPP for help. The Horticultural Society

spent a year training the group on plaza maintenance so that YMPJ could hire a maintenance crew of local residents. Also in the South Bronx, NPP worked with economic development organization SoBro in advance of their plaza opening to develop a data-informed design to increase revenue for adjacent small businesses. Specifically, the Horticultural Society helped to design pop-up concessions in vacant storefronts around the plaza to attract customers and estimate the amount of revenue that concessions could generate for the plaza. The NPP also managed a year-long free Wi-Fi demonstration in Corona Plaza to address the digital divide and increase Internet access in the community.<sup>22</sup> These examples illustrate the ways in which the Horticultural Society was able to work directly, collaboratively, and nimbly with plaza managers to identify and solve for specific neighborhood needs.

While DOT hoped that the NPP could support partners to the point where they were positioned to sign a maintenance contract directly with the City, the program did not have sufficient money or resources to enable most groups to be fully self-sustaining without ongoing NPP assistance. Despite these limitations, the NPP successfully demonstrated the value of investing in collaborative capacity-building models for new public space managers for the 21 plaza partners it served.

## OneNYC Plaza Equity Program

Building on the successes and lessons learned from the NPP, DOT offered City funding for public space management when it created the OneNYC Plaza Equity Program (OPEP) in 2015. DOT dedicated \$1.4 million for OPEP and issued a competitive request for proposals (RFP) for a vendor to support plazas with technical assistance and operations. DOT ultimately awarded the Horticultural Society \$1 million per year for a three-year contract to provide supportive services to 30 designated medium- and high-need plazas. Medium-need plazas received up to \$20,000, and high-need plazas up to \$80,000, for materials, services, and public programs based on a personalized support plan developed by DOT and plaza partners.<sup>23</sup>

The creation of the OPEP marked a shift in the relationship between the Horticultural Society and DOT, which transitioned from an informal arrangement to a formal contract backed by City funding. Under this procurement, the Horticultural Society was able to assist more partners. However, the program also positioned DOT as an intermediary between the Horticultural Society and plaza partners, with DOT making decisions about which partners to prioritize and the types of services that they should provide.

The Plaza Program has since been incorporated into the PSEP, which integrates both plaza and open street management under one program.

# Types of Open Streets

DOT defines three categories of open streets:

- **Limited Local Access:** Streets designated primarily for pedestrian and cyclist use that also allow car traffic at very low speeds.
- **Full Closure:** Streets that are temporarily closed to traffic to create public space that supports local businesses, community groups, and schools.
- **Full Closure - Schools:** Streets closed to traffic to support school drop-off and pick-up operations, recess, and outdoor learning on school days.

Any formal or informal group of individuals or businesses with ties to the community is eligible to manage or participate in the operations of an open street. Types of organizations that typically manage open streets are listed in the table below:

**Table 1: Types of Open Street Partners**

Partner Type	Description	Example
<b>Schools</b>	Public, private, and charter schools may join Open Streets to expand the space students have to play, to make gathering for moments like pick-ups and drop-offs easier for families, and to calm traffic.	PS 146 Brooklyn New School (Rapelye Street, Brooklyn)
<b>Informal Neighborhood Groups (without 501(c)3 status)</b>	Grassroots organizations created by local residents to address the needs and interests of their communities. Some of these organizations have been created specifically to manage open streets, while others, such as block associations and tenant associations, expanded their mission and scope to include the operation of open streets. These groups must identify and partner with fiscal sponsors (either nonprofits or business partners that have contracting capacity) to receive City funding.	West 103 <sup>rd</sup> Street Block Association (West 103 <sup>rd</sup> Street, Manhattan)
<b>Nonprofit Organizations</b>	Organizations with 501(c)(3) status that choose to manage an open street when the program aligns with their broader goals and values.	Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice (Harrod Place, Bronx)

Partner Type	Description	Example
<b>Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)</b>	BIDs are public-private partnerships between the City and local businesses comprised of local property owners that seek to advance economic development in commercial and mixed used neighborhoods. BIDs, which cover 4% of city streets, are primarily funded by a tax assessment on properties within BID boundaries. <sup>24</sup>	Downtown Jamaica Partnership (165 <sup>th</sup> Street, Queens)
<b>Merchants' Associations</b>	A group of local business owners that advocates for the interests, needs, and economic growth of businesses in a particular area. Merchants' Associations tend to manage an open street on a commercial corridor.	5 <sup>th</sup> Avenue Merchant's Association (5 <sup>th</sup> Avenue, Brooklyn)
<b>Individual Businesses</b>	For-profit entities in various industries that provide goods or services to customers. Typically, a business will participate in Open Streets to increase their visibility, cultivate local relationships, expand space for selling and dining, and contribute to the vibrancy of the neighborhood.	Jamrock Jerk (141 <sup>st</sup> Street, Queens)

## Expectations of Open Street Operators

To run successful open streets, partners must effectively navigate numerous DOT requirements including daily maintenance, operational responsibilities, and various other bureaucratic permits and processes for community programming while balancing community needs. Acceptance into the Open Streets program grants operators access to a DOT permit allowing limited or full closure of the street to cars. However, this permit does not guarantee funding or operational or maintenance services, nor does it include permits for hosting programs and events. Open Street partners are responsible for the following tasks:

- **Operations:** Operators are responsible for setting up and breaking down open street infrastructure, including traffic closure equipment (such as barricades, cones, signage) and street furniture (such as like moveable tables, chairs, and tents). Once the open street is set up, operators are also responsible for sanitation, beautification, and maintaining street safety, which can involve directing traffic, mediating conflicts, and responding to



questions. Multiple open streets managers rely on the Horticultural Society to perform operational tasks. While DOT offers partners traffic barriers and traffic cones and Street Lab (through its subcontract with DOT) provides some partners with street furniture for programming, operators are generally expected to independently source the items needed to manage their open street. Partners are exclusively responsible for the transportation of supplies at the beginning and end of each day, as well as storage for all moveable equipment and infrastructure.

