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The 2021 NYC Mayoral Election: What Candidates Are Saying About Transportation Issues & What the Next Mayor Should Do!

During the primary election on June 22, New Yorkers will have a say in how the City moves forward from the pandemic. Every citywide office is on the ballot, including Mayor. As usual, the mayoral field is crowded. The leading Democratic contenders currently registering in the polls are Eric Adams, Shaun Donovan, Kathryn Garcia, Ray McGuire, Dianne Morales, Scott Stringer, Maya Wiley, and Andrew Yang. In addition, there are two Republican candidates: Fernando Mateo and Curtis Sliwa. Regardless of who wins, Bill de Blasio’s successor will have to deal with the pandemic’s aftermath, as well the unprecedented economic disruption it has wrought on New Yorkers and the City.

Among the many policy decisions the new mayor must make will be those affecting transportation—or, as it has been variously referred to by the candidates, the “central nervous system,” “heartbeat,” and “lifeblood” of the City. From busways, bike lanes, and Open Streets to traffic congestion, Vision Zero, aggressive emissions and climate-change goals, the next mayor will shape the way people and goods move around the City for years to come.

Budgets will be tighter and tough decisions will need to be made about which transportation policies the City will pursue. For the mayoral election in 2013, the University Transportation Research Center (“UTRC”) at the City College of New York (of the City University of NY), issued a report entitled the “**Mayoral Election Transportation Policy & Issue Primer: Candidates’ Positions and Plans.**”¹ The Center will be releasing a similar report in advance of early voting in June for this mayoral election along with a voter e-palm card summarizing the candidates’ positions on key issues impacting transportation. The purpose is to educate voters on important transportation issues and the candidates’ stances on the issues that matter to New Yorkers. Be sure to visit the UTRC website www.utrc2.org in the coming days for the full report and the voter palm card.

To facilitate this coming report, UTRC formed a *NYC Mayoral Election Transportation Policy “Advisory Committee”* which is currently advising and assisting in the preparation of the 2021 NYC Mayoral Transportation Policy & Issue Primer. The Advisory Committee is comprised of experts from every mode in the transportation field, including government policymaking, and representative/leaders of various critical transportation stakeholders and influencers in the NYC area. Some of the members of the Advisory Committee include: *the Riders’ Alliance; Transportation Alternatives; the Regional Planning Association; and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign.*

¹ <https://bit.ly/3vqBw6F>

ABOUT THE CANDIDATES

Eric Adams² is the Brooklyn Borough President. **Shaun Donovan**³ is currently a senior strategist to the president of Harvard University and previously served as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and director of the Office of Management and Budget under President Obama). **Kathryn Garcia**⁴ is the former Sanitation Commissioner under Mayor de Blasio. **Ray McGuire**⁵ is a former Vice-chair of Citigroup. **Fernando Mateo**⁶ is President of the New York State Federation of Taxi Drivers and spokesperson for the United Bodegas of America. **Dianne Morales**⁷ is Executive director and CEO of social-services nonprofit Phipps Neighborhoods. **Curtis Sliwa**⁸ is the founder and CEO of the Guardian Angels and radio-talk-show host. **Scott Stringer**⁹ is the current New York City Comptroller and previously served as Manhattan Borough President. **Maya Wiley**¹⁰ is Senior Vice-President of Social Justice and professor of urban policy at the New School and is former counsel to Mayor de Blasio. **Andrew Yang**¹¹ is an entrepreneur and former presidential candidate in the 2020 Democratic primary.

