How can New York City use the Open Streets Program to Improve Street Use for Pedestrians and Cyclists?

Patrick Spauster

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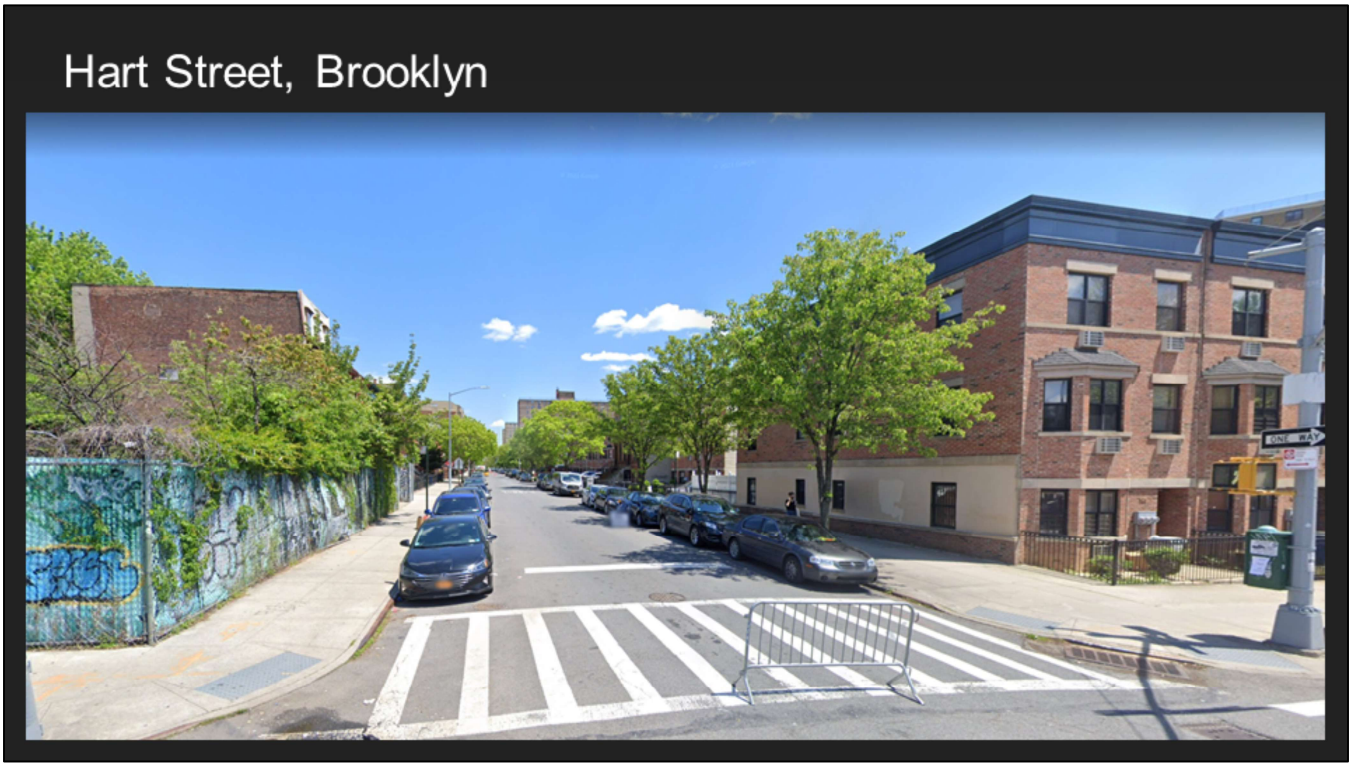
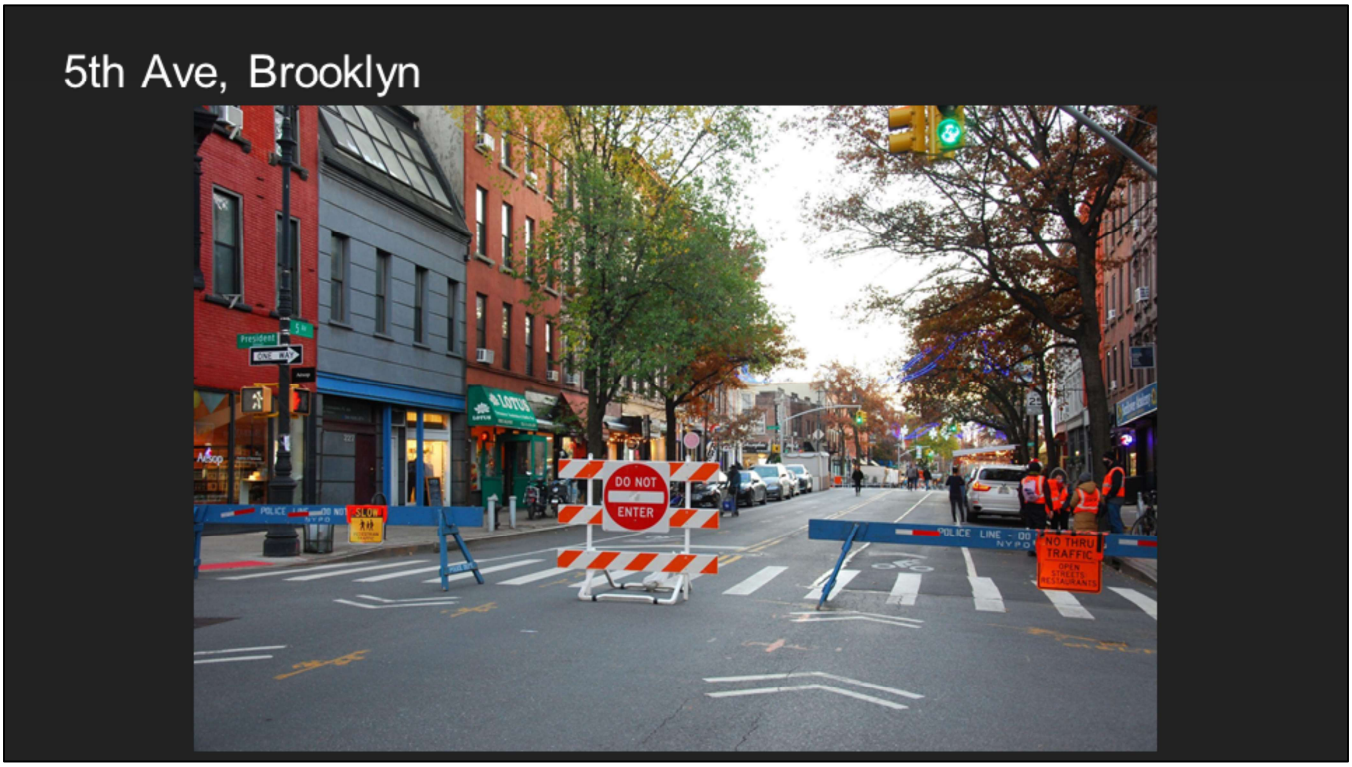


