

Manna for Westway

The approval of Westway—the city's proposed replacement for the West Side Highway—is a fine Federal New Year's present for New York. And as a generous stocking gift, the Federal Government has added a \$78.5 million mass-transit grant, the largest single sum for transit operating assistance that the Department of Transportation has ever made. The conditions set by Secretary Coleman for over \$1 billion in Federal funds for the highway's construction—no-strike provisions, affirmative action guaranteed by the unions and a substantial construction commitment by the private sector—can only strengthen the project.

With the Federal funds comes official recognition of Westway's economic and environmental importance for New York's future. The highway will service the business district's commercial and manufacturing activities—taking trucks off local roads to do so. It is being designed to restore and revitalize the West Side waterfront for recreational and residential use. And it has been judged not only compatible with environmental controls, but by far the best of the alternatives for replacing the West Side Highway's wreckage.

Right now, that wreckage resembles nothing so much as Red Grooms's Pop Art evocation of the highway as a rotting roller coaster supporting stalled space-age vehicles and a galleon in full sail, a combination of lunacy and decay that is uncomfortably close to New York reality. Five years of bitter opposition to the plan has ranged from the concerned to the paranoid, with a preference for the status quo, even if it means stagnation. The arguments are so shot with absurdities that it is time to set the record straight and capitalize on the opportunities.

There are several serious misconceptions at large. The first is the proposition that "trading in" Westway funds for mass-transit funds is a good idea; it is an extremely poor trade, as even some staunch proponents of mass transit realize. The amount available through alternative Federal funding legislation is about \$436 million, and we would lose the additional \$100 million that the state will pay for Westway's right of way. We would probably also lose other discretionary mass-transit grants.

The opponents contend that now that Westway has been priced at \$1 billion, we could gain a higher trade-in for mass transit by deciding we never really wished to build it. But the Federal Government took the plan on good faith and took a dim view of such gimmickry while it was being urged. A reputation for bad faith in Washington is not a pressing New York need. Under other approaches to road construction, New York would have to find money in its own empty pocket for the required 20 percent of local matching funds. The Westway Interstate formula of 90-10, Federal-state grants would not cost the city a cent.

Next, it must be made clear what this welcome \$1 billion is really paying for. It is not just money for a road, or for jobs, badly needed as they are. Westway is a constructive and comprehensive land-use project; it probably represents New York's major planning opportunity of the century.

In place of a barrier-highway, this road would let us reunite the city with its waterfront. A good part of the route will be on and under landfill. The new land will provide 93 acres of riverfront parks and 110 acres for residential, commercial and industrial development. The city promises controls through appropriate zoning.

Finally, we deem false the assumption that Westway is an alternative to mass transit and that the two modes are irreconcilable. Westway forms a most significant part of a total transportation strategy. It will accommodate deliveries and services that never take the subway. For commuters, two lanes will be reserved for buses and car pools at peak hours.

It is to the critical design and development aspects of the new highway that community attention should now be directed. Westway can be brilliant planning and environment; its proper concept and completion are in the long-term interest of all New Yorkers. It can add a special dimension of pleasure and utility to New York life through the quality of its execution.

Much will ride on effective controls against speculative development and the disruption of neighboring communities. Monitoring those controls is the role of the city's watchdogs now.