

Progress and Protest: The Evolution of Public Works on Long Island under Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller

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In the mid-twentieth century, parkways, highways, and expressways brought suburbanization to eastern Long Island. Until 1920, the island east of Brooklyn and Long Island City, Queens, remained open, predominantly rural territory. Subdivision and home-building booms of the 1920s and post-World War II era, however, substantially filled the territory to the Queens-Nassau border. In response to suburbanization in the 1920s New York had become the first state to develop a centralized park planning agency and an action plan for automobile-friendly regional park development.¹ The island was not subject to metropolitan traffic and lacked any significant manufacturing centers; it seemed destined to support the city's recreation and residential needs, as Governor Smith often claimed. Throughout the 1930s Robert Moses realized this potential.

As the head of both the Long Island State Park Commission and the New York City Department of Parks by 1934, Robert Moses oversaw the creation of a comprehensive park system on Long Island. Additionally, in various city appointments and with broad support from the state legislature and the city's mayoral office, Moses supervised the design and construction of the comprehensive arterial highway network for the New York metropolis between 1933 and 1968, which opened the island to residents, as well as recreationalists; including the Cross-Bronx Expressway, the Grand Central and Belt parkways around Brooklyn and Queens, the Long Island

Expressway, and the Long Island State Park Commission's Northern State and Southern State parkways. The resulting dense network of bridges, parks, and transportation arteries transformed postwar Nassau and Queens into a model of postwar suburban development.

Robert Moses linked the expressways and parkways of the Bronx and Long Island with the Triborough Bridge (1936), the first bridge between Long Island and the mainland, followed by the Bronx-Whitestone from Whitestone, Queens to Old Ferry Point (1939) and the Throgs Neck Bridge (1961) between Locust Point, the Bronx, and Little Bay, Queens. This automobile infrastructure facilitated postwar suburbanization and spurred extensive land development on Long Island. Nevertheless, Moses always hoped to build more Long Island Sound crossings and make the island further accessible to the mainland.²

Nelson A. Rockefeller (NAR) was governor of New York State from January 1, 1959 through December 18, 1973. During NAR's tenure Long Island experienced its largest period of growth ever. In Nassau County, east of the city line, in a region known in the 1940s for its farms and large private estates, suburban development had reduced the acreage of rural land by 90.7 percent in the 1950s, while the county's population increased by 93.3 percent.³ To the east, in a single decade Suffolk's population increased by 141.5 percent, an upsurge which brought the county's population to 666,784 by 1960. For the remainder of the twentieth century planners identified Nassau and Suffolk as the counties most likely to undergo the highest regional population growth of sixty-four percent.⁴

Due to explosive population increases on Long Island, city planners advocated comprehensive automobile infrastructure development both in Queens and Brooklyn, as well the suburbanizing counties to the east. Planners and politicians called for an arterial highway belt around greater New York, a plan first proposed by the Regional Plan Association in the 1920s, as

well as more bridges between Long Island and the mainland, either to Westchester County, New York, or to New England through eastern Connecticut or Rhode Island.

After the completion of the Throgs Neck Bridge in 1961 Moses began to plan another bridge to the east. To do so he would have to expand the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority's power beyond New York City; thus to build a bridge between Oyster Bay in Nassau County and Rye in Westchester and he would need the governor's support. Moses and Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller had squared off earlier in the decade over a 100-million dollar state park bond. Moses had threatened to retire if he did not receive public recognition for and departmental control of bond funds. Governor Rockefeller called Moses's bluff and forced Moses leave the State Council of Parks and other state posts, leaving him with only city posts, including the most powerful of which was the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority. At first the governor had been against the bridge, but in 1967 he switched his platform to support Moses's proposed Sound crossing. It was speculated that NAR had made a deal with Moses to support the Sound crossing in exchange for Moses's support of NAR's project to create the Metropolitan Transit Authority, (MTA) which in 1965 merged and reformed the subway system and regional commuter railroads.⁵ In 1967 in hearings before the state Senate Finance committee and the Assembly's Ways and Means Committee, Governor Rockefeller issued a statement in favor of the Rye-Oyster Bay Bridge.⁶

