People, Practices, and Ambition: PlaNYC's Legacy for New York City's Transportation System Revisions

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Abstract of requested paper

This paper reviews how the NYC Department of Transportation was influenced by PlaNYC internally, and set a path forward for the continued development of the department. It will describe NYCDOT circa 2005, the role of DOT in the development of PlaNYC, and the extent to which PlaNYC paved the way for the appointment of Janette Sadik-Khan in the same month as PlaNYC was announced. It then describes the way Commissioner Sadik-Khan reorganized the agency and its objectives, often using PlaNYC as her justification, but building on it in ways that a mayoral plan could not do; it also discusses how PlaNYC's mayoral imprimatur assisted DOT in securing funding both internally and from external sources, and the agency's creativity in finding new sources of funding and new ways of doing things. It describes the evolution of DOT through Bloomberg, de Blasio, and Adams, and how PlaNYC has (and has not) continued to shape the agency. It will look at the long-term impact of recruiting key leaders who either were part of OLTPS (Will Carry, Emily Gallo) who were recruited into DOT as part of Sadik-Khan's efforts, and how they have had a lasting impact on the agency. It concludes with an assessment of how mayoral leadership, central planning, agency leadership, and staffing all interact either to further or hinder mayoral objectives.

Introduction

Nearly 20 years after the publication of PlanNYC, The New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) has been fundamentally transformed in both policy and practice. Stated goals around public safety, mobility, and infrastructure maintenance have remained similar, but the agency has shifted from a fundamental focus on system maintenance to one that has additionally prioritized active design changes to city streets, and added goals around environmental and public space missions, all building on the initiatives in the original PlaNYC. However, just the publication of the plan was not sufficient at ingraining this lasting change within the agency, which has lasted (as of late 2025) across three different mayors and five different agency commissioners, but rather benefitted from many forms of leadership leaving key legacies across the agency. This paper will explore the key people and decisions through the lenses of leadership, organizational structure, resources, public messaging, and external advocacy and discuss how, these people and choices contributed to the lasting effect on PlaNYC's goals being so strongly embedded within DOT.

Background

When the original PlaNYC was released by mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2007, it represented a sea change in the City's policy position on transportation issues, particularly those under the discretion of the New York City Department of Transportation. The media coverage focused, with good reason, on the City's decision to actively pursue congestion pricing, to apply a toll for

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driving into the busiest parts of Manhattan to fund transit enhancements. But in addition, the plan contained other transportation policies, including commitments to improving bus service, bicycle safety, and use of the City's streets to create a better public realm. While none of these ideas were completely new to the public discourse, PlaNYC represented the first time they were presented comprehensively in at least several decades.

Since that time, New York City is on its fourth mayor, its sixth transportation Commissioner, and has been through a range of formative events ranging from the 2009 financial crisis, to Superstorm Sandy, to the COVID-19 pandemic, among many others. However, across that time, the key planks of the original PlaNYC vision have been remarkably durable. New York City is the first municipality in the United States to have a roadway pricing scheme, helping fund massive capital investment in the city's transportation system. The city has more than doubled its mileage of bus lanes, and more than quadrupled its mileage of bike lanes. Reusing unneeded street space as plazas and other forms of public space have become central to the agency's mission. While the details have evolved, the policy framework has been fairly consistent across many administrations, and was a key campaign platform of the most recent mayor to be elected, Zohran Mamdani - as a democratic socialist quite different from Mayor Michael Bloomberg, but with a fundamentally similar transportation vision.

Was this outcome inevitable? Looking at other cities across North America suggests otherwise; while much good infrastructure has been created across the country, no large city has matched New York even on a per capita basis, and progress has been filled with fits and starts. Even within New York City the issues have often been controversial, with one prominent mayoral candidate quoted as saying "I'm going to have a bunch of ribbon cuttings ripping out those [explicative] bike lanes". Continued progress was not an accident or an inevitability, and this paper will discuss the elements that contributed to this, namely:

1. Leadership - NYCDOT's Commissioners and other key personnel set clear direction and created environments that led to success.
2. Organizational Structure - The internal structure of NYCDOT changed over time, first to protect policy development from the operational pressures of an infrastructure maintenance entity, and then to bring those policies into the mainstream of the agency's operations. A focus on hiring and promoting key staff ensured that the bureaucracy was consistently fed with people to keep carrying on efforts even as more senior leadership left.
3. Resources - A commitment to long term funding of programs allowed investments in both internal infrastructure and external outcomes, and funding growth over time matched the policy intent.
4. Messaging and outreach - As part of delivering on PlaNYC's intent, there was a parallel commitment to expanding community engagement, and the City adapted evolving messaging over time that allowed it to stay in step with the key issues of the day.

NYCDOT is in many ways a different agency than it was in 2007, oriented in large part around the delivery of hundreds of street design projects every year, much more intentional management of the streets as a public space, and a leadership role in improving bus service

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around the city in partnership with the MTA. These activities all had seeds in PlaNYC, and how the agency has developed over time is instructive in understanding how the agency has blossomed.

Agency Leadership

Strong agency leadership is clearly critical to creating and maintaining momentum over time. While the report is associated most memorably with Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan (for good reason), both her predecessor Commissioner Iris Weinshall, and her successors Commissioners Polly Trottenberg, Hank Gutman, and Ydanis Rodriguez all played key roles related to the times in which they led the agency. As of this writing, it is early in the leadership of Commissioner Mike Flynn who will not be discussed here, though the policy direction appears to continue. It is also important to recognize the role played by Dan Doctoroff, deputy mayor under Mayor Bloomberg, who provided much of the overall energy and leadership for the plan's release and implementation.

