

Heading Forth on Fourth

A History of a life-line through Brooklyn

Fourth Avenue has been a public thoroughfare, in one form or another, since Brooklyn was founded. Along the roadway, you can find the Vecht-Cortelyou house which was originally built in 1699. Fourth Avenue remains a vital life-line for commerce and travelers between the South Brooklyn communities of Bay Ridge, Dyker Heights and Bensonhurst and Downtown Brooklyn. It is an arterial thoroughfare which stretches over six miles from Times Plaza, a triangle formed by Atlantic Avenue and Flatbush Avenue in Downtown Brooklyn to a southern terminus on Shore Road in Bay Ridge.

Fourth Avenue supports retail establishments, light industry, auto-repair services and multiple dwellings along its six mile route. It is home to numerous churches and schools as well. Directly beneath Fourth Avenue is the R train subway. It provides transportation to the citizens of Gowanus, Park Slope, Sunset Park and Bay Ridge. The R train subway below Fourth Avenue is arguably a more vital link for Brooklyn's citizens than Fourth Avenue itself. The subway opened in 1915 and connected Manhattan with Bay Ridge. A pioneer straphanger could take a train from Chambers Street over the Manhattan Bridge to 65th Street and Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge. As Fourth Avenue traverses the borough from North Brooklyn to South Brooklyn, each community on the roadway presents a unique community and a different flavor. Fourth Avenue presents a different face to the world as it stretches through Downtown Brooklyn, Gowanus, Park Slope, Sunset Park and Bay Ridge.

When Fourth Avenue passes under the elevated Gowanus Expressway at 65th Street and into Bay Ridge it changes dramatically. The roadway changes in width, number of lanes and character. In Bay Ridge the thoroughfare is 60 feet wide and predominantly bounded by small apartment buildings, houses of worship and schools. Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge is not a truck route. Fourth Avenue from Times Plaza to 65th Street is 88 feet wide and carries a heavy volume of trucks and commercial vehicles. In Park Slope and Sunset Park it is bordered by more commercial establishments including manufacturing sites, warehouses high rise cooperative apartment buildings and hotels.

Fourth Avenue serves as an alternative to the Gowanus Expressway for drivers as well as a thoroughfare for local traffic. The traffic along it is controlled by traffic lights whose sequence is generally coordinated so that a vehicle traveling from north to south or south to north at a legal rate of speed would have a progressive cascade of green lights or a "Green Wave" at peak travel times such as rush hour. This "green wave" allows higher traffic volume, reduced noise (honking and idling) and reduced pollution from vehicles.

A married couple from Park Slope posted their experiences of Fourth Avenue through the 1970s and 1980s that succinctly and accurately described the thoroughfare's characteristics in modern times in Park Slope and Sunset Park. They moved to Park Slope from Manhattan in 1976 and

described Fourth Avenue as, “Three lanes wide on each side of a raised divider, zoned for commercial and industrial development and cars and trucks sped down it with lightening speed requiring quick reflexes and a strong constitution. Groups of teenagers ... would periodically play chicken with passing vehicles, sauntering slowly across the street in defiance of lights and traffic rules, daring you to hit them (.) In the 70’s the thoroughfare was dominated by tenement style buildings, tire-repair shops, Pentecostal Churches, bodegas, abandoned warehouses, vacant lots, taxi garages, gritty coffee shops and Spanish restaurants. The landscape was working class Brooklyn Americana ... segue to 2012 and Fourth Avenue still has lots of traffic but no one has played chicken with cars in years. The tire-repair shops and Pentecostal Churches are (being) replaced by luxury condo(s) ... (as well as) cafés, bars, pastry stores and upscale diners.” This description accurately reflects the grittier nature of Fourth Avenue from Flatbush Avenue to 65th Street to current times. However, Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge has been and still is substantively different from the rest of the thoroughfare accurately described by these urban pioneers.

There are no easy answers to questions raised about how to improve safety on this vital thoroughfare. There are limits on what the NYCDOT can do to improve efficiency or safety on Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge due to the size of the roadway and the current configuration of the avenue. During the visioning study portion of the process the greatest attention of the T & T Committee and the board was directed to the desire to increase safety for pedestrians along Fourth Avenue. To that end, every participant in the discussions and debate on proposed changes to the thoroughfare agree that more safety is a good thing. However, no reasonable person would recommend the elimination of vehicle traffic on Fourth Avenue although this would virtually guarantee no pedestrian fatalities in the future. What the Traffic and Transportation Committee and the community board have attempted to do is analyze all the variables of the proposed changes and weigh the good effects that a change would bring with any concomitant detriments. Extreme positions and extreme suggestions do not enhance our efforts to produce a good plan for improvement of Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge.

