

Commissioner Rodriguez:

We are writing to you today in regards to the city's Open Streets Program.

The most successful Open Streets across the city are almost entirely run by neighborhood volunteers. These volunteers provide or facilitate a wide variety of cultural programming; handle public communications and community outreach, either in person or online; and have worked to secure additional street resources, like furniture, games, community art projects and signage that help bring our Open Streets to life.

Since the onset of the pandemic, our all-volunteer groups have been trusted partners dedicated to helping make this citywide program a continued success. We are grateful for your support and leadership, as well the amazing team of dedicated NYCDOT professionals who work with us everyday to make our respective Open Streets a source of pride for the city. We volunteer our free time to create these safe spaces with lively programming because we truly believe they build and foster stronger communities. Although it's hard work, it's incredibly rewarding.

However, we wanted to reach out to share some serious challenges and concerns we have with the reimbursement process for the city's Open Streets program. As mostly all-volunteer organizations, it is becoming increasingly difficult to spend upfront on our respective Open Street operations with the promise of being reimbursed at a further date. In fact, as of this letter's writing, several Open Street groups have still not received *any* of the funding they were allocated by the city for the 2023 season, including funds for the spring launch from April to June (which were billed by July 2023).

We have raised concerns multiple times with NYCDOT staff about the reimbursement process, and the length of time it is taking to reimburse funds that we have already spent on this city program. But our concerns are not limited to just the delayed timeline. It also affects:

1. *Our ability to continue the overall execution of the Open Streets program;*
2. *Efforts to make the program more equitable through diverse programming;*
3. *The resulting need to directly fundraise from local residents;*

Execution of the Open Streets program

Whether year-round or seasonal, some costs, like for storage or insurance, cannot be paused. Additionally, it's difficult to attract programmers when we do not know when we can pay them. The funds NYCDOT provides our groups often does not cover all of the programming expenses, nor does it allow for expansion. Yet without it, our respective Open Streets cannot survive.

That is why we are asking for you to help intervene to secure the overdue funds owed to us from the 2023 season and work on ways that this can be more timely in the future. We want more Open Streets across the city and without changes to the current system, we don't see a path forward so it can grow to its full potential in an equitable way.

For volunteer organizations, having to post substantial money upfront for our operating expenses before being reimbursed by the city is unsustainable and limits what we can offer on the Open Street. As a result, we have to spend time fundraising, competing against one another for grants, and repeatedly tapping our neighbors for donations. *All of this equates to unpaid work by our volunteers that was outside the scope of running the Open Street program.*

Diversifying our programming

The lack of on-time reimbursement has had a chilling effect on the popular programming options that Open Streets groups have been able to facilitate during the 2023 season. On many occasions, we were only able to coordinate programming that came in organically and free of charge. Our volunteer team fields and schedules incoming programming requests -- but **unless we deliberately seek out and diversify programming, our Open Street only reflects the community members most able to contribute for free.**

In the future, we would love to have the cash on hand to book some of the incredible, diverse talent that NYCDOT has pre-approved and shared in their '[Public Space Programming Catalog](#).' But until the existing process changes, we're limited in what we can do.

Relying on resident donations

It should be noted that our neighborhoods wildly fluctuate in regards to having the resources to donate and volunteer. This directly impacts the number of places able to support thriving and sustainable Open Streets.

As grant opportunities for Open Streets continue to dwindle each year, we are wary of overly relying on donations from residents and of "donor burnout" when Open Streets are funded through taxpayer dollars. **This approach of needing to ask for money locally to pay for upfront costs feels like double dipping into the pockets of New Yorkers.**

We understand that NYCDOT does not have the ability to speed up the reimbursement process. But we would like to request—and would deeply appreciate—an intervention with the Office of Management & Budget, or whatever entity is prevalent to resolving these concerns.

It is our hope that with improvements to the reimbursement process in the 2024 season, we can continue to cultivate programming that speaks to the many cultures and interests who regularly enjoy our respective Open Streets, allowing them to thrive for years to come.

Thank you for your time and continued support.

Best,

34th Ave Open Street Coalition (Queens)

31st Ave Open Street Collective, Inc. (Queens)

Sunnyside Shines - 46th St Open Street (Queens)

Caldwell Enrichment Programs, Inc. - Jennings Open Street (The Bronx)

North Brooklyn Open Streets Community Coalition (Brooklyn)

Loisaida Open Streets (Manhattan)

West 103rd Open Street Community Coalition (Manhattan)

StreetsPAC (Citywide)

Open Plans (Citywide)

Transportation Alternatives (Citywide)