

## 1,000 New Benches Coming to City Streets

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DOT Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan and East Harlem resident enjoy the new CityBench

HARLEM — There are times when Linda Fuenzalida, a dapper senior citizen from East Harlem who gives her age simply as "old enough," would like to stop and rest her legs on her way home from the grocery store.

"Before, we had benches but they took them away during the Giuliani administration," she said about former mayor Rudolph Giuliani's controversial removal of some city benches. "Every time I was outside and tired and wanted to sit down but couldn't, I would bless him," she added with a mischievous chuckle.

But Fuenzalida's days of brushing the dirt off of stoop steps to find a place for a respite or thinking about Giuliani when her legs hurt are just about over.

Two brand new sleek carbon steel benches were unveiled by the Department of Transportation and the Department for the Aging on Thursday, right in front of Fuenzalida's senior center, on East 109th Street between First and Second avenues, as part of the CityBench program.

About 1,000 of the benches will be installed at bus stops, in commercial districts and areas around the five boroughs with a high concentration of seniors and the physically impaired, as part of the three-year initiative.

Making the city more walkable and livable for seniors is the goal, and to this end the additional public street seating was recommended by various reports including the DOT's World Class Streets report and Age-Friendly NYC, as well as in PlaNYC 2030.

"New York has it all but it also needs places to take it all in," said DOT Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan. "The idea is to reinvigorate our sidewalks."

The three-seat benches were designed by Ignacio Ciocchini, director of design for Chelsea Improvement Company, with comfort and durability in mind. One of the main complaints about city public seating was that it was just too narrow, said Ciocchini. The CityBench's wider seat allows for more personal space and for someone to place a bag or a pet next to them.

Made of domestic carbon steel and electro-coated with a protective material similar to that used on automobiles, the benches are designed to require very little maintenance.

The perforations on the bench are a design element meant to invoke the constant movement of the city. They also serve a practical purpose by dispersing heat in the summer allowing snow to fall through in the winter.

The benches also come in a backless model and cost about \$1,800 a piece to fabricate, said Ciocchini. Several benches of similar design are already on the streets of Chelsea.

"It's a very simple design that relates well to other street furniture," said Ciocchini.

East Harlem was a great place to add the benches because it is an Age Improvement District where seniors were asking for the seating.

"This makes sure that seniors have a place to sit down and time to rest. It's great when people have options," said East Harlem Councilwoman Melissa Mark-Viverito.

The benches will help all area residents but are especially beneficial for seniors, said Ruth Finkelstein, senior vice president for policy and planning at the New York Academy of Medicine. It allows them to live independently longer and remain a visible part of the community.

"For older adults benches are exercise, they are social engagement and anti-depressants," said Finkelstein.

Josephine Tavarez, 68, said she couldn't wait for the return of warm weather to use the benches.

"It'll be very nice in the summer to sit outside [and] play dominoes," said Tavarez. But she was worried that younger people would monopolize the benches and not make room for seniors.

"It's nice but it's not going to be for us in the long-run," said Tavarez.

But Fuenzalida said she's going to make sure seniors get first priority for the seats.

"I'm very blatant. If I'm tired I'm going to tell whoever is sitting there I need to sit down," she said. "These are my benches, my community and my Harlem."