- **Programming:** Operators are solely responsible for curating and carrying out programming and events to activate their open streets to be responsive to community needs. Programming is quite diverse across the open streets network, including live music and dance lessons, tai-chi and yoga classes, immigration workshops, social services outreach campaigns, and cultural celebrations. To host such activities, partners must secure a permit with the Mayor’s Office of Citywide Event Coordination and the Street Activity Permit Office (SAPO). SAPO permits involve a fee, liability insurance, and approval from community stakeholders and relevant city agencies. While open streets partners are responsible for leading programming, many work with third-party organizations like Street Lab and Open Plans to coordinate events.
- **Community Engagement:** Partners are responsible for engaging with community members to build awareness of their open street and its benefits, provide information about guidelines and operating hours, generate community buy-in, and navigate opposition. When interested groups apply to DOT to create a new open street, DOT requires at least three letters of support from community stakeholders and a Community Outreach Plan. DOT provides guidance for open streets operators on how to notify relevant stakeholders about the proposed open street and to outline their strategy for ongoing stakeholder and community outreach throughout the Open Streets season.<sup>25</sup> DOT then notifies the public by posting information on its website at least 45 days before designating the new open street, but without a centralized portal for collecting feedback or comments from members of the public, putting that responsibility for feedback collection solely on operators. If DOT approves an application, DOT notifies the relevant City Council member, Community Board, and Borough President. The SAPO permit process requires an additional set of community approvals. The Community Board may request additional information from an applicant, such as signatures from local businesses and residents to demonstrate the applicant’s connections to the community, before recommending SAPO approval.<sup>26</sup> DOT does not directly engage communities about open streets on behalf of partners.
- **Funding and Fundraising:** Partners must secure funding for nearly all aspects of running an open street, including staffing, procuring and storing street furniture and barricades, programming, and community engagement. DOT offers reimbursable funding up to a maximum of \$20,000 for nonprofit partners and fiscal sponsors based on the size and scale of their open street and whether the open street is located in a priority investment area. To allocate funds equitably across the city, DOT has designated three tiers of priority investment areas based on: neighborhood racial and income demographics; density of

population and jobs; and previous levels of DOT investment. Because DOT provides these funds on a reimbursement basis, operators must make purchases and pay vendors upfront.

- **Eligibility for City Funds:** Due to City procurement rules, only entities with nonprofit 501(c)3 status are eligible to receive direct City reimbursements. Open streets operators that do not have 501(c)(3) status must find fiscal sponsors to collect reimbursements from DOT. BIDs and Merchants' Associations managing open streets are eligible for some grant funding from the Department of Small Business Services (SBS) for public realm and commercial corridor revitalization that some operators have can put toward their open street.
- **Private Fundraising:** Partners may also raise funds by conducting revenue-generating activities on their open street, such as selling merchandise or allowing street vending. To do so, partners must secure a Short-Term Concession permit. To supplement City funds, operators may also apply for philanthropic grant funding, secure discretionary funds from Council Members, and solicit donations through crowdfunding campaigns.
- **Coordination with Government Entities:** Partners must coordinate with various City agencies to ensure buy-in and secure access to the City services and guidance needed to run an open street. Specific agency coordination tasks include:
  - **Department of Transportation (DOT):** Operators must work closely with DOT on all aspects of the open streets management, including the submission of applications to create and run open streets, approvals and permits for programming, and processing of reimbursements.
  - **Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA):** Partners must notify the MTA about open street schedules and locations to coordinate bus rerouting. Partners are responsible for creating and distributing informational flyers to alert riders of any bus route changes.
  - **New York Police Department (NYPD):** The NYPD is responsible for enforcing parking and traffic violations. In the application process, partners must demonstrate that their open street aligns with public safety goals and warrants the allocation of NYPD resources. Several partners report inconsistent NYPD support, describing police presence and enforcement as insufficient. In one case, NYPD reduced an open street's operating hours citing safety concerns. NYPD presence on open streets is often reliant on proactive outreach; partners who engage with local precincts through community meetings are more likely to receive support, such as assistance with patrols or "no parking" signage. However, coordination between agencies and enforcement such as ticketing or towing is very limited.
  - **Fire Department of New York (FDNY):** Partners must coordinate with FDNY to develop an effective barricade placement that works for both emergency services and

open streets. This also requires notifying emergency services in advance of street closures to adjust their routes.

- **State Liquor Authority (SLA):** Restaurants that participate in open streets can apply to SLA for liquor licenses to be able to serve alcohol outdoors.

## Global Best Practices

Many of New York City's international peer cities have implemented their own versions of open streets through programs that create pedestrian-friendly public spaces by temporarily or permanently restricting vehicle traffic on streets. What sets New York City's approach apart is its uniquely bottom-up structure: any community organization or neighborhood group can propose and manage an open street.

At the same time, there is much to learn from open street programs around the world, and the elements that help them thrive. For over 50 years, Bogotá's *Ciclovía* has transformed more than 76 miles of city streets into car-free zones every weekend and on major holidays, creating space for walking, cycling, and community gatherings. This iconic program has inspired hundreds of similar events globally, including New York City's own Summer Streets.<sup>27</sup> Barcelona approaches the reclamation of streets with *Superillas*, or Superblocks, a model that converts car-dominated areas into vibrant public spaces using tactical urbanism and green infrastructure.<sup>28</sup> In Montreal, the city government is leading pedestrianization at scale with strong public investment.<sup>29</sup> In Paris, a series of transportation reforms backed by the Mayor and popular vote are steadily advancing pedestrianization through initiatives like car-free zones near schools and expanded green infrastructure.<sup>30</sup>

Key features of these successful open streets models from global cities include:

- **Significant public financial support to activate, operate, and permanently pedestrianize streets:** Cities that provide robust funding for open streets have higher-quality sites and activations. The City of Montreal provides about \$700,000 CAD (\$500,000 USD) to each organization that operates a pedestrianized street.<sup>31</sup> This funding enables the pedestrianization of mile-long stretches of streets throughout the city for at least three months during the summer. In Paris, the city spends about €400,000 (\$454,000 USD) per site to upgrade and install green infrastructure on pedestrian streets, primarily school streets.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, New York City DOT only provides, as noted earlier, up to \$20,000 to open streets operators.
- **Strong political support from city leaders:** Open streets benefit when city leaders are visible advocates for the program. In Bogotá, politicians and community leaders regularly travel themselves by bike and participate in *Ciclovía*, the city's equivalent of Open Streets.<sup>33</sup> The Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, recently championed a successful ballot initiative to pedestrianize an additional 500 streets throughout the city.<sup>34</sup>
- **Regular data collection and impact evaluation to build support for the program and inform adjustments:** Data collection has enabled cities to inform strategic program

changes, generate buy-in, mitigate local concerns and dissipate opposition, and efficiently guide public resource distribution. In Bogota, the District Secretariat of Mobility collects data to demonstrate the efficiency of cycling, build political will for active transport infrastructure, and strengthen the Ciclovía program through improved bike path connectivity.<sup>35</sup> Ongoing mobility surveys continue to evaluate impact, reinforce public support for Ciclovía, and promote cycling as an efficient mode of transport. In Barcelona, the municipal government routinely tracks air quality, noise, and traffic volumes around its Superblocks program to demonstrate benefits and guide future planning efforts.<sup>36</sup>

- **Implementation of high-quality infrastructure upgrades:** Global cities that have permanently pedestrianized streets use distinct design features and infrastructure to delineate pedestrian-only spaces. Specific design elements include the use of stone surfaces and smooth curbs to visually distinguish pedestrian streets from streets for vehicles, wayfinding measures like tactile guidance strips on street edges and textured paving areas marking thresholds, and street furniture. Many cities, like Brighton (UK), Paris, and Barcelona, have also installed retractable bollards and swinging gates to seamlessly close streets to traffic when open streets are active.



