

Mass Transit, New Towns, and National Parks in New York City's 'Forgotten Borough'

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My dissertation insists that Staten Island is central not only to the history of twentieth-century New York City, but to postwar urban planning and politics more broadly. Despite its absence from almost every major historical work on the postwar urban crisis, the borough was considered by many planners and politicians to be New York City's greatest asset and most volatile liability.¹ Set against the rest of the boroughs' declining populations and shrinking tax revenues, Staten Island's large swaths of vacant acres provided a blank slate onto which urbanists mapped their conflicting critiques and cure-alls for the American city. Amongst a long list of influential politicians, environmentalists, and planning organizations that debated the future of Staten Island, Governor Nelson Rockefeller and the Regional Plan Association (RPA) stand out as having particular interest in and influence on the borough.² My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center was integral to tracking and contextualizing both Rockefeller's and the RPA's planning approaches to the "forgotten borough"—philosophies which by the early 1970s had come into tension with one another. While Rockefeller would move, in the late 1960s, toward encouraging a dense, socially-diverse, mass-transit oriented Staten Island, the RPA's uncompromising support of Gateway National Recreation Area would forestall precisely the type of new town planning project—the South Richmond Development Corporation designed by James Rouse—that was capable of densifying and integrating the borough's overwhelmingly white, middle-class southern shore.³

The Nelson A. Rockefeller Gubernatorial Records document the Governor's intimate relationship with Staten Island, a borough he described as "Boomtown, USA."⁴ In particular, the documents reveal that while Rockefeller supported an aggressive highway building schedule for the borough through the early-1960s, by the mid-1960s he pivoted toward a "balanced transportation" approach that brought the Staten Island Rapid Transit (SIRT) back to life while leaving much of the vehicular infrastructure planned for the borough unbuilt. Rockefeller's initial enthusiasm for highway development was grounded less in ardor for automobiles than in the massive, and flexible, streams of federal revenues available for highway development. Like Robert Moses, the Governor understood highway

construction not simply as a subsidy for the city's transportation network, but also as a means of conserving open space, developing industrial zones, and protecting the shore line—a way as he told borough residents of creating “an Island that is both vibrant with commerce and delightfully livable...a testament to...the art of living in this fast-paced age.”⁵ By the mid-1960s, the Rockefeller administration had spent \$56 million on Staten Island highway projects and was promising another \$118 million for the development of four more highways.⁶ The West Shore Expressway would leverage highway moneys toward “industrial and parkland development.”⁷ Shore Front Drive would help protect Staten Island's long, southwestern edge from erosion and hurricanes.⁸ Richmond Parkway would direct money toward a five mile bike and pedestrian path traversing the borough's steep, wooded, central spine. The Willowbrook Parkway would lead continental and North-Shore residents to the Island's several beach-front parks.

Only one of these projects, the West Shore Expressway, would be realized however, as the Governor joined many city and federal policy-makers in a decisive pivot away from highway construction in the second half of the 1960s. Highway subsidies, the logic went, were not only costing mass-transit providers significant losses in revenue and ridership, but also diverting government moneys from long-overdue infrastructure improvements. An “over-emphasis” on vehicular transportation had resulted in a “costly and inefficient system,” Rockefeller would admit to Staten Islanders in a 1965 speech.⁹ In order to “sustain...economic growth in a metropolitan area,” the Governor asserted, “there is the absolute necessity that you have a modern, balanced network of transportation facilities.”¹⁰ Just one year after he had opened the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge with neither a pedestrian path nor train track, Rockefeller was now insisting that “mass transportation must provide the backbone” of the city's transportation program.¹¹