I moved to a new apartment this summer, and when I woke up one September morning, the street was barricaded. The school on my corner sponsored an Open Street, and closed it every weekday during the school year. Around the city, I noticed other Open Streets.

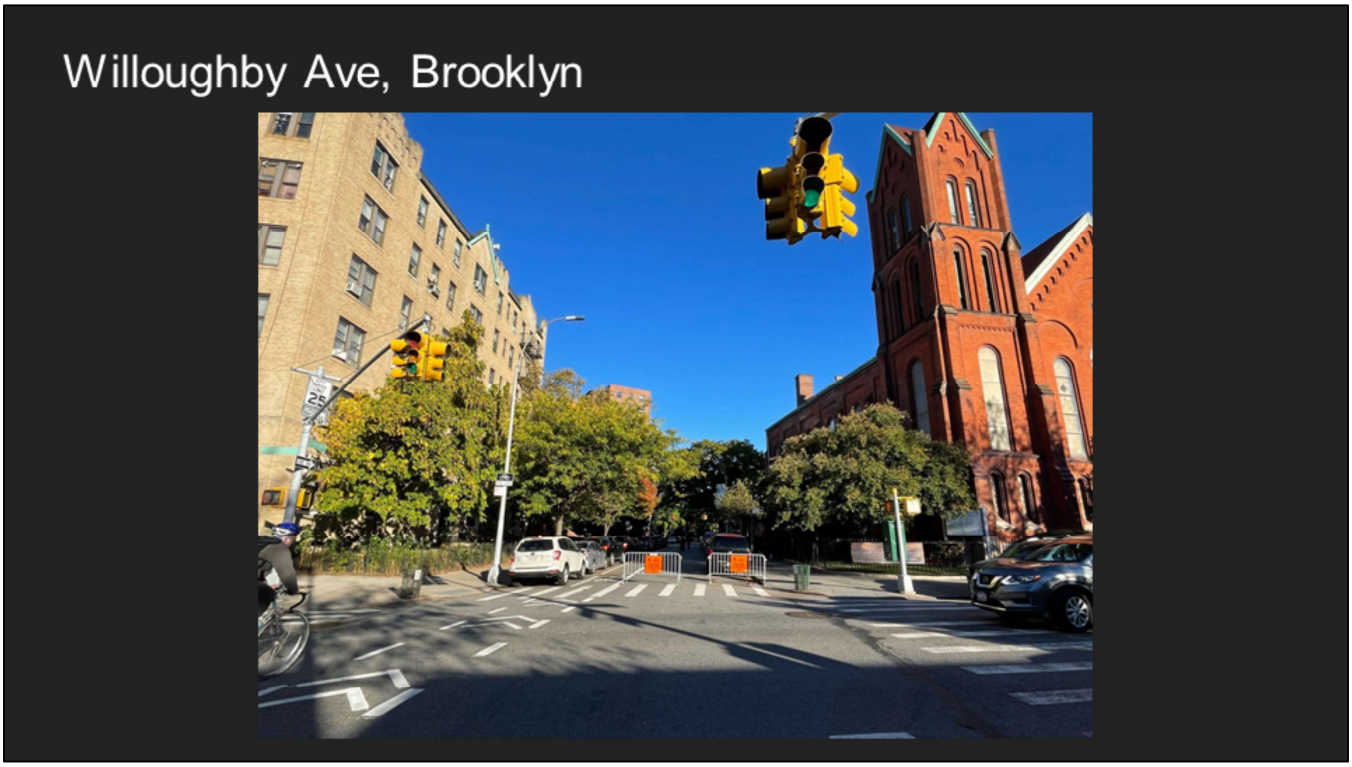
When I first began digging into this question, I thought it was so specific, and made for a specific challenge: creating open outdoor space during covid

But the more I looked into it the more I realized that every Open Street was different.

Some Open Streets, like my block on Hart Street, were closed by schools on particular days.



Other Open Streets, like 5th Ave in Brooklyn, were closed summer weekends. They had programs, music, restaurants, and shopping.