Iris Weinshall was appointed as Commissioner of DOT by mayor Rudoph Giuliani in the year 2000, and then was reappointed by Mayor Bloomberg when he took office. At the time of her appointment, NYCDOT's internal capacity was limited. While the corruption that led to many arrests within the agency in the 1980s as documented in the book "City for Sale" was gone, the agency had not fully professionalized all of its operations, and did not have a strong cadre of policy analysts. Most notably, her tenure was marred early on by a major crash on the Staten Island Ferry, which exposed longstanding unprofessional practices.

A key focus for Commissioner Weinshall, along with key deputies such as First Deputy Judith Bergstrom and D/C for External Affairs David Woloch, was to put the agency on a solid footing operationally and financially. This included major investments in infrastructure, such as a roughly $3B program of rehabilitating the major East River Bridges, as well as in staff, with not only hiring of new leadership for the ferry, but also an intentional focus on hiring a new generation of agency staff. The agency also laid the bedrock for building a safety culture at the agency, most visibly through the start of the process to change Queens Boulevard away from the "Boulevard of Death".

PlaNYC itself was developed and released during the tenure of Commissioner Weinshall, and was led by people whom she had hired, including D/C David Woloch, and Steve Weber, Assistant Commissioner for Long Term Planning and Sustainability. While agency leadership changed shortly thereafter, the future success of the initiatives would not have been possible without the foundation building work her administration put in, including but not limited to setting up a fully professional operation to allow greater executive focus on policy, as well as hiring many of the people who would both write the document and go on to implement it.

A solid foundation is necessary but not sufficient to allow a policy structure to grow. Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan's tenure began shortly after the release of PlaNYC, and brought a dramatically different energy to the department. Along with key hires such as Bruce Schaller, Jon Orcutt, and Andy Wiley-Schwartz, Commissioner Sadik-Khan sent a clear

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message that PlaNYC was not just a single moment in time, but was meant as a real plan of action. While it may sound simple to say that a plan should be followed, an operational bureaucracy of thousands of employees needs a clear and ongoing message that there were new priorities to be followed, with uncomfortable accountability if they were not.

One clear example of the strong leadership making a difference was with the Bus Rapid Transit study, a joint effort between NYCDOT and MTA New York City Transit to explore how bus service in the city could be improved by applying bus priority principles used elsewhere in the world, and committed to as an initiative in PlaNYC. While the study had been going for many years before Commissioner Sadik-Khan was appointed, it was resulting in relatively modest recommendations with an unambitious implementation schedule. Commissioner Sadik-Khan, along with her compatriot President Howard Roberts of NYCT, ordered a re-evaluation of the program with a clear mandate to make the recommendations more robust. As put by Ted Orosz, program manager for NYCT: “In 2006, it was an accepted truth that all-door boarding was simply impossible in New York City. By 2008 we had our first route up and running, and in the Bronx of all places”. That first route on the Bx12 route, with a new joint NYCT-DOT brand as Select Bus Service and new bus lanes, shelters, and signal priority along the route, was a dramatic success, with running time reductions of about 20%, and a ridership increase of about 10% - including a reduction in fare evasion. This success paved the way to many more similarly joint projects between the agencies, and an overall message that bold projects could be successful.

Perhaps no project was as bold or well known under Commissioner Sadik-Khan’s tenure than the closure of Broadway through Times Square and Herald Square. This was of course another example of bold leadership; similar projects had been talked about since at least the 1960s but were never executed, and similar to above, the success for both pedestrians and vehicle traffic led the way to other future work. But from an operational perspective, this project also illustrated the value of putting projects in the ground (relatively) quickly, without needing to wait for time consuming and costly capital projects. “Green Light for Midtown” as the project was known was an example of how the agency’s operations could be used in this fast delivery. The agency paved streets to provide a clean surface, agency pavement markings contractors put down artistic designs instead of lane lanes, agency concrete crews built concrete barriers (mountable for FDNY), and the agency changed traffic signals, signage, and much more in order to deliver the project over the course of several weeks. This program of using agency resources, known now as Street Improvement Projects, has been foundational in how the agency has done business since.

Importantly, during this time both before and after the release of PlaNYC, the agency and larger City hired not only new leadership, but also promoted and hired staff throughout the agency that would become the next generation of agency leadership. In addition to the author, some of these hires and promotions included Ryan Russo who would become the first D/C for Transportation Planning and Management, Josh Benson who would become the D/C for Traffic Operations, Emily Gallo who would become Chief of Staff to Commissioner Trottenberg, and Will Carry, who would become the A/C for Policy at the agency.

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By the end of the Bloomberg Administration this basic framework for implementing change was in place, and while this represented significant growth over prior work, was focused on a relatively small number of projects each year. Commissioner Polly Trottenberg, appointed by Mayor Bill De Blasio, was tasked with an incredibly ambitious goal from Day 1 with a commitment to Vision Zero, the idea that deaths and serious injuries on the city's roadways were fundamentally preventable, and that the City would work towards eliminating them within 10 years. The value of Vision Zero as a message is discussed in more detail below, but among other things, this commitment would require a substantive change in the scale at which the agency performed safety work, and similar other increases in commitments were made on other subjects, such as bus and bike lanes.