PRIMARY ISSUES IN THE NYC TRANSPORTATION REALM

Several mayoral candidates have offered transportation-specific policy agendas that, if realized even partially, would transform New York City. Yang has proposed an MTA takeover by the city and superblocks, while Stringer wants to be the “Bus Mayor” (his words) of a city “where buses roll by every six minutes with not a single car parked in the dedicated lane.”¹² Garcia, the former Sanitation Commissioner, as part of her transport plan, would clear curb space by taking trash bags off the sidewalks and replacing them with sealed containers.¹³ Among the mayoral candidates who have put out policy positions on transportation, most address buses and bikes as well as congestion pricing and the MTA. Nearly every candidate wants to upgrade and integrate the City’s subways, buses, and bike infrastructure, and serve the needs of all New Yorkers.

Street Design

Many candidates emphasize changes to the streetscape such as adding protected bike lanes and busways and expanding the Open Restaurants and Open Streets programs, which Mayor de Blasio recently made permanent.¹⁴ Dianne Morales wants to expand everything—bike lanes,

² <https://ericadams2021.com/eric-adams-100-steps-forward/>

³ <https://shaunfornyc.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Plan-for-the-City-of-New-York.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.kgfornyc.com/policy/transportation-2/>

⁵ <https://www.rayformayor.com/policy>

⁶ <https://www.mateothemayor.com/>

⁷ <https://www.dianne.nyc/public-investment>

⁸ <https://sliwaforny.com/issues/>

⁹ <https://stringerformayor.com/plans/transportation/>

¹⁰ <https://mayawileyformayor.com/plans/> <https://mayawileyformayor.com/maya-wileys-community-first-climate-action-plan/>

¹¹ <https://www.yangfornyc.com/policies/own-our-transportation>; <https://www.yangfornyc.com/policies/funding-open-streets-to-be-a-permanent-more-equitable-program>

¹² <https://stringerformayor.com/plans/transportation/>

¹³ <https://www.kgfornyc.com/policy/transportation-2/>

¹⁴ <https://www.amny.com/coronavirus/de-blasio-signs-open-streets-bill-into-law/>

busways and pedestrian plazas across the City—and redesign the streets.¹⁵ In stark contrast, Fernando Mateo thinks the City needs more street parking and would evict Citi Bike docking stations from the streets to give the space back to cars.¹⁶ Donovan, Garcia, Morales, Stringer, and Wiley endorse Transportation Alternative’s “NYC 25x25” challenge to reclaim 25% of the street space currently designated for cars (including three million on-street parking spaces) by 2025.¹⁷ A Yang administration would reclaim streets from cars and transform them into walkable, mixed-used public spaces with superblocks—a new urban-planning idea out of Barcelona that creates three-by-three blocks that restrict traffic to roads around the outside, while the inside is open to pedestrians and cyclists.¹⁸

A Yang administration would also reclaim full control of the City’s subways and buses from the state-run Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), vesting municipal control with the NYC Department of Transportation.¹⁹ Current City Comptroller Scott Stringer told a District Council 37 Forum that he has “crunched the numbers” and the City cannot take on the debt, making it impractical to take over the MTA – and McGuire concurred.²⁰ Currently, the New York City mayor appoints a few MTA board members and the City owns the tunnels and tracks underground, but the state controls the MTA. Yang would fill the board with people who align with how the City’s residents get around and will best advocate for their communities. Separately, to modernize the City’s transportation system, Yang believes that the MTA must facilitate a better degree of usability and explore something similar to Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS).

Cycling and Micromobility

Cycling and micromobility (including bikes, mopeds and scooters) have become increasingly popular modes of transportation, especially during the pandemic. However, the City lacks the infrastructure to support these alternatives, making them less viable options for many people. In addition, many of the City’s 1,300-plus mile network of bike lanes remain unprotected from vehicle traffic, which raises safety issues. The Democratic candidates want to change that to varying degrees. Stringer’s campaign website calls for a 425-mile, five-borough bikeway connected to greenways,²¹ while Wiley’s campaign website calls for the creation of 300 miles of bike lanes.²² Also, Yang told Newsweek “I want it so that, when someone moves to New York City, they think, ‘Great! I don’t need to own a car.’ One aspect of that is going to be making the City as bike-friendly as it possibly can be.”²³

