

The Public Ought to Know: Sanitation lacks tools to clean Queens traffic malls

By Corey Bearak

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Last month as I drove south on Utopia Parkway just south of the Long Island Expressway, I noticed weed growth on the center island traffic malls. I was on my way to a Queens Jewish Community Council Board of Trustees meeting at Utopia Jewish Center. I parked my car on the west side of Utopia Parkway and crossed a weed-covered mall to get to the synagogue. It got me thinking about the prior week's chat with Lenny Speiller, the capable chief of staff to Councilman Jim Gennaro (D-Fresh Meadows).

I had consulted for Gennaro last spring and summer so I did not even mention his name in my column during that time, even when I discussed water rates and he had a relevant bill. Gennaro's district office is near the Chevy Chase/Union Turnpike express bus stop I use to travel to and from City Hall. During my last time there Lenny shared a few local newspaper clippings with sharply different coverage of Gennaro's successful effort to clear weeds on a portion of Union Turnpike following complaints from civics and community members.

It reminded me how nothing has changed over two decades. The city continues to not maintain traffic islands and malls on a regular basis and only does so after much prodding by elected officials or community boards. Community Board 13 sponsors a summer youth employment program and often uses the young workers to clear some of the traffic malls in the district. It started during the tenure of former longtime Chair Sue Noreika.

The relatively short width of many malls makes it unsafe for the kids to work on Little Neck Parkway and Union Turnpike in eastern Queens. They perform effective work on the oversized, very wide malls on Hillside Avenue near Martin Van Buren High School. CB 13 Chair Rich Hellenbrecht noted that longtime board member Dan Friedenreich provides crucial supervision to ensure the mall cleaning there gets done effectively.

Interestingly, this short stretch of Hillside Avenue got reconstructed before points east and west were done a few years later. When the rest of Hillside Avenue and Northern Boulevard got rebuilt, the city no longer replaced the center malls. This was its way of addressing its failure to remove the weeds. Obviously this posed some traffic safety impacts, particularly for pedestrians. Can you imagine Queens Boulevard reconstructed that way? Scary!

So Gennaro secured a commitment from the Department of Sanitation to clear weeds on Union Turnpike with workers who were available because other seasonal tasks (snow removal, salt spreading) were not taxing the agency's

resources. When I first tried to get Sanitation to clear weeds from traffic islands, supervisors complained their workers only had shovels and brooms — not the best equipment to remove weeds. They also lacked herbicides to prevent recurring growth.

Apparently the agency now has some chemicals, but the problem remains and the tools the workers use have not changed. I always found it curious that Sanitation, which lacked the proper tools, was charged with cleaning traffic islands. Why not the Parks or Transportation departments? At least their workers have the right hand tools.

The culprit remains an interagency memorandum known as the “Leventhal Agreement” after Nat Leventhal, who chaired Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s transition team after the 2001 election. As Mayor Ed Koch’s deputy mayor for Operations, he oversaw the Jan. 17, 1983 agreement that assigned jurisdiction for cleaning certain city properties. It charged Sanitation with cleaning paved traffic islands and malls and Parks with handling grassy malls. (Weeds can make paved malls grass-covered.) Transportation handled the highways.

This gets more crazy when you think about the sidewalks along local street underpasses such as the Little Neck Parkway and Commonwealth Boulevard under the Grand Central Parkway, where pigeon droppings frequently require cleanups, as well as the many Long Island Rail Road underpasses. If these and weedy locations were counted, they might lower a community district’s cleanliness ratings, which the agency semiannually brags about in the Mayor’s Management Report.

The annual cajoling of Sanitation and supervisors who argue that they have a city budget office unwilling to fund the agency to get the equipment and that their workers lacked the tools frustrated me to the point of drafting legislation to make Transportation the responsible agency. Legislation should not be necessary and residents should not depend on a local official such as Gennaro to aid them, nor should this require annual vigilance by an elected official or a community board.

Hellenbrecht says mall cleaning ought to be routine to improve safety and visibility and reduce long-term maintenance costs. Let’s “annoy” the mayor. Call 311; tell him: “Clear the weeds.”

Corey Bearak is an attorney and adviser on government, community and public affairs. He is also active in Queens civic and political circles.