

Curbing Highwaymen

Highway builders brought up on the belief that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points are now discovering that the whole is greater than the parts. A Federal Court of Appeals has ruled that the Highway Administration must prepare a full environmental impact statement for the entire length of U.S. 7, a 280-mile road that runs through several New England states. This wise decision, breaking important new ground, flies in the face of accepted practice, in which such a road is built segmentally by the states, each state preparing its own assessment of its own section.

If the effect of the decision is to put the emphasis on road-building as environmental design, that is exactly where it belongs. From the planning of landscaped and contoured dividers, to sensitive siting in relation to the land, a careful design is the essential prerequisite for any highway. Except in isolated instances, this has been neither the principle nor the practice in most highway construction. The brutality of large segments of one of New York's newest Interstates, 684, which slices its unfeeling way through northern Westchester's rolling hills, is a case in point. Getting there need not destroy the reasons for going there at all.