A recent article in the Daily News lightheartedly characterized Bay Ridge residents as being unwilling to slow down vehicles along Fourth Avenue. The headline, “Hell, no! We won’t slow” only serves to trivialize the importance of conducting a thorough analysis of the NYCDOT proposal. Community Board 10 pioneered studies of pedestrian safety and regularly requests and approves safety enhancements for its roads and transportation network. The Community Board 6 in Park Slope and CB 7 in Sunset Park have approved the NYCDOT’s proposals to enhance safety on Fourth Avenue including proposals to reduce lanes from three lanes to two as an anti-speeding measure along Fourth Avenue.

The T & T Committee and the board carefully considered the DOT proposals and balanced the benefits and detriments of the proposals while gathering all the information possible to assure we make a good decision. If a proposed change will have an extreme negative impact on the ability of Fourth Avenue to function then that proposed change merits more close scrutiny and the board must weigh the cost to the community against the potential benefit to the community. The

Committee debated and carefully considered whether the potential detriments of any proposed change outweighed the possible benefits. This is too big of an issue to allow mistakes to occur because some people and tabloids want immediate responses or knee jerk reactions.

As Chairman of the T & T Committee I was personally disappointed to see no direct anti-speeding impediments incorporated in the DOT proposal for Bay Ridge. The proposed changes especially the lane reductions are meant to have the side effect of reducing speeding and studies have shown that “road diets” can reduce speeding vehicles without affecting the efficiency of the thoroughfare but I believe we need and deserve actual direct anti-speeding measures for Fourth Avenue right now.

The other communities of Fourth Avenue decided to eliminate one lane out of three through lanes for traffic in both directions. In effect they have given up 33 1/3 % of their traffic capacity on the avenue. In Bay Ridge a reduction of one lane out of two through lanes of traffic is a 50% reduction of our traffic capacity on the avenue. The lane reductions in Park Slope and Sunset Park will have less of an impact on traffic in those communities than the proposed lane reductions in Bay Ridge. The reductions do not guaranty a reduction in speeding and no direct anti-speeding measures were incorporated in the proposals for the avenue for any of the communities.

The issue which was raised again and again throughout the whole process was a concern over speeding drivers and pedestrian safety. The NYCDOT plan for Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge should incorporate direct anti-speeding alterations to the roadway. Anti-speeding measures for Fourth Avenue can include raised speed reducers: speed bumps, speed tables and speed cushions. These were requested by members of CB 10 but left out of the proposed changes for the roadway by the NYCDOT. A raised speed reducer deflects the wheels of a travelling vehicle with the purpose and direct effect of reducing the speed of the vehicle. Some kind of speed reducers could be incorporated into the roadway on Fourth Avenue and/or on identified dangerous side streets. (i.e. 82nd Street).

A speed table is a speed reducer configured as a flat top speed hump raised approximately three inches above the road and it could be as wide as or wider than a normal crosswalk. NYCDOT Street Design Manual states that a community in NYC can request a speed table even a mid-block speed table from the Commissioner. The DOT has installed them in various places in Manhattan to slow down speeding traffic. Speed tables have been shown to reduce vehicle speed by 15% which would certainly improve pedestrian safety. The operational effectiveness of speed reducers to achieve traffic calming has been confirmed by traffic studies. I believe that Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge needs and deserves one or two speed tables to stop the speeding drivers that are killing pedestrians on Fourth Avenue.

The NYCDOT redesign proposal for Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge started with a request by CB 7 in Sunset Park for safety enhancements to the avenue in 2009. Borough President Marty

Markowitz took up the cause and commissioned a visioning report for Fourth Avenue in 2010. The report contained suggestions to redesign the thoroughfare in order to enhance its beauty and improve pedestrian safety. In 2010 the Borough President created a Fourth Avenue Task Force for redesign of the thoroughfare. The T & T Committee discussed safety improvement issues for the avenue throughout 2011. The NYCDOT set up a website (over 240 comments were received), hosted workshops and had an open house at PS 264 to discuss ideas and receive community input on any proposed changes for Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge throughout 2013. The “visioning workshops” were open to the public and held at various locations in the community. Many voices were heard throughout the process including automobile enthusiasts, bicycling advocates, the BRAKES group and Transportation Alternatives.