In 1966, Rockefeller took affirmative action to achieve this “balancing of rubber and rail transportation.”¹² First, he introduced a bill providing for \$30 million in emergency funds “to repair, clean and improve subway, commuter railroad and

bus facilities throughout NYS.”¹³ Second, he proposed and passed a \$2.5 billion transportation bond, directing \$25 million toward improving the SIRT and \$600 million for upgrades on the New York City transit system.¹⁴ Third, he established the State Department of Transportation specifically charged to provide a “unified and balanced...transportation plan and policy.”¹⁵ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he created the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which would subsume the surplus funds of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority and direct them toward “badly needed physical improvements to the subway and bus systems serving the City of New York.”¹⁶ Regarding the decline of mass transportation, Rockefeller promised Staten Islanders, that New York would lead “the Nation in state government action to reverse the results of...decades of neglect.”¹⁷

Rockefeller’s shift in transportation policies on Staten Island were encouraged by the continued decline of the borough’s industry despite the completion of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. At the opening of the bridge in 1964, Rockefeller celebrated the structure as an industrial jumpstart, what he called “a keystone in the vast network of transportation facilities” that would “course the hearts of two boroughs.”¹⁸ Likewise, Borough President Albert Maniscalco promised “the opening of the bridge and its roadnet w[ould] bring many industrial employers to the island,” and the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce suggested that the bridge would reposition Staten Island at the “geographic center of the largest industrial and consumer market in the US.”¹⁹ In November of 1965, however, Rockefeller would discover that industrial employers were continuing to exit the borough despite the bridge’s completion. The Governor’s staff warned him that “the economic impact of the Verrazano Bridge on Staten Island appears to practically nil.”²⁰ “In regard to labor and manufacturing jobs,” a Rockefeller staffer wrote, “the Island’s positioning today may be worse than it has been in recent years.”²¹ Indeed, in 1965 alone, the Bethlehem Steel shipyard, Piels Brewery, and Wallerstein Company had all abandoned the island. Improving transportation between North New Jersey and New York City while also inflating real estate prices on Staten Island, the Verrazano Bridge had accelerated—rather

than captured—the wave of industry fleeing New York City. “Our best approach,” Rockefeller’s advisor warned, “would be to tootle a very cautious tune insofar as the impact of the bridge is concerned.”²²

As he returned to the borough one year after opening the Verrazano Bridge, Rockefeller faced a disturbing economic and environmental picture—industrial employment and mass-transit options were dramatically shrinking, while the suburban housing market was growingly increasingly costly and ever-distant from the city’s core business districts. With Staten Island’s recent history offering a foreboding parable, Rockefeller began to layout a different vision for New York City’s metropolitan growth in the late 1960s. Rather than support the flexible, vehicular-encouraged suburban sprawl of the 1950s and 1960s, Rockefeller would shift toward prioritizing dense, mass-transit oriented development.

In addition to his aggressive pivot toward mass-transit funding, we might also consider Rockefeller’s subsequent championing of the New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC) as an important corollary to this density-embracing vision. As a legal and financial vehicle to encourage new town development throughout New York State’s more urbanized regions, the UDC sought to overcome social segregation by creating dense housing clusters adjacent to both mass-transit and business centers.²³ Sure enough, by 1970 Rockefeller’s hand-picked chief executive officer for the UDC, Ed Logue, would seek to partner with new town developer James Rouse, in planning a \$6 billion “new town in town” for Staten Island’s southern shore.²⁴ The South Richmond Development Corporation (SRDC), as it was called, was planned to straddle the SIRT while drawing corporate headquarters, industrial employers, and 400,000 residents—most of whom would be apartment dwellers and straphangers—to a removed, lily-white corner of New York City.