Returning again to the value of leadership, it is not enough simply to tell people to deliver more, but it needs to come with a clear message that this would be valued, as well as structure and resources to make it happen. The details of the organizational structure change and resources will be discussed in more detail below, but were part of an overall vision for the agency. With Ryan Russo, who had led much of the development of the SIP program under the prior administration, as the head of a newly formed division of Transportation Planning and Management, there was a clear focus on using operational resources to deliver changes to street design and operations meant to increase safety, speed buses, and improve cycling and air quality. The responsibility the agency had to continue delivering a state of good repair on streets, bridges, and other infrastructure did not go away, but the directive to improve conditions at the same time became fundamentally entwined with these operations. There was also a clear directive from both the Mayor and the Commissioner that pursuing change was important, even when politically difficult.

As an instructive case, it is worth returning to Queens Boulevard. The changes made during the tenure of Commissioner Weinshall meaningfully reduced the number of crashes and fatalities on the streets, but the boulevard was still among the most crash-prone in the city. This first round of changes was focused on the operation of the street, such as allowing more time for pedestrians to cross the street, and changing parking regulations. To take the next step a more fundamental redesign was undertaken under Commissioner Trottenberg, expanding medians, creating a dedicated bike lane, and reducing traffic capacity to slow traffic speeds. These changes were more controversial, as they changed the fundamental nature of the street, and as the project advanced along the corridor different political issues were encountered. While each of these steps were difficult, by the end of the administration the most dangerous parts of the street all had been redesigned, and the effects showed up in achieving years of no fatalities along the boulevard.

The tenure of Commissioner Hank Gutman was relatively short, and was dominated by the exigencies of the Covid pandemic, and so will not be discussed in great detail here. However it is important to note that even amid a focus on other major projects such as developing a plan for the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, Commissioner Gutman maintained a clear commitment to the overall goals of PlaNYC, most notably by creating new busways on major bus corridors in Queens, Brooklyn and Northern Manhattan, and by repurposing a lane on the Brooklyn Bridge as a dedicated cycling path, separating bikers from the very busy pedestrian promenade.

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One key outcome of the social unrest during the COVID-19 pandemic was the additional focus on racial inequity. While NYCDOT had worked to address this under previous commissioners, the work took additional focus under Commissioner Ydanis Rodriguez. While the agency was operating at a higher scale than in prior years, Commissioner Rodriguez focused on making sure that work was distributed equitably around the city, implementing the concept of Priority Investment Areas that took into account historically disadvantaged and underinvested-in parts of the city.

Commissioner Rodriguez's tenure also oversaw a substantial expansion of automated enforcement. The first red light enforcement cameras dated to the 1990s, and were expanded under Commissioners Sadik-Khan (bus lane cameras) and Trottenberg (speed cameras), and so were not a fully new concept, but the bus lane and speed camera programs were both expanded substantially under Commissioner Rodriguez. Cameras both provide effective and consistent enforcement, and also use less discretion than traditional enforcement measures, reducing potential uneven enforcement.

Organizational Structure

A key element to the long term success of PlaNYC was how the organizational structure changed over time to first nurture and then institutionalize those goals. This isn't to say that there is only one way this work could be organized for success, but it is instructive to see how the structure changed over time to reflect the stages of agency growth. There have been other studies of Department of Transportation type structures by organizations such as NACTO, but New York City provides a lesson on integrating new goals into ongoing work.

The initial development of PlaNYC was under the Office of Long Term Planning and Sustainability, a new office created specifically for this work. The office was led by Steve Weber, previously Lower Manhattan Boro Commissioner and a planner at the Regional Plan Association, and was largely staffed by agency new hires. While technically under the larger Department of Traffic, the office functionally reported largely to the Commissioner's office (D/C Woloch and others), as well as directly to City Hall. This provided a degree of independence from other agency operations-focused decision making.

After the release of PlaNYC, this office was incorporated into a new division at the agency called Planning and Sustainability, led by a new D/C in Bruce Schaller, a veteran of city government but most recently an independent consultant and data analyst focused on sustainable transportation. This division was tasked with developing the new commitments from PlaNYC, including the bus priority program and the public space programs.

Once these programs were better established, and following the retirement of longtime D/C for Traffic Operations Michael Primeggia, Planning and Sustainability was combined with the Traffic division into a new entity called Traffic and Planning, under the leadership of D/C Schaller. This arrangement ensured that the newly established programs could be well integrated into the operational functions of the agency, helping growth and also reducing the ability to easily separate and diminish the function.

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The final relevant change, following the retirement of D/C Schaller, was to split Traffic and Planning into two roughly evenly sized divisions, with one (Traffic Operations) focused on technology and operations (such as the traffic management center and traffic signals), and the other (Transportation Planning and Management) focused on roadway design, including both the planning and engineering functions, and the operational implementation of changes via signage and pavement markings. While on the one hand this created more potential friction in terms of internal coordination, it realistically reflected that for programs to grow, responsibility needed to be spread out among more people. As the current D/C for Transportation Planning and Management, I am well aware that in many cases leadership becomes the bottleneck for program growth, and that if these functions remained combined, the programs could not possibly have seen the growth that did happen.