The NYCDOT proposal for Fourth Avenue included lane reductions between 15th Street to 65th Street in CB 7. The proposed changes for Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge always incorporated lane reductions. The DOT presented the Bay Ridge Fourth Avenue Corridor Safety Plan with proposed lane reductions for Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge to the T & T Committee on May 13, 2013. CB 10 hosted a Town Hall meeting to get more input on the NYCDOT proposal on June 5, 2013. It was held at St. Anselm’s Parish Hall and more than 200 citizens attended.

On June 10, 2013, the Traffic and Transportation Committee voted to recommend approval of the NYCDOT Bay Ridge Fourth Avenue Corridor Safety Plan although the debate and discussion produced more than the normal amount of division over certain points of the plan. The Committee did not recommend the NYCDOT proposal in its entirety.

The Committee rejected outright some of the proposed changes and voted to include proposals that were not in the plan. The Committee felt comfortable picking and choosing what parts of the overall NYCDOT proposal they felt would best serve the issue of pedestrian safety without eliminating the utility of the thoroughfare to accommodate traffic. The board should feel free to do the same. Any reduction to traffic capacity of the thoroughfare will impinge upon vehicular traffic: cars, buses, taxis, school buses and emergency vehicles. Commuters using the Verrazano Narrows Bridge and travelers on Third and Fifth Avenues will be affected by proposed lane reductions on Fourth Avenue between Ovington Avenue and 86th Street.

CB 10 was presented the T & T report at the last meeting of the year on June 17, 2013 and it engendered a healthy debate and exchange of ideas. The discussion on the DOT proposed plan for Fourth Avenue was tabled to a special extraordinary session during the summer. I believe that was the right thing to do at the time. We should proceed only when we are satisfied that the time and the proposal is right. If there was some confusion as to the actual proposal the committee voted on and its content, I apologize for any deficiency in the presentation.

At the June 17, 2013, I presented a report describing the plan section by section in order of the controversy engendered by the proposed changes to each section which was confusing. The report tonight is more straightforward. I want to reiterate that I believe the board should consider

adopting some of the proposals recommended by the Committee because some of them do enhance safety and have very little impact on the traffic capacity of the avenue. The report will be delivered in a geographical order describing the proposed changes for Fourth Avenue from 65th Street to Shore Road.

The NYCDOT identified four crash “hotspots” (2006-2010) on Fourth Avenue:

Bay Ridge Avenue (8 pedestrian injuries/37 total injuries), Ovington Avenue (7 pedestrian injuries/22 overall injuries), Bay Ridge Parkway (12 pedestrian injuries/42 total injuries) and 86th Street (24 pedestrian injuries/52 total injuries). There have been 5 pedestrian fatalities on Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge over the past eight years including a pedestrian killed on the corner of 82nd Street and Fourth Avenue. CB 10 previously recommended and the DOT installed turn restrictions for vehicles at Fourth Avenue and 86th Street to enhance pedestrian safety in 2012.

Here is the NYCDOT Bay Ridge Fourth Avenue Corridor Safety Plan with all proposed changes and what the T & T Committee voted to recommend to the entire board.

Looking at a map of the thoroughfare from left to right or from north to south, Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge runs from 65th Street by the Gowanus Expressway (North) to Shore Road by the Belt Parkway Entrance ramps (South).

SHORE ROAD DRIVE (by the BR Towers) between 65th Street and Shore Road Drive.

The NYCDOT proposes creating a dedicated eastbound lane coming from the Belt Parkway for cars on Shore Road Drive going over Fourth Avenue heading towards Fifth Avenue and removing the parking spots on Fourth Avenue on the eastside of Fourth Avenue so that cars making left turns from Shore Road Drive onto Fourth Avenue would have additional lane on Fourth Avenue to continue north toward Sunset Park. The parking spots would be relocated to the south side of Shore Road Parkway so there would be no loss of parking spots.

The T & T Committee voted to recommend the changes as long as the NYCDOT would install signage for the removed parking spots on the eastside of Fourth Avenue so that parking was only prohibited from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday (when the lane is needed for traffic) and if a left turn signal is installed for the left turn bay for north bound traffic on Fourth Avenue at the 65th Street Extension (under the Gowanus Expressway). The Committee felt that the parking should not be prohibited for overnight parking and the left turn signal was needed to alleviate congestion caused by the DOT’s reconfiguration of the lanes here.

Discuss/Vote

67TH STREET

The NYCDOT proposes to refurbish crosswalks and stop line markings over the thoroughfare between 67th Street and Ovington Avenue. The DOT proposes to paint a stripe nine feet from the curb to narrow the travelling lanes and to designate a nine foot parking lane.

The NYCDOT also proposed some designated commercial areas with specific regulations for commercial vehicle only stopping to load or unload goods. This was added on to the original proposal and contained no specific information.