¹⁵ [https://twitter.com/search?q=bike%20\(from%3A%40Dianne4NYC\)&src=typed_query](https://twitter.com/search?q=bike%20(from%3A%40Dianne4NYC)&src=typed_query)

¹⁶ <https://www.mateothemayor.com/post/evict-citibike-street-docks-restore-parking>

¹⁷ <https://www.dianne.nyc/public-investment>; <https://www.transalt.org/press-releases/coalition-of-80-organizations-launch-nyc-25x25-challenge-new-york-citys-next-mayor-to-give-streets-back-to-people>;

<https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2021/03/02/decision-2021-transalts-25-by-25-proposal-shakes-up-mayoral-race/>

¹⁸ <https://www.yangforny.com/policies/funding-open-streets-to-be-a-permanent-more-equitable-program>

¹⁹ <https://www.yangforny.com/policies/restore-control-of-the-subways-and-buses-to-the-citizens-that-use-them>

²⁰ <https://youtu.be/vapNaAOVzU8?t=2198>; <https://youtu.be/vapNaAOVzU8?t=2355>

²¹ <https://stringerformayor.com/plans/transportation>

²² <https://mayawileyformayor.com/maya-wileys-community-first-climate-action-plan/>

²³ <https://www.newsweek.com/andrew-yang-believes-bikes-wants-make-cars-unnecessary-new-yorkers-1571154>

Congestion Pricing

In 2019, New York State passed congestion pricing legislation to charge vehicles a toll to enter Manhattan south of 59th Street to generate revenue for mass-transit. The specific details have yet to be revealed—including who should get discounts or exemptions—and the project was delayed during the Trump administration. In March 2021, the Biden administration finally informed the MTA that it could submit an environmental assessment instead of an environmental impact statement – a welcome development for proponents of congestion pricing. The next mayor will have some say in the matter, and many candidates—including Adams, Stringer, Wiley, and Yang—have said they will push to put the plan into action sooner rather than later. In testimony before the MTA during a fare hike hearing in December 2020, Adams said the City should “push to fast-track the implementation of Central Business District tolling ... which has been projected to raise up to \$1 billion annually in fees for the MTA and will pave the way for a \$15 billion bond issue by the agency.”²⁴ Investing in public transit would help reduce the number of vehicles travelling in the Central Business District (CBD), which could create a more accessible transit system.²⁵

WHAT THE NYC MAYORAL ELECTION OUTCOME MEANS FOR THE PASSENGER GROUND TRANSPORTATION INDUSTRIES

The mayoral candidates’ general transportation policies could have repercussions for all sectors of the for-hire passenger transportation industry in New York City. The candidates have a general desire to increase alternatives to driving personal vehicles, such as expanding bus and bike lanes and installing related infrastructure. The expanded bus lanes would benefit operators who have buses in their fleets, but the focus on bikes could sabotage the interest of for-hire operators generally. In contrast to prior years when the sheer number of Uber and Lyft vehicles were viewed as the source of traffic congestion and other woes, none of the candidates has taken the position that there needs to be fewer for-hire vehicles (FHV’s) on the road. If fewer people drive their own cars in the City, they will still need to get around, and not everyone is going to take a bike or bus.

Unfortunately, the media and the candidates have not paid much attention to the private bus, taxi and for-hire ground transportation industries. In an attempt to get the candidates to focus in more depth on the private passenger ground transportation industries, over the past few months I hosted a series of “Transportation Chats” with the candidates leading the polls at the time – namely Adams, Stringer, and Yang. I was joined by industry stakeholders that included Bus4NYC, the Black Car Assistance Corporation, the Black Car Fund, the Limousine Association of NY, the Limousine Association of New Jersey, the Livery Roundtable, the Livery Base Owners Association and many others - to ask the candidates about issues facing their industries. The leading candidates discussed many ground transportation issues in response to questions from the bus/motor coach, taxi and for-hire vehicle industry leaders in New York City, as well as individual

²⁴ https://www.brooklyn-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/MTA-Fare-Hike-Testimony_12_2020.pdf

²⁵ <https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2020/12/16/decision-2021-which-mayoral-candidates-support-a-car-free-manhattan/>

small business owners in the transport sector, including the medallion debt crisis and extending the For Hire Vehicle cap (which we will focus on here).