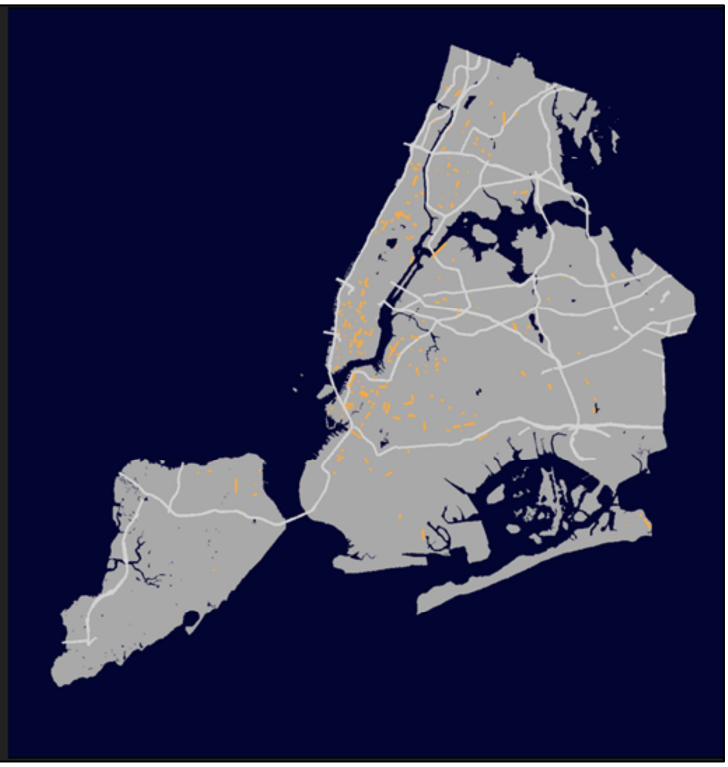
Willoughby Avenue cuts through a residential strip was closed every day on my bike back from work, set up by neighbors: no programs, no businesses, just street space.

