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City loosens grip on Manhattan

■ Many restrictions are suspended and cars are allowed below Canal Street

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The city loosened its grip on Lower Manhattan streets yesterday, easing many single-occupancy restrictions and allowing cars below Canal Street during the day for the first time since Sept. 11.

The announcement comes just a week after the Metropolitan Transportation Authority reopened the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel to Manhattan-bound traffic overnight and on weekends, which will help ease congestion on the Brooklyn Bridge during those times.

The tunnel is now open to all Manhattan-bound vehicle traffic on weekdays from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m., and on weekends from 8 p.m. Friday to 6 a.m. Monday. There are no single-occupancy restrictions, officials said. During the day, only emergency vehicles are allowed into the tunnel.

At the Manhattan-bound Holland Tunnel, the single-occupancy-vehicle ban now runs from 6 to 10 a.m., the same time frame as all other points of entry into Manhattan below 63rd Street. It previously ran from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The requirement for two or more occupants to be in the vehicle remains in effect indefinitely for the Brooklyn, Manhattan, Williamsburg and Queensboro bridges and the Holland, Lincoln and Queens-Midtown tunnels.

All eight crossings — including the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel — are open to all traffic leaving Manhattan around the clock, with the exception of a prohibition for commercial vehicles and trucks at the Brooklyn-Battery and Holland tunnels.

In addition to the bridge and tunnel openings, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani also announced that passenger vehicles will now be allowed to travel below Canal Street, except between 6 and 10 a.m. on weekdays. Previously, cars were only permitted on streets below Canal and west of Broadway weekdays between 6 p.m. and 5 a.m. and on weekends.

The exceptions to the 6 to 10 a.m. single-occupancy ban are emergency vehicles, those with special parking permits for the disabled, taxis and motorcycles.

The city has set up a series of zones in Lower Manhattan designating where cars, pedestrians and commercial vehicles can and cannot go. Sector A, or the area below Canal and west of Broadway, is the most open quadrant. Other zones — B, C, D and E — are closer to and encompass Ground Zero, and are open only to pedestrians, residents and some commercial vehicles.

The Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel had been closed since Sept. 11 to all Manhattan-bound traffic because of its proximity to Ground Zero. It reopened to Brooklyn-bound traffic from the FDR Drive in mid-October. Staten Island express buses have been using the tunnel since September.

Frank Pascual, a spokesman for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Bridges and Tunnels division, said all traffic will be turned south once it exits the tunnel on the Manhattan side. Cars will be able to access streets in Lower Manhattan or head directly onto the FDR.

West Street northbound remains closed.

Since parts of Lower Manhattan have reopened to traffic, the southernmost point of access has been the Brooklyn Bridge. Nightmarish backups have been reported on the span, some stretching all the way down the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway to the Prospect Expressway interchange.

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