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In the fight to realize Vision Zero, an intersection we can't ignore

BY CITY COUNCIL MAJORITY LEADER JIMMY VAN BRAMER AND LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT GAIL O. MELLOW

This week, Mayor Bill de Blasio is conducting the business of the city from Queens, as part of City Hall in Your Borough. On his way to and from Queens Borough Hall, the mayor is likely to travel through one of the most complicated and dangerous three-way intersections in all of New York City. Located in Long Island City, Queens, it's where Queens Boulevard, Thomson Avenue and Van Dam Street converge directly in front of LaGuardia Community College, five high schools, a middle school, and a growing number of businesses. In its current state, this intersection is an alarming threat to safety and demands immediate attention.

Every day this area draws thousands of students, faculty and staff. Between classes, the sidewalks in front of LaGuardia Community College fill to capacity, with many forced dangerously onto the street and into traffic. Just to cross the street, pedestrians must walk two street blocks and navigate three zig-zagging intersections. Many resort to darting between cars and trucks, making it across with just seconds to spare. Meanwhile, a constant stream of speeding cars and trucks rush competitively between the Long Island Expressway and the Queensboro Bridge.

When things go wrong here, the consequences are deadly. In 2013, a 16-year-old high school student, Tenzin Drudak, was killed and five people were injured when an out-of-control van jumped a curb.

As the Council member for western Queens and the president of LaGuardia Community College, we joined with the community to fight for critical safety improvements. Some were implemented, but more needs to be done. Just last year, this intersection saw 24 people injured in crashes.

We thank the mayor for acknowledging the danger of this intersection in April with the commitment of \$17 million in capital funds for a redesign. But while these funds are a good first step, we cannot let the implementation of the redesign fall to the wayside. We urge the mayor to prioritize this deadly intersection and act quickly before it's too late.

As we move forward to finalize the redesign plan, we urge the mayor and his team to keep the core focus on the protection of pedestrians and cyclists. Therefore, we oppose any effort to widen lane widths, which encourages speeding, and support the widening the sidewalks in front of LaGuardia Community College to better accommodate the thousands of people going in and out of the college and nearby schools.

As the number of cyclists throughout New York City continues to grow, we must also ensure that cyclists traveling through this section of Long Island City have safe travel routes. Currently, no bike lanes exist here. Ideally, protected bike lanes would be installed, along with new signage to alert drivers to the presence of cyclists, and traffic calming measures.

It's been three years since Mayor Bill de Blasio stood in Queens to announce Vision Zero, an initiative to end traffic fatalities once and for all. Since then, the number of crashes resulting in serious injury or death in New York City has been steadily falling, with the fewest ever measured during the first six months of 2017. In Queens, we're on the way to turning Queens Boulevard from the "Boulevard of Death" to the "Boulevard of Life." With a proper redesign that keeps pedestrians and cyclists front and center and incorporates constant community input, we could transform the intersection of Thomson Avenue, Van Dam Street and Queens Boulevard from a dangerous and chaotic disaster waiting to happen, to a safe space for pedestrians and cyclists that would serve as a shining example of the power of Vision Zero to save lives through shared vision and bold action.