These steps - first creating space to nurture new programs, then embedding the programs within the larger agency operation, and then creating a management structure to support continued growth - all were critical to maintaining the importance of PlaNYC's policies over time. Programs need focus to get off the ground; then to become lasting they need to be entrenched in the bureaucracy; and finally they need a growth-oriented management structure. Individually these steps were necessary, and together they were sufficient to bring the agency to its current place.

Public Messaging

While some of the key outputs are the same - namely street design changes related to safety, transit improvements, and cycling infrastructure, the frame through which these changes have been discussed by DOT has subtly shifted over time. These shifts to some extent reflect changing political priorities, but are also important when considering how this work moved into being a core function of the agency across multiple political regimes.

This shift is especially salient as of the writing of this paper, as bike lanes and other street safety improvements are once again taking a prominent place in culture wars. The Trump administration has included bike lanes as part of the "woke" agenda that they oppose, and the Ford administration in Ontario, Canada is aggressively working to remove bike lanes within the City of Toronto; similar examples can be seen in many European countries as well. Within New York City, there are certainly parts of the political spectrum friendlier and less friendly to livable streets, but with the mainstream conversation being around how much and how fast rather than trying to stop or remove entirely. The dialogue is typically framed around priorities and public process and not whether street safety should be fundamentally part of the City's agenda.

When PlaNYC was first released the message was focused on sustainability and mobility. These were very effective at getting the first set of big projects off the ground in areas friendly to those messages, such as central Manhattan and inner parts of Brooklyn and Queens. With sustainability as such a clear part of the Bloomberg administration's agenda, this provided a strong backing for some of the signature projects of that time, including Times Square and the introduction of bus and bike lanes on First and Second Avenues in Manhattan.

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However, sustainability alone did not have much currency outside those areas. An example can be seen in the New York Times's profile of then-mayoral candidate Anthony Weiner, who aggressively portrayed himself as representing the boroughs outside Manhattan, and threatened to "rip out those fucking bike lanes". Notwithstanding the lack of success for Mr. Weiner's campaigns - likely helped by events outside his position on bike lanes - this sentiment was not considered to be outside the political mainstream. Mayor Bill de Blasio, who eventually won the election to replace Mayor Bloomberg, was considered to be a moderate on transportation issues, previously representing a relatively political neighborhood in Park Slope, Brooklyn, but having voted against the Congestion Pricing proposal during his time on the city council.

As Mayor De Blasio was elected, a different framing of street design issues came to the forefront, one that spoke clearly to the newly elected mayor: the concept of Vision Zero, the idea that traffic fatalities are caused by humans and are ultimately preventable, and public policy should be formulated around reducing them to zero. The concept originated in Sweden, and while known among transportation professionals was not common public policy in the United States. The new mayor spoke deeply and passionately around the importance of protecting New Yorkers' lives, and the hires of both the Police Commissioner William Bratton, and more specifically the Transportation Commissioner Polly Trottenberg were done with the mandate of implementing a Vision Zero program in New York City.

Vision Zero became a broader lens through which to implement change, since it was harder for people to be against a safety focused message. That is not to say that street design work went unopposed - certainly there were still political fights over many individual projects - but it meant that there was relatively broad support for the overall program. It helped that the results were clear; while there had been a long term trend towards fewer fatalities in the city over the preceding decades, there was a notable step change in fatality numbers during the de Blasio administration, including a 2018 low since the advent of record keeping.

As noted above, the Covid-19 pandemic that began early in 2020 brought a number of challenges, including a new frame for some of the agency's work, with a focus on the streets as public realm on a broad scale. While public realm improvements had long been part of the agency's work program, including with the Plaza Program introduced as part of the original PlaNYC, these interventions were not central to the broad message of the agency in the same way that Vision Zero was. However with the pandemic response's focus on social distancing and outdoor interactions, there was a sudden demand for an increase in using the streets as part of the broader living space around the city. This messaging change started under the de Blasio administration, and then continued more strongly through the Adams administration.

First on an emergency basis, and later through more regularized programs, DOT introduced two new concepts that became part of the agency mission: Open Streets and Dining Out NYC. Open Streets was a program that "opened" streets to pedestrians and non-motorized traffic, by either prohibiting car and truck access at times of day, or using movable barriers to create a defacto shared street where vehicles would need to travel slowly. Initially implemented using NYPD to set up the spaces, the program became most successful when brought into the