## Bogotá, Colombia



Photo credit: Shutterstock/Gabriel Leonardo Guerrero

Bogotá, Colombia's Ciclovía event closes 76 miles of streets to vehicle traffic and occurs every Sunday and on major holidays.

## Paris, France



Photo credit: Clarence Eckerson Jr.

An open street in Paris, France with permanent, swinging gates installed.

## Barcelona, Spain



Photo credit: RdA Suisse from Suisse - [Barcelone Superilôt de Sant Antoni](#) 94 33, CC BY 2.0

The Sant Antoni Superblock in Barcelona, designed and implemented at a formal vehicle intersection

## Montreal, Canada



Photo credit: Shutterstock/Marc Bruxelle

Montreal's pedestrianized Mont-Royale Avenue.

# Findings

The findings below highlight key changes to the Open Streets program as it has evolved over the last five years, alongside persistent challenges that operators face in effectively managing their open streets. The analysis in this report is informed by publicly available data on the location, hours of operations, and managers of Open Streets, as well as over 30 in-depth interviews with Open Streets operators and public space experts.

1. **DOT's purview of public space management increased rapidly and dramatically at the onset of the pandemic.** Before the pandemic, DOT's Plaza Program supported 84 pedestrian plazas.<sup>37</sup> By the end of June 2020, three months after stay-at-home orders were first issued in New York, the City established 129 new open streets across the city, increasing the number of public space sites under DOT's purview by nearly 40%. Today, DOT now has oversight of hundreds of new public spaces that did not exist five years ago (see Table 2). The public-private partnership model established for the Plaza Program provided a framework for the Open Streets program to allow hundreds of sites to open under the management of private partners, primarily BIDs, schools, and community-based organizations. The newly created open streets involved new operational challenges such as complex siting, road closures, car and bike management, bus rerouting, traffic safety, and emergency vehicle access. Despite the increased scale and needs of DOT's public space work, the Open Streets program lacks a dedicated budget and funding source.
2. **The number and scale of open streets has dropped significantly since the peak of the program in 2021, but targeted investments by the City have modestly reversed this decline.** The Open Streets program expanded rapidly between 2020 and 2021, as the initial emergency program enabled new sites to come online very quickly. The Open Streets program peaked in 2021, with 326 individual sites, operating for an average of 58 hours per week. Open Streets reached a low of 202 sites in 2023, representing nearly a 40% drop from the program's peak. The average size and operating hours of the remaining sites also declined that year, by 18% and 31%, respectively. The number of sites increased slightly in 2024, reversing the steep downward trend. While 32 sites went offline between 2023 and 2024, the addition of 62 new sites—of which 32 were school streets—offset this loss. Some open streets were completely closed to cars and featured outdoor dining setups and street furniture, while others only used barricades or were not fully car-free.<sup>38</sup>

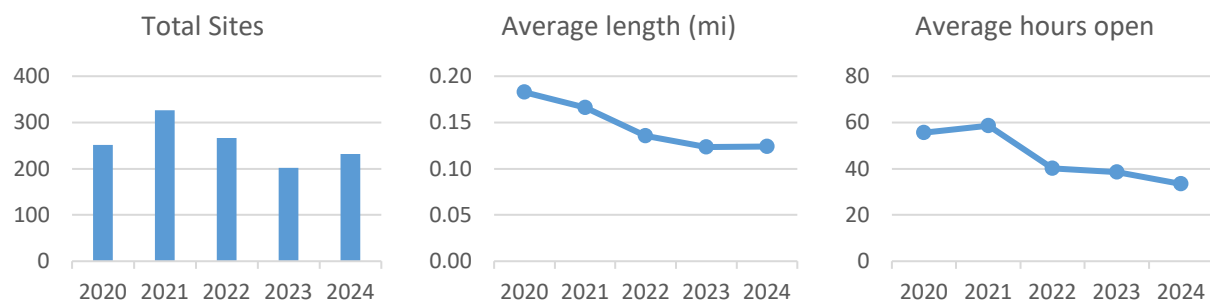
The introduction of DOT's Public Space Equity Program (PSEP) contributed to the modest growth of open streets locations in 2024. Modeled off the Neighborhood Plaza Partnership, the PSEP provides partners in low-income neighborhoods with operational, financial, and capacity-building support to maintain high-quality public spaces. Through contracts with DOT, the Horticultural Society and Street Lab provide partners with operational and programming support, as well as a limited amount of capacity building. Street Lab provided technical assistance and development and programming support to

about 25% of the new open streets that began operating in 2024.<sup>39</sup> Half of the new sites receiving support from Street Lab were in high-need communities in the Bronx, pointing to the importance and ability of capacity building and technical assistance in establishing new open streets.

**Table 2: Total Number of Open Streets per Year (2020-2024)<sup>40</sup>**

Year	Total Sites	Average Length (mi)	Average Hours Open Per Week
2020	251	0.183	55.49
2021	326	0.166	58.60
2022	266	0.136	40.20
2023	202	0.123	38.47
2024	232	0.124	33.40

**Figure 1: Total open streets, average length, and average hours open per week, by year**



3. **There are more open streets in Manhattan alone than in the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island combined.** Since the beginning of the program in 2020, Manhattan has consistently had the highest number of open streets, with Brooklyn in a close second. Within Manhattan, a handful of Lower Manhattan neighborhoods have especially high concentrations of open streets. Four neighborhoods, Greenwich Village, SoHo, the Lower East Side, and Chinatown, collectively host 41% (36 out of 87) of the borough’s open streets. Staten Island has the fewest open streets of the five boroughs, with just six sites in total in 2024.

These patterns have held even as the total number of open streets citywide and each borough has fluctuated over the years. However, some boroughs experienced steeper declines in the number of open streets than others. All five boroughs had fewer open

streets in 2024 than during the program’s peak in 2021, but Brooklyn lost the most sites, dropping from 113 open streets in 2021 to only 67 in 2024 – a net loss of 46.