Open Streets are not evenly distributed

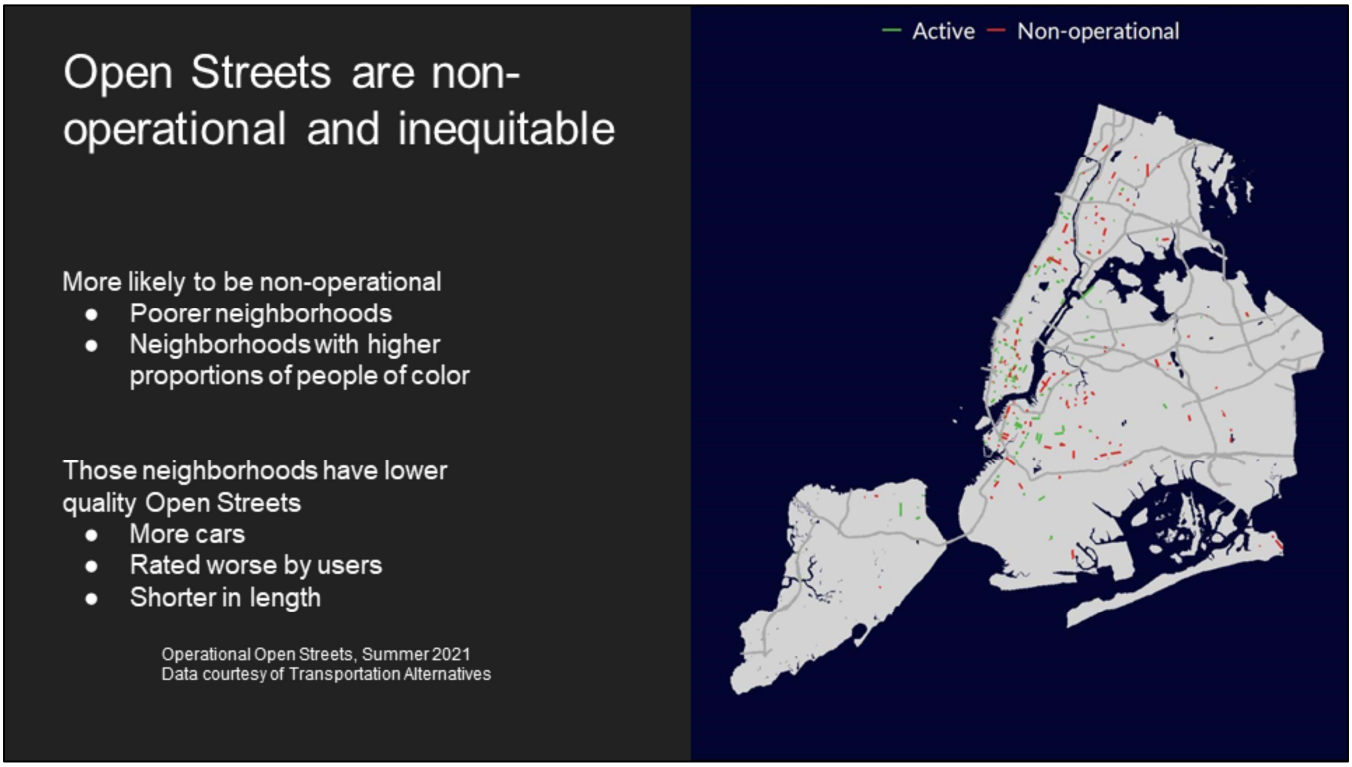
Less likely to be located in

- Poorer neighborhoods
- Neighborhoods with higher proportions of people of color