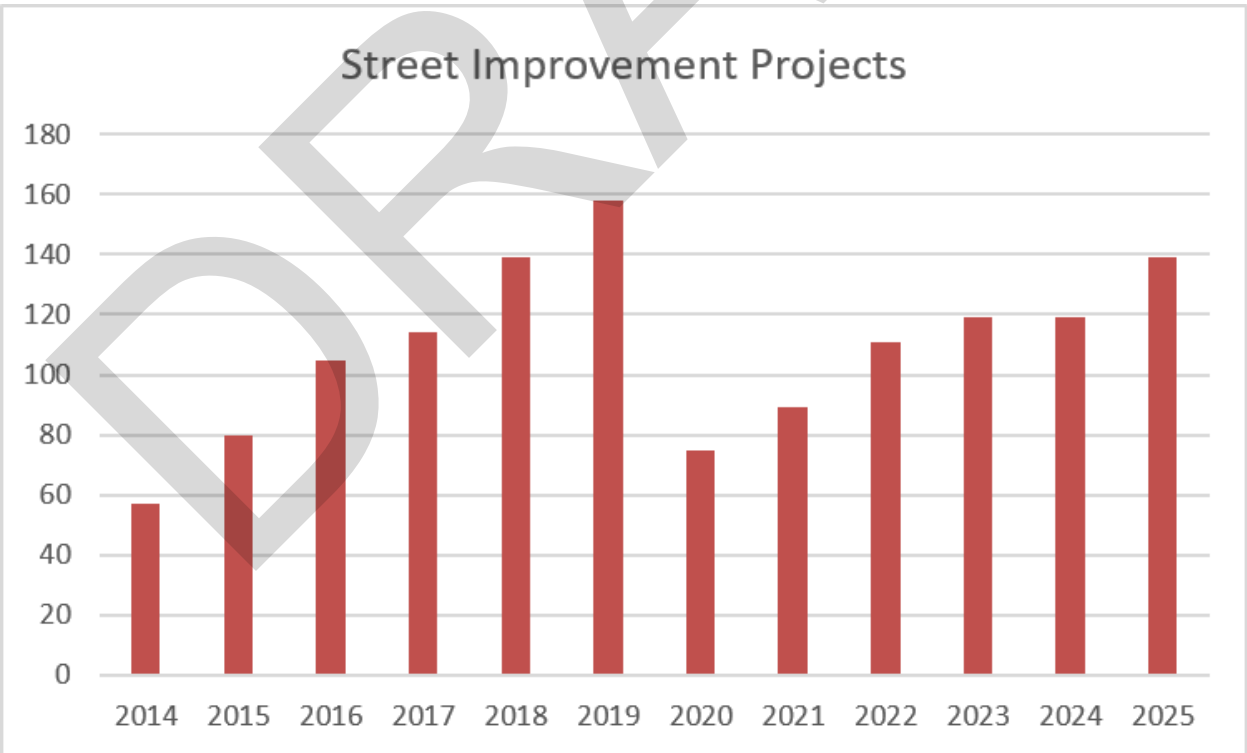
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agency operations, including both support payments to local partners and the hiring of a non-profit partner to manage streets with low capacity partners, and included activations via programming partners. The program grew to over 200 locations citywide, including some very notable successes in places like 34th Avenue in Queens and Berry Street in Brooklyn.

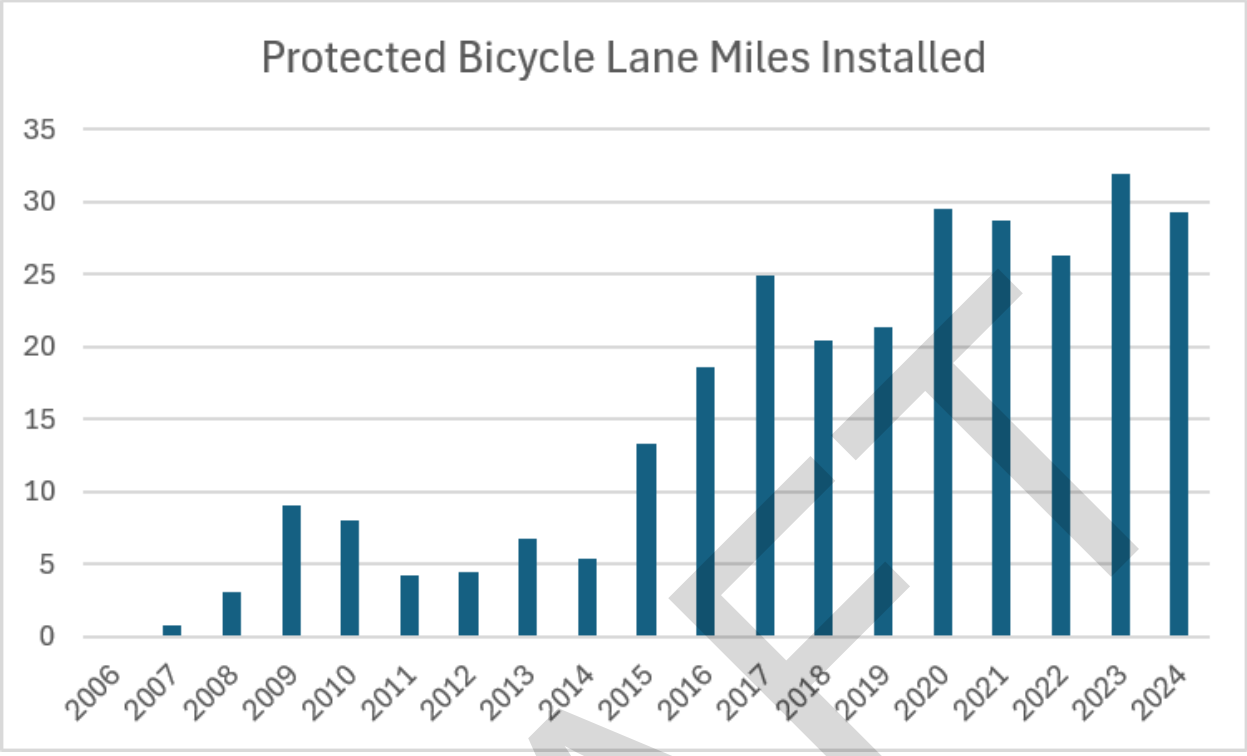
Similarly Dining Out NYC evolved from an emergency program to one that has become a core function of the agency. While outdoor cafes on sidewalks were allowed previously, a relatively small number of restaurants participated, in part because of a challenging administrative process. During the pandemic, the City allowed much broader outdoor dining, with both expanded sidewalk dining as well as allowing restaurants to set up in the parking lane of streets and within portions of plazas. The set up process was greatly relaxed, initially with restaurants able to self certify compliance with a set of standards, and was eventually made permanent with a set of laws passed by the City Council.