The T&T Committee voted to recommend approval of the proposed changes to the street markings over this part of the thoroughfare but rejected any proposal for commercial zone designations since the exact sites, times, or terms of such zones were not included in the proposal and could not be properly discussed. The commercial zone proposal was not part of the original NYCDOT proposal and was not discussed at the Town Hall meeting. One member asked why the DOT proposed a nine foot parking lane in this section of Fourth Avenue and a thirteen foot parking lane in the section between Ovington Avenue and 86th Street. T & T Member Liz Amato reminded the Committee of the vital importance of having clearly defined commercial zones.

OVINGTON AVENUE (near IS 30 and LES) between Ovington Avenue and 86th Street

The NYCDOT proposes “reducing from two to one travel lanes in each direction” along this section of Fourth Avenue. In addition the NYCDOT proposes to paint a painted line 13 feet from the curb in both directions so that a parking lane is delineated and the single lane for traffic is narrowed. Painted left turn bays would be located at every intersection so that the one lane of traffic would widen to two lanes at the intersections for one or two (at most) turning vehicles. This would include a painted bay for south bound drivers making a left hand turn unto 86th Street from Fourth Avenue.

The Committee discussed this proposed change in great depth and some members discussed possible congestion, traffic redirection to other avenues and danger for pedestrians who may believe new painted medians are safe from vehicular traffic. The Committee voted 6-5 to recommend these changes to the board.

Discuss/Vote

BAY RIDGE PARKWAY (75th Street)

The DOT proposes to extend the NE curb into Fourth Avenue to shorten the distance for people crossing Fourth Avenue using the northern cross walk. This would not eliminate any parking spot because the corner to be extended has a fire hydrant on it.

The Committee voted to recommend the proposed change since the intersection was a traffic “hotspot”.

Discuss/Vote

82ND STREET

At 82nd Street the NYCDOT proposes adding safety enhancements at the intersection of 82nd Street and Fourth Avenue since it was the site of a recent pedestrian fatality. The DOT proposed extending the NE curb into Fourth Avenue to shorten the distance for people crossing Fourth Avenue in the northern crosswalk. It would slow cars turning right onto Fourth Avenue from 82nd Street and make pedestrians waiting to cross more visible.

The Committee voted to recommend the change since there was a recent pedestrian fatality there and voted to recommend that the SE curb should be extended across Fourth Avenue as well since it would help pedestrians in the southern crosswalk of the intersection get across Fourth Avenue more safely and it would not cost a parking spot since the corner has a fire hydrant on it. The Committee recommended that the board request bollards to be placed on the extensions for greater visibility.

Although this was not part of the original proposed plan it did fit the aim of the Fourth Avenue visioning mission statement and the proposal was very exact and specific so the Committee entertained it with the rest of the proposal.

Discuss/Vote

85TH STREET

At 85th Street the NYCDOT proposes safety enhancements at the intersection:

They propose a ban for right turns on 85th Street for north bound traffic on Fourth Avenue heading to Sunset Park.

On the SE corner of the intersection (across from Sleepy’s) they propose to extend the curb into Fourth Avenue to shorten the crossing for pedestrians using the southern crosswalk at the intersection. This would also make pedestrians crossing 85th Street on the eastern side of the avenue more visible to drivers and people in the crosswalk would be protected from north bound cars on Fourth Avenue making sharp right turns onto 85th Street. This would eliminate one parking spot at that SE corner.

The DOT proposes to widen the southern crosswalk over Fourth Avenue from the SE corner across the avenue to the western side of the avenue widening like a “fan”. The cross walk on the SW corner would widen to twice the size of the cross walk at the SE corner of the intersection of 85th Street and Fourth Avenue. The wider portion of the cross walk would protect pedestrians near the unmanned 85th Street entrance to the 86th Street R line subway station. This would

eliminate two parking spaces on the western side of Fourth Avenue between 85th and 86th Streets. This would help “even out” the skewed intersection and protect pedestrians who take the most direct route to or from the 85th Street subway entrance.

The Committee voted to recommend approval of the proposed changes except for the ban on right turns from Fourth Avenue unto 85th Street because possible confusion with other turning restrictions and because it would redirect traffic heading to the municipal garage on 85th Street and 5th Avenue.

Discuss/Vote

86TH STREET

The NYCDOT proposes installation of a concrete pedestrian refuge island in the middle of the southern crosswalk at 86th Street and Fourth Avenue and an 80 foot long (3-4 foot high) pedestrian fence on the western side of Fourth Avenue running south from the SW corner (by MochaMocha) to the middle of the block (between 86th and 87th Streets). This would prevent dangerous jaywalking and discourage double parking or standing to shop or discharge passengers in that bus stop area.