Open Streets, Summer 2021
Data courtesy of Transportation Alternatives

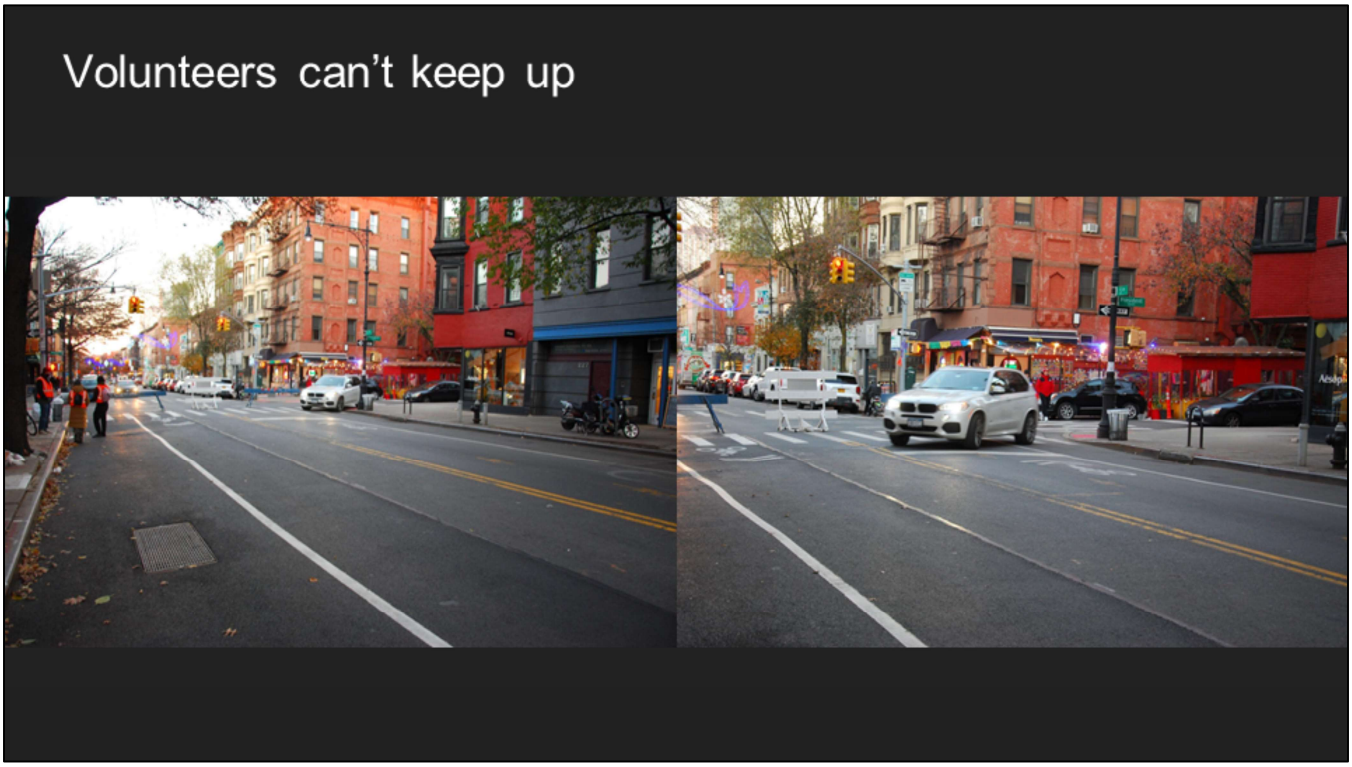


Because Open Streets, and the neighborhoods they are located in, are so different, huge spatial disparities have emerged in where Open Streets are located. Open Streets are less likely to be located in poorer neighborhoods and neihborhoods with higher proportions of people of color.



And Transportation Alternatives, in a summer survey, found that just 40% of Open Streets were operational.

They found that Open Streets were more likely to be inactive in poorer neighborhoods with higher proportions of people of color. Those open streets were also shorter than their counterparts, more frequently disrupted by car traffic, and consistently rated worse by users



The Open Streets program is also almost entirely run by volunteers and community groups. While DOT oversees the program, they mostly field applications and then drop off barriers, leaving sponsoring organizations to do the day to day work of setting up barricades.

But community partners often don't have the resources to keep staffing barricades and ensuring cars did not enter.

This decentralized institutional structure contributed to the massive disparities in which Open Streets remained operational.

Where sponsoring organizations had the money, personpower, and connections with DOT, MTA, police and other agencies, Open Streets were able to thrive. Where they didn't Open Streets fell out of operation. Often the communities that need Open Street's positive benefits, like less air pollution, less traffic accidents, social cohesion, and boons to business, were the same communities who didn't have the resources to make Open Streets function year round.

Local communities are making Open Streets work

- Strong local organizations
- Fundraising
- Programming
- Volunteers
- Relationships

Some local communities have found innovative solutions, and there are lessons to be learned from their success putting on the program themselves, but these successful programs were often located in wealthier communities, where they had the resources to invest in Open Streets

Advocates want permanents solutions

- 24/7 closures
- Bollards and boulders
- Redistributing resources

Advocates want permanent street closures, permanent traffic calming infrastructure, to redistribute resources based on need and traffic-related harm, and to make city agencies the primary caretakers of open streets, not volunteers

Adams will implement a new program

- May 2021 City Council law makes Open Streets permanent
- DOT must directly manage or provide resources to 20 Open Streets
- Adams has advocated for a health-equity planning approach

A new law passed in 2021 makes the program permanent, mobilizes some resources to support the program operations, and calls for DOT to manage directly, or provide resources for at least 20 streets. implementing this new law will fall to mayor adams, who has promised to continue the program and has made public statements in support of a health-equity based approach to where DOT plans streets. Advocates worry that the limited resources made available won’t be enough to solve deep disparities.

Open Streets needs to be scalable

- Analyze equity gaps
- Invest in making under-resourced streets successful
- Continue voluntary program
- Pilot permanent street closures

Open streets should start small and focus on scalability.

First, they should do an audit for where Open Streets are needed most, and invest resources in making sure that the 20 DOT managed streets succeed, and make progress on the equity disparities.

They should also leave the volunteer based program open to communities where it is working. in these community, they should test permanent street closures and traffic calming infrastructure.

