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Work set to begin on Union Square Pedestrian Plaza

By Andrew Park

The transformation of Union Square's north end begins this month.

The city Department of Transportation will begin implementing pedestrian plaza spaces and traffic changes to the Broadway and East 17th Street corridors that's aimed at improving safety conditions in the Union Square area.

The DOT first unveiled its plans in April.

Acting on its own data, the agency said change was needed after logging a rise in the number of pedestrians struck by cars from 2004-2008.

The DOT's plans for Union Square will now funnel downtown traffic on Broadway away from Union Square toward Park Avenue via East 18th Street.

The two-way East 17th Street strip between Broadway and Park

Avenue will have a pedestrian plaza put in with traffic restricted to west-bound only. The pedestrian plaza will loop around the corner to rest between 18th to 17th Streets on Broadway.

The DOT said this would significantly cut down the number of pedestrians hit at the Broadway/17th Street/Union Square West intersection, one of the most active accident-prone crossings in the area.

On Broadway between East 23rd and East 18th streets, plans call for an existing east side bike lane to be removed to the west side of the sidewalk. The new bike lane will be outfitted with a buffer that will also provide floating parking spots. The east side of Broadway will cater regular street parking and moving traffic.

With 17th Street now a right turn only, traffic continuing down

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through Union Square West will run into another right turn only at 14th Street. Transit officials said this was to discourage non-local traffic from congesting the south end of Union Square.

The plan, which ran into local opposition, now has the backing of the community, a local representative said.

"A resolution of support was passed in July after months of discussions with the community and DOT," said Community Board 5 district manager Wally Rubin.

Since the plan was announced, Union Square residents and business owners had voiced concerns over DOT data and the impact the

traffic changes would toll. CB5 had held off on deciding on the matter until the two sides were closer together, Rubin said. "The DOT listened and DOT made a whole raft of concessions," he added. "DOT responded to them — not all of them — but many of them."

The Union Square Partnership BID, which stayed mum during the discussions, deferred questions to the DOT, which did not reply to inquiries.