**Table 3: Number of Open Streets by Borough (2020-2024)**

Year	Bronx	Brooklyn	Manhattan	Queens	Staten Island
2020	25	83	89	50	11
2021	33	113	122	56	10
2022	23	94	110	33	8
2023	13	63	89	31	6
2024	29	67	87	45	6

4. **Open Streets enjoys widespread support among neighbors and local stakeholders, but community engagement is left solely to Open Streets operators with very little support from the City.** Public support for open streets typically grows over time, as neighbors and local stakeholders experience the program’s benefits firsthand. The operator of an open street located on a major commercial corridor reported that half of the businesses along the avenue were initially neutral towards the program, while the other half strongly opposed. After five years of consistent programming, organic street usage, and demonstrable increases in business sales, the opposition dissipated. Similarly, a series of surveys in 2024 and 2025 from the Fifth Avenue Merchant Association found that 93% of respondents supported the Fifth Avenue Open Street in Park Slope, Brooklyn and that 75% of nearby businesses wished to participate.<sup>41</sup>

However, community opposition to the program has contributed to the downsizing or total closure of some open streets in some neighborhoods. DOT’s Open Streets program does not adequately support Open Streets operators in collecting community feedback, mediating conflicts, or provide City-backed legitimacy to the open street, leaving partners to address community opposition on their own. Without adequate support from the City to manage and address community concerns, many open streets have been downsized or shut down completely, especially in neighborhoods where the open streets program operators have faced verbal harassment and even physical aggression from local stakeholders and neighbors.

5. **The Open Streets program does not adequately invest in early-stage capacity building to identify potential program partners and help them to apply for the program and create new open streets.** One of the NPP’s most impactful roles—offering early-stage capacity-building for new public space stewards—has been largely absent in the Open Streets program. Community groups interested in applying for a new open street often lack the resources or guidance to get started, if they are aware of the program at all. Only a small portion of community groups receive a “high-need” designation from DOT, which qualifies them for the full range of services, including early-stage technical assistance and



programming and maintenance support provided by The Horticultural Society and Street Lab. To address the unmet needs of program partners and inequity in the program overall, nonprofits like Street Lab and Open Plans have voluntarily stepped in using private funding to provide early-stage capacity building, as well as technical, community organizing, and street activation support for public space partners. However, in the absence of public funding, these efforts are limited in scale and do not meet the widespread need across the city. As a result, the City is limited in its ability to recruit new partners and build support for open streets in outer-borough and lower-income neighborhoods.

6. **The Open Streets program does not have a dedicated budget or funding source and has instead been carried out through a patchwork of ad-hoc procurement mechanisms, making it very vulnerable to budget cuts and scope reductions.** The City has cobbled together funding for the Open Streets program through a mixture of federal COVID-era stimulus funding, “Alternative Transportation Modes” funds meant for Streets Plan projects, and SBS Neighborhood 360 funds for commercial open streets. The stimulus funds have now sunset, and the SBS Neighborhood 360 funds are no longer allocated to Open Streets. The Alternative Transportation Modes funds dedicated to Open Streets has also varied significantly over the last five years, ranging from \$3.6 million to just \$6,500. Furthermore, it is unclear how DOT determines how to prioritize funds between Open Streets and other street safety needs. Without a consistent, dedicated source of funding, it is difficult for program staff and partners to plan or budget for the future.

The City currently reimburses Open Streets partners for programming events through micro-purchase orders of up to \$20,000 to bypass more complex administrative and procurement requirements. This procurement method provides critical flexibility for Open Streets operators that frequently need to make small purchases to support operations and programming. DOT calculates the total amount of reimbursable expenses that each Open Street partner is eligible to receive using a formula that accounts for the number of blocks, weekly hours of operation, seasonal duration of operation (number of months), and whether it is in a Priority Investment Area.

However, the vast majority of partner organizations—from BIDs to nonprofits to volunteer groups—named insufficient and inconsistent City funding as their biggest challenge. While \$20,000 is the maximum amount the City can reimburse partners for through micro-purchase orders, the exact amount that partners have access to through this method has fluctuated over the years. Several partners could not verify how much money they would actually have access to in advance of their season. DOT notifies partners of their maximum reimbursement allotment after operators have developed budgets and made the key purchases required to stay on track with their season timeline. This delayed and unpredictable communication hinders partners from making informed, strategic financial decisions and often forces them to take on costs they wind up being unable to sustain.

Many partners had to make program cuts because the amount they received in reimbursements unexpectedly declined each year. For instance, the Prospect Heights

Neighborhood Development Council’s funding from various City sources dropped by approximately 58% from 2023 to 2024. With this reduction in funding, the total program budget fell from \$200,000 to \$120,000. These cuts forced a 40% reduction in operating hours, with the number of operational days shrinking from 86 to 66 days. In 2025, they are expecting to receive just \$20,000 from the City and as a result, will only be operating the Vanderbilt Avenue open street for 22 days this season.

7. **The Open Streets program provides insufficient support to even the most well-resourced current partners, resulting in burnout and unsustainable operations.** Partners consistently spoke of the need for more resources to effectively sustain the following three elements of running a successful open street:

- **Staffing:** Managing an open street often demands staff time and resources that exceed what partners can provide. Most partners are highly reliant on volunteer labor, which frequently leads to attrition and burnout and jeopardizes the program’s long-term sustainability. Four organizations that the Comptroller’s Office interviewed attributed their decision to drop out of the program in 2023 to volunteer burnout. Even for more well-resourced operators with full-time staff, open streets management can be resource-intensive. For instance, despite having both full-time and part-time employees, a Brooklyn BID responsible for managing an open street reported that the program took up to 60% of staff capacity on top of their existing responsibilities.
- **Transport, Set-up, and Storage of Supplies:** Operators identified procuring, transporting, and finding storage for barricades, street furniture, and other supplies among the most difficult aspects of open streets operations. Some groups have found creative ways to manage these responsibilities: one partner uses a large percentage of its budget to rent space in a local deli basement to store chairs and tables; members of a Merchants’ Association donated furniture from their establishments for use on their open street; volunteers on a community nonprofit’s open street receive free food from a nearby pizzeria and bathroom access from a local barbershop; one operator that does not have paid staff works with a student community service program to remove litter from their open street. Effectively tapping into local resources requires that community partners have established, trusting relationships with neighbors—and the capacity to leverage those relationships.
- **Programming:** Operators reported that the funding that DOT makes available for open streets programming is not nearly enough to cover programming costs (and is well below the amount of funding provided by other cities with world-class open streets). The inadequate support has resulted in some partners scaling back programming, causing engagement to drop and decreasing the benefits that the Open Streets program was designed to provide.

