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Our Towns

A Creaky Bridge, Too Far From the Days of a Power Broker's Rule

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Suddenly, in another reminder that the pendulum of public favor never stops swinging, we're in the middle of a [Robert Moses](#) boomlet, with museum events, lectures and scholarship taking a new look at the past century's megabuilder.

A visionary who masterfully created much of the world we know in New York, or a Godzilla stomping on the poor and dismissing mass transit to build his roads, bridges and parks? Twenty-six years after Moses' death, it's as relevant a debate as it was in 1974 when Robert Caro published his acclaimed and fiercely critical book on Moses, "The Power Broker."

You can argue Moses round or flat. But you can't look at perhaps the region's most complicated, vexing and important public works project, the reconstruction and re-imagining of the Tappan Zee Bridge, and ponder the imperial world of Moses without two thoughts. First, that era seems as ancient as Byzantium. Second, was its passing an entirely good thing?

There's not much monumental about the Tappan Zee (which Moses did not build). Constructed on the cheap between Rockland and Westchester Counties and opened in 1955, it's a mess: overloaded, poorly engineered, in chronic need of extensive maintenance and potentially dangerous. It's well known for commuting surprises like an epidemic of "punch-throughs" — holes in the roadway where a chunk gives way and you can see the river below.

The necessity for rebuilding or replacing the three-mile-long bridge took hold in the late 1990s, and a formal planning process began in 2000. Planners eventually took 150 concepts for a new bridge or tunnel and mass transit system and boiled them down to six options, and details of some of the options were unveiled last week. There will be open sessions at Purchase College in Westchester on Tuesday and at the Palisades Center mall in Rockland on Wednesday to view the proposals.

Almost everything seems more complicated than in Moses' heyday, with building a bridge the least of it.

What kind of mass transit — bus and/or rail, and which of multiple options for either? Where to? Rail links from Rockland to Manhattan, or a transit plan covering the corridor from Suffern to Port Chester with connections beyond, or something in between? How to come up with as much as \$14.5 billion for the most ambitious plan? From the public sector, a private consortium or a public-private partnership?

How best to get public comment and to navigate between the various parties involved, including two counties with different mass transit agendas and the three major players: the New York State Department of Transportation, the New York State Thruway Authority and the Metro-North Railroad? How to do anything without riling citizens groups and environmentalists?

Peeved at the pace of progress and failures in communication, the Westchester County executive, [Andrew J. Spano](#), and his Rockland County counterpart, C. Scott Vanderhoef, fired off a plea last week to Gov. [Eliot Spitzer](#) to intercede in the process, saying it can't continue as is.

"The process now in place is confusing, unresponsive, and in several ways unreliable," they wrote. "It comes across as bureaucratic, provincial and lacking any sense of regional vision."

Mike Anderson, who heads a team of engineers, planners and other experts working on detailed versions of the six proposals, says he knows there's frustration at the pace of progress, but that's not necessarily bad. "It's important," he said, "for us to do this as conscientiously and with as much public input and discussion as possible, because selecting a design as a solution and then having to defend it is the way of the past."

It's a good thing that a public agency can no longer bulldoze neighborhoods willy-nilly in the name of progress. But just as it's crucial to get this right — it's a project meant to work for a century — it's also important to get it done, or at least started.

The bridge now carries 135,000 vehicles a day, though it was designed for 100,000. There's a desperate need for east-west transit options in Rockland and Westchester beyond the automobile. Add in plans for a Catskill casino and Stewart Airport becoming the fourth major airport in the region, and Mr. Anderson may be right when he says there's no other project in the country on this scale in such a sensitive and vital corridor.

"This is the opposite of Robert Moses," said Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at [New York University](#). "Here you have a project in search of a decision-maker. There you had a decision-maker in search of a project."

THE goal is to start construction in 2010 and, depending on how grandiose the plan is, finish by 2015. It seems pretty optimistic, especially with no idea where the money will come from. There won't and probably shouldn't be a Moses, but if there's going to be a Moses Lite, someone who can knock heads while respecting process, it will probably be Mr. Spitzer or someone he picks to be his designated hitter.

It's going to be a long, bumpy road no matter what; but, Moses or no Moses, someone needs to be sure the whole thing doesn't fall through one of those nasty punch-throughs.

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