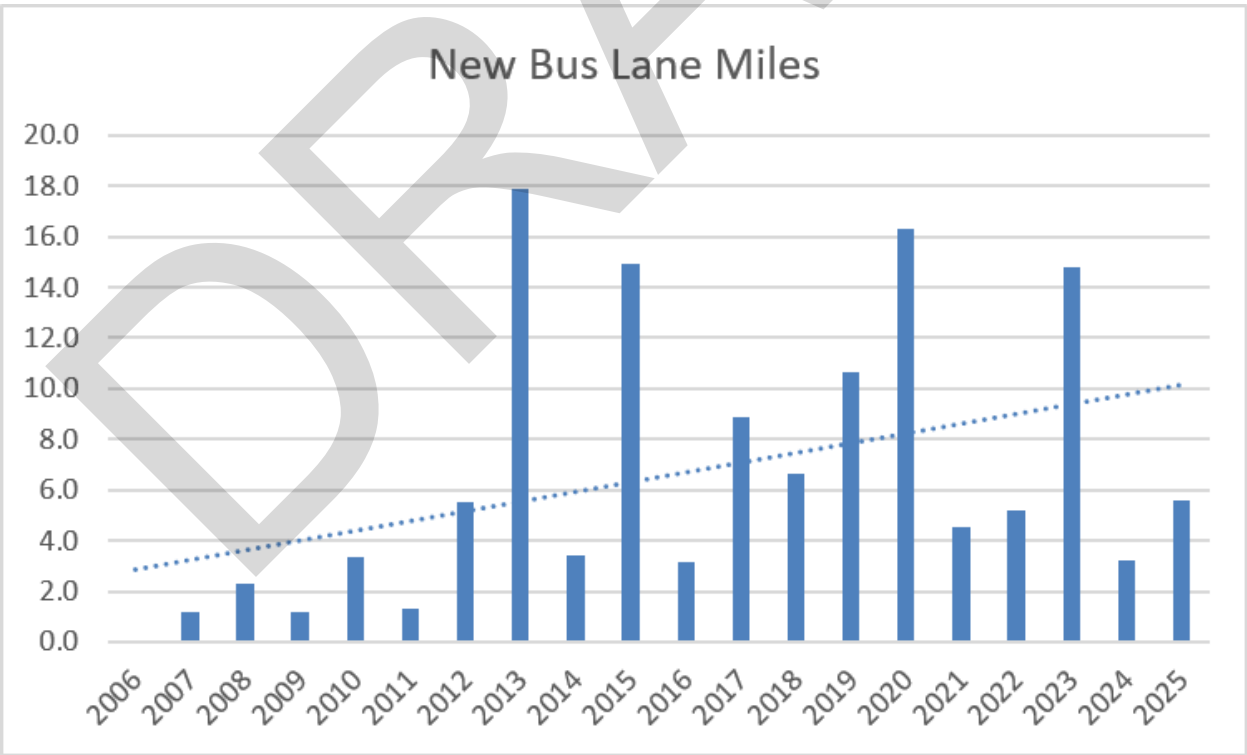
A common theme through this history is the broadening of the agency's mission and the ways in which it engages with the public. While the subjects had all been in the agency's portfolio - improving street safety and public space were certainly part of PlaNYC and the programs had their start in the Bloomberg/Janette Sadik-Khan administration - their public presence grew over time under different leaders, and became new ways for the larger public to understand the work that the agency does, and was supportive of all the growth in the agency over the past 20 years.

Organizational Outputs and Resources



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As shown in the charts above, while non-linear, the "production" of the agency has increased substantially over time as the agency went through the transitions described earlier in the paper.

The commitments have also grown as the agency's capacity has grown, in particular through Street Improvement Projects (SIPs). These "in-house" or "operational" projects use the basic building blocks of the agency - things like street markings, signage, and concrete - to quickly implement changes on a schedule that would be impossible through the City's capital construction process. Installing projects in this way also provides flexibility to the agency, in some cases to make changes when things aren't working as intended, and in other cases to go back and install more advanced treatments once new travel patterns settle in.