A Street Lab-supported Bronx nonprofit hosted many successful cookouts, live music, circuses, and other programs that drew large crowds and generated significant positive engagement from community members. However, as DOT-allocated

resources for such support declined, the nonprofit struggled to secure permits and access reimbursements and even small-scale activations like food giveaways became financially and logistically infeasible. As programming waned, the nonprofit reported that community participation and enthusiasm for the open street had largely dissipated. A Brooklyn BID reported a similar pattern: after several early seasons of robust programming, a decline in City funding left the BID unable to provide high-quality street activations, leaving community members less interested in the pedestrianized space.

8. **The SAPO process is expensive, slow, opaque, and inflexible, posing a major bureaucratic barrier for partners seeking to activate their open street with programming.** Community programming is what activates open streets and makes the program thrive. However, SAPO's excessively complex and bureaucratic permit application process makes it difficult for Open Streets partners to execute events that often require advanced planning, vendor contracts, and logistical coordination. Partners identified the following SAPO challenges:

- **SAPO permits can be costly:** On top of a required \$25 application fee, applicants must obtain a \$1,000,000 liability insurance certificate and pay additional fees as determined by an assessment. Additional fees can range from \$1,000-\$31,000 depending on the size and scope of the proposed event. Open Streets partners report being notified by SAPO about the amount of additional fees with as little notice as one week before event, without receiving any prior communication or cost estimates, making it difficult for them to budget for even simple types of community programming. SAPO does not provide any information about how additional fees are determined or how the City uses the fees that it collects.
- **SAPO approvals are slow:** Regardless of when an application is submitted, SAPO does not seem to share event approval status until a week out from the event. Although the SAPO website includes a correspondence tab on for applicants to direct questions to an assigned representative, applicants frequently report that their representatives are often unresponsive to requests for guidance and clarification, communicating only when a form is missing or incomplete. While some partners have adjusted their expectations and processes to account for last minute SAPO approvals, others report cancelling block parties and events that they had previously advertised because they did not receive their permit with enough time to finalize all of the event details. Smaller partners who cannot easily float vendor payments or secure commitments without an approved permit in place are especially impacted.
- **The SAPO permit application process is inflexible:** SAPO requires the same level of labor and detail for events both big and small. For all events, partners must submit a vendor list, site plan, run of show, production schedule, insurance certificate, proof of non-profit status, and agency sponsor letter. While such details may be appropriate for large-scale events with vendors, amplified sound, or other elaborate elements, those requirements can be onerous for small, light-touch, short-duration events. The

document templates that SAPO provided were often confusing to understand and, in some cases, even out of date.

Even for applicants comfortable with navigating bureaucracy, SAPO's non-intuitive website design, vague expectations, and burdensome requirements are overwhelming. One Open Streets partner reported that the SAPO process led to the loss of more volunteers than any other task associated with the program. Rather than trudge through a slow, costly, and unpredictable application process, partners have chosen to forego the regulatory permitting process entirely, instead opting to forge ahead with non-permitted events.

9. **The roles and responsibilities of various City and State agencies involved in open street operations are undefined, leaving Open Streets partners to navigate several bureaucratic processes with minimal support or guidance.** Open streets operations require significant coordination to manage vehicle and bike traffic safety, ensure access for emergency vehicles, secure event permits, reroute buses, and obtain liquor licenses for open streets with restaurants. All of these tasks require coordination with different agencies, processes that can be overwhelming, especially for small volunteer-run groups who often do not hold expertise about the intricacies and functions of different government agencies.

Many Open Streets partners voiced significant frustration that DOT provided no guidance about how to coordinate with other agencies, including SAPO, NYPD, FDNY, MTA, and SLA. When Open Streets partners have attempted to directly engage various agencies, the agencies often provided conflicting responses or pointed fingers at each other with no clear protocol to resolve the issue. The lack of standard operating procedures has created several challenges for open streets management. For instance, the City has not communicated clear processes for how Open Streets operators should engage MTA when bus drivers are not notified of bus reroutes, nor has the City provided operators with guidance or resources on how to notify riders of bus reroutes. In addition, DOT and NYPD often defer to each other on how to enforce traffic and parking violations when people try to drive through open streets barriers or park cars along open streets, with neither agency ultimately assuming responsibility for the issue.

10. **The reimbursement process for Open Streets operators is slow, complex, and financially burdensome.** While partners initially received support through federal pandemic relief grants, they now access public funding via reimbursement. Under this current model, partners must front all program costs using their own funds and then seek reimbursement from DOT, often facing long delays, unpredictable timelines, and inconsistencies between reimbursed amounts and actual incurred expenses. As with all other City programs, partners without 501(c)(3) status are not eligible to receive direct City funding without a fiscal sponsor. Partners described the following challenges with the reimbursement process:

- **Partners must make payments out-of-pocket before being reimbursed, an expense that only some can afford.** A lack of funds to make upfront purchases prevents some

organizations from taking advantage of public funding altogether. Partners lacking ample financial resources, as well as partners without 501(c)(3) status, face the greatest barriers to participation.

- **The total amount of money DOT reimbursed partners for was lower than expected.** Several partners reported significant gaps between the funding amounts initially promised by DOT and the reimbursements they ultimately received, creating uncertainty among even the most experienced operators. For instance, a small business in Queens was only able to access half of the \$12,000 originally offered by DOT, while a BID was reimbursed just one-third of its total spending, resulting in a \$32,000 loss.
- **The process of gathering and submitting proof of payment is time-consuming and complex,** especially for partners working with smaller or informal vendors. Partners with few or no staff routinely struggle to navigate the bureaucracy involved in submitting reimbursement requests and may lose money if they fail to complete the process correctly. One Open Streets manager spent their full \$10,000 allotment on operations, but received only \$6,000 in reimbursement after their nonprofit was unable to provide documentation that met DOT's standards for the remaining expenses.
- **DOT is slow to reimburse open street expenses, complicating partners' ability to plan, budget, and sustain their open streets.** Some partners reported waiting two years after submitting their invoices to get reimbursed. One partner described being forced to cancel programming on their open street due to a delay in receiving a \$10,000 reimbursement. Others noted that delays make it harder to attract vendors, many of whom are unwilling to take on the risk of working without timely compensation.



