

The Public Ought to Know: DOT must take steps to make Queens streets safer

By Corey Bearak

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My son, Jonathan, said his grandmother called on my work line, the family line my wife, Rachelle, usually answers. (She was playing mah-jongg at the home of my friend, Ira the Republican.)

Mom also called the phone my son and daughter share with the fax machine. Mom lives a few houses south of 80th Avenue and 260th Street in Floral Park, where the death of Giulia Lewis occurred.

Mom did not know who died and who got hurt; she only knew that Stephanie, a close friend of our daughter, Marisa, lives a few houses on the other side of 80th Avenue and worried that Marisa was alright. The point is that the young life lost that evening could have been anyone. The 80th Avenue of my youth disappeared years ago. Traffic planning never caught up.

I do not know if city traffic engineers will consider young Giulia's death "preventable" (usually the phrase is "preventable accident," but I hesitate to apply that phrase here). If they make such a finding, look for a traffic signal, if not four-way stop signs, to be installed at that intersection no later than sometime next year.

City traffic engineers follow a criteria based on preventable accidents and traffic volumes within a 12-month period, usually a calendar year. The standards, called "warrants," provide objective criteria so a signal does not get installed without justification. It also allows the city to use federal monies for the signals.

Requests for traffic signals take much time and often result after numerous studies and restudies. I recall virtual campaigns over not months but years to install traffic lights along 81st, 82nd, 83rd and 86th avenues and the Little Neck Parkway. I remember consideration on a vote to approve a city asphalt plant, and like magic a light was installed at 86th Avenue and Bell Boulevard.

The Ad Hoc Committee for Langdale Safety, led by Freda Solow, persisted until the city installed the first-ever “Rest-on-Red” self-actuated (it turns green only after a vehicle stops) traffic signal on 80th Avenue and Langdale Street, as well as four-way stop signs along every Langdale Street intersection but 79th Avenue. A similar light got installed at 86th Avenue and 249th Street by PS 133.

While communities and residents welcome increased traffic safety, the time it took still stings. According to the Mayor’s Management Report, the Department of Transportation completed 705 traffic studies and installed signals at 225 intersections in the fiscal year that ended in June.

It also reported no traffic studies pending over 12 weeks. While studies once took longer, study length fails to tell the whole story. Rejected requests and multiple requests for restudy matter if an initial request does not result in a signal installation recommendation.

The MMR cites the DOT’s key function: “Ensure the safety of motorists, pedestrians and bicyclists traveling in New York City.” But don’t look for the DOT’s report in the MMR under “Public Safety,” look under “Infrastructure and Community Services.” The MMR no longer contains indicators on traffic studies; it should.

The MMR touts a reduction in traffic fatalities; its focus is problem intersections such as those on Queens Boulevard. My concern remains neighborhood intersections such as 80th Avenue and 260th Street.

While attending PS 191, I recall bicycle rides along 80th Avenue from Langdale Street past the Little Neck Parkway to a store on 249th Street. By the time we moved into 80-23 260th St. (Mom and Dad just sold it), I noticed a change. My friends and I would muse that 80th Avenue was no longer as safe to bike.

In the 1960s there was no QUAD or other Lake Success office complexes. I was launching model rockets on the Hillside Avenue lot now a shopping center just past the city line, and the Long Island Jewish Hospital campus was much less developed. Local traffic and stress on neighborhood streets was much less.

City traffic planners are still playing catch-up with intersection controls, and most new controls followed complaints and accidents, not pro-active reviews.

Even the speed bumps followed traffic complaints.

Most low-density Queens neighborhoods serve as pass-throughs to major commercial centers in and out of the borough, as well as to higher-density communities. Traffic-control schemes should reflect that, and the DOT should take a comprehensive look at local streets that run parallel to our borough’s

major streets.

The driver's apparently reckless behavior notwithstanding, might a signal have prevented the loss of Giulia Lewis? Traffic controls alter driver and pedestrian behavior; that can only mean enhanced safety.

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