

# A Return to Gridlock as the City Reopens?

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Before and after COVID-19. Where would you rather live? | Image courtesy of Chekpeds

**BY CHRISTINE BERTHET, CO-FOUNDER OF CHEKPEDS** | The COVID-19 quarantine has made us all aware of how wonderful New York can be: How clean and fresh the air has been, how quiet without gridlock blocking EMS, and without too many cars! Most significantly, there were no pedestrian fatalities in the last two months in Manhattan[1]. Certainly, we don't want to return to the negative aspects of life pre-pandemic.

Everyone agrees that coming out of the crisis is more complicated than getting in. A transportation transition plan must be put in place ASAP for New York City to emerge from this crisis with a balanced, healthy, and equitable transportation system: Delay cars returning. Promote public transportation, and fewer cars.

It is urgent we adopt a strategy to resist the most basic herd instincts before it is too late to go back: Diving has doubled in Manhattan in the last two weeks[2]. The New York Stock Exchange told its employees that no one will be accepted at work if they come by bus or subway! The feeling is that driving a car now is the safest way to get to work. Proximity to others in the subway or bus seems too high a risk.

Every day pre-quarantine, 2.8 million New Yorkers took public transportation to work in the Central Business District (CBD). Imagine the massive gridlock if each of those 2.8 million New Yorkers drives. Where will they park? Where will we walk? How will EMS get through? A mere 30% increase would be catastrophic not only for traffic flow but, crucially, for pedestrians' and bicyclists' safety.

The NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) has been tasked with deploying tools adopted by many cities to come smoothly out of the pandemic: Opening streets, widening sidewalks and bike lanes adding space for pedestrians and cyclists including on all East River Crossings, and adding, temporary, bus lanes to facilitate the safe and equitable return of commuters and pedestrians. DOT's roadwork season ends October 31. To complete this work, they need 24/7 access without traffic hindrances. Absolutely impossible if cars return too soon.

A recent study[3] shows that the COVID-19 virus remains contagious for three days on plastic and steel surfaces. Governor Cuomo's initiative to thoroughly disinfect buses and subway cars is an excellent step to assure commuters that public transportation is the safest way to travel. Can cars do as well?

We urge the Mayor to adopt these transportation transition measures now:

First, immediately set up High Occupancy Vehicle protocols at all accesses to Manhattan, including bridges and tunnels[4]. This worked very well after 9/11. Shared trips/carpooling must be required and it is imperative that 120,000 Uber and taxi drivers NOT come into the City all at once.

At the same time, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey and New Jersey Transit must make it attractive and safe to take the bus. Without car traffic, bus trips will be truly rapid. Add bus lanes and enough immaculate buses to facilitate passenger distancing. Consider free rides at the beginning.

Without such measures, it will take years for New York to return to public transit, while the MTA continues to hemorrhage money—leading to spiraling cuts, loss of service, and loss of passengers. The '70s showed us how hard and expensive it was to recover.

Right now, the Mayor must NOT cut the Transportation Department budget. The DOT must aggressively move forward to create safe networks of bus lanes, bike lanes, and wider sidewalks linking the five boroughs.

In time, the City will make appropriate decisions depending on the status of COVID -19. Like most New Yorkers are finding out, we can learn from the pandemic how to make things better and that must include transportation that is safe, clean, healthy and efficient before the gridlock tries to come back.

*Chekpeds is a New York City coalition focused on pedestrian safety. Since its founding in 2005, it has brought vital street improvements to Chelsea and Hell's Kitchen, where it is based. Chekpeds also addresses citywide parking, intercity bus permits, and pedestrian policies, and has created tools for activists like Crashmapper.org and Open Streets.*

[1] Versus 19 for the same period last year—Crashmapper.org

[2] [https://www.streetlightdata.com/VMT-monitor-by-county/#other\\_metrics](https://www.streetlightdata.com/VMT-monitor-by-county/#other_metrics)

[3] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/health/coronavirus-surfaces-aerosols.html?referringSource=articleShare>

[4] Sam Schwartz – <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-moving-nyc-when-the-virus-subsides-20200424-4hlcgmoyzncvfdewfswdgwkrs4-story.html>

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