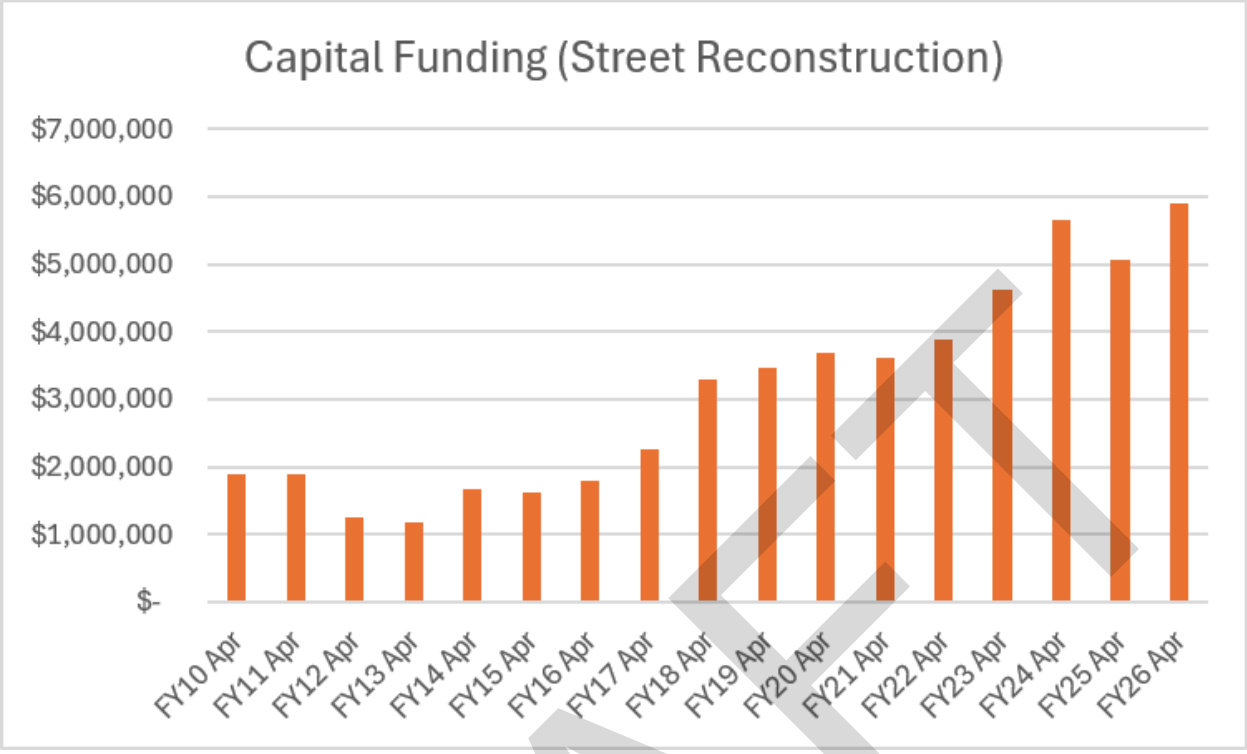
In late 2019, the City Council passed, and Mayor de Blasio signed, what was known as the "Streets Master Plan" law. Largely led by Council Speaker Corey Johnson, who at the time had mayoral ambitions, the law placed a requirement on DOT to develop 5 year plans in 2021 and 2026, notably in future administrations. The law also required some specific benchmarks to be included in the plan, including around accessibility, bus stop amenities, and substantial increases in production of bus lanes and bike lanes. At the time, the agency noted that achieving those milestones would require an investment of over a billion dollars, including needs to hire substantial staff and build new operational facilities to support that work.

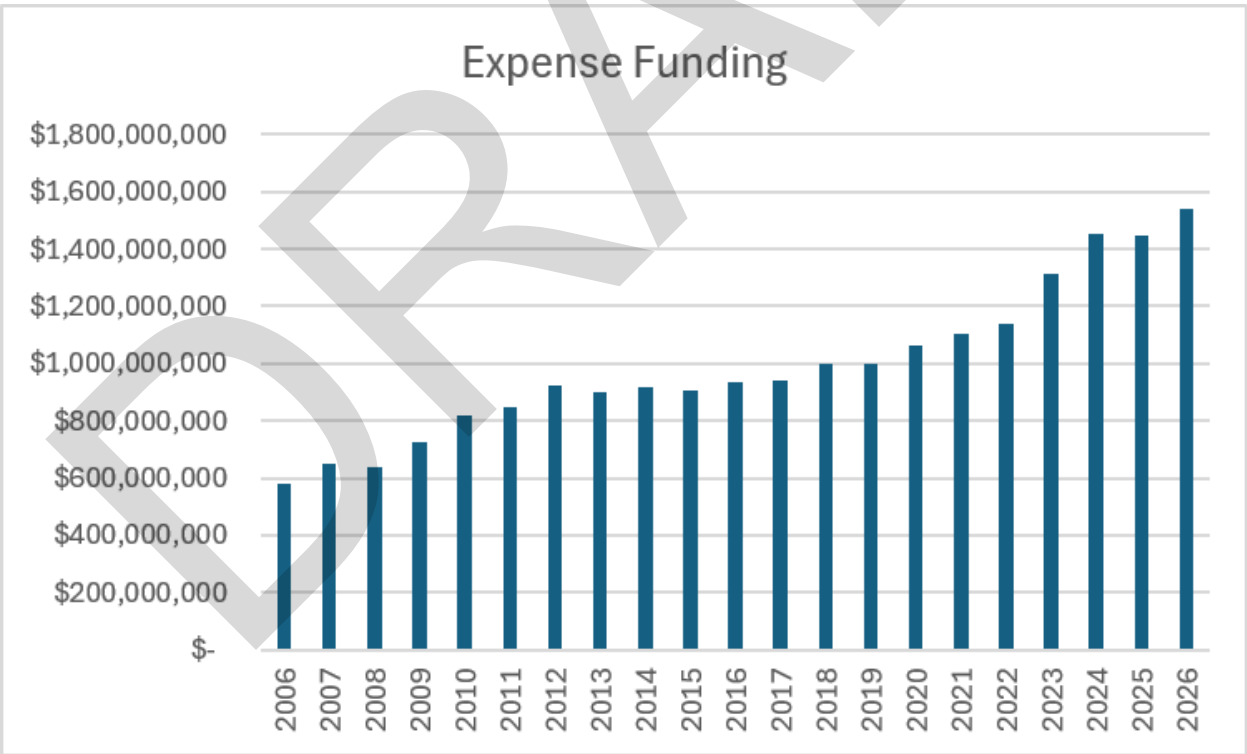
Of course not long after this law passed, the Covid-19 pandemic occurred, which both caused a fiscal crisis within the city, and also added new priorities like the public realm programs described earlier. DOT did publish the 5 year plan in 2021 as required, including the legislated benchmarks, but understandably the required investment did not happen at the same time; the agency's headcount in fact declined slightly in 2021 and 2022 under the effects of the needed hiring freeze. As a result of this delayed investment, while substantial amounts of new bus and bike lanes were installed from any historical comparison, they did not meet the benchmarks in the law.

