

NEWS

As Carriage Ban Nears a Vote, Questions Remain Over Horses, Drivers and Transition Plans



by **Keyian Vafai**
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As the New York City Council moves closer to ending Central Park's 163-year-old horse-drawn carriage industry, questions remain about the fate of the carriage horses and drivers — and the three stables, all of which are based in Hell's Kitchen and Hudson Yards.



Horse-drawn carriages in Central Park. Photo: Keyian Vafai

A marathon committee hearing was held last month about the bill to ban the carriage industry, Intro 943, also known as Romanch's Law, which gained momentum after 18-year-old tourist Romanch Mahajan was killed after being thrown from a horse-drawn carriage in June.

If passed in its current form, carriage licenses would expire on June 1, 2028, owners would be prohibited from selling their horses to another carriage business or to slaughter, and the City would create a workforce transition program for the drivers. But key provisions — including where the horses would go, how drivers would transition and who would pay for long-term care of the horses — remain unclear.

One part of the bill already appears likely to be changed before it reaches the full Council.

As written, Romanch's Law prohibits licensed carriage horses from being sold or transferred for slaughter or "for use in a horse-drawn cab business," while directing the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) to conduct outreach to owners about their obligation to dispose of such animals in a humane manner.



Romanch Mahajan's aunt, Sovia Thurkal, broke down during her testimony at City Council hearing last month. Photo: Phil O'Brien

While the prohibition on sales for slaughter has drawn little disagreement, both supporters and opponents of the legislation say the restriction on transferring horses to another carriage business should be removed — a change that would require an amendment by the bill’s cosponsors.

“It shouldn’t be written in a way that says they can’t be used for X, Y or Z,” said Edita Birnkrant, executive director of New Yorkers for Clean, Livable and Safe Streets (NYCLASS), an advocacy organization at the center of the long fight to ban the carriages. “I don’t think that you can tell the owners that you can’t use them for another carriage business.”

The proposed amendment would address one of the industry’s biggest concerns. Drivers argue that if they lose their profession, they should have the right to decide where their horses go. That could include continuing carriage work in cities where the industry remains legal, such as New Orleans or Savannah.

Councilmember Carl Wilson, who represents Hell’s Kitchen and sits on the Council’s Health Committee, said he had not yet considered the proposed amendment. “I would have trouble with allowing a horse to be put into another line of work that we’re not happy with here,” Wilson said.



Councilmember Carl Willson at the committee hearing on Romanch’s Law last month. Photo: Phil O’Brien

Along with that, supporters of the legislation appear to have different understandings of how any transition would be financed.

The bill's author, Councilmember Christopher Marte said there's a coalition of horse sanctuaries that have expressed a willingness to purchase the horses at market value while also covering their care, though "the owner independently has to decide what they want to do with their horses."

Allison Bowling of the Urban Equine Rescue Coalition (UERC), a consortium of 31 animal sanctuaries advocating for the carriage ban, had a different notion of the financial agreement. "We are of the understanding that the City would provide these terms with the owners as part of a buyout, and we would be contracted to support the transition," Bowling said.

The UERC hopes to place carriage horses through its network of sanctuaries, primarily in the Tri-State Area. According to a coalition presentation prepared for the council hearing, potential funding sources include private donors, foundations, animal welfare organizations, corporate sponsors, public fundraising campaigns and grants.



Horses at the Red Feather Equine Sanctuary in North Carolina. Photo: Red Feather Equine Sanctuary.

Bowling, who is also co-founder of Red Feather Equine Sanctuary in North Carolina, acknowledged that this may be a tough task, but feels confident that the coalition could find a way to support any horse without a home.

“The reality is that there are more horses in need than there really are homes for them,” Bowling said, stressing that ultimately there was no one-size-fits-all solution for each animal.

The day after the hearing, drivers gathered at Clinton Park Stables on W52nd Street to argue that the bill would unnecessarily restrict what they could do with their horses. Christina Hansen, a driver and union shop steward, said she hopes to take over a successful carriage business in Nashville, Indiana, after its owner retires, but under the bill would be unable to bring her horse there.

“I can’t take my horse Sherman, who loves being a carriage horse, he loves people, he loves carrots, he loves everything about it,” Hansen argued. “I can’t go buy that carriage company, take my horse there, and work with him. The City of New York says that is inhumane.”



Christina Hansen, a driver and union shop steward, speaks at a press conference at Clinton Park Stables following the hearing. Photo: Catie Savage

Drivers also questioned whether sanctuaries, which rely largely on donations, could sustainably care for the horses long term. Hansen said support could fade once the news cycle subsides. “Once they’re ‘rescued,’ nobody is going to keep sending them money for the next 20 years,” Hansen said.

