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REPORT

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Retail Space

Times Square Will Remain Pedestrian Zone, Even Atlanta May Copy Program, Experts Say

New York City Feb. 7 converted its Times Square experiment into a permanent pedestrian zone, and the program is expected to pave the way for the policy to be adopted in other American cities. Pedestrianizing an urban area can bring increased retail profits, improved health for residents, and make American cities better places to live, according to industry experts.

Shin-pei Tsay, deputy director of Transportation Alternatives (TA), a New York City-based advocacy organization, told BNA March 1 “there are many other cities who are picking up programs that New York City has piloted. In fact, some of the most car-oriented cities, like Atlanta and Los Angeles, are going to be trying it out this year.”

According to Aug. 7, 2008, TA data, a pedestrian street improves all aspects of an urban environment. Pedestrian zones, properly installed, can:

- raise property values up to 9 percent;
- boost foot traffic by 20 percent; and
- raise retail sales by 10 percent.

“Properly Installed” is the operative phrase, however, Chuck Wolfe, a Seattle-based land use and environmental attorney, said Feb. 23. “The idea is that you simply use these ‘mall’ spaces by simply blocking off a street and expecting that the world will follow can’t be done without a fair amount of integrated thought about transportation access,” he said.

Asked if pedestrian zones are the future of urban life, Wolfe said “I think reinventing streets is the future of urban life, [but] that’s a complex matrix. A lot of people have thought about and written about the whole notion of complete streets . . . you have to have a vital street life and include the elements that will allow for that. You also have to, in terms of my profession, write codes

while preserving property rights, while honoring unique situations where you don’t want to strike out somebody’s historic loading zone or something like that. You have to have flex. You can’t just block off a street and hope that it works.”

There aren’t, as yet, many studies that show a direct impact upon retail from pedestrianizing a street, said Tsay, but the “trend shows that when there is more foot traffic there are better generally receipts for merchants.”

Anita Kramer, senior director for retail and mixed use development at the Urban Land Institute (ULI), told BNA March 4 that there is no single formula for pedestrian streets and that each potential project must be looked at in its own context. “I think it’s [dependent] on how it’s configured and what the surroundings are and what the parking availability is. It is very individual. It’s not just any place, any one impact, it is dependent on . . . what market is there and what the market is.”

Daniel Butler, vice president of retail operations for the National Retail Federation, told BNA March 4 that a pedestrian zone can work in America, but not everywhere. “As long as it is planned out and there’s a consumer base that is accessible, you can definitely create a place where pedestrian foot traffic works. But at the same time if you’re out in Middle America and you want to [create] this same kind of development in the middle of the desert, I’m not so sure that the same thing would work there.” Butler said that businesses with medium to small footprints tend to do best. “What we’ve seen is companies that might have large locations in other places [come in with] smaller footprints that still reflect the identity of the company.” Business such as restaurants, shoe repair shops, dry cleaners, gift shops, and art galleries are types of retail that do well in this type of format, he said.

Pedestrian Issues Cover Everything. Peg Staeheli, founding principal of Seattle-based SvR Design, told BNA Feb. 25 “pedestrian issues can cover everything, so a lot of master plans really focus on transport-specific, or downtown-specific, or just sidewalks.”

The biggest challenge to creating pedestrian zones, she said, is emotional. “We have to go into our empathetic minds, because we all think of the pedestrian issue that is ours. It’s a place that everybody owns but everybody wants to own it in their own way. We need to kind of step back and think about everybody else.”

The hard part, she said, is “putting yourself into the other [person’s place]—the mother with the child, the father with his adult parents, the couples, senior citizens, teenagers that want to hang out on a street corner, and all the competing uses in that zone.”

Kramer said that the American style of pedestrian zone is closest to a replication of the pre-freeway, old-fashioned Main Street. “Although these are very pedestrian-oriented . . . if you look closely, there is always the street through most of it. It’s truly a main street development, so there are very attractive sidewalks, nice landscapes . . . but there is a street running through the middle of it and that . . . makes it accessible so people have the option of parking.”

In the old Main Street, she said, the truck and the car were a part of its feel. “We like our cars and people aren’t going to be walking long distances from one end of the development to the other.”

Escape From New York Traffic. Manhattan’s eight-month experiment, Green Light for Midtown, which banned vehicles on Broadway from 47th to 42nd streets and from 35th to 33rd streets, has garnered largely positive feedback, according to published reports. Mayor Michael Bloomberg was reported as saying it had earned a “warm response from merchants and tourists.” According to data from the New York City Department of Transportation (NYC DOT), the program had brought about a 35 percent reduction in pedestrian injuries and a 63 percent reduction in injuries to motorists, with 80 percent fewer pedestrians walking in the roadway in Times Square.

