

Want Fewer Crowds on the Brooklyn Bridge? You're Not Alone

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

City officials are taking steps to reduce congestion on the bridge by possibly creating a separate bike-only entrance and limiting vendors on the promenade.

FULL TEXT

The Brooklyn Bridge has become as famous for its outsize crowds as its sweeping views of the New York skyline—earning it the distinction of the “Times Square in the Sky.”

The elevated promenade of the iconic bridge is clogged with selfie-posing tourists, vendors hawking water and souvenir knickknacks, and harried commuters just trying to get to work or back home. Cyclists constantly brake for pedestrians overflowing into the bike lane. Pedestrians yell at cyclists for going too fast, or coming too close.

Pedestrian crossings have soared in 2017 to an average of 13,196 for a weekday, compared with 10,484 in 2011, while weekend crossings for the same period have boomed to 32,453 from 14,145.

Cyclist crossings have also increased to an average of 3,157 for a weekday in 2017 from 2,981 in 2011.

“Before it was O.K., it was fun, you’d run into some interesting people,” said Njeri Blair, 24, a real estate broker from Brooklyn who rides across the bridge several times a week. “But now it’s just a mess. It’s not enough space. And the majority of people don’t even know there’s a bike lane.”

In response, the New York City Department of Transportation is taking a series of steps to relieve congestion on the Brooklyn Bridge, including possibly creating a separate bike-only entrance to the bridge on the Manhattan side and limiting the number of vendors and where they can sell on the promenade.

These steps were outlined in a report released Friday that was based partly on the findings of an engineering study by a consulting firm, Aecom, which was hired by the city in 2016 to look for ways to relieve overcrowding and improve safety on the promenade.

The Brooklyn Bridge, which opened in 1883, once carried far more people when railroad cars and trolleys used the bridge. But today, traffic is limited to six lanes for passenger vehicles and the wood-and-concrete promenade overhead that narrows to just 10 feet across in places, barely wide enough to fit the side-by-side pedestrian and bike lanes.

Earlier this year, the city opened a \$22 million entrance to the bridge on the Brooklyn side that transformed a tight corridor known as “the cattle chute” into a grand portal lined with trees and wildflowers to accommodate the growing numbers of visitors.

But transportation officials have postponed any decision on whether to widen the promenade itself, including one option to build decks on top of the girders that run directly above the car lanes. The new report cited Aecom’s finding that a larger promenade would attract even more people and add more weight to the bridge, which could be a problem.

Aecom recommended an inspection of the bridge’s cables before considering any deck expansion, according to the report. The cables, which are original, had already been scheduled for a full inspection in 2019, the first since the 1980s.

“While our engineering study indicates we need further analysis, we are announcing near-term steps to further

improve access to the promenade, including an exciting idea for bike access from the Manhattan side,” said Polly Trottenberg, the transportation commissioner.

The separate bike entrance would consist of an elevated lane on the Manhattan side that would run along the edge of the bridge —physically separate from the existing promenade —and then join back with the promenade in an L-shape. It would divert cyclists from the heavily crowded entrance to the bridge, and also reduce any potential conflicts with pedestrians in a sloping section of the bridge where Manhattan-bound cyclists are going their fastest. The city would create this bike entrance by converting a vehicle exit ramp on Park Row that was closed after the Sept. 11 terror attacks as it leads directly to the area around the headquarters of the New York Police Department. As security restrictions have eased over the years, the city has started to reopen Park Row for public use, including planning a bike and pedestrian pathway there.

The report also ruled out a more controversial approach that would turn an existing vehicle lane into a roadway bike lane —something that has been called for by cyclists, transportation advocates and urban planners. The report said that it raised safety concerns, would be difficult to maintain, and would lead to traffic backups.

Paul Steely White, the executive director of Transportation Alternatives, an advocacy group, urged city officials to reconsider. “Improving the entrances is welcome, but you’re not doing enough to address the core problem that there is not enough space for pedestrians and bikers on the bridge itself,” he said. “Generally, cars are still coming first and bikers and pedestrians are left to fight over the leftovers.”

A new bike entrance would require several years to open, but in the meantime, transportation officials are already moving to draft regulations that would limit vendors on the bridge. At the Manhattan entrance, large crowds browsing the vendor tables and carts create a bottleneck.

Several vendors said that they did not want to give up their spots on the bridge. “I don’t want to move, I want to stay,” said M.D. Rahman, who was selling hot dogs and water on a recent afternoon. “I have my family to take care of —this is my bread. If I move, where do I go?”

Gary Phaneuf, who was selling magnets and key chains of yellow taxis and city landmarks, said that it was already hard enough trying to eke out a living. “They’re just going to push us out,” he said. “And there’s no Plan B.” Transportation officials are also installing new signs and graphics to divert some of the throngs to a little used bridge stairwell on the Manhattan side that leads down to Frankfort Street. Pedestrians could take the stairwell to exit the bridge instead of continuing onto the ramp leading to City Hall, or they could take it to enter the bridge from below. The stairwell will eventually link to the new pathway on Park Row, which is expected to open in 2018 and will serve as a corridor between the tourist destinations of South Street Seaport and Chinatown.

On the bridge this week, many pedestrians and cyclists said that something had to be done about the congestion. Both groups said they liked the idea of a separate bike entrance that would put more distance between them.

Debbie Coppard, a retired school cafeteria manager from Canada, was walking on the promenade for the first time when a bike sped by. She said there were simply “too many people to have a bike lane.”

Over in the bike lane, Astacio Morales, 58, a construction worker, said he could not relax and enjoy himself because he has to watch out for pedestrians drifting into the bike lane.

“You’ve got a lot of kids walking over here so it’s very dangerous,” he said. “You’ve got to stay focused all the time and very vigilant. You can’t ride a bike like you would actually like to.”

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Credit: WINNIE HU

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