

Park Place - Underhill Avenue Block Association

Approved Minutes
10/20/2021

Attendees:

Phyllis Brody	Kyle Gorman (DoT)	Michele Smith
Lee Eastman (DoT)	Saskia Haegens (PHNDC)	Teddy Theoharis
Jill Frasier	Ethan Mulligan	Matt Weinstein
Den Gordon	Diana Regan	Stacey Weinstein
Marc Gordon	Ed Regan	David Whitbeck

The meeting was held via Zoom and called to order by Marc Gordon, co-president at 7:35 PM.

Featured Speaker – feedback on Open Streets

Marc Gordon introduced Kyle Gorman, Senior Program Manager in the Public Space Unit of the NYC Department of Transportation. Mr. Gorman gave a presentation which had originally been given to the Community Board 8 Transportation Committee on Sept 28th.

Open Streets on Vanderbilt Ave and Underhill Ave originally commenced in May 2020 as an emergency response program during the pandemic with Prospect Heights Neighborhood Development Council as DoT's community partner. The DoT has assessed the Prospect Heights Open Streets through a community feedback survey (Feb-May 2021), a traffic study for the Open Streets (Mar-Nov 2021), and through pop-up community workshops (Sep 2021). Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with many respondents noting benefits to local businesses and opportunities for recreational use of the Open Streets. A number of areas for operational improvements were also reported, including clearer delineation of bike lanes to keep bikes and pedestrians separated; addressing increased traffic congestion on adjacent streets; and inadequate garbage cleanup on Vanderbilt Ave.

Improvements in the program introduced in 2021 were: clearer bike lanes, new signs and barriers, public art on Vanderbilt Ave, event programming, and deployment of Clean-up Corps workers on Vanderbilt Ave.

Looking forward, DoT is continuing to perform traffic counts on both streets through Nov 2021, and in the winter will analyze traffic data and develop proposals for implementation in 2022. "DoT tool kit" items including street furniture, bike infrastructure, curb use management and many others will be considered for possible implementation. DoT will host a community workshop in Nov 2021 to get feedback about design proposals for 2022 projects. In winter 2022, DoT will present projects to CB 8 for final feedback, and will implement projects in spring /summer 2022.

Several questions were asked and addressed as follows:

Survey respondents were self-selecting; was consideration given to doing a focus group to provide more inclusive representation especially of working class people in the community; how will data collection be done differently in the future?

We want to reach as many people as we possibly can and we are open to using focus groups and other data collection techniques for future community input.

Were B69 bus riders represented in survey respondents and community feedback sessions? I have experienced many complaints from bus riders on re-routed buses.

DoT did not specifically target this population but we can liaise with our colleagues in MTA to see whether they have received feedback about the re-routing of the bus line during weekend closures of Vanderbilt Ave.

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Has anyone considered the impact of Open Streets to availability of parking?

Parking (also referred to as “curb management”) comes up in many DoT projects. There are multiple impacts on availability of parking in Prospect Heights, including capital projects such as the water & sewer project; this will be looked at over a period of time.

Do you monitor actual usage (not just survey responses) of the Underhill Ave Open Street?

Yes, we have been doing counts of pedestrians, bikes and vehicles on the Open Streets and also get anecdotal observations from PHND and our Clean-up Corps partners.

The current water & sewer project will impact Park Place through at least later summer / early fall 2022. Much of Vanderbilt Avenue’s northbound traffic is routed onto Park Place when Vanderbilt is closed. Is the water & sewer project’s impact on Park Place being taken into consideration when planning 2022 Open Street initiatives, and might some initiatives be deferred until completion of the water & sewer project?

DoT will evaluate the timing and impact of capital projects and this will influence what will happen in 2022 regarding traffic management. This year we implemented variable message boards in Grand Army Plaza to attempt to reduce traffic onto Vanderbilt Ave.

Regarding the Vanderbilt Ave block from Park Pl to Prospect Pl, it is less used during the weekend than the other Vanderbilt Ave Open Street blocks (only 2 restaurants use the Open Street), and the closure of the street to traffic is an issue for other businesses such as the Foodtown on that block. Is any consideration being given to removing that block from the Vanderbilt Ave Open Street?

We’re currently focused on this year’s projects; we can do another survey of the businesses on that block and have a focused conversation with Foodtown’s owners since it is a primary business in the neighborhood.

