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Mayor Urges New Yorkers to Take the Stairs

Mayor Bloomberg's Latest Public-Health Initiative Advises Skipping the Elevator

By DAN HIRSCHHORN

Mayor Michael Bloomberg unveiled his latest public-health initiative on Wednesday, encouraging New Yorkers to bypass building elevators and instead take the stairs.

To motivate people, the administration will issue new guidelines encouraging public and private buildings to make staircases more attractive and accessible alternatives to elevators.



Edward Reed

Mayor Michael Bloomberg unveils his new initiative on Wednesday.

The mayor is also submitting legislation to City Council that, if passed, would turn some of those guidelines into laws for new construction and buildings undergoing major renovations.

"I have five floors in my house, I take the stairs," Mr. Bloomberg said as he rolled out the initiative at the New School in Greenwich Village.

"This isn't about going to the gym, this is about what you do in your daily routines."

At the core of Mr. Bloomberg's latest program, the first of its kind in the country, is the creation of the Center for Active Design, a nonprofit organization that promotes changes to building and street designs meant to encourage active lifestyles.

The center will also work to improve access to healthy food in under-served neighborhoods.

Mr. Bloomberg—who has previously banned smoking in bars, restaurants and parks, mandated that restaurants post calorie counts and rolled out the nation's largest bike-sharing program—said the initiative is yet another way to combat obesity, heart disease, diabetes and a other health problems.

The legislation being submitted to the City Council would require building owners to provide visible access to stairs and post signs encouraging their use near elevators—the city's health department says it has already had success experimenting with signs imploring people to "burn calories, not electricity."

Another bill would change the current fire code by permitting stairwell doors to be kept open magnetically, so long as they automatically close in the event of a fire alarm.

Taking the plans together, Mr. Bloomberg hopes to see new stairwells that are more visible, better lighted and more inviting, perhaps even with art and music—a far cry from the dingy halls found in many of the city's older high-rises.

"Since the invention of the elevator, stairs became relegated to purely [escape] during a fire," said David Burney, who heads the city Department of Design and Construction.

"So they're minimal in size, they're in the corner of buildings, often dark without windows. So what we'd like to see is the stair being brought back."

Mr. Bloomberg added: "The issue is not having access, it's making it more attractive."

The mayor—who made his announcement across the street from a recently constructed New School building featuring sleek, windowed stairwells that overlook Fifth Avenue and 13th Street—didn't speculate how soon the City Council would enact his proposed legislation.

But the administration worked with the council in developing the bills, and Speaker Christine Quinn supported them in a statement.

"Even small changes to the way we design our city can greatly increase physical activity and in turn, combat obesity," Ms. Quinn said. "We must seize every opportunity possible to end New York City's obesity epidemic."

Officials emphasized that any mandated changes would only apply to new buildings and major renovations—and that the changes are relatively low-cost.

"We're not asking people to spend a lot of money to increase mobility," Mr. Burney said.

Some New Yorkers said they were open to the mayor's idea.

Ronnie Peterson, a 40-year-old real-estate clerical worker who lives on the fifth floor of a South Bronx high-rise, said he almost always takes the elevator. He would use the stairs more if his steep, windy stairwell were more pleasant.

"If the stairwells were nicer, yes," Mr. Peterson said. "But no one can make you take the stairs. It's a choice."

And Deborah Brown, a 62-year-old public schoolteacher who lives on the seventh floor of an Upper West Side high-rise, said she only takes the stairs to get to her apartment when the lines for her building's two elevators are long.

"I think it's a good idea," Ms. Brown said. "It might remind me to take the stairs. If I have a lot of packages I'm not going to take the stairs. But if I don't have a lot of packages there's not a reason in the world I can't climb seven flights."

But Ms. Brown also described the stairs in her building as the kind of "user-friendly" ones Mr. Bloomberg wants to promote—"clean, well-lit."

"Quite frankly, I forget the stairs are there," she said. "You don't notice the stairs when you're standing by the elevators. But I know that seven flights is a good workout. Now when I get home I'm going to proudly take the stairs."

Mr. Bloomberg, who recently saw his push to ban the sale of large sodas blocked in court, preemptively pushed back against critics who say he's hurting business with more regulations.

He has also moved to ban cigarette displays in stores.

"Somebody asked me the other day, 'Well isn't all this nanny-gate stuff hurting business?'" he said. "And I pointed out we have record numbers of companies moving here, we have record numbers of private-sector jobs here, we have record numbers of tourists coming here. These are things that most people like."

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