

Brooklyn Bridge, the 'Times Square in the Sky,' May Get an Expansion

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ABSTRACT

New York City has commissioned a \$370,000 engineering study of the bridge's walking and biking promenade to address crowding.

FULL TEXT

Peter Cardillo cannot lose himself in the panoramic views on his walks home across the Brooklyn Bridge from Wall Street. He is too busy trying to stay in one piece.

A few weeks ago, he stepped around tourists blocking his way and was nearly hit by a bicycle. He told the rider to slow down. The rider blamed Mr. Cardillo for crossing into his lane.

"It's very dangerous," Mr. Cardillo, 70, the chief market economist for First Standard Financial, said as he joined the masses moving slowly toward Brooklyn the other evening. "I'm always looking on the side because I never know when I'm going to get hit by a bike."

Think driving the Brooklyn Bridge can be nerve-racking? Try squeezing onto the elevated, wood-and-concrete promenade that runs above its six vehicle lanes. Up there, the pedestrian and bike paths, barely wide enough in places for two-way traffic, are further narrowed by hordes of tourists posing for selfies, street performers working for tips and vendors selling water, ices and freshly sliced mangoes. On a typical weekday, 10,000 pedestrians and 3,500 cyclists cross.

Now after escalating complaints, New York City transportation officials said on Monday that something would finally be done to solve the riddle of what they call "Times Square in the Sky." That something -- if the crossing can take it -- could be building a new path to alleviate congestion so bad that some people avoid the Brooklyn Bridge entirely.

"We've decided the time has come," Polly Trottenberg, the city's transportation commissioner, said as she walked across the crowded bridge on a recent evening. "We want to think in a deep, thoughtful way about the next evolution of the bridge."

Beginning this month, a seven-month engineering study by a consulting firm, Aecom, will assess how much weight the bridge can carry and consider options for expansion, such as widening the existing promenade by building decks on top of the girders that run directly above the car lanes, according to city officials.

But Ms. Trottenberg cautioned that the \$370,000 study was only a first step and that any expansion of the promenade would most likely be complicated. "I have to tell you, every time we touch this 133-year-old bridge, it tends to be costly and complex," she said.

The Brooklyn Bridge, which opened in 1883, actually carried far more people across every day when railroad cars and trolleys used the bridge. Today, traffic is limited to passenger vehicles, and pedestrians and cyclists on the elevated walkway. The promenade, which was part of the original bridge, narrows to just 10 feet across in places from 17 feet at its widest point.

Across New York City, with the population above 8.5 million, foot traffic has increased across many bridges. The Brooklyn Bridge has seen its largest crowds on weekends, according to counts the city takes each May. An average of 1,917 people an hour crossed at peak times in 2015, or more than triple the 511 people in 2008. Weeknight traffic increased to an average of

1,057 people an hour at peak times from 880 people in 2008.

Bike traffic has also grown on the Brooklyn Bridge, reaching an average of 358 cyclists an hour at peak weeknight hours in 2015, compared with 185 cyclists in 2008. Ryan Russo, a deputy transportation commissioner, said that while he biked across the Brooklyn Bridge to work in the morning, he returned home on the Manhattan Bridge so as "to not contribute to the crowding."

Even with more people crossing the Brooklyn Bridge, city officials point out that there are fewer than a dozen collisions involving pedestrians and cyclists reported each year. The city has already taken steps to address congestion and safety issues on the bridge, including painting a wider line between the pedestrian and bike lanes and adding more bike and directional markings.

On a recent Friday afternoon, pedestrians were crisscrossing the bike lanes as they snapped photos or took in the views. Cyclists had to steer carefully to avoid crashing into them, or the spider web of cables that runs alongside the bridge to support it.

"It was quite crowded," Koen du Maine, 21, a college student from the Netherlands, said after riding a Citi Bike across the bridge to Manhattan. "You have to be careful. There are always people in the bike lane."

He added that it was easier to ride in his native country because the bike and pedestrian lanes are typically separated by barriers, and are often on different levels, so there is less drifting between them. (City transportation officials have provided a conceptual rendering of a promenade expansion that would include those changes.)

Matt McCroskey, 37, an actor who lives in Brooklyn, said he had become reluctant to ride across the bridge, but was reconsidering after receiving a bike from a friend. "It's usually so jammed with people that biking across is not always a pleasant experience," Mr. McCroskey said.

While he would like to see the promenade expanded, Mr. McCroskey said, he worried that could make the problem worse. "It just might encourage more people," he said.

Ms. Trottenberg, who became transportation commissioner in 2014, is herself a regular on the Brooklyn Bridge and takes everyone who comes to visit her on a walk across it. After moving back to the city from suburban Washington with her husband, Mark Zuckerman, the president of the Century Foundation, Ms. Trottenberg recalled that they started walking and biking across the Brooklyn Bridge from their new home in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn.

Soon after, Mr. Zuckerman told her, "You have to figure out how to widen the walkway."

"Trying," she told him.

Now Ms. Trottenberg is keeping her word.

"Just for the record," she said, "my husband is not the only one who feels that way."

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