

Politics of Expressways

Putting Highway Through City's Core Is Regarded as Poison to a Candidate

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

This is the year for scuttling expressways. Mayor Lindsay's announcement that plans for the Cross-Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan Expressways are being abandoned came hard on the heels of the cancellation of the controversial New Orleans expressway by Transportation Secretary John A. Volpe on

News
Analysis

July 1. Boston has ordered yet another study—they are approaching the dozen mark—of its equally con-

troversial and still unbuilt Cambridge-Memorial Drive inner loop in view of stepped-up opposition. Philadelphia is embroiled in a donnybrook over its Crosstown Expressway with a community that does not want it.

Most of these proposals are 10 to 20 years old; all have been fought, stopped, revived and, finally, in the case of New York, New Orleans and San Francisco, killed off, after decades of rising community opposition and battles that made national headlines.

Whatever Mayor Lindsay's motivation for this act in an election year, it is increasingly apparent that the cause of the inner city expressway is now about as close to political poison as a candidate can get.

U. S. Paid 90% of Cost

Twenty years ago expressways were the shiny Christmas ribbon with which the gift of a new transportation system for the American people was to be wrapped. It was virtually a gift, for the roads were to be built with the Federal Government footing 90 per cent of the bill and 10 per cent paid at the local level.

Since the Highway Act was passed in 1956, almost 30,000 miles of a projected 42,500 miles of interstate highways have been built, at a cost close to \$56.5 billion.

Out on the open road, everything went well. It was only when the highways had to be connected through cities that trouble began.

The line drawn across the map when the expressway got to the city limits invariably went through low-cost housing, minority neighborhoods, small industry, parks and historic neighborhoods. These areas had the lowest property values.

But other values were involved. Historic and neighborhood preservation, the division of the city with a concrete Chinese wall, economic and racial discrimination and the destruction of older communities became the subject of organized citizen protest. All of these factors were present in New York.

"White men's roads through black men's bedrooms" became a rallying cry in Baltimore and Philadelphia. Most of the inner city belts, still on paper, have been a catalyst of urban prob-

lems and protest. They have pushed more than one mayor's back against the political wall.

In the opinion of many, based on a large body of professional and public sentiment, the two New York roads appear to have met a timely fate. Within the administration there has been an almost tangible aura of distaste for them and an attitude of wishing they would simply go away.

The linear-city scheme for the Cross-Brooklyn Expressway promoted by the Mayor was an attempt to make that road palatable in terms of progressive planning.

The strip community of housing, schools, shops, services and industry to be built on air rights is an ambitious, experimental approach to solving urban problems.

But the economic, political and technical realities of cost, timing, unification of warring community groups and political pacification, plus problems of air pollution and extremely complex structure, doomed the project from the start.

Even if the multiple miracles needed to make the plan a reality had been forthcoming, there still would have been the classic New York stumbling block of coordination of municipal departments.

The cut-and-cover solution of a partly depressed Lower Manhattan Expressway was a similar palliative.

According to a planning spokesman, the city is seriously studying another route. "We are looking at an alternative which would not involve major demolition and would utilize existing streets and highways," he said. "It would not bisect the island."

Round-the-Battery Planned

The proposal calls for depressing the drives along the East and Hudson Rivers for a round-the-Battery route with new connections and interchanges for the Manhattan, Brooklyn and Williamsburg bridges. The scheme has already been approved in part by the City Planning Commission and dubbed the "Lindsay loop." Brooklyn Bridge approach construction under way now would tie into the plan.

The questions are how soon the alternate route could be built, how big it would be, and how much money it would get from the Federal Government. At present, it qualifies only as an arterial road, on a 50-50 funding basis, rather than under the more generous 90-10 interstate road provisions.

The basic question, in Brooklyn, Manhattan and everywhere else, is how urban traffic can be moved and the highways still made sensitive to man's life and surroundings. Some solution will have to be found. That it is a political as well as an environmental dilemma is something the Mayor has made painfully clear.