In March 1964 NAR created the Long Island Bridge Study Committee. The committee was designed to aid county planning officials and state agencies including the Tri-State Transportation Commission, the State Department of Public Works, and the State Department of Transportation (DoT) in completing bridge studies between 1965 and 1972.⁷ Proponents said a Long Island Crossing would greatly benefit the area by finishing the metropolitan arterial

network of outer belt highways. The proposed crossing between Rye and Oyster Bay, as a bypass to traveling through New York City, would provide needed traffic relief and could be self-financed successfully by revenue bonds.⁸ In 1967, in response to positive reports from these various commissions, Chapter 717 of New York State Law, the Legislature authorized the MTA to construct two Long Island Sound bridges, one at Oyster Bay in Nassau County, and one farther east in Suffolk County to either eastern Connecticut or western Rhode Island.

When Robert Moses first introduced a Long Island Sound crossing to the state legislature in the early sixties he received a measure of support from Long Islanders, particularly for an eastern crossing. Bridge support came from interest groups concerned with economic growth on Long Island, such as the Long Island Federation of Labor and the Long Island Home Builders Institute Incorporated. Planners and politicians including the Nassau-Suffolk Regional Planning Board, Senator John R. Dunne of Nassau, and Suffolk County Executive H. Lee Dennison also supported the proposed bridge.⁹ In pledging his support to a Sound crossing County Executive Dennison articulated the prevalent concern that eastern Long Island was a ‘dead end’ that could be opened only by increased access to New York and New England.¹⁰ The Long Island Association of Commerce and Industry supported a Sound crossing and forwarded the slogan “A sound bridge for a sound future.”¹¹ The proposed bridge and approach highways promised long-term economic and population growth to the Island.

While a future bridge between Suffolk and Connecticut or Rhode Island garnered substantial support from eastern Long Islanders who hoped to link Suffolk's economy to New England, in 1968 the revised Madigan-Hyland report to the state Department of Transportation identified a bridge between Westchester and Long Island a top priority due to existing city-centric traffic patterns.¹² The report indicated that a Rye-Oyster Bay Bridge would save

impressive time and distance for users—a reduction of more than fifteen miles of driving and an average thirty minutes of driving time for a great majority of users.¹³ Not only would a crossing elevate traffic on existing roads, coinciding with the population boom moving further east down the island, it would be able to support more traffic to eastern Long Island and open Suffolk County up for development. Rockefeller claimed the bridge could add up to 22,000 jobs to the Long Island economy by 1980.¹⁴ Dr. William J. Ronan, the first chairman of the MTA, supported the project by arguing that by 1985 an estimated 40,000 cars a day would use a bridge between Nassau and Westchester, and that a bridge to Port Jefferson would bring ten percent greater development to the area than if the bridge was not built.¹⁵ The Rye-Oyster Bay Bridge became the focus of Moses' Sound crossing dream.

As his dealings with Robert Moses concerning the MTA and the authorization of a Sound crossing suggest, Governor Rockefeller maintained a complicated relationship with the proposed bridge. During reelection years, he often downplayed the project so as not to anger potential supporters from Nassau and Westchester. Nevertheless as governor in the late sixties and early seventies, he continued to support a Sound crossing. In a 1972 television spot the NAR summed up his position on the project. He urged New Yorkers to anticipate change and see the congestion in Long Island's future if the automobile transportation infrastructure was not improved. The existing three bridges were rapidly approaching capacity and approach highways, he said, were overloaded. "Unless we face up to what's happening now, Long Island will become hopelessly congested. The Island's potential for economic growth and new jobs will be choked off. Whether Long Island grows cramped and crowded—or whether it will have an open and expansive future—will depend on whether a bridge is built to end the Island's inconvenient and costly isolation."¹⁶