# Recommendations

**Expand and reform the Open Streets program to reach every New York City neighborhood, increase program flexibility, and establish permanent street redesign opportunities.**

The current Open Streets program options only include three types of open streets: full closure, partial closure, and school street. These limited options leave out many other approaches to street pedestrianization. DOT should widen the spectrum of what an open street can look like to encompass everything from one-day pop-up events to permanently redesigned car-free streets. The table below summarizes the range of options for the newly reimagined Open Streets program:

**Table 4: Pop-Up to Permanent: Widening the Spectrum of Open Streets Options**

Type of Open Streets	Description	Duration
<b>Block Party</b>	One-time, single-block street closures for recreational activity, to experiment with the Open Streets concept.	Temporary
<b>Pop-Up</b>	One-off, multi-block street closures for recreational activity.	Temporary
<b>Slow Street</b>	Streets designated primarily for pedestrian and cyclist use that also allow car traffic at very low speeds.	Semi-Permanent
<b>School Street</b>	Streets adjacent to schools closed to traffic during drop-off, pick-up, and recess hours.	Semi-Permanent
<b>Seasonal Full Closure</b>	Streets routinely closed to vehicle traffic for part of the year, from once a month to multiple day per week	Semi-Permanent
<b>Year-Round Full Closure</b>	Car-free streets designed to prioritize pedestrians using temporary materials.	Permanent
<b>Permanent Pedestrianization</b>	Car-free streets designed exclusively for pedestrians using permanent materials and hard infrastructure.	Permanent

To support these greater opportunities for street pedestrianization, the City should take the following steps:

1. **Set a goal to establish at least one open street in every community district.** The reimagined Open Streets program should aim to increase the number of sites citywide and ensure every New Yorker can access one. The size, scale, and purpose of each open street can vary to fit each neighborhood's local context and needs.
2. **Establish a clear, transparent process for community awareness and engagement that is proportionate to the size, duration, and purpose of different kinds of open streets to better support Open Streets operators in addressing community concerns and improve design and implementation.** Rather than putting the onus of community engagement solely on Open Streets operators, DOT should create an online portal for community members to share concerns *and* support operators in addressing the concerns raised through design and operations improvements. DOT should additionally provide partners with assistance through direct mailings, distribution of flyers and posters, online surveys, facilitation of townhall meetings, and on-street feedback sessions. Finally, DOT should provide Open Streets program operators with branded materials to signal legitimacy and City support, including t-shirts, signage, and branded street equipment.

With a wider range of Open Street typologies, the level of community engagement required should scale up or down based on the size, duration, and design of the proposed open street. One-day pop-ups and block parties should not require more than a few letters of support from community organizations or local stakeholders. Partners proposing seasonal full-closure open streets should ensure that the community is aware of the proposed new location and has an opportunity to express concerns, share feedback, and provide input about how the Open Streets site should be operated. Large-scale, permanent redesigns should adhere to a more robust community engagement process that DOT uses when undertaking similarly transformative capital projects.

3. **Partner with community organizations and neighborhood groups to host block parties and other temporary events that cultivate broader support for open streets, with a particular focus on open space deserts.** Pop-up events and tactical urbanism approaches can proactively demonstrate the value of activating public spaces, building public support for pedestrianizing public spaces and mitigating against local opposition. The City should provide the resources for a wider range of neighborhood groups to regularly host block parties and other "pop-up" events temporarily repurposing streets into recreational public spaces, with a focus on neighborhoods underserved by parks and open spaces. These pop-ups should lay the foundation for expanding open streets to new neighborhoods, identifying potential partners, and familiarizing communities with the concept and potential of the Open Streets program.
4. **Provide technical support for envisioning, planning, and designing capital projects to permanently pedestrianize streets and plazas.** Redesigning streetscapes for permanent pedestrianization requires significant technical planning, design, and expertise in community engagement processes. The City should provide interested Open Streets

partners with technical support and resources to hold visioning and planning workshops, co-create street redesigns that are responsive to community needs, and shepherd the new pedestrianized improvements through DOT's street improvement or capital processes.

## **Offer partner organizations robust financial support and technical assistance to create, operate, and program Open Streets.**

Partner organizations require support from the City to apply for and operate the Open Streets program. This is especially true for partners with limited budgets or groups based in low-income communities. DOT currently uses the existing Public Space Equity Program to provide high-need partners with operating support and maintenance services, but demand for these services exceeds available resources. The City should better support Open Streets partners and shore up their ability to participate in the program long-term through the following measures.

1. **Significantly increase citywide funding and support for Open Street operators through new requests for proposals (RFPs) to secure additional technical, operating, and programmatic assistance.** The new RFP should substantially expand support the Open Streets program's operational and administrative needs with services provided by experts in public space management and fund partners at every stage of the pipeline described in the prior recommendation. These contracts would expand the scope of funded services currently provided by citywide public space stewardship partners, including the Horticultural Society and Street Lab. The provision of these services through formal citywide procurement contracts would relieve financial burdens on individual Open Streets partners, expanding their individual capacity and laying the foundation for citywide expansion of the program. These citywide contracts should come with advance payments to ensure providers have adequate funds to support day-to-day operational needs.

The types of services procured through these contracts should include:

- Organizing block parties and pop-up events in high-need communities to build awareness of the Open Streets program and promote its benefits.
- Recruiting new and potential Open Streets partners in neighborhoods where the program currently has no presence.
- Providing technical support to organizations and individuals interested in becoming Open Streets partners, including assistance applying for the program, securing fiscal sponsorship, and establishing and facilitating connections to peer support networks.
- Advising partners on conducting community engagement to effectively inform and involve local stakeholders in the design and operation of their open street.

- Providing maintenance services to partner organizations. These services should address the main operational challenges Open Streets partners face, including setting up moveable barricades, storing street furniture, providing horticultural care and sanitation services, and identifying local partners to support maintenance and operational needs.
  - Continue creating and providing workforce development opportunities for local residents as well as formerly incarcerated or unhoused individuals, as modeled by the Horticultural Society's exemplary HortNYC program.
  - Designing and executing thoughtful programming for open streets tailored to individual communities and assisting partner organizations in securing permits and meeting City insurance requirements.
  - Assisting partners in navigating City processes to take advantage of vending and concession opportunities on their open street to raise revenue.
  - Envisioning and designing potential long-term infrastructure upgrades to implement permanent pedestrianization improvements on open streets.
2. **Make it easier for individual Open Streets partners to access consistent funding sources by connecting partners to fiscal sponsors and compiling and distributing a list of other public and private financial resources available to partner organizations.** Many partners currently struggle to meet the financial demands of managing an open street. Accessing publicly available funding and raising money from private sources both present challenges to Open Streets partners. Furthermore, organizations without 501(c)(3) status are not eligible for reimbursement, as per the City's procurement rules. This effectively locks neighborhood groups, individuals, and informal grassroots organizations out of public funding. To ensure that any organization motivated to run an open street can access funding to do so, the City should:
- a. **Connect interested Open Streets partners to fiscal sponsors, who can take on the responsibility of receiving donations on behalf of organizations without (c)3 status and act as a pass-through for City funds.** Many partners who are not incorporated as nonprofits already rely on fiscal sponsors but had to do the work of finding one on their own, without support from the City. These fiscal sponsors should have demonstrated track records and capacity to navigate the City's complex procurement and reimbursement processes.
  - b. **Explore philanthropic partnerships to enable upfront grantmaking and provide more flexible funding sources.** The City should consider supplementing public funding for Open Streets with matching philanthropic dollars, such as from the Mayor's Fund, to allow partners to access flexible funding for programming and events more easily.
  - c. **Compile and update a list of funding opportunities available to Open Streets partners, including plain language guidelines for how to access those funds.**

Organizations that manage open streets report seeking funding from a variety of sources beyond the City, from individual donations to philanthropic grants to discretionary funding from the City Council. However, only groups that had relationships with donors and awareness of other funding opportunities accessed these options. The City should provide all Open Streets partners with a list of potential funding and grant opportunities, including from other City agencies, including plain language guides that explain eligibility and process requirements for each.