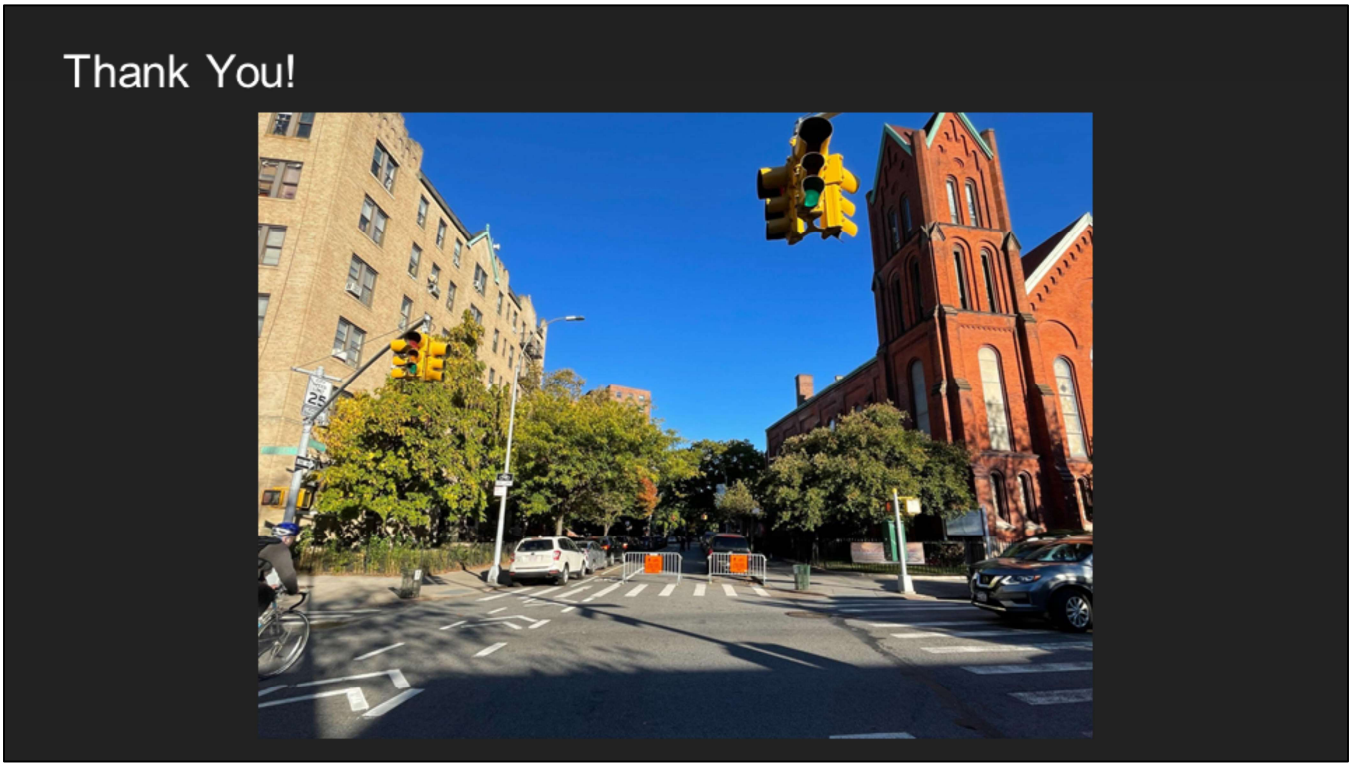
Open Streets needs to be sustainable

- DOT should manage the program
- Adams should appoint a DOT head that prioritizes open space for pedestrians and cyclists
- DOT should track progress on equity gaps
- DOT should establish metrics of success based on observed lifestyle changes and community sentiment

DOT should manage the program and needs a supportive lead and the mayor's backing.

They need to track progress on how many streets operate and how new streets minimize equity gaps.

On individual street they should Measure success through observed lifestyle changes - How many pedestrians and cyclists use the street compared to normal. Are traffic accidents down? Are people diverted from cars to public transit? Through surveys and polling - how do residents feel about the streets in their community.



I'm struggling with the question of whether it's better to be broad or narrow. to try to make sure as many New Yorkers as possible can access new open space, or to invest deeply in a few Open Streets to ensure they work. A huge program, with inconsistent operations and crappy infrastructure may hurt the cause. Targeted infrastructure could help gain support and future funding.

Thanks!