Bridge advocates could not deny that the Rye-Oyster Bay crossing would have some negative impacts on the communities it would traverse. One report in favor of the bridge estimated that nearly one hundred fifty structures, mostly residences, would have to be condemned, and acknowledged a visual impact upon the immediate surroundings and additional noise levels, and even the potential redefinition of some sailboat racing areas. Despite this, as well as the potential loss of some fifty acres of marshes and shoreline, proponents remained optimistic.¹⁷ According to an MTA pamphlet, “with the modern tech [sic] available for determining environmental impacts on specific points, skillful design will be able to min [sic] the effects on nearby properties.”¹⁸ Reports maintained that of the nine potential routes, environmental impacts and residential relocation due to construction would be minimal and would be far outweighed by economic and traffic improvements.¹⁹

Substantial protest grew immediately against the bridge, Robert Moses, and NAR, from opponents who disagreed that the economic and transportation benefits of the proposed bridges would outweigh any ill effects on the surrounding suburbs. Protests against the bridge most frequently defended suburban life, rather than suburban environments, in the face of regional highway development. Bridge opponents discussed preservation of the environment in only general terms. The bridge was, according to a *New York Times* editorial, “a direct threat to extensive stretches of shoreline, mudflat and marsh, with all that they mean to wildlife and the good life of the region.”²⁰ Preservation of the “good life” of Long Island living was the paramount concern. Residents perceived the North Shore as a clean environment that would become irreparably polluted by increased traffic fumes and construction, and that in turn a polluted environment would mutilate the character of the North Shore. Bridge protests focused most often on the aesthetics of the shore and the recreation it provided.

North Shore residents worried traffic from Robert Moses' planned bridge approaches would ruin the beauty of the region, although exactly how it would do so was rarely explored.²¹ Rather residents made a vaguely-defined connection between the aesthetics of the North Shore suburbs, which were skirted by the Northern State Parkway, but did not have any major highways running through them, as being in opposition to heavily-trafficked commuter corridors. Suburban communities on Long Island would become, a resident told the NAR, "little more than noisy highway corridors and blighted blurs on the landscape to motorists hurrying through on their way to the bridge."²² "I live on Center Island [sic] and have a deep appreciation for the tranquility and beauty of that portion of Long Island which is unique," this protestor continued. "It seems unthinkable that you could lend your name to a program which would blanket a large area of beautiful territory with massive highways and approach roads which would be required to make this bridge accessible."²³ In a corresponding argument, a North Shore politician worried that the Rye-Oyster Bay Bridge would "bring New York City into our backyards."²⁴ North Shore residents feared increased accessibility to the region would bring dense urban cityscape into the suburb.

Long Island suburbanites feared urban blight and blamed both Robert Moses and Governor Rockefeller for the specter of decline which they felt loomed over the island. The president of the Old Westbury Civic Association did not want urban sprawl or a decaying urban residential environment in Nassau. "We believe that a family has the right to decide the type of community in which it will live," he said. Nassau's homeowners "should not be forced to live in high density areas because the State has destroyed the open area residential land near their businesses."²⁵ "New York City' is bad enough," a resident of Centerport wrote NAR, "why not leave a little part of New York City and environments in a pleasant state?"²⁶ In part, the

connection between traffic and population growth in small communities reflected a growing awareness of the environmental and aesthetic problems incurred by suburban sprawl, “‘boom’ type problems” of sewage, pollution, and parks “already plaguing Western Long Island.”²⁷

North Shore residents opposing the bridge often did so by framing the area around Oyster Bay as a suburban ideal. A bridge, one North Shore resident told the governor in a letter, would only benefit mainland summer tourists. Seasonal use did not justify such a “shattering influx of humanity into a small community.”²⁸ Walter A. Peterman of Syosset described his home to Governor Rockefeller as a “pleasant place to live in a suburban semi-rural residential area.” The specter of a “grandiose scheme” of highway and bridge development, Peterman claimed, was a reoccurring nightmare which threatened this ideal suburban experience.²⁹ A ten year old wrote NAR to say that she and her friends liked Locust Valley, their residential community, “just the way it is. We don’t want it a city-like town ... we play in the woods where we live. They will probably build houses in the woods ... Please don’t build a bridge.”³⁰ Residents of the residential communities of the North Shore fought additional highways and bridges because they would introduce more traffic and more people to the suburbs of Long Island. Having found a bit of the domestic ideal for themselves in the suburbs, residents were unwilling to see the rest of the island filled with homes, parking lots, and roads.³¹