Like Rockefeller, the RPA also championed new town planning and development throughout the tri-state region. In preparing their Second Regional Plan in the mid-1960s, the RPA insistently advocated for a series of “new towns” throughout

the New York City metropolis. Such “satellite centers,” they argued, would help ameliorate “the growing apartheid of the Region—a forced separation of Negroes and Puerto Ricans from the rest of the population.”²⁵ With a diverse mix of housing types including “large apartments,” “garden apartments,” and “houses on small lots,” such centers “would bring large numbers of blacks and whites together and so inhibit the growing separation of the races.”²⁶ Furthermore, new towns would “make possible good public transportation,” provide “lower-cost housing” close to industrial and commercial employers, and weave “green spaces” into neighborhoods rather than produce “scattered urbanization.”²⁷ The RPA proposed two dozen such “regional sub-centers,” including clusters in Jamaica, Queens; New Brunswick, New Jersey; and Staten Island.²⁸ In developing such projects, RPA planners sought to imitate James Rouse’s Columbia, MD—designed for a “balanced community” of 110,000 residents—a planned city which David Rockefeller described as “the outstanding example of a new town in this country.”²⁹

On Staten Island, however, the RPA’s support of new town development would be stymied by their adoration for the Department of Interior’s plans to preserve 26,000 acres of urban seashore, beach, and marsh as a national park known as Gateway National Recreation Area (Gateway). In 1972, just as State Senator John J. Marchi gathered support for legislation enabling the Rouse Company to develop a 10,000 acre new town across southern Staten Island, the National Park Service added a keystone of Rouse’s plan—the 1,500-acre park known as Great Kills Harbor—to their federal park bill. Despite Mayor Lindsay, Governor Rockefeller, and a long list of housing and planning organizations supporting Rouse’s new town, the RPA would advocate quick and uncompromised passage of the national park. Without publishing a single word that analyzed the lost housing and development opportunities to be caused by the park’s formation, the RPA would launch a multi-year campaign to push Gateway through the federal, state, and city governments. Our “involvement over the years would fill a very fat report,” the RPA proudly proclaimed in 1972.³⁰ Not only was the organization’s 1960 publication *Race for Open Space* “the genesis of the proposed park,” but the

RPA also funded and staffed the Gateway Citizens Committee, developed a cache of “technical information” used in congressional testimony, and hosted congressional tours through the future park.³¹

The RPA’s insistence that the bill be passed quickly and unadulterated ensured Gateway would meet its environmental preservation goals at the expense of some of the urban park’s most explicitly stated social ideals. For example, despite the park’s promise to make the city’s coastal wilderness accessible to inner-city residents, the RPA urged Mayor Lindsay to withdraw his demand that Congress include strong subsidies for mass-transit in park legislation.³² Furthermore, both Governor Rockefeller and State Senator John Marchi encouraged state and federal lawmakers to develop low-income housing within or directly adjacent to the park: Rockefeller suggested to President Nixon that a small percentage of parklands be used for low- and middle-income housing at Floyd Bennett Field, while Marchi asked state and city lawmakers to consider a land-swap allowing the National Park to coexist within Rouse’s new town.³³ While both housing compromises were dismissed by federal lawmakers, RPA officials nevertheless advocated for the park’s passage, celebrating Gateway without ever drawing the public’s attention to the housing and transportation possibilities displaced by the preserve.

Thus, as opposed to Rockefeller’s enthusiastic embrace of both the UDC and mass-transit funding for their promise to better integrate New York State communities, I argue that the RPA’s priorities shifted away from racially integrating urban communities in the 1960s toward ecologically renewing low-density, bio-diverse habitats in the early 1970s. The RPA’s prioritization of a National Park over a socially-diverse New Town is one of many examples that my dissertation traces in order to reveal how the rising environmental movement not only paralleled, but forestalled the last ditch efforts of Great Society liberalism to integrate holistically-planned urban communities. This political sea-change is vividly captured throughout Staten Island history as liberals and moderates slowly turned away from plans for urban renewal projects, new towns, and

European-style greenbelts, opting instead for a more fragmented array of tools—including ecological zoning, density limits, linear parks, and educational preserves—more narrowly focused on environmental concerns alone. If the decline of Great Society liberalism should be understood as a transformation rather than a reduction of state power, then the formation of Gateway suggests that the environmental state—along with its many advocates—played a crucial role in this mid-1970s shift in metropolitan politics and power.