3. **Baseline funds for the Open Streets program—including funding for individual open street sites and programmatic funds allocated through RFPs—to ensure the continued longevity of the program.** To address long-term sustainability of the program and ensure all partners can have clear expectations for operating funds, the City should baseline funding for all Open Streets-related expenses from competitively awarded contracts to programming funds for Open Streets partners, making these funds a permanent priority in the City’s budget each year. The funding should increase proportionately as the City and partners establish new open streets.

## Cut red tape to strengthen management of the Open Streets program and make it easier for partners to do their work

Open Streets partners consistently named navigating City bureaucracy to receive programming permits and reimbursements and coordinating with City agencies as their biggest challenges as public space managers. Best practices from cities around the world show that strong city leadership and data-driven program evaluation processes are important ingredients to successful open streets programs.

Expanding the Open Streets program and ensuring its long-term sustainability requires simplifying the City’s processes around permitting and accessing funding, improving interagency coordination, and tracking the program’s performance.

4. **Reform the reimbursement process to make it easier for Open Streets partners to receive public funds.** The current process is especially burdensome to Open Streets partners and many other nonprofits and contractors who do business with the City. Open Streets partners, the majority of whom lack cash flow and operate with tight budgets, must carry out time-sensitive work regardless of whether their reimbursements have been approved and distributed. In countless cases, partners report taking out costly loans to pay employees and bills while they await delayed payment.

Reforms should address bureaucratic issues that prevent partners from budgeting and planning effectively to maximize the impact of their Open Street, as follows:

- a. **Launch a portal that allows Open Street partners and City agencies to track the status of reimbursements and provides a direct communication channel for updates and inquiries.** Transparency is an essential step to improved efficiency; without a uniform public standard for identifying dysfunction and delays in the



application process, the reimbursement system is impeded. A reimbursement status tracker with an accessible user interface and responsive communication channel must be available to Open Streets partners and City agencies.

- b. **Provide clear guidance on the requirements for successful reimbursement and guidelines for obtaining proof of purchase.**
  - c. **Allow for partial payments of invoices, disbursing funds for the items that comply with the City's proof of payment requirements.** The City should reimburse all the expenses for which operators have submitted proper receipts and paperwork, rather than holding up entire invoices for a few outstanding issues. This approach ensures that Open Streets partners, most of which operate on shoestring budgets, can receive more timely payments.
  - d. **Establish deadlines for paying Open Streets partners and contractors on time.** The City should adopt a formal written policy setting a maximum 90-day reimbursement timeframe for Open Streets partners and contractors to prevent delays in critical funding. In line with recommendations made by the Human Services Council, the City should establish clear, published milestones for timely review of budgets, invoices and requests for payment that require the City to pay interest penalties for exceeding deadlines.
5. **Reform the onerous SAPO permitting process** to make it easier for Open Streets partners to carry out community programming. Recommended reforms include:
- a. **Launch a portal that allows Open Streets partners and City agencies to track the status of permits and provides a direct communication channel for updates and inquiries.** As with the reimbursement process, transparency is key to enhancing efficiency; the lack of a consistent public system for tracking delays and issues in the application process hinders the permitting system. This new portal should include an easy-to-use interface and a responsive communication channel, accessible to both Open Street partners and City agencies. Furthermore, the City must proactively communicate fee details upfront. A well-functioning portal will resolve bureaucratic barriers, helping Open Streets partners activate their streets with programming while complying with City regulations.
  - b. **Establish a clear timeframe for SAPO permit application review.** Currently, the absence of statutory deadlines in the permit process leaves Open Streets operators in the dark about the status of their application, often receiving updates only a week before their scheduled event. In the meantime, partners who wish to pursue programming must carry out time-sensitive work involving financial investments and interpersonal commitments, all while unsure if their permit will be approved. This uncertainty creates significant risk, which can be unsustainable and discouraging, ultimately deterring many from pursuing programming or permits and limiting the potential of public spaces.

- c. **Tailor the application process to scale, offering a variety of templates and forms that differentiate between event size.** The current SAPO application format applies a one-size-fits-all approach, imposing excessive permit and liability insurance requirements on small- and medium-sized events. Both small and large events are subject to the same high standards of capacity, making it difficult for partners to activate their street at any scale at all. Additionally, this uniform approach prompts partners with limited resources to pursue larger-scale events, even when such programming may not align with the needs, capacity, or capabilities of their community.
6. **Develop an Open Streets Handbook that outlines best practices for managing, programming, and maintaining Open Streets.** Many Open Streets partners report little to no guidance from the City in performing the duties of Open Streets management. This handbook should include best practices for tasks ranging from administrative processes (such as fiscal sponsorship, insurance coverage, and permitting) to executing community events to daily maintenance and operations. It should also guide partners on how to make their open street more accessible to people with disabilities by using clear signage; ASL and video captioning for live music, events, and workshops; offering escort services for the blind that allow individuals to safely develop a sense of open street layout; and communicating with paratransit companies and drivers to ensure access to the open street.
7. **Empower the Chief Public Realm Officer to oversee interagency coordination to support the Open Streets program.** The operations, programming, permitting, and sanitation of Open Streets sites require significant involvement from multiple agencies, including DOT, SAPO, DSNY, and NYPD. School Streets involve coordination with DOE, and Open Streets along bus routes must coordinate with MTA for bus rerouting. Coordination with MTA is also necessary to ensure paratransit operators are authorized to pick up and drop off riders along open streets. The State Liquor Authority approves liquor licenses for restaurants that participate in Open Streets. Many Open Streets operators have expressed frustration about the amount of time it takes to navigate the requisite government entities, as well as confusion and a lack of clarity on how best to engage with such a wide range of City and State agencies. The Chief Public Realm Officer, or an equivalently empowered designee at City Hall, should convene an interagency working group to ensure alignment and to clarify roles and responsibilities across all of these agencies so that Open Streets partners are not left to guess how to manage contacts with various offices.
8. **Conduct regular evaluations and publicly track data on Open Streets usage and economic impacts, as well as progress toward expanding and pedestrianizing Open Streets.** City agencies, Open Streets partner organizations, and public realm experts have sporadically conducted studies about the impacts of the program, focusing primarily on economic impacts to businesses and collecting community feedback about individual sites. These studies overwhelmingly demonstrate that Open Streets generate positive economic outcomes, improve traffic safety, and have community support. However,

