



## Urban Renewal: Getting Cars Out of the City Center

Posted by [Glenn](#) on March 12, 2006 - 9:29pm in [The Oil Drum: Local](#)

Topic: [Policy/Politics](#)

Tags: [automobile](#), [congestion](#), [oil](#), [peak oil](#), [traffic](#), [transportation](#) [[list all tags](#)]



Despite some lip service against the evils of Robert Moses type highway building, public policy has focused on facilitating as many automobiles into the central business districts as technically possible. Great sums of money and planning effort are still spent on trying to alleviate traffic congestion, only to find that once one bottleneck is "fixed" many other arise. We see this in the timing of traffic lights, the widening of roads at the expense of sidewalks, pedestrian barricades, the number of traffic police used to facilitate traffic at bottlenecks, etc. And yet where has it all ended - more and more automobile traffic constantly congesting the scarce public space of our urban centers.

Building on the last post on [21st Century Urban Renewal](#), the new study "[Necessity or Choice? Why People Drive in Manhattan](#)" released by NYC's [Transportation Alternatives](#) and [Interloafer's](#) fairly detailed list of policy fixes (which I agree with 100%), I would like to start a conversation about auto-dependency by debunking many of the traditional assumptions about automobile traffic in the urban environment. It's time to revisit the thinking and assumptions that got us here.

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The conventional wisdom about automobile traffic in the urban environment has been:

- A) Large numbers of automobiles entering a city's Central Business District (CBD) are necessary and essential to the flow of commerce.
- B) The automobile is the only way that many people can enter the city to do business.
- C) Necessary delivery trucks/vans, commercial vehicles (like taxis, livery cabs) and Mass Transit Buses are the main source of traffic congestion, which is the main deterrent of more people entering the city.
- D) Any attempts to limit the number of automobiles on the road are economically harmful, politically unpopular and only causes more traffic congestion.

E) Therefore we must deal with all the negative effects of automobiles as a necessary cost of doing business

Based on data from the [Transportation Alternatives report](#) on New York City, which used publicly available government information, it's time to completely throw out these assumptions for New York City and many other large urban centers:

A) Automobiles contribute very little to the overall economic activity of the Manhattan CBD. About 30% of automobiles entering the CBD drive through it *without stopping or doing any business*. Automobiles contribute less than 14% of all trips to the CBD. Those 14% of trips are no more valuable than trips made by foot, bike or mass transit.

B) Ninety percent of people who drive to the CBD *have a mass transit option*. People drive instead of taking mass transit to the CBD for convenience, not as a necessity. In many cases the time difference is less than 10 minutes.

C) Passenger cars, many of which are occupied by only a single person, *make up 60% of the automobiles entering the CBD*. Personal cars (low value traffic) are the real source of the congestion that inhibits higher value traffic like commercial deliveries, buses and short distance taxis from making their trips efficiently.

D) Rather than causing economic harm, reducing the number of passenger cars in the Manhattan CBD would appear to *increase the efficiency of higher value automobile traffic*. This is no doubt why during the recent transit strike that the Bloomberg administration chose to restrict entry to the Manhattan CBD to only cars with 4 people or more.

Politically, this should not be a big deal. Most people in NYC do not own cars and most of those that do would never think of using it to commute into the CBD during the peak commuting hours due to lack of available parking. The disconnect politically lies not with the voters, but with their representatives and public employees that have special parking permits which [encourages them to drive at 2-3x the rate of most classes of workers](#).

Traffic planners now readily accept the assumption that if you relieve bottlenecks, build more and wider roads, more automobiles will show up. In fact, that's usually the main reason to build more roads or widen existing ones - to accommodate more traffic. If that logic is true, why *wouldn't closing roads and narrowing roads will result in fewer cars over time?*

E) Given how low value passenger automobile traffic turns out to be, *it is surprising that we continue to tolerate the negative impacts they cause* - pedestrian and cyclist deaths, traffic congestion, air pollution, noise/honking disruptions and just the sheer waste of scarce public space.

Based on this analysis, governmental action to limit the number of low value automobile traffic on the streets of dense urban areas can only serve the public interest, regardless of energy prices. Peak oil is only the latest reason to provide carrots and sticks to encourage more use of mass transit and less dependence on automobiles in dense urban environments.



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