Medallion Values & Debt

What to do with medallion debt is probably the one issue where candidates disagree the most. Adams said he supports a taxi medallion bailout, stating that he believes the City did a disservice to the yellow cab industry and must be held responsible. During the Transportation Talk event, Yang indicated he aligns more with a proposal by then-Council Member (now Congress Member) Ritchie Torres to revalue taxi medallions in the “six-figure” range, and for the City to provide a guarantee for every medallion. Also, Yang commented on the current plan put forward by Mayor de Blasio and TLC Chair Aloysee Heredia Jarmoszuk’s, announcing that New York City is creating a \$65 million Taxi Medallion Owner-Driver Relief Fund to offer 0% interest loans of up to \$20,000 to use as down payments to restructure medallion debt. Yang said he was “frankly a little bit confused by the mayor’s plan” and that “the whole thing just seemed strange ... like they were trying to avoid making tough decisions.” Stringer released a statement calling the plan “a disgrace” that “fails to deliver the significant relief drivers deserve.”²⁶ Stringer has been a supporter of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA) proposal, which proposes that the City act as a backstop for non-performing loans by providing participating lenders a \$125,000 guarantee on the loan if lenders restructured loan balances to \$125,000.

The FHV Cap & Exemptions

New FHV licenses have been on pause since August 2018 with few exceptions for wheelchair accessible vehicles and battery electric vehicles. Currently, the TLC has full authority to determine the number of new licenses that it will issue and whether any exemptions will be offered. In May, the TLC published proposed rules to eliminate the exemption for battery electric vehicles. That hearing is scheduled for June 22 – primary day. Stringer said he believes some kind of cap on for-hire companies, such as Uber and Lyft, should exist today, saying that he does not believe that unfettered competition helps drivers earn a living. Regarding livery/community car services, Adams said he believes New York City must take care of both drivers and base owners, and that the next City government needs to listen to industry voices and find a middle ground.

WHAT TRANSPORTATION ISSUES THE CANDIDATES “DID NOT TALK ABOUT” & WHAT THE NEXT MAYOR SHOULD DO!

Since the last mayoral election, the way people move around the City has changed and could change even more during the next four years. None of the candidates are talking about urban air mobility (“UAM”) or automated vehicles, but they should be – it is happening elsewhere and is inevitable. Sadly, New York City’s transportation system lags behind many cities in the U.S.

²⁶ <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/newsroom/statement-from-new-york-city-comptroller-scott-m-stringer-on-taxi-debt-relief-proposal/>; <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/168-21/mayor-de-blasio-taxi-medallion-owner-driver-relief-fund>

and internationally, and it will continue to do so simply because transportation innovation has never really been a top priority.

The agencies tasked with regulating passenger transportation have been slow to adjust to the changes in technology. There is, at the very least, a lack of accountability, oversight, and coordination between and among City and State agencies and public and private transport modes. Right now, transportation-related functions, responsibilities and policy-making are spread-out across numerous independent agencies. The New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission oversees taxis, for-hire vehicles, green cabs, black cars, liveries, limousines, paratransit, and commuter vans. The Department of Transportation oversees scooters, bike sharing, shared micro-mobility networks, as well as transportation infrastructure and traffic control of vehicles on the streets, while the State-run MTA controls the subways, buses, and rail. The Department of Sanitation is responsible for cleaning the streets, and the Street Activity Permit Office within the Mayor's Office issues permits to close the streets for festivals, block parties, farmers markets, and other events. The Department of Finance is responsible for Parking Violations, while the New York City Policy Department has police powers and can issue traffic tickets. The Fleet Division of the NYC Department of Citywide Administrative Services oversees the City fleet, except for school buses, which fall to the Department of Education. I am sure there may be more, but that is the point. Transportation responsibilities are in silos, and spread around—so that everyone has a piece of the puzzle, but no sees the big picture to piece it all together. There needs to be a Deputy Mayor for Transportation and Infrastructure to oversee transportation policy, transportation infrastructure, and all transportation-related agencies and functions in City government as well as a master plan to prioritize policies to ensure affordable and efficient transportation.

