Westway, Still the Best Way
New York Times (1923-Current file); Nov 14, 1977; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 32

Westway, Still the Best Way

Now that we can talk about Westway again without election posturing, it is time to face real facts and figures. Mayor-elect Koch has pronounced the mammoth replacement for the derelict West Side Highway a disaster that will never be built—except if he's wrong or fails to persuade Governor Carey, in which case it might be built. He had best begin with some very precise calculations.

The facile arguments against Westway all revolve around one possible alternative: Trade in the Federal highway money and spend it, mostly, on subways instead of autos. No one denies the urgency of New York City's mass-transit needs and everyone agrees on the importance of clean air. But swirling around the discussion has been a lot of dubious environmentalism and specious economics. If there is an alternative it must make sense in terms of cost and consequence.

Westway would replace the old, rotting elevated road and the decayed Hudson River piers with a six-lane highway constructed largely as a tunnel in newly created, offshore landfill. Of the new land, 93 acres would be park and 60 acres would be for housing and other uses. The cost is estimated at $1.156 billion, including replacement of the condemned Gansevoort incinerator. The Federal Government is committed to pay 90 percent of whatever the final cost. New York State would pay 10 percent. New York City would pay nothing.

Because such projects are approved incrementally as design progresses, the already authorized expenditures for Westway stand at $837 million—plus an inflation adjustment of 6 percent, making a total of $887 million. That is the sum on which a trade-in tomorrow morning would be calculated. The value of such an exchange—and also the cost—can be broadly determined. But it takes more patience and prudent reckoning than we tend to hear in public forums. So bear with us through some rough math as we try.

•

If we trade Westway for subway money tomorrow, the potential Federal subsidy would be 90 percent of the $887 million, or $798 million (Line 1 of our Box Score). As it parcels out the specific grants for transit projects, however, the Federal Highway Administration will demand 20 cents in local matching funds for every 80 cents it sends. So to qualify for the $798 million, New York State and City would have to put up $200 million. The state presumably would offer at least half, now earmarked for Westway, but the city's share of between $50 million and $100 million would have to be found elsewhere.

Assume—big though the assumption may be—that this matching money is discovered. Now find another $80 million in city funds (already built into next year's budget) to replace the price the state would pay for Westway's right-of-way. Trading Westway for subway means that state aid would be reduced by this $80 million (Line 2 of our Box Score).

•

Interim summary: If the city were able to raise $50-$100 million, it could probably generate Federal and state mass-transit subsidies of between $868 million and $818 million.

•

The *net value* of the subsidy, however, by the most conservative possible reckoning, would be diminished by at least 40 percent and probably by more than 50 percent, as follows:

Take off $25 million to remove old piers and $50 million for a new Gansevoort incinerator. And now hang on. If Westway is not built, the city would lose taxes on nearby private property that are conservatively expected to total $39 million a year. And if much of the trade-in money is spent to finish the Queens subway line, as it would be, the city would be burdened with an annual operating deficit of at least $20 million a year, and probably much more. Together, these items would add a yearly cost of $59 million to the trade-in. Convert this annual charge into a lump sum "present value" cost—much the same way that businesses capitalize future expenses for a new plant—and it becomes, conservatively, the equivalent of a single dip into the city treasury of about $250 million.

A Trade-In Box Score

If the city were to trade Westway for subway subsidies tomorrow morning, it would have to put up $50-$100 million of its own money to obtain the following (in millions of dollars):

	Best Case	*Worst Case*
Federal aid	$798	$798
State aid (less $80 million for purchase of Westway right-of-way)	70	20
Gross subsidies	$868	$818
Less:		
West St. road	50	100
Piers and incinerator	75	75
"Present value" of annual losses	250	250
Costs	375	425
NET VALUE OF AID	$493	$393

•

Interim summary: Trading Westway for subway would involve costs to the city totaling between $375 million and $425 million (see "Costs" in our Box Score). Whereas Westway would mean putting up no money to generate well over a billion dollars in subsidies, the trade-in would require putting up at least $50 million to generate subsidies with a net value (see the bottom line) of no more than $493 million, probably only $393 million, and perhaps much less.

•

Alas, the costs of a trade-in do not end even here. There remains a very real question of whether the regular Federal mass-transit grants (called UMTA) would not also shrink. In 1974-76, they ranged from $200 million to $280 million a year, but they are discretionary, depending on how the Highway Administration sees competing claims. New York's case for an increase in these subsidies is great, but Boston lost roughly half of its $100 million UMTA subsidy when it traded highway funds for mass transit. A further loss, or at least a smaller increase than might be available from the UMTA kitty, is almost certain if Westway lapses.

Finally, there is the serious question of what the city would actually get in mass transit improvements through a trade-in. Present plans would spend about 40 percent on completing new lines; most of the rest would go to rehabilitate structures, tracks and equipment. How far would $800 million go and would it justify the loss of Westway? Of the planned new lines, only Queens could be finished; the Second Avenue subway would remain a roofed-over ditch. With the $41 million that would be available for station improvements, the city could remodel one station—perhaps the Broadway-72d Street—and have a little left over. The operating deficit, the city's basic rail transit problem, would not only remain, it would increase.

All this, please remember, deals only with the economic debate, which has been a muddle. Soon there will be more controversy over the number of jobs that would be created by Westway or rival projects. Assume, however, that the job stimulation for subways would be equal (which we doubt). There still remain powerful planning reasons for Westway, bearing on both the quality of New York life and its commercial revival.

Trading in Westway seems to us to offer transit gains that are minimal at best and questionable in the extreme while incurring losses—of subsidy and opportunity—that would be truly appalling. It is a sacrifice that no enlightened leader should ask New Yorkers to make.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.