Susan Wagner, the president and founder of Equine Advocates in Chatham, New York, a constituent sanctuary of the coalition, scoffed at carriage industry concerns, alleging that the industry is presently sending horses to slaughter.

“One of the questions that a lot of people don’t seem to realize when they say, ‘well, if this happens, what will happen to the horses?’” Wagner began. “Going to slaughter is happening now. If you don’t stop it, it’s just a vicious circle that will never end. That’s what some people need to understand. It’s not that they will go to slaughter, they’ve been going to slaughter.” Wagner said she was referencing Freedom of Information records from 2005 to 2012, which show that about 70 horses departed the industry each year, but there is no evidence that they were sold to slaughter.

Equine Advocates, the largest sanctuary of the coalition, currently houses 82 horses, and Wagner said it has the capacity to take eight more. Of the 82, two are former carriage horses — Jack and Mark, from New York and Philadelphia, acquired in 2016 and 2020, respectively. Wagner says she was troubled by the state of their health when the sanctuary took them in. “When Jack first came, his feet were in such bad shape. It took our farrier three years to get them back to normal.”



Jack, a former carriage horse from New York, at the Equine Advocates sanctuary in Chatham, New York. Photo supplied.

While questions remain about how Romanch’s Law would be implemented, Chicago offers a glimpse of what New York’s transition could look like if the bill passes. The Midwest city’s council voted 46-4 to ban horse-drawn carriages in December 2020 after a years-long campaign by animal rights advocates.

Larry Ortega, the former owner of Chicago Horse & Carriage, had worked in the industry for more than 40 years when the ban passed. At the time, he owned eight horses. Rather than selling them immediately, Ortega said he spent the next several years finding homes he felt comfortable with, covering their care himself in the interim.

“I took two, three years out of pocket, just paying, keeping them,” Ortega told W42ST. “I had some offers, but even though these horses were my ‘work property,’ they’re like your dog, your cat. You become very attached to them. So I wasn’t going to just pawn them off to the highest bidder.”

Two of Ortega's horses were sold to a former carriage driver who now operates a special-events carriage business. Another two retired at a farm, where he still pays for their board. The remaining four were sold to other "horse acquaintances."



Larry Ortega had worked in the industry for more than 40 years when the Chicago ban passed. Photo supplied.

Ortega did not consider sanctuaries when finding homes for his horses, harboring skepticism of the sanctuary system. "I just read last week one got shut down. Horses were starved, because if they don't have money coming in, and people don't donate, they can't feed these animals," he said, referring to an incident in which the San Diego Humane Society conducted a massive rescue operation at the Villa Chardonnay sanctuary, where authorities rescued more than 160 neglected horses and other animals earlier this year.

But Wagner painted a different picture of sanctuary life. "Jack and his best friend, Nemo, live in a beautiful pasture, and they eat grass all day long," she said, about the former New York City carriage horse. "To me, the key to a horse having a happy life is having lots of space to roam because they need to move around, not be stuck in a stall... That's a good retirement for a horse who's worked as hard as Jack."

A significant difference between Romanch's Law and Chicago's carriage ban is that New York's proposal includes a workforce transition program for drivers. Ortega said that when the Chicago ban passed, he was left to fend for himself during the global pandemic.

"They offered us nothing," Ortega said. "A lot of my drivers ended up being gig workers. I did for a short while. I didn't know what to do." Ortega said he made ends meet as a DoorDash driver until ending up at his present place of employment.

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Whether New York's transition program will prove more successful remains an open question.

The bill currently directs the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (DCWP) to work with the Mayor's Office of Talent and Workforce Development to help drivers transition into other careers but the details have yet to be worked out.

At a press conference the day before the hearing for Romanch's Law, Mayor Zohran Mamdani said his administration was "critical of the insufficiencies of the worker protections" and looked forward to working with the Council to strengthen them.

Councilmember Marte said that the current sticking point is what kinds of jobs drivers want to transition into and "figuring out which agency is going to be the lead." He estimated that drivers make between \$65,000 and

\$75,000 a year, but believes the City can help place them in jobs with better pay, benefits and potentially pensions.



Councilmember Christopher Marte at a vigil in Central Park for Romanch Mahajan. Photo: Phil O'Brien

Drivers remained unconvinced. “I don’t want your hospitality job in a casino. I don’t want your hospitality job in a hotel. The hotels are already on strike,” driver Alexis Lawson said.

The Council’s Health Committee is expected to consider the bill, along with any amendments, after the summer recess, before deciding whether to send it to the full Council.

W42ST reached out to the DCWP for comment regarding the workforce development programs but had not heard back at time of publishing.

** Additional reporting by Catie Savage*