

Bury This Big Mistake

by Geoff Kelly

Transportation officials begin studying several expensive ways — and one intriguing bargain — to reclaim Humboldt Parkway



Sixty-two years ago, William Gallancy, an associate engineer with New York State's Department of Public Works, told a standing-room-only crowd at St. James Evangelical and Reformed

Church on High Street that the Kensington Expressway was the best solution to East Buffalo's problems. Traffic congestion on the neighborhood's thoroughfares was bad and getting worse, he explained. *"Gallancy said 70,000 vehicles a day cram that section's main arteries—Main, Kensington, Genesee, Bailey and Walden," according to a Buffalo News account of the meeting.* "And, he added, the growth of suburbs and congestion of traffic continues to increase at a tremendous rate.

"Unless something is done to relieve this congestion, he said, property values will drop alarmingly. 'It is doing more to depress property values than anything else,' he warned. 'We must save the city from becoming a backyard for its suburbs.'"

Well. That certainly didn't work.

The \$45 million Kensington Expressway tore up Frederick Law Olmsted's tree-lined Humboldt Parkway, claimed hundreds of homes in previously stable neighborhoods, ripped a trench in the ground that emphasized the city's racial division, and diverted automobile traffic

from the East Side's once-thriving business strips to a limited-access expressway that shuttles commuters from downtown Buffalo to the northern suburbs in about 10 minutes on a clear day.

In other words: Making the city a backyard to its suburbs. Depressing property values. Starving small businesses on Jefferson and Fillmore of customers and abetting the evisceration of those business districts. Subjecting two generations of residents surrounding the expressway to air and noise pollution.

As for relieving the ever-increasing congestion Gallancy worried about, the Kensington today carries about 70,000 vehicles per day. In other words, traffic volume between downtown and the northern and eastern suburbs is about the same as it was in 1958. The region's population hasn't grown to fill the capacity created by the state's highway engineers. It hasn't grown at all. This city incurred all the negative impacts of an urban expressway, and it turns out we didn't even need it.

The loss of Humboldt Parkway in favor of an entrenched highway cutting the city in two ranks high on the list of most regretted and frequently bemoaned Buffalo planning mistakes, right alongside the failure to locate UB's new campus downtown.



It is also the first of these mid-century blunders that the region has a real shot at reversing. The New York State Department of Transportation, armed with \$2 million in federal funds, is currently shopping for a consultant to evaluate possible ways to restore Humboldt Parkway.

“This is a chance to undo something that never should have happened,” says Stephanie Barber of Restoring Our Community Coalition, a group of neighborhood stakeholders who have been advocating for restoration of

Humboldt Parkway and helping NYSDOT to define the goals of the

project, from scope and design issues to health impacts and community benefit agreements.

The Kensington is in rough physical shape anyway, Barber says—witness ongoing emergency roadwork on sections of the expressway, as well as work on the retaining walls and railings between Jefferson and Michigan. NYSDOT is going to have to invest heavily in repairs soon, Barber says, so now is the time to push for a dramatic reclamation project of the sort that at least a dozen US cities have undertaken in recent years to rid themselves of urban expressways.

Presently, NYSDOT seems to favor two roughly defined design options, both of which entail capping the Kensington from Best Street to Delavan Avenue, and installing an approximation of Olmsted's parkway on top of the cap.

Last August, Mayor Byron Brown introduced a new design option that has attracted considerable interest among local transit activists: burying the entire thing, from Oak Street to Delavan, and replacing the high-speed, limited-access expressway with a low-speed, at-grade boulevard, fully integrating the traffic it carries with the urban street grid. Coupled with the long-debated plan to slow down the Scajaquada Expressway and convert it to a walkable, bikable boulevard, Brown's recommendation presents the city an opportunity to restore vital elements of the city's Olmsted patronage, and to join the 21st century in regard to urban transit planning.

Cover it or bury it?

According to Craig Mozrall of NYSDOT, there are five design options under consideration. First, the do nothing option. Second, simply improve retaining walls and railings, plus landscaping, which is what is happening between Jefferson and Michigan now.