¹ For thorough histories of mid-twentieth century New York City that nevertheless overlook Staten Island’s centrality to New York City planners and politicians see, for example, Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993); Christopher Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Kenneth Jackson and Hillary Ballon, ed. *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007); Christopher C. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban nature & the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Kim Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate: Regime Change in New York City, 1974 to the Present* (New York: New Press, 2007); Joshua Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: New Press, 2000); John Hull Mollenkopf, *A Phoenix in the Ashes: The Rise and Fall of the Koch Coalition in New York City Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). A few recent histories of New York City that touch on Staten Island include Julie Sze, *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 109-113; Ted Steinberg, *Gotham Unbound: The Ecological History of Greater New York* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014); Joseph Viteritti, *Summer in the City: John Lindsay, New York and the American Dream*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Daniel C. Kramer and Richard M. Flanagan, *Staten Island: Conservative Bastion in a Liberal City* (New York: University Press of America, 2012); and Timothy J. Sullivan, *New York State and the Rise of Modern Conservatism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

² The surprisingly long list of planners who studied and commented upon Staten Island include Frederick Law Olmsted, Rexford Tugwell, Clarence Stein, Lewis Mumford, Robert Moses, Ian McHarg, Stewart Udall, Paul Davidoff, James Rouse, Ed Logue, Lord Llewelyn-Davies, and Elizabeth Barlow Rogers.

³ For histories of James Rouse and new town planning see Nicholas Dagen Bloom, *Suburban Alchemy: 1960 New Town and the Transformation of the American Dream* (Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2001); Bloom, *Merchant of Illusion, James Rouse, America's Salesman of the Businessman's Utopia* (Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2004); Ann Forsyth, *Reforming Suburbia: The Planned Communities of Irvine, Columbia, and the Woodlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Joshua Olsen, *Better Places, Better Lives: A Biography of James Rouse* (Philadelphia, Urban Land Institute, 2004).

⁴ Office of the Governor, "Press Release," October 28, 1966, Folder 2930, Box 73, Record Group (RG) 15, Series 33, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gubernatorial Records (NAR), Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).

⁵ Nelson A. Rockefeller, "Excerpts of Remarks," Building Awards Luncheon of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, November 8, 1965, Box 37, Folder 1393-1394, Box 37, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC.

⁶ Nelson A. Rockefeller, "Excerpts of Remarks," Building Awards Luncheon of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, November 8, 1965, Box 37, Folder 1393-1394, Box 37, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC.

⁷ Nelson A. Rockefeller, "Excerpts of Remarks," Building Awards Luncheon of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, November 8, 1965, Box 37, Folder 1393-1394, Box 37, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC.

⁸ Temporary State Commission on Protection and Preservation of the Atlantic Shore Front, "The Protection and Preservation of the Atlantic Shore Front of the State of New York," June 1962, Albany, NY, Folder 346, Box 29, RG 15, Series 29.2, NAR, RAC.

⁹ Nelson A. Rockefeller, "Excerpts of Remarks," Building Awards Luncheon of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, November 8, 1965, Box 37, Folder 1393-1394, Box 37, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC.

¹⁰ Nelson A. Rockefeller, "Excerpts of Remarks," Building Awards Luncheon of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, November 8, 1965, Box 37, Folder 1393-1394, Box 37, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC.

¹¹ Nelson A. Rockefeller, "Coordinated Transportation Policy, Planning and Programs," Position Paper, 1967, Folder 430, Box 20, RG 15, Series 34.2, NAR, RAC.

¹² Nelson A. Rockefeller, "Coordinated Transportation Policy, Planning and Programs," Position Paper, 1967, Folder 430, Box 20, RG 15, Series 34.2, NAR, RAC.

¹³ Nelson A. Rockefeller, "Staten Island Dinner, Re: Transportation" Speech, October 28, 1966, Folder 2930, Box 73, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC.