these studies are conducted irregularly, and do not provide long-term data. To increase accountability and transparency for the goals of this program, DOT should establish an annual program evaluation process. As a first step, the City should collect and report data about usage, pedestrian and cyclist counts, economic impacts, and street safety. This information should be publicly available and guide future program investments, design choices, and policy changes. The City should also provide public updates on whether it is meeting its new mandate of at least one active open street in each community district, changes in the number and operations of open streets, and steps that the City has taken to make permanent pedestrian improvements.

# Conclusion

Open streets have become a cherished and essential fixture of New York City's public realm, delivering wide-ranging benefits to local communities across all five boroughs — from economic revitalization and enhanced social cohesion to improved safety and a reimagining of how we use public space. Despite the program's successes, serious structural challenges have resulted in the total number of open streets declining citywide.

Burdensome permitting processes, delayed reimbursements, insufficient funding, and a lack of early-stage capacity building and operational support have led to staff burnout, uneven street activation, and programs that are difficult to sustain—even for the most well-resourced partners. Realizing the program benefits that the City touts depends on the immense volunteer labor of community groups, many of whom struggle to keep their programs afloat in the absence of meaningful public investment and champions within the Adams Administration. Without a dedicated budget, funding uncertainties only compound public underinvestment, placing the program's future in jeopardy.

To fully realize the potential of open streets and ensure their long-term success, the City must embrace a more efficient, inclusive, and well-resourced approach. This includes committing to equitable expansion goals, implementing transparent and site-specific community engagement, supporting a spectrum of pedestrianization models, and establishing a clear, formalized pathway to permanent street redesign. By investing in early-stage capacity building and providing sustained financial, technical, and operational support, the City can empower community partners to shape and activate public spaces in ways that are responsive to local needs, inclusive, and lasting. With strong public investment, citywide coordination, and data-driven impact evaluation, the City can effectively support its community partners and ensure that New Yorkers are able to enjoy open streets for years to come.

# Methodology

## Qualitative Analysis

The Comptroller’s Office conducted structured interviews with 26 Open Street partners about their experiences interfacing with DOT, operating their sites, organizing programming, and fundraising. Not all organizations that were contacted elected to participate in an interview. All conversations took place virtually between November 2024 and April 2025. These partners spanned all five boroughs, all organization types, and represent active and inactive Open Streets sites. Additionally, the Comptroller’s Office interviewed 10 public realm experts and reviewed publicly available reports and literature about open streets. Information collected from these interviews informed this report’s findings on Open Streets program benefits as well as challenges faced by partners. A complete list of partners and public realm experts interviewed follows below.

Partners	Borough	Interview Date
<b>31<sup>st</sup> Avenue Open Streets Collective</b>	Queens	10/22/24
<b>34<sup>th</sup> Avenue Open Streets Coalition</b>	Queens	10/22/24
<b>Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice</b>	Bronx	10/25/24
<b>Sunnyside BID</b>	Queens	10/28/24
<b>Flatbush Development Corporation</b>	Brooklyn	10/28/24
<b>Addisleigh Park Civic Organization</b>	Queens	10/31/24
<b>Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association</b>	Bronx	10/31/24
<b>Prospect Heights Neighborhood Development Council</b>	Brooklyn	11/1/24, 3/3/24, 3/17/24
<b>Park Slope 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue BID</b>	Brooklyn	11/4/24
<b>Loisaida Open Streets Community Coalition</b>	Manhattan	11/4/24



Partners	Borough	Interview Date
Sunset Park 5 <sup>th</sup> Avenue BID	Brooklyn	11/7/24
North Brooklyn Open Streets Community Coalition	Brooklyn	11/8/24
Downtown Jamaica Partnership	Queens	11/12/24
Jamrock Jerk	Queens	11/12/24
Cadwell Enrichment Program	Bronx	11/14/24
Central Queens Academy	Queens	11/14/24
5 <sup>th</sup> Avenue Merchant's Association	Brooklyn	11/14/24
161 <sup>st</sup> Street BID	Bronx	11/15/24
Community League of the Heights	Manhattan	11/18/24
Incredible Credible Messengers	Brooklyn	11/19/24
Council of Jewish Organizations of Staten Island	Manhattan	11/19/24
IS 61Q (Leonardo Da Vinci School)	Queens	11/21/24
PS 146 (Brooklyn New School)	Brooklyn	11/22/24
Cooke School	Manhattan	11/22/24
Chinatown BID	Manhattan	11/22/24
West 103 <sup>rd</sup> Street Block Association	Manhattan	12/7/24

Public Realm Experts	Interview Date
Open Plans	10/9/24, 10/23/24, 3/3/24, 3/17/24
Street Lab	11/8/24, 2/27/25, 4/3/25
Emily Ahn Levy	11/20/24
Daphne Lundi	12/9/24

Public Realm Experts	Interview Date
WXY Studio	1/8/25
NYCDOT	1/22/25
Design Trust	2/7/25
Horticultural Society of New York	2/24/25, 4/17/25
Laura Hansen	2/27/25, 4/3/25
Urban Design Forum	3/31/25

## Quantitative Analysis

Data on the archival locations and structure of open streets is derived from regular snapshots posted on the DOT website by Transportation Alternatives (TA). TA documented this data approximately once a month, beginning on May 2, 2020 and concluding on November 4, 2024. The data are street-level, naming the open street and the streets intersecting at each end, the nature of the closure, posted hours and sponsoring organization. Data on Open Street sponsors in early months of the pandemic were not as reliably reported. The street segments were geocoded using the City’s GeoSupport; some observations with multiple non-continuous or irregularly shaped entries sharing a sponsor or other characteristics were combined and given a single, standardized open street identifier. Entries sponsored by restaurants and bike lanes were judged to be misclassified as open streets and excluded from the data. The number of open hours is an average of the total reported weekly hours for each unique open street ID for each observation in the data.

The Comptroller’s Office also reviewed transaction-level data on disbursements to Open Streets vendors from DOT and SBS budget codes derived from the City’s Financial Management System to analyze the structure of payments to sponsors.

## Acknowledgements

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