

The New Westway Math

The Westway controversy is never dull. While the debate rages over the replacement of the not-so-noble ruin of the West Side Highway from the Battery to 42d Street, the section from 42d to 57th is springing holes. But as the highway crumbles and West Side rush-hour traffic approaches immobility, the fiddling with figures continues: a city report issued under the aegis of the new Planning Commission chairman, Robert Wagner, presents still another arrangement of the arithmetic, and the battle about trade-in benefits escalates, with Boston's roadway financing tactics now drawn into the controversy. Bashing Westway with numbers has become an intercity sport.

The Wagner report offers some addition but no subtraction. It adds up every possible source of mass transit money for the next ten years, including a Westway trade-in, and maximizes it; on this optimistic basis \$3.3 to \$4.4 billion might be available over a decade. It does not take much thought to realize that there would be more money with a Westway trade-in than without it. But at best, Westway would add only about 25 percent to other transit grants. And there is something wrong with the arithmetic that fails to subtract from the value of the trade-in the Federal funds that would be lost for West Side roads and related building projects; other sources would have to be found.

The report's conclusion, which is more realistic than its mathematics, is that mass transit improvement must be a top city priority. That in itself is hardly news. Even more significant is the observation that the city now has no master plan and no clear priorities for any mass transit projects. This failure suggests that the first and

most pressing need for the city is to get it all together—to set transit planning programs and design standards at a vastly upgraded level. You don't throw a few billion dollars down an M.T.A. black hole.

On the Boston-New York front, figures of all sorts are being pulled out of hats and reports to prove that Boston did, or did not, gain by its transit trade-ins. Boston has traded in expressways for mass transit with demonstrable benefits. New York disputes Boston's figures, but that is secondary; the arrangement was a success in terms of subway and surface transit. What Boston traded in, however, were two undesirable and politically unpalatable routes of the community-splitting kind already discredited in the 1960's. They were roads nobody wanted—the equivalent of New York's Lower Manhattan and 34th Street Expressways. Westway is a false comparison.

But what follows is pure irony. Boston now wants to rebuild its Central Artery, much as New York wants to rebuild the West Side Highway, and it wants to do it with a Westway-type plan—a depressed roadway covered with parks and buildings. While New York is being urged to trade in Westway, on the example of Boston, Boston has its own, brand-new \$1-billion Westway on the boards. Moreover, New York State and City have made their commitment to the highest level of design for Westway by selecting the distinguished architecture and landscape team of Venturi & Rauch and Clarke & Rapuano to do the job. With the prospect of first-rate design, New York should be more committed to Westway than ever.