Has DoT communicated to Google Maps, Waze, Uber, Lyft etc. so that they don’t route cars onto Vanderbilt during hours when the street is closed to traffic?

DoT provides them the data, but these are all private companies and they prioritize and control how they use the data.

Featured Speaker – COVID-19 testing resources

Marc Gordon presented information he had compiled about COVID-19 testing and resources for getting tested in Prospect Heights.

The FDA recommends people get tested for COVID 1) if COVID symptoms are present; 2) if you have been exposed to someone with confirmed COVID; 3) if you participated in higher-risk activities including travel and attending large gatherings without social distancing; 4) if you are required to be tested for travel, employment, or medical treatment.

PCR tests are the most accurate and are the tests used when a test is required. Antigen (or “rapid”) tests produce results in 15-30 minutes but are somewhat less accurate. They sometimes produce false negatives when the patient has only recently been exposed to the virus, whereas PCR tests will detect that infection more accurately.

Insurance companies are required to cover the cost of tests deemed medically appropriate. They may, but are not required to cover the cost of elective tests (e.g. asymptomatic people being tested prior to travel). Check with your own insurance company and the test provider before being tested to determine whether you will have any financial responsibility.

Marc then reviewed the availability, appointment scheduling, insurance acceptance and turnaround times for PCR tests, antigen tests, and at-home antigen tests at 6 providers near our PPUABA blocks: Alliance Health,

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CareCube, CityMD, Duane Reade, Kings Pharmacy and Northwell Health. His presentation with the details will be posted with these minutes on the PPUABA website.

Growing Our Community – James Forten Playground

Den Gordon presented a “big picture” about Growing Our Community / Friends of James Forten Playground’s plans for James Forten Playground. Den reviewed a labeled map of the playground and discussed the plans for each area.

- The tree beds alongside Underhill Avenue (area 1 on the map) were recently planted with shrubs (and last fall, with spring bulbs) and are currently protected by temporary fencing to allow the shrubs to take hold.
- The tree beds in the playground entryway (area 2 on the map) are often used to “park” playground toys, and the soil is heavily compacted. For now, the soil will be aerated and mulch added but no additional planting is currently planned.
- The center tree beds (area 3 on the map) have severely compacted soil, and kids go into those tree beds to dig and run through the tree beds. While the Parks department gardener suggested planting shrubs there, from observation of the usage of the playground, Den believes shrubs planted there wouldn’t survive. The plan is to create a digging area for kids, with buckets and shovels. Mulch will be applied in those tree beds this weekend.
- The tree bed along Prospect Place (area 4 on the map) slopes toward Prospect Place. It has severe soil erosion and needs a soil retention treatment. Permission is being sought this winter to install a soil retention structure next spring, and eventually create a “exploratory / discovery area” for kids.
- The northeast area of the playground (area 5 on the map) has very low light so plants won’t easily grow. It is currently fenced and not easily accessible. Future usage will require capital investment and will be discussed with the Parks department.

Near-term activities will include planting of daffodil bulbs and spreading a truckload of mulch on Sun Oct 24, and a set of kids’ activities on Sat Nov 06, 10:30am-12:30pm. Volunteers are needed for both activities, especially for the Nov 06 date.

PPUABA business items and announcements

The minutes of the September 2021 meeting were approved unanimously.

Marc announced that the Communications Survey will close on Friday Oct 22. Members who haven’t yet responded are encouraged to do so. Find the invitation emailed to all members on Oct 07, or if you can’t find the email, notify Marc and he will provide a hardcopy form.

Marc reported that early voting begins this Saturday and will continue until Sun Oct 31; Election Day is Nov 02. Details about polling places, hours and ballot proposals can be found on the PPUABA website “Election 2021” article. Teddy Theoharis contributed that the official NYC voter guide can be found at <https://www.voting.nyc/meet-the-candidates> and that information about the ballot proposals can be found at <https://www.voting.nyc/meet-the-candidates/2021-ballot-proposals/>.

Marc solicited suggestions for guest speakers at future meetings beyond November, when Crystal Hudson will be our guest speaker (assuming she wins the election for City Council District 35).

New business and other items

Dee Regan reported that she was very pleased with the responsiveness of the 77th precinct Community Relations officers on a query she made earlier this week, and also with the water and sewer project’s Community Construction Liaison, Danilo Mikhaylov.

The meeting adjourned at 9:13 PM.