Civic, recreation, and homeowner associations mobilized against the Westchester-Nassau bridge proposal and inundated local newspapers and the governor’s office with letters and petitions protesting the Rye-Oyster Bay crossing. In 1971 both houses of the New York State Legislature responded to protests in Suffolk, Nassau, and Westchester by nearly unanimously approving a bill to deny the MTA power to build a Rye-Oyster Bay bridge. Nevertheless Governor Rockefeller vetoed the legislation. In a concurrent attempt to halt the Sound crossing,

the City of Rye filed suit claiming the veto invalid, coming as it did after the ten-day period normally allowed for acceptance or rejection, but the State Supreme Court dismissed the suit in October. In the spring of 1972 NAR again vetoed a bill again passed by the legislature to deprive the MTA of the power to build the bridge.

In addition to mounting public protest against the bridge, NAR and Moses faced new obstacles from the federal government. New stringent environmental regulations hindered progress on the Rye-Oyster Bay Bridge. The 1968 establishment of the Oyster Bay Wildlife Refuge within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service meant the project needed an easement from the Department of the Interior to allow a route through the marshy approach area, even though studies had deemed it the route of least total impact. The regulations of the Environmental Protection Agency (established in 1970), and new requirements instituted by the Federal Highway Authority in 1972 regarding an environmental impact statement, added additional paperwork and construction constraints.

More significantly than even new environmental red tape faced by bridge supporters, Robert Moses's participation in the project hampered progress and became a liability. From the beginning of his career in the 1920s Moses worked to comprehensively plan a wide swath of the metropolitan region by including power over both city and suburban projects under park commissions and authorities. By the 1960s, however, Long Island residents, many of whom had celebrated previous highways, parks, and parkways that Moses built on Long Island, began to protest comprehensive planning that linked city and suburb. Long Islanders also began to protest the authorities which gave Moses unchecked power over regional development. His plan to expand the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority beyond New York City to oversee the building of the bridge in Westchester and Nassau counties was met with severe criticism.

Bridge opponents questioned why New York City, rather than Nassau and Westchester, should be allowed to build a bridge outside of their territory. Both from the region at large and internally within the Authority, people balked at the bridge proposal “as a location rationalized by [Moses] hired engineers” as a power grab.³² The City of Rye Republican Committee accused Moses of proposing the bridge solely to “increase his empire.”³³ Two members of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel authority, William J. Tracy and George V. McLaughlin, claimed they had sanctioned merely an investigation of the bridge, not its construction, but Moses had gone ahead and introduced a bill to the state legislature without the approval of the agency’s officials. McLaughlin told Moses, “I consider the improvement that you propose in the publicity unauthorized by the members of the Authority a misuse of your position as Chairman.”³⁴ Bridge opponents often acknowledged Moses's vision and achievements in pioneering mass-use recreation parks and parkways, but felt that his emphasis on mass-use recreation and the corresponding “cement roads and black top”³⁵ represented “now outmoded and even destructive concepts.”³⁶ Moses repeatedly claimed the bridge was indispensable to growth in Long Island's suburbs, but ultimately he misread resident’s stance on highway development programs in the 1970s.³⁷ As one Rye resident observed “what is most difficult for Mr. Moses to comprehend is that there is a limit to a bridge and a highway” program. At some point, more highways were no longer welcomed as good for the region.³⁸

By the early 1970s the Sound crossing had become a political liability and public relations nightmare for Governor Rockefeller. Support for the bridge fell away and NAR faced personal criticism for his support of Moses and the project. As one MTA employee bluntly told NAR: “one of the more difficult public relations problems we have had with respect to the Rye-Oyster Bay Bridge is Bob Moses’ persistent identification with the project.”³⁹ In response Moses

was slowly edged out of the decision making processes.⁴⁰ By spring 1971 members of the New York State DoT, MTA, and the Tri-State Transportation Commission, as well as local agencies were increasingly unwilling to publically support the crossing program.⁴¹ NAR began to distance himself from the project, which had become a potential liability to his political future in the Republican Party.⁴²

