

East 25th Street Closed to Traffic to Create Baruch College Public Plaza



East 25th Street between Third and Lexington avenues was free of vehicles on Thursday, Dec. 20, 2012, just two days after work began to convert the street into a public plaza.

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FLATIRON — After lobbying for nearly two years, Baruch College has finally been given the green light to turn one block of East 25th Street in front of Baruch College into a car-free pedestrian plaza.

The Department of Transportation, which had previously rejected the proposal, has now given the plan its seal of approval. On Tuesday, the block of East 25th Street between Third and Lexington avenues was closed down to vehicular traffic — the first step to turning part of a busy cross street into a hub of pedestrian activity.

The space still lacks a final design plan, but the university said work is under way to add tables, chairs and planters to the block to make the plaza usable and enjoyable even in its earliest stages of development.

“[T]he creation of the 25th Street Plaza will be a transformative event that will forever enhance the campus experience for our students, faculty and staff, as well as for the local community,” Baruch College President Mitchel B. Wallerstein said in a statement.

Baruch first floated the idea of turning the block into a public plaza in early 2011. In its pitch to members of Community Board 6, Wallerstein noted that the school has no green or outdoor space for students to use and called the plaza a “win-win arrangement” that would serve both the university and the surrounding residents.

But not everyone was thrilled with the idea.

Residents worried about potential problems with noise, trash and traffic at another Community Board 6 meeting in September of last year.

Wallerstein, who attended that meeting, explained that the school would pay for security personnel to patrol the block and that, according to an independent traffic study the school commissioned, closing the stretch would cause minimal disruptions.

The board ultimately voted to support the plaza plan. But just two months later, the DOT rejected the application, which was submitted through its NYC Plaza Program, even though the university promised to foot the entire bill itself.

"This is an extremely competitive citywide program," a DOT spokesman said at the time. "And although the Baruch submission had strengths that warranted consideration, it was not selected for this round of the NYC Plaza Program."

Now, more than a year later, the project has finally received the city's blessing. The street has already been repaved to indicate the space is separate from the surrounding streets and, in an email, the university said it intends to solicit input from members of the community before finalizing any design plans.

A DOT spokesman said the project was approved the second time around because the school promised to provide its own funding, had conducted a traffic study and had garnered community board support.

The plaza is expected to be completed within the next 18 to 24 months, according to university officials.