The next two options involve capping the Kensington between Best Street and Delavan Avenue. The trench that carries the Kensington is not deep enough to be capped as is, so the first capping option envisions a surface median that is raised four feet above grade, with two lanes of traffic on each side of a landscaped parkway. The second capping option is slightly more dramatic: It entails digging the

trench four feet deeper, resurfacing the expressway, then building the new parkway at grade over top.

Finally, there's the fifth option introduced by Mayor Brown last summer: Fill in the expressway and replace it with an at-grade, tree-lined urban boulevard comprising eight lanes. In each direction there would be a slip road and three inner lanes, with parkway in between. In his August letter, Brown referred NYSDOT to the Central Freeway Replacement Project in San Francisco, in which an urban expressway was demolished and replaced with an expanded Octavia Boulevard, removing what many considered a blight on the city's landscape and injecting the proximate business district with new vitality, while managing to accommodate the displaced traffic.

The burial option has at least two distinct advantages, according to advocates such as the New Millennium Group, which has written a brief in support of Brown's recommendation. First, burying is considerably cheaper than capping. A rough cost estimate for the project in 2007 tagged the second capping option at \$265 million for covering less than one mile of expressway. When people talk about the price now—and it's a guessing game, to be sure, until the study gets underway—the figure ranges from \$350 million to \$500 million. No funding for construction of the project has yet been identified.

On the other hand, the cost of simply burying the expressway is probably less than \$100 million.

The second advantage is that burying the expressway will return commuter traffic to surface roads, which means some of it will disperse and be absorbed into the urban street grid. Vehicle traffic that disappeared from business districts on Genesee, Walden, Fillmore, and Jefferson when the Kensington was opened will, hopefully, reappear, as motorists seek new routes between downtown and the suburbs.

NYSDOT's response to Brown's letter was tepid: Alan Taylor, regional design engineer, wrote that the department had not considered any option that involved "permanent impacts or changes to the operation of Route 33."

“To add that alternative would change the classification of the study under NEPA,” Mozrall explains, referring to the National Environmental Protection Act, “from an environmental assessment to a full-blown environmental impact statement, because that would have a drastic effect on the through traffic that’s running on the expressway right now.”

An EIS can take substantially longer than an environmental assessment, which Mozrall says will probably take two to three years as it is. Still, he added, if the citizens advisory group, the mayor, the Common Council, or any of the other politicians driving this project told NYSDOT to get serious about that fifth option, then NYSDOT would do it.

But the mayor’s office has not communicated with NYSDOT since sending that letter last summer, and the mayor’s office did not respond to numerous requests from this newspaper for comment on the issue.

“We haven’t heard back from the city that that is in fact what they want to do,” Mozrall said. “We did tell the city that we would talk about that option in the scoping action...but as far as the purpose and need of the projects that have been identified by the advisory committee, the actual changing of the expressway into an eight-lane boulevard does not meet the purpose and need. We don’t see how that would reflect original Olmsted design, which only had two lanes of traffic separated by a wide parkway.”

Setting priorities

“They have the wrong objectives,” says John Norquist, former mayor of Milwaukee and president for the Congress for the New Urbanism. Norquist has displayed particular interest in Buffalo’s transit projects, weighing in on reconstructing Route 5, dismantling the Skyway, and expanding the Peace Bridge plaza. His gut reaction to NYSDOT, and to transportation departments generally, is distrust. DOTs everywhere, he explains, are principally concerned with relieving traffic congestion, and moving cars from one place to another as quickly as possible.

“Having through traffic not have to slow down through town should not be a priority for the City of Buffalo,” Norquist says. “It hasn’t done

Buffalo any good to have that criterion. If the objective of the expressways was to eliminate congestion, they worked perfectly, because congestion is not a big problem in Buffalo—not just traffic congestion but money congestion, people congestion. Everything’s been decongested because of this narrow objective of fighting congestion.”

An expressway, he says, is a rural form that doesn’t belong in the city. Few European cities have expressways within their city boundaries. Vancouver, which has some of the highest property values in North America, has no expressways whatsoever within the city boundaries.

“But Buffalo’s leaders made a decision, with the help of Robert Moses and the state DOT, that Buffalo should be a great place to drive trucks through,” says Norquist. “So they dug up Olmsted’s boulevard, which added value to Buffalo, and put in this thing that doesn’t add value to Buffalo.”