On June 20, 1973, Governor Rockefeller announced that he had decided to discontinue plans for the bridge and directed the DoT and MTA to withdraw pending applications pertaining to the project.⁴³ In a press release the governor declared “this has not been an easy decision,” and noted that while he first supported the bridge, “in recent years the people of our State and the country have gradually come to adopt new values in relation to our environment and evidenced a willingness to forego certain economic advantages to achieve these values.” The bridge, NAR pointed out, had become an incendiary keystone debate in an evolutionary period for New York and American society wherein “people are beginning to question whether all growth is automatically good.”⁴⁴ The Moses era of highway building that focused on tightening connections between city and suburb had come to an end by the time of the Rye-Oyster Bay bridge proposals. In the suburbanized New York metropolitan area, the Regional Planning Association called open land “the counterbalance to urbanization” giving the New York metropolitan landscape “structure and order.”⁴⁵ As a result, the 1970s, a decade characterized by fears of urban blight and a disinvestment in urban infrastructure, were an era when highways came to be seen as suburban problems rather than urban solutions. In turn, NAR came to realize that Long Islanders were suspicious of any development which would bring massive change to their suburban lifestyles and surroundings.

Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller's gubernatorial papers reveal the questioning of master planning and notions of 'progress' by suburban voters. When Moses tried to extend the power of city agencies over Long Island's suburban hinterland he was met with a fierce and effective critique of master planning and suburban sprawl. The anti-development protest in greater New York coincided with a rising nation-wide critique of urban sprawl: in the late 1950s, in the face of the "exploding metropolis" William H. Whyte Jr., a leading figure in the fight for open space, had issued a blistering condemnation of sprawl. Anti-sprawl advocates had organized and gained momentum through the 1960s. Rather than allowing city infrastructure programs to dominate the region, the rural and the non-mass-produced suburbs of the North Shore were reevaluated as aesthetically, socially, and ecologically valuable. At a time when residents of the urbanized northeast were worrying about the enclosure of vacant land and a parallel national movement was underway, Moses and any politician who supported extensive highway development faced great criticism.⁴⁶

Ultimately residents of Rye and Oyster Bay questioned the notion of progress as represented by increased traffic on new bridges and highways. "I hear this word 'progress' until I could scream," one North Shore resident wrote NAR. "Is it 'progress' to mow down a beautiful little community ...?"⁴⁷ A Rye resident told the governor that while the community still remained a retreat to nature from the sprawling metropolis, "due to so-called progress, we have been faced and defaced with throughways, cross-county ways, new development, small lot subdivision, etc ... In Rye we have reached the limit of this type of progress." The suburbanite feared that any extension of New York City's arterial highway and bridge network would make his elite community "a dirty, soot-filled place for the transaction of business and collection of tolls on superhighways and bridge extensions."⁴⁸ In the language of local autonomy and self-

determination to maintain a specific type of suburban life on the North Shore, bridge opponents characterized the fight as a “moment of decision on the one hand between surrender to commercial expediency or on this other a united defense of a way of life that demands a proper environment ... this could be the first place in the world where people stood up and said no to this kind of progress.”⁴⁹ In turn, Governor Rockefeller reshaped his policy on regional development in response to the shift in public attitudes on road building on Long Island.

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- ⁴⁷ Mrs. Inez Nicholeson to Nelson A. Rockefeller, April 1967, "Highways, Long Island Sound Bridge," Reel 105, Office Files, General Public Works, Third Administration, RG 15, NAR, Gubernatorial, RAC.
- ⁴⁸ E. Darmstaedter to Nelson A. Rockefeller.
- ⁴⁹ Ann Carl, "Crisis in Long Island's Future," Long Island Commercial Review (March 27 1967), "Highways, Long Island Sound Bridge," Reel 105, Office Files, General Public Works, Third Administration, RG 15, NAR, Gubernatorial, RAC.