Despite this challenge, the overall trend since the publication of PlaNYC shows continued investment in the agency; without this investment all of the efforts described in earlier sections would not have been possible. Both the capital and expense budgets of the agency grew substantially, as did agency headcount.

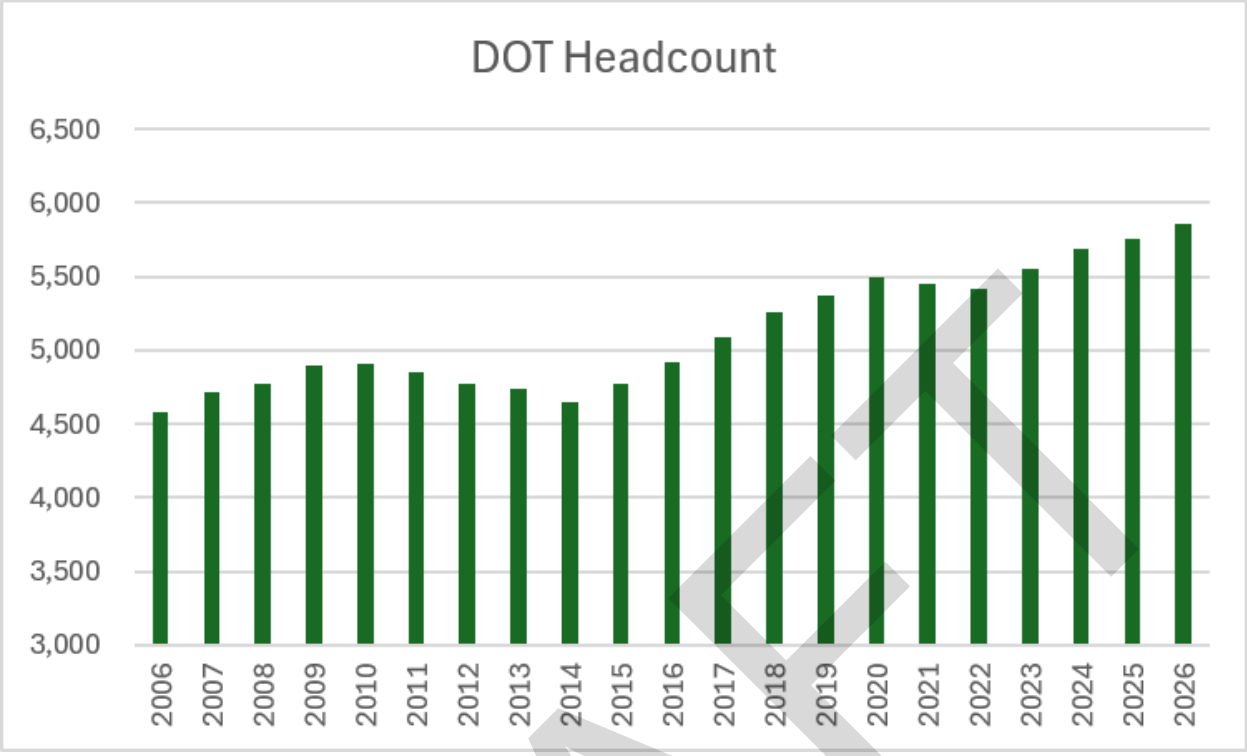
This too is an important part of the historical record - leadership, organizational support, and messaging were all critical, but the growth would have looked very different without the sustained monetary and personnel investments over time.

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Capital Funding (Street Reconstruction)
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Expense Funding
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Author's note

A note about the author and sources: I was hired by NYCDOT in August 2006 to work on writing the transportation chapter of PlaNYC, as part of a team that included other project managers and unit leadership and the Mayor's Office of Long Term Planning and Sustainability, as well as others throughout DOT and the City. I progressed through a series of more senior positions at DOT, and have been the Deputy Commissioner for Transportation Planning and Management since 2017. This set of jobs has given me a unique perspective on how NYCDOT has changed over the past 20 years, and many observations in this paper grow out of that direct experience. At the same time, I recognize that none of these jobs provides universal insight into all relevant aspects of the agency and city government, and so this paper is also based on interviews with many current and former staff at DOT, the Mayor's Office, and relevant outside organizations. While perfect clairvoyance about events in decades past may be imperfect, this paper is a best attempt to create a coherent narrative utilizing as many perspectives as possible.

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