Another stated motivation for the program was to speed up traffic and reduce motorized travel time within New York’s Midtown. Although the reductions weren’t as impressive as planned, the NYC DOT data showed improvements in all directions. “According to this data, the project is delivering on its expectations,” according to the NYC DOT. Most of the hard data from the mayor’s office has yet to be released, causing criticism from those outside City Hall, according to published reports.

“At the moment in our country we are still in this transition mode,” said Staeheli. “New York City is setting an incredible example for the country, saying, ‘We believe we can get people here to reduce the travel time and increase the pedestrian environment and enhance retail. And their example will be followed and tracked around the country.’”

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CHUCK WOLFE, LAND USE ATTORNEY

Impact on Retail. The impact on business, Wolfe said, spirals out in a seemingly endless manner. “You have to think about things like, if you have more people on the

street, you have to have reliable garbage service and make sure that the places where it is collected are not inhibited by bike-only or pedestrian-only zones. You really have to think these things through.”

Other, less obvious issues to be considered are:

- **Storefront visibility.** Staeheli said that “the building edge needs to be visible and inviting and clear.”

- **Vegetation blocking signs.** “Trees are really important for pedestrians to feel like it’s a good environment,” Staeheli said, “but in a retail environment you need to plant trees that are high, probably 10 feet off the ground. But then you want vibrant, low green space; that’s an area where you are starting to see the owners getting involved in enhancing the front of their stores. When they do that, that almost is a better signal of quality environment than their little reader boards.”

- **Who pays for all this?** “We work for private developers,” Staeheli said. “It’s who should pay, what do they have to gain? What’s the payback period for them? That’s always a difficult thing. I think that generally you find that they get the payback.”

Parking and Resistance. The resistance from the auto-oriented world remains formidable, and motorists do not give up their turf gracefully, Wolfe said. Staeheli agreed. “We should not expect that everyone is going to embrace it,” said Wolfe. “There will always be cars, there will always be people who live in suburbs; there will always be people who live in rural locations. Part of the success is selling the idea, [and] remembering who your audience is.”

The parking issue is enormous,” Tsay said, “and really can’t be underestimated. There’s so much fear around lack of parking. There is this huge misperception that customers travel by car to their stores . . . Merchants who think their customers travel to them by car actually think that pedestrianizing the street will remove parking spaces, and if you look at parking behavior, most of the time the choice parking spots in these retail districts are taken up by the merchants [and their employees] themselves.”

Asked the best way to resolve the parking dilemma, whether real or imagined, Kramer said that cities were coming up with functional methods already. “Most of what these [developments] have been able to do is to put parking structures behind the store fronts and sometimes wrap the buildings around the parking structure,” she said.

Butler said that it’s possible to have parking on the perimeter, which he called “kind of the best of both worlds. You have this kind of accessibility and pedestrians can walk around and shop, where parking isn’t so far away that it is prohibitive.”

Pedestrian Hazards. Wolfe, asked what cities planning to pedestrianize their streets should most guard against, said, “It’s a very, very contextual question, and we have to be careful not to be too formulaic about it. I think big cities who don’t allow for this might face consequences of less successful downtowns . . . this may not make sense in some places.”

Wolfe said that his major concern, from clients on both sides of this issue, is the impact on business, especially in troubled times. “[Retailers will say], ‘You’re going to put me out of business. That’s the real concern and sometimes it’s true. And it has a lot to do with context, the ones that succeeded are sometimes college towns . . . like Burlington, Vermont. Sometimes it’s a

mind-set of the region of the country, sometimes it is the right mix of the types of businesses that will thrive. But sometimes it won't work."

'There's a Lot of Opportunity There.' Wolfe's favorite example of a successful pedestrian street is the San Antonio, Texas River Walk. "It is a really good example," he said, "because they mix so many important elements; water, greening, [and] multiple levels of access."

As to New York's new pedestrian zone, Tsay said, "It is really great that the city took this on. [They] took the chance, they grounded it in research and data, they sent people out to understand how behavior might have

changed. They recognized that peoples lives cannot be sacrificed for traffic capacity. One of the reasons Mayor Bloomberg came out in support of this package was there was such an incredible drop in pedestrian injuries and fatalities along that corridor."

"Right now," said Tsay, [a pedestrian zone] is really an expression of our priorities as an urban society. When we do it right, we get a lot of things right. We get air pollution right; we get noise reduction right, we get health right. There's a lot of opportunity there."

"In the right setting, said Wolfe, "a pedestrian zone is going to enhance value because it is creating a place where people want to be. That's a truism."

BY KEVIN LAMBERT