The next NYC Mayor should create a *Transportation Master Innovation Plan* as part of the reorganization of transportation policy and oversight. This plan should prioritize policies to ensure affordable and efficient transportation, using a multi-modal approach to promote clean air and sustainability, resiliency, equity and accessibility for all. Some initial ideas and priorities could include:

- Implementing **Mobility-as-a-Service** so that uniform payment can be made for private and public transport connections that are seamless, using a city smartphone application (identifying the most sustainable, fastest and least expensive routes from point A to B, with every mode represented and available on one platform – taxis, public buses, trains, bike shares, scooter, etc.);
- An overhaul of the **Access-A-Ride (AAR) system** to exclusively use the many under-utilized Wheelchair Accessible Taxicabs and Green Cabs with one smartphone app and phone number, available on-demand to any AAR eligible user, and also to non-eligible users as well;
- **Implement first and last mile partnerships** to promote equity, with free transfers from public transit to neighborhood livery car services and commuter vans (dollar vans), as part of public private partnerships (including livery stand and other franchise opportunities);

- **Reduce the size of the City’s vehicle fleet** and instead use the many for-hire vehicles and taxicabs to help deliver meals to seniors, engage in package delivery, and to transport city employees;
- Promote **Electric Vehicle (“EV”) infrastructure** by installing fast charging infrastructure on city property, including parking lots, and in strategic residential areas around the city, as well as on curb front property at taxi and FHV relief stands; and
- Provide **EV incentives** to all modes to increase the number of EVs on the road in the taxicab, private bus and for-hire vehicle industries (ideas could include: priority queuing and parking; access to priority or express lanes; exemptions from congestion charges; City grants to offset the purchase of new EVs; and waiver of all TLC licensing fees or any other City fees).

NOW IT IS TIME TO VOTE, AND TO LEAD!

In this year’s primary, NYC will – for the first time – use ranked choice voting for the mayoral race. In other words, voters can rank mayoral candidates in order of preference.²⁷ In a field with so many Democratic candidates, this could make predicting a winner very difficult. However, that may not matter when it comes to some transportation issues because the eight major Democratic candidates all have very similar ideas about where their administration would take the City: more busways, more bike lanes, and more revenue for the MTA. Where the mayoral candidates diverge is on the how aggressive the City should be in reclaiming street space from vehicles and their proposed approaches to assisting the taxi industry that was decimated by the unchecked growth of Uber and Lyft until recently and the more recent impact of the pandemic shutdown.

The 2021 New York City election consists of Democratic and Republican primaries on June 22, 2021, followed by a general election on November 2, 2021. The early voting period for the primary is June 12–20, 2021. Voters must vote at their assigned early voting site. Voters may also request an absentee ballot to vote by mail. To learn more about deadlines to register to vote, requesting absentee ballots, early voting hours and locations, ranked choice voting, and casting ballots, visit NYC Votes (www.voting.nyc/), the New York City Campaign Finance Board (www.nyccfb.info/nyc-votes), or the Board of Elections (vote.nyc/page/register-vote) websites. Off to the polls!

²⁷ For more information on ranked choice voting, visit the NYC Campaign Finance Board website: <https://www.nyccfb.info/nyc-votes/ranked-choice-voting/>.