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****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****

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78th Street Temporary Summer Plaza
Kicks Off in Jackson Heights, Queens

Jackson Heights, NY, July 1, 2010 -- On Thursday, New York City Council Speaker Christine C. Quinn, City Health Commissioner Dr. Thomas Farley, New York City Council Member Daniel Dromm, Transportation Borough Commissioner Maura McCarthy and other elected and city officials will kick-off the opening of the Jackson Heights - 78th Street Temporary Summer Plaza in Queens.

The Temporary Summer Plaza is part of the NYC Department of Transportation and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's city-wide initiative to transform underused streets into vibrant, social public spaces and spaces for physical activity. Located on 78th Street between Northern Boulevard and 34th Avenue in Jackson Heights, this car-free street will provide open space for adults and children to play, exercise and relax during the summer months. It will be open beginning July 1st every day through August 31st. In September and October, it will be open on Sundays through October 31st. It will also serve as a gathering space for neighborhood events, informal socializing, better access to Travers Park, and more space for the local Greenmarket.

In a City Council district that ranks second to last in access to park space, a car-free street is an innovative solution to the most pressing challenge in the Jackson Heights community.

"This is a creative solution to providing additional open space for our growing community. One of the top concerns expressed to me by my constituents was the lack of open space," said City Council Member Daniel Dromm (D-Jackson Heights). "This community-led endeavor proves what can be done when you are willing to think outside the box."

The area's limited recreation space has had troubling public health consequences given the growth of childhood obesity. Locally available public space provides the richly diverse neighborhood with access to no-cost recreation, exercise, and the opportunity for interaction with neighbors.

"I'm thrilled to see communities like Jackson Heights open select streets for active play, and I encourage other neighborhoods to follow this example," said Dr. Thomas Farley, New York City Health Commissioner. "Playstreets provide a safe, fun, healthy alternative to a summer filled with TV and video games. Only half of our city's children are at a healthy weight, so we need these alternatives -- and we need families to get out and enjoy them."

"We are pleased to have worked with the community to create this temporary pedestrian plaza which everyone can use to better enjoy their streets," said Maura McCarthy, Transportation Borough Commissioner. "We will evaluate the project over the next two months."

The Jackson Heights population is particularly vulnerable to social isolation from language barriers, cultural differences, lack of mobility, health problems, and economic constraints.

For the past two years, the Jackson Heights Green Alliance, along with the support of other community groups and hundreds of volunteers, has successfully managed a Play Street on 78th Street between 34th Avenue and Northern Boulevard on Sundays from June to November.

"This Plaza/Playstreet project allows Jackson Heights residents space for activities from chalk painting and ball games to learning to ride a bike. We are excited about the possibilities." said Dudley Stewart co-founder of the Jackson Heights Green Alliance.

The entrance to 78th Street from Northern Boulevard will be closed with Department of Transportation-approved planters and/or barricades. In addition, an access lane will be created for emergency vehicles and vehicles from the Garden School which is located on the same street. The appropriate signage will be added to notify motorists of this change.

Additionally, the left-turn signal at the stoplight at the intersection of Northern Boulevard and 78th Street will be turned off during this period. On weekdays, the street will be staffed by young adults from the Summer Youth Employment Program, via Queens Community House, who will train and provide adult supervision for the youth workers. On weekends, the street will be staffed by local volunteers in shifts, as it has been on Sundays in the previous two years.

At night, similar to Travers Park, the street will be closed for activity. The street, as a public thoroughfare, will remain open to pedestrians and cyclists, as it normally would. The only difference will be the absence of parked cars and traffic on the street.

The Playstreets program to create more open spaces for active play is a collaboration between the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT), the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. The program's goal of helping families be more active also helps address the city's childhood obesity epidemic (43% of New York City elementary school students and 42% of 2 to 4 year-olds in Head Start are overweight or obese).

Working together with the Parks Department, the Community Playstreets program fosters collaboration with community groups to close a neighborhood street to cars and open it for play. The program provides an easy, low-cost way to create active play space and impact the health of the city's children and their parents by encouraging outdoor play and exercise. The program can also help New York be a greener city by encouraging families to go outside and play instead of watching TV and using air conditioners which are major users of electricity.

For more information visit www.jhgreen.org and www.nycgovparks.org

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