



MARCOS OKSENHENDLER DAILY NEWS

So many buses, so little space

By ROBERTA BRANDES GRATZ

NEW YORK Apple Tours is still on suspension after a court hearing yesterday. In light of the fact that one of its buses killed a pedestrian last month, that makes sense. Maybe the judge should keep it that way.

But the company's offensive conduct is easy to deal with in comparison with the larger intrusion on city life of a superabundance of buses.

In fact, the tour bus issue reflects how overboard the city has gone to accommodate suburban and commercial interests at the expense of resident pedestrians and public transit users. We are overrun by rubber tires.

Obviously, many buses do have a place in the city. The double-deckers for tourists are fine, as long as their number is limited and they operate safely and legally. Some express buses that drop off and pick up rush-hour commuters have a place, as long as they don't idle at a midtown curb all day.

The problem is the hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of suburban tour buses that crowd city streets. They are

unnecessarily large. Their size and luggage capacity are appropriate for long-distance travel, not local service. Their idling engines pollute the air to maintain interior temperatures.

And they crowd out city buses at bus stops — just look at Eighth Ave. in midtown after the theaters let out, for one egregious example. City bus drivers report the interference to no avail and note that it adds time and turmoil to normal service.

The buses are hardly the only intruders. Let us not forget the trucks, especially those 18-wheelers one sees with increasing frequency, even on narrow side streets. Volume deliveries for national chains, we're told, keep costs down and operations efficient. But New Yorkers pay the price in more congestion, increased pollution and greater traffic dangers.

The city welcomes visitors. New Yorkers are proud to share their city's richness and uniqueness. Visitors are an

economic asset, up to a point.

But suburban visitors cannot expect door-to-door service. That is a suburban amenity, not an urban lifestyle. It can be achieved only at the city's expense, and with a reduced quality of life for the residents who are the real economic and social lifeblood of the city.

It was almost 30 years ago that the alarm was first raised about tour buses at a national convention on tourism.

Today, many revitalized cities wrestle with this issue. Tourism-savvy cities like Charleston, S.C., and Savannah, Ga., limit bus size, numbers and behavior. In-town exploration (best done in New York on foot and public transit anyway) is limited to smaller, often open-sided, vehicles. Intercity buses drop passengers at hotels and disappear until the return home. Small vehicles or walking tours replace them.

People argue that many suburbanites won't come if they have to take the train, walk or use public transit. Too bad. Let them enjoy their own scenery by car or bus, not ours. And don't plead personal safety. It is an insult.

Anyone resistant to experiencing the city on urban terms should stay home. Don't ask city residents to foot a bill in budget costs and quality of life for visitor convenience.

If train schedules don't accommodate

late-night theatergoers, add trains. Coming to the city by train was a great convenience in an earlier day of frequent, uncrowded trains. It could be again.

The city is too accommodating to suburban cars, too. For example, it gives free parking to thousands of commuting police officers who could add to subway safety if they used their subway passes instead.

And why are hotels given so much frontage for short-term parkers? Residential buildings don't enjoy that privilege.

Smart solutions are available to tackle congestion. Many cities apply them. The willingness to act comes first.

Gratz is the author of "Cities Back From the Edge: New Life for Downtown."

*Behemoths
meant for
intercity travel
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