

From Streetsblog:
Unlocking the Potential of the New Jackson Heights Plaza
By Ben Fried

Earlier this month you might have noticed a few press accounts about merchants in Jackson Heights who think a new public plaza on one short block of 37th Road is crimping their bottom line. The plaza is actually part of a much broader plan to improve street safety, speed bus trips, and reduce traffic congestion in Jackson Heights, which neighborhood groups and NYC DOT have been working on for years without receiving much media attention. Now that there's a tinge of conflict, the press is all over it — an innovative and community-driven transportation project has turned into a story about shopkeepers upset over the removal of 20 parking spaces.

The plaza reclaimed the block of 37th Road between 73rd Street and 74th Street. Before the plaza, traffic on that block degraded the neighborhood street network. Drivers turning left onto 37th Road used to cause traffic to back up on 73rd Street and beyond, causing epic fits of horn-honking. Buses routed onto the block more than a decade ago to make way for the construction of the 74th Street transit hub had to make a series of zigzagging turns, slowing down more than 10,000 bus riders every weekday. When the proposal to re-route the buses and take traffic off the block came before the local community board, the vote in favor was unanimous.

“The objective was to get that traffic to move more smoothly and reduce that honking,” said Council Member Daniel Dromm, who has championed the changes and shepherded the project through to completion. Now Q47 and Q49 buses make one turn instead of three, and Dromm says bus drivers have told him they save seven minutes on each trip compared to the old route.

Merchants knew about the changes well in advance and most of the neighborhood's business groups were supportive, said Dromm. After the plaza installation last fall, complaints began to surface about the loss of parking. But the parking loss — 20 spaces, according to one plaza opponent — is insignificant compared to the foot traffic that could be drawn to a well-run public space. Not only is Jackson Heights compact, walkable, and full of pedestrian traffic, but it has the least amount of park space per capita of any neighborhood in the city. The plaza is also right next to the 74th Street subway station, which sees more than 40,000 boardings on a typical weekday.

Some local merchants apparently don't see the value of having a public plaza on their doorstep. “Our customers come to do shopping, not to sit,” said Mohammed Pier, president of the Jackson Heights Bangladeshi Business Association.

But it's clear that the overwhelming majority of people who come to Jackson Heights don't drive there. According to DOT's 2010 neighborhood travel survey, 94 percent of interview subjects didn't drive cars to get to Jackson Heights:

Other merchants believe that the benefits of the plaza outweigh the effects of having less parking. "Right now the business is slow because of the economy," said Vasantrai Gandhi, who owns a shop called the New York Gold Company and used to chair Community Board 3. "Nobody can judge how much this affects business. One thing is sure. Now there is no accidents, no horn honking, no pollution, no fumes. Some areas benefit and some areas are at a disadvantage, but what's important is safety."

I spoke to some residents familiar with the project who think any loss in foot traffic is probably due to the re-routing of buses, not the plaza. They also speculated that the plaza would have received a better welcome if it had opened during the warmer months and started drawing crowds immediately. (Although even in the fall and winter, the space attracts people.)

The missing ingredient, more than great sunny weather, is vision and leadership from the businesses around the plaza, said Afzal Hussein, who opened Espresso77 on nearby 77th Street in 2007. "77th Street never used to have foot traffic," he said. "Since I opened it people walk here."

Hussein sees the potential of the plaza to become a destination, and he says he'd be glad to help make it work. "In the summer you can have art exhibits or performance," he said. "You need a community working together, it's no one person's job. They need a leader. It's a lot of potential there but nobody's thinking that way."

Without a merchant group taking ownership of the plaza, Dromm's office has been coordinating events and maintenance. So far, he said, several community organizations have asked to use the plaza for events, including the Bangladeshi Youth Congress, Queens Community House, and Sindhu USA.

"We're really working hard to make this successful and I'm calling on the business community to do the same thing," said Dromm. "We want to help them, but it may require a little different thinking than they've had in the past."