¹⁴ Nelson Rockefeller, "Luncheon Meeting, Staten Island Chamber of Commerce," Speech, July 20, 1967, Folder 1982, Box 52, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC; and Nelson A. Rockefeller, "Staten Island Dinner, Re: Transportation" Speech, October 28, 1966, Folder 2930, Box 73, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC

¹⁵ Nelson A. Rockefeller, "Coordinated Transportation Policy, Planning and Programs," Position Paper, 1967, Folder 430, Box 20, RG 15, Series 34.2, NAR, RAC.

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- ¹⁷ Nelson A. Rockefeller, “Staten Island Dinner, Re: Transportation” Speech, October 28, 1966, Folder 2930, Box 73, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC.
- ¹⁸ Nelson A. Rockefeller, “Opening and Dedication Verrazano-Narrows Bridge Ribbon-Cutting,” Speech, November 21, 1964, Folder 1213, Box 30, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC.
- ¹⁹ Albert Maniscalco, “Borough on the Bay,” *Staten Island Register*, November 20, 1964, Folder 1393-1394, Box 37, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC; Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, “Facts About Staten Island,” 1965, Folder 1393-1394, Box 37, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC.
- ²⁰ Nicholas D. Cammero to R.W. Pederson, “Subject: Governor’s Staten Island Appearance,” November 4, 1965, Folder 1393-1394, Box 37, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC.
- ²¹ Nicholas D. Cammero to R.W. Pederson, “Subject: Governor’s Staten Island Appearance,” November 4, 1965, Folder 1393-1394, Box 37, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC.
- ²² Nicholas D. Cammero to R.W. Pederson, “Subject: Governor’s Staten Island Appearance,” November 4, 1965, Folder 1393-1394, Box 37, RG 15, Series 33, NAR, RAC.
- ²³ For more on Governor Rockefeller’s Urban Development Corporation see Peter Siskind, “Shades of Black and Green: The Making of Racial and Environmental Liberalism in Nelson Rockefeller’s New York,” *Journal of Urban History*, 34 (Jan., 2008), 243-265; and Ivan D. Steen, “New Town in the City: Edward J. Logue and His Vision for Roosevelt Island New York,” *Journal of Planning History*, 9 (August 2010), 183-197.
- ²⁴ William Huus, “South Richmond Idea Wins Logue’s Interest,” *Staten Island Advance*, November 15, 1970, 1; William Huus, “South Richmond Bill to Bow at Albany” *Staten Island Advance*, March 10, 1971, 1.
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- ²⁶ Regional Plan Association, “Association’s ‘Second Regional Plan’ Calls For Network of Metropolitan Communities in New York Area,” News Release, November 12, 1968, Folder 5347, Box 886, RG 3.1, RBF, RAC.
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- ²⁹ David Rockefeller, “New Towns and Satellite Cities: A Proposal for Development and Financing,” An Address Before the Regional Plan Association, New York, February 16, 1971, Folder 5356, Box 887, RG 3.1, RBF, RAC.
- ³⁰ RPA, “Statement of the President, Annual Meeting,” May 25, 1972, Folder 5354, Box 887, RG 3.1, RBF, RAC.
- ³¹ RPA, “Statement of the President, Annual Meeting,” May 25, 1972, Folder 5354, Box 887, RG 3.1, RBF, RAC; RPA, *Annual Report*, August, 1974, Folder 5358, Box 888, RG 3.1, RBF, RAC.
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see RPA, “Statement of the President, Annual Meeting,” May 25, 1972, Folder 5354, Box 887, RG 3.1, RBF, RAC.

³³ On Nelson Rockefeller’s Floyd Bennett Field housing plans see New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal, “A Total Residential Community for Floyd Bennett Field,” December 1970, Folder 3716, Box 131, Series 34, NAR, RAC. On the Governor’s lobbying efforts for the inclusion of such housing in Gateway plans see Nelson Rockefeller to Richard Nixon, July 28, 1971, Folder L58, Box 2745, Records of the National Park Service, RG 79 (National Archives, College Park, MD).