

After Spike in Deaths, New York to Get 250 Miles of Protected Bike Lanes

The city will build the lanes as part of a \$1.7 billion street safety plan to be adopted by Mayor Bill de Blasio and the City Council.



By Emma G. Fitzsimmons

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Riding a bicycle in New York City is often a harrowing journey across a patchwork of bike lanes that leave cyclists vulnerable to cars. The dangers came into focus this year after 25 cyclists were killed on city streets — the highest toll in two decades.

Now Mayor Bill de Blasio and the City Council have agreed on a \$1.7 billion plan that would sharply expand the number of protected bike lanes as part of a sweeping effort to transform the city's streetscape and make it less perilous for bikers.

Its chief proponent, Corey Johnson, the City Council speaker, calls it nothing less than an effort to “break the car culture.”

Such ambitions show how far New York has come since around 2007 when the city, under Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, started aggressively taking away space for cars by rolling out bike lanes and pedestrian plazas.

Under pressure from the City Council, the city would be required to build 250 miles of protected bike lanes in the coming years, along with a dizzying list of other street upgrades that safety advocates have long called for. The city now has about 1,250 miles of bike lanes, including 126 miles on city streets that are protected, meaning that a barrier separates the lanes from vehicles.

“New Yorkers know that the way we get around our city right now makes no sense,” said Mr. Johnson, who is expected to run for mayor in 2021. “Our streets have been really poorly planned in a piecemeal fashion.”

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The cyclist deaths have prompted an outpouring of sadness and outrage. The victims have included a 10-year-old boy killed by an unlicensed driver steps from his home and a 52-year-old man who was hit out of nowhere by a careening car that was captured in a horrifying video.

Cities like Los Angeles and Washington are expanding their bike networks, but New York's plans are far more expansive. San Diego plans to build 70 miles of new bike lanes, while Cambridge, Mass., set rules this year to add protected lanes on all rebuilt roads. Copenhagen is the international model for bike infrastructure, with about 250 miles of protected bike lanes.

The bike lanes proposed in New York are a key part of Mr. Johnson's so-called Streets Master Plan, a bill that is expected to be approved by the City Council on Wednesday. Mr. de Blasio's administration had expressed concerns about the bill, but the mayor is now on board and says he will sign it.

“We know redesigning New York City's streets will help us end tragic, preventable traffic deaths,” Will Baskin-Gerwitz, a mayoral spokesman, said in a statement. “Mayor de Blasio and his team have worked hard with the Council to hone ambitious new goals that will save lives.”

The plan could face many challenges. Bike lanes have often faced fierce opposition, including lawsuits and resistance from community boards that balk at having parking spaces removed and worry about the impact on local residents and businesses. The city's Department of Transportation would also have to move quickly to add workers and equipment to carry out so many construction projects at once.

The bill calls for the Transportation Department to release a plan every five years to make streets safer and to prioritize public transit, starting in December 2021. The city must hit targets every year, including building 150 miles of bus lanes that are physically separated from other traffic lanes or monitored by cameras over five years.

Mr. de Blasio has completed 100 miles of protected bike lanes since 2014, but the City Council's plan is more aggressive and reflect Mr. Johnson's disdain for cars.

He has argued that, among other problems, the city has too many parking spaces, comments that have been viewed as a frontal attack on the two million or so New Yorkers who have cars.

The City Council has become increasingly eager to make its mark and to push Mr. de Blasio, who recently ended a failed presidential bid, on key issues.

“This is the Council playing a much bigger role in governance and trying to resolve some issues they see that the mayor was not going to tackle,” said Jon Orcutt, a longtime transit advocate and former city transportation official.

Mr. Orcutt pointed to a younger generation of Council members who ride bikes or want new lanes in their districts, like Antonio Reynoso and Carlos Menchaca.

After the recent spate of cyclist deaths, Mr. de Blasio’s administration pledged to add 30 miles of protected bike lanes a year, up from an average of 20 miles per year over the past three years.

The Streets Master Plan calls for 30 miles of protected bike lanes in the first year and 50 miles in each subsequent year. The city must also build 20 miles of bus lanes that are protected by a barrier or camera enforcement in the first year and at least 30 miles every year after.

The idea of protected bus lanes is a new one for New York, where the Metropolitan Transportation Authority is starting to mount cameras on buses to catch vehicles blocking bus lanes and fine them. London has long used cameras mounted to buses as a way to keep its buses moving.

Under Mr. de Blasio, the city also closed 14th Street to most traffic to create a “busway” to prioritize buses and is re-timing traffic lights to give priority to cyclists instead of motorists.

The official who oversees the subway and buses, Andy Byford, said he supported Mr. Johnson’s streets plan and its focus on expanding bus lanes.

“Early results from the dedicated busway on 14th Street show the huge passenger benefits that can be gained from giving transit priority,” Mr. Byford said in a statement.

Mr. de Blasio made street safety one of his signature initiatives shortly after he took office in 2014. His plan, known as Vision Zero, aims to eliminate traffic deaths by 2024.

Vision Zero has shown progress in recent years, bringing the number of traffic fatalities down to record lows. But the rise in cyclist deaths this year has alarmed safety advocates.

Mr. de Blasio’s office said the streets plan “builds on the foundations the Mayor has built over the last several years under Vision Zero.”

But Mr. de Blasio and his transportation commissioner, Polly Trottenberg, had raised concerns about the aggressive timeline set by Mr. Johnson. Mr. de Blasio said in a radio interview last month that he agreed on the goals of the streets plan, but said it would be difficult to implement.

“I agree with him on his analysis of needing to reorient our society away from cars,” Mr. de Blasio said. “I agree with him that we need to be aggressive in terms of bike lanes and bus lanes. I think the dissonance here is about how we figure out achievable goals.”

To gain Mr. de Blasio’s support, Mr. Johnson’s office agreed to push back the start date for the first streets plan, from this month to December 2021, around the time the next mayor takes office. Until then, the city will keep its current commitment to build 30 miles of protected bike lanes each year.

At a City Council hearing in June, Ms. Trottenberg said her agency would need billions of dollars in additional funding to implement the plans, along with new staff members, offices and construction equipment.

“Achieving the targets in the bill as drafted would require a significantly reconfigured agency,” Ms. Trottenberg said.

The streets plan is expected to cost about \$1.7 billion over 10 years, according to estimates from Mr. Johnson’s office.

The bill also calls for installing so-called transit signal priority at 750 intersections during the first year and 1,000 intersections per year after that. Transit signal priority is a system that allows buses to turn traffic lights green to speed them up. The city must also create one million square feet of pedestrian space in the first two years.

Mr. Orcutt, who now works at the advocacy group Bike New York, praised the plan and said it formalized the idea of a citywide, interconnected bike network into law. He said the city’s request to push back the start date was reasonable because building 50 miles of protected bike lanes per year is a significant jump from the current rate.

“It’s going to take more people and more outreach,” he said. “There are some real logistical hurdles to hitting these targets.”