

BEN WETZLER

FOR CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT 4

Public Space

Quality of life starts right when you walk out the door. **Every New Yorker should be able to have pride in their neighborhood and see it as a beautiful, inviting, and accessible extension of their own home.** To make that happen, we will need an aggressive plan for our infrastructure, covering safety on our streets and sidewalks, changes to our rules regarding scaffolding and trash, and transformative investments in parks, open space, and civic institutions. During my time as a Democratic Party District Leader for the East Side, I advocated for proven methods to keep our streets safe and investments in our public spaces, and if elected I will work to ensure that every East Sider can walk with their families down streets that are clean, inviting, and fun. That is my promise to the neighborhood.

1. Sanitation and Quality of Life

Walking down a Manhattan sidewalk has become an unpleasant experience. Buildings are covered with scaffolding for years at a time, piles of garbage and rats nests cover the curb, and the uneven pavement makes it inaccessible for people with walkers, strollers, grocery carts, and mobility aids. **We must take action to improve the quality of our sidewalks.** Here's how I plan to do it.

Tackling Uneven Pavement and Improving Accessibility

Our sidewalks are in disrepair, making it difficult to get around for all New Yorkers, but particularly elderly and disabled neighbors who rely on wheelchairs, canes, and walkers and have trouble navigating uneven pavement. Part of the problem stems from inefficiency and outdated practices at the Department of Transportation; separate units within the Department perform work on the sidewalk versus the street itself, with little coordination or economizing to make projects move faster. **If elected, I will work with the Department to reform these practices and bring our sidewalks up to an acceptable state of repair.**

Removal of Scaffolding

Earlier this year, the City Council took unprecedented action to reform the laws that govern scaffolding above the sidewalk, including reducing the frequency with which buildings must undergo facade inspections, increasing the allowed height of structures, and imposing penalties on landlords who leave scaffolding up without doing any associated work. **I believe that there is more that can be done to reduce these unsightly impositions on our neighborhood, including permitting the use of high-tech cameras for facade inspections.** This would reduce the cost and time associated with needed inspections and get scaffolding down faster, and if elected I will introduce legislation to allow it.

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Neighborhood Interagency Task Force on Graffiti

Every neighborhood in New York City has to deal with unsightly graffiti on storefronts and in parks. The new improvements in Stuyvesant Cove Park—across the street from my home in Stuyvesant Town—were open to the public for only a few days before the first spraypainted tags appeared. **If elected, I will work with the Parks Department, the NYPD, the DOT, and the various block and neighborhood associations to create an East Side Neighborhood Task Force focused on identifying and quickly removing tags and other forms of vandalism across our community.**

Modernizing Trash Pickup the Right Way

New York is a pariah among peer cities for our antiquated and unsanitary approach to garbage collection. We leave leaky plastic bags out in public, blocking our sidewalks and creating a feast for disease-ridden rats, and many streets—including E. 14th and E. 20th on either side of Stuyvesant Town—go for blocks without a single City trash can. To date the most significant effort the City has undertaken to improve collection procedures has been to delay trash set-out to after 8:00 PM, an ineffective solution which created new burdens for building owners and employees with little sanitation benefit.

The solution to this problem is on-street and in-building containerization of trash before it is collected. **If elected, I will move to rapidly expand the City's containerization pilot to the East Side while working with residents and building owners to ensure that containers are appropriately sized, aesthetically pleasing, and do not leak, smell, or pose safety hazards.** I will also introduce legislation rolling back the costly and unnecessary late-night set-out mandate and work to add new City trash cans around the neighborhood where they are needed.

2. Transportation Safety

Traffic on our streets and crowds in our subways are among the most serious safety concerns in the 4th District. **We need to make our City safe for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit riders, with investments in improved infrastructure and a shift in priorities towards the most space-efficient modes of transportation.** These changes to our infrastructure will require coordination between agencies at multiple levels of government, the Council, the Mayor's office, and the State, but we cannot afford to delay action any longer. If elected, I will work to transform our transportation system towards one that puts safety first so that no New Yorker needs to fear walking down the street again.

Implement "Sammy's Law"

In 2024, in response to the worst three months of traffic deaths in a decade, the State Legislature passed "Sammy's Law" authorizing the City to reduce speed limits on certain

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streets. Research has shown that the reductions in speeds envisioned by Sammy's Law would lead to a more than 30% reduction in injuries due to vehicle crashes, but the City Council has not yet moved to implement this legislation. **If elected, I will make traffic and pedestrian safety a top priority and introduce legislation putting Sammy's Law into practice on NYC streets.**

Making Crosswalks Safer for Pedestrians

New York City is the only municipality in the entire state that allows cars to park next to a crosswalk, leaving no room for the driver to pull in or out except into the path of pedestrians. This creates an unacceptable safety risk to neighbors as they cross the street. **If elected, I will support legislation requiring the Department of Transportation to implement buffer zones around crosswalks at intersections to ensure cars are parked in safe locations**, starting with intersections where the City is doing other roadwork and gradually expanding to the entire city by 2040.