Under Norquist, Milwaukee dismantled some of its mid-century highway system. A few years ago, Toronto tore down the eastern section of the Gardiner Expressway. Seoul, South Korea removed one of its busiest expressways, carrying 100,000 cars per day, spurring private investment in the real estate along the boulevard that replaced it. The Champs d’Elysees in Paris carries 80,000 cars per day. The New Millennium Group’s brief (available at www.nmgonline.org) refers to Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn, an urban boulevard with an Olmsted pedigree that carries 70,000 cars daily, just as the Kensington does. There is plenty of evidence to be found in other cities that urban boulevards offer more than adequate traffic capacity, while conferring economic, aesthetic, and health benefits to the surrounding community.

“In my mind, [burying the Kensington] should be considered for the additional opportunities it provides to the city as a whole,” says Justin Booth, chair of the City of Buffalo’s Bicycle & Pedestrian Advisory Board, which NYSDOT asked for input on the project. The Bicycle & Pedestrian Advisory Board promotes a “complete streets” approach to transportation planning, wherein road projects take into account the needs of pedestrians and bicyclists, in addition to the welfare of adjacent communities.

Booth is concerned about air pollution. Currently the car and truck exhaust disperses into the air. (That's problematic enough, according to Stephanie Barber of Restoring Our Community Coalition, who cites widespread upper respiratory health issues in her community.) If the expressway is capped, the exhaust will need to be vented, which means concentrated exposure at its outlets. Where will that be? Booth wonders, too, if the caps NYSDOT envisions will support large shade trees. He's also concerned that the high cost of the capping options means that the project will never move beyond the current \$2 million study.

And, like Norquist, Booth believes the project goals should be set by the community, not by NYSDOT, and he suspects that the baseline goal of maintaining Route 33 as it exists begins with the state, not with the community. "Right now the Kensington functions, in my opinion, as an auto sewer," he says. "It doesn't diffuse the traffic into the community, it funnels people from point A to point B. The goal of the project is to maintain the current traffic capacity, which you could with the boulevard. But, to be honest, do we want to? It's not benefiting the city of Buffalo, it's benefiting the commuters who cut through the city of Buffalo to the detriment of the neighborhood that surrounds it."

What happens next

The official position of Restoring Our Community Coalition, according to Barber, is to put every option on the table. Barber thinks the option advanced by Mayor Brown and supported by New Millennium Group ought to be given full consideration during the study phase of the project, as should all other design possibilities. "I think in a study you want to look at every single idea thoroughly," she says. "Let the pluses and minuses be weighed fairly."

It's been a long haul getting to the point of a funded study. According to Barber, who lives in Hamlin Park, the notion of reclaiming Humboldt Parkway was first promoted by a resident named Clarke Eaton a dozen years ago. Eaton would make presentations, complete with drawings and brochures, to the local homeowners association. ("We'd allow him to come talk to us about once a quarter," Barber says.) Pie in the sky, Barber recalls people thinking. "We all thought it

was a good idea,” she says, “but we just thought there was no chance.”

Over the years, Eaton’s idea began to acquire advocates. He collected letters of support from politicians and community leaders. As health impacts from exposure to exhaust began to manifest in the community, Barber and other neighbors began to see some sort of remediation of the mistake that was the Kensington as a necessity. That coupled with the clear economic injustice imposed by the construction of the Kensington Expressway galvanized the community into action.

“If you look at the expressway, which used to be a parkway, and look at what’s happening a block from there, the whole community is deteriorating,” Barber says. “We started looking at Bidwell Parkway and Colonial Drive, and we looked at a block from there, and those neighborhoods are thriving.”

They applied pressure to State Senator Antoine Thompson and Assemblywoman Crystal Peoples-Stokes to put their weight behind the issue in Albany. They recruited Masten District Councilman Demone Smith as an advocate. They reached out to NYSDOT. Now there exists the possibility that this colossal mistake can be buried—under a cap or under rock and soil—forever. During the two or three years the study will take to complete, elected officials must work on finding funding for construction.

“If we can fix something like this, we can fix a lot of things,” Barber says. “I don’t want my great-grandchildren to say, ‘Whose idea was this?’”



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