The DOT proposes to paint the parking lane along the western side of Fourth Avenue closest to the curb between 86th Street and 87th Street with a contrasting color and paint “BUS ONLY” signage on the lane.

The NYCDOT proposes to change the S53 bus stop, with the cooperation of the MTA, and move the S53 bus first stop where passengers line up to be picked up from its present location on the western side of Fourth Avenue between 86th and 87th Street one block south to the western side of Fourth Avenue between 87th and 88th Streets. The first stop bus stop move would eliminate four parking spots on the block. The S53 last stop where bus passengers are discharged would remain on the western side of Fourth Avenue between 86th and 87th Street close to the subway entrance. The aim is to reduce bus commuter congestion.

The NYCDOT proposes to extend the curb for pedestrians crossing 86th Street on the SW corner of 86th Street and Fourth Avenue (by MochaMocha). There is a taxi stand there and one parking spot for a waiting taxi would be lost.

The T & T Committee spent a great deal of time with this proposal as well. Many members brought up good ideas about bus congestion and reconfiguration of bus stops. There were suggestions that the NYCDOT should add right turn signals for north bound Fourth Avenue traffic turning right unto 86th Street and heading to Bensonhurst as well as a left turn signal for westbound traffic on 86th Street making a left unto Fourth Avenue from 86th Street. An exclusive cycle for this turning traffic in rush hours/peak hours would prevent pedestrian/vehicle conflict in the eastern cross walk over 86th Street. Requests were made for mid-block cross

walks to replace the current ones at the intersection. None of these ideas were adopted in the NYCDOT plan.

The T & T Committee voted to recommend approval to paint the bus lane a contrasting color (11-0), to move the S53 first stop to pick up passengers one block south (7-3) [T & T members Stelter and Gounardes were concerned that the bus stop move would create danger by increasing volume of traffic crossing 87th Street] and to install the curb extension on the SW corner (6-3). The Committee rejected the fence, the pedestrian island and any painted turn bay for left turns unto 86th Street for south bound traffic on Fourth Avenue (heading toward the Belt Parkway) proposed changes. The members believed the potential problems for bus passengers being discharged and buses turning militated against the fence and the island. The painted bay was believed to be too confusing with the other signs and signals in the intersection.

Discuss/Vote

87TH STREET

The NYCDOT proposes to leave unchanged the thoroughfare from 87th Street to 95th Street.

95TH STREET TO 101ST STREET

The NYCDOT proposes to reduce the two lanes for traffic from 95th Street to 101st Street to one lane in both directions with a dedicated left turn bay for cars travelling south towards the Belt Parkway to turn onto 100th Street. The idea is to calm traffic by giving it less lanes to travel over.

The T & T Committee voted to recommend approval (6-4) of lane reduction for traffic calming limited to the north bound traffic heading toward Sunset Park only and that both lanes of south bound traffic are unaltered so drivers can get to the Belt Parkway entrance ramps easily. The north bound lanes would be reduced to one lane along this portion of Fourth Avenue but would widen to two lanes to accommodate a left turn bay for turning cars travelling north making a left turn onto 99th Street. The two southbound lanes would increase to three lanes to create a left turn bay for southbound traffic making a left unto 100th Street.

Discuss/Vote

101ST STREET TO SHORE ROAD

The NYCDOT proposes no changes to the thoroughfare itself between 101st Street and the southern terminus of the thoroughfare at Shore Road.

It does propose to change the intersection of Shore Road and Fourth Avenue with safety enhancements including:

A barrier on the ramp for Long Island bound drivers entering onto the Belt Parkway. This would more clearly delineate the traffic flow and better channel the traffic coming from Fourth Avenue and turning right from Shore Road onto the ramp. It should slow drivers turning right from Shore Road and drivers travelling south on Fourth Avenue heading onto the entrance ramp to the parkway for traffic heading to Long Island. The wide entrance ramp in effect would be narrowed and channeled into two lanes which would slow drivers and improve pedestrian safety. The NYCDOT proposes a curb extension on the SW corner of the intersection to shorten the crossing distance across Shore Road. This corner is the one closest to the comfort station and closest to the shore. The extension would discourage speeding to make a right turn from Shore Road onto the parkway. The DOT would repaint the crosswalks to create high visibility crosswalks in the intersection.

The T & T Committee voted to recommend approval of these proposed changes to the intersection to the board.

Discuss/Vote

Respectfully submitted,

Brian Kieran

Chairman Traffic and Transportation Committee