Major Street Redesigns in Midtown

Midtown Manhattan is the center of the world, and too often its infrastructure feels like an afterthought. Buses spend ages caught in traffic while pedestrians push through dense crowds on narrow sidewalks. **If elected, I will champion street redesigns that prioritize bus speeds and pedestrian space so that the business districts, residential neighborhoods, and transit corridors that make up Midtown are no longer choked with congestion and slow traffic.** These include the proposed 34th Street busway, the pedestrian-focused 5th Avenue redesign, and other improvements to major streets that will improve traffic flow and accessibility.

Subway Improvements

Though the MTA is controlled by the State, subway stations and stairwells in NYC are City property and the City has a responsibility to riders and MTA employees to keep them clean and safe. In addition to taking a targeted and data-driven approach to deterring crime in the subways, there are important infrastructure improvements that can be made to the stations, and **if elected, I will work to install modern turnstiles and platform barriers with the goal of improving platform safety and reducing fare evasion.**

3. Waterfront Access and Open Space

The 4th District is among the lowest ranked by public open space per capita in the City. Our waterfront presents the best opportunity for East Siders to get away from the bustle of Manhattan and enjoy some fresh air, and transforming it into a best-in-the-nation open green space will be one of my top priorities on the Council.

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A Reimagined FDR Corridor

The FDR Drive runs along some of the most beautiful waterfront in the country and is an important recreational area in a district that lacks open space. Unfortunately, the Drive and its entrance and exit roads cut this important recreational corridor off from the rest of the community, with hazardous pedestrian crossings, loud noise, and uninviting, underutilized space beneath the viaduct. **If elected, I will pursue an ambitious, long-term transformation of the area beneath and adjacent to the Drive that opens up more waterfront space to the public, transforming it with benches, public art installations, improved lighting, and sound mitigation.**

Additionally, I will work to **introduce traffic calming measures and better signage around some of the Drive's most dangerous exits and entrances**—adding a traffic light at the E. 36th Street approach, trimming back the foliage that blocks visibility at the E. 25th Street exit and endangers children in the adjacent school zone, and installing traffic cameras at E. 20th Street and Avenue C to police the flagrant red light violations that regularly occur at that intersection, just to name a few. These safety improvements will better connect the neighborhood to its waterfront assets and open up new parkland for us all to enjoy.

Complete the East River Greenway

For years the City has worked to improve the East River Greenway, expanding the esplanades that provide bicycle and pedestrian access from East Harlem to Sutton Place and from Corlear's Hook to Midtown. The only barrier to connecting these two segments and creating a fully accessible waterfront recreational path along the full breadth of the East River is the United Nations complex. **If elected, I will work with the relevant City, State, and Federal authorities to resolve the outstanding legal and security issues that have delayed completion of the UN Esplanade** and finally realize the dream of a single East River Greenway for East Siders to enjoy.

Food and Drink Pilot Along the Waterfront

Many New York parks have successful food and beverage concessions that make them refreshing places to relax and have a bit to eat and a beer. The East River waterfront should be no exception. **If elected, I will work with the Parks Department to implement a food and drink pilot for portions of the East River Esplanade**—starting with the former site of the Water Club—to restore that space as a publicly accessible relaxation area and generate revenue for the City.

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Connect St. Vartan Park to the Waterfront via “Play Street”

St. Vartan is one of East Midtown’s most wonderful parks, providing a rare strip of publicly-accessible green space in Midtown Manhattan. However, the park’s location adjacent to the Midtown Tunnel approach exposes park-going pedestrians to significant car traffic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the City closed off traffic on a portion of E. 36th Street and created a “play street” with community activities connected to the park and adjacent field. If elected, I will not only restore the E. 36th play street but also work with the MTA to open their land on the opposite side of the street to the public (currently used for open air storage) and add an additional play street on E. 35th Street in front of the River School, **nearly doubling the amount of publicly accessible pedestrian space in the area and connecting St. Vartan to the East River Esplanade and the E. 34th Street ferry terminal.**

4. Supporting Libraries, Parks, and Recreation

Our public spaces should not be staid, utilitarian places. They should be fun! From our parks and libraries to our cultural centers and commercial streetscapes, we should be striving to activate as much of our communal space as possible and create inviting environments that everyone can enjoy.

Commit to Fully Funded Libraries and Parks

Throughout the Adams Administration, the mayor has made repeated attempts to cut funding to libraries, parks, and cultural institutions. These could potentially have devastating effects on the services they provide to the public and their ability to run clean, family-friendly public spaces. **If elected, I will commit to fully funding our libraries and parks**, preserving these critical parts of the City’s communal fabric and ensuring that they remain available to all New Yorkers.

Restoring a Workable Outdoor Dining Program

Outdoor dining was a lifeline for small businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic and significantly improved the street life in our neighborhoods. The program was not perfect, but rather than address issues related to pedestrian space, noise, and sanitation in the outdoor dining areas, the City Council voted in 2023 to make it seasonal, requiring that businesses demolish their structures and reapply for permits every spring. As a result, as of this April 1st there has been a 81% reduction in the number of outdoor dining spaces across the City compared to last year, and bureaucratic complications that the Council never anticipated have hamstrung successful outdoor dining setups. **If elected, I will introduce legislation to permit full-year outdoor dining in suitable locations across Midtown and the East Side with strict standards for cleanliness and noise.**