

Westway or What?

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The 50-cent fare on New York City's buses and subways obviously can't last. And when the fare goes up, Mayor Koch's support of Westway — that long gestating plan to redevelop the lower Hudson River waterfront with Federal highway money — will no longer be secure. The Mayor endorsed Westway in return for Governor Carey's promise to hold transit fares steady until 1981. Yet as the Mayor will quickly discover, there are better reasons to support Westway and to get on with it.

Dropping Westway sounds attractive to New Yorkers who know that Federal law allows cities to "trade in" highway grants for mass transit subsidies. So the law says. But in practice, the value of such trade-ins is problematical and gets more so all the time. Indeed, the city is still waiting for the trade-in cash it thought was automatic when it abandoned improvement of the Long Island Expressway last year.

Federal highway money comes from a trust fund fed by gasoline taxes. Once a project is approved by the Department of Transportation — as Westway has been, to the tune of \$1.3 billion in 1977 dollars — Congressional appropriation is practically assured; the fund's assets cannot be used for any other purpose.

But when a city "trades in" a highway, it must have not only the department's approval but a direct appropriation by Congress from the general revenues of the Federal Government. In each of the past two years, Congress has offered only \$700 million against a trade-in backlog exceeding \$3 billion. And the requests keep growing with inflation while a budget-conscious Congress keeps holding the line at \$700 million.

The inevitable delays of a trade-in will themselves raise the cost of any New York project and diminish its cash value. Also, whereas the city would pay nothing whatever for Westway, it would have to put up at least 5 percent of any substitute transit projects. In a trade-in, the city would lose about \$100 million in state payments for the land under the West Side Highway. It would sacrifice the chance to spend almost \$400 million to create profitable new land in lower Manhattan. And

it would lose such incidental improvements as replacement of the Gansevoort incinerator and demolition of the useless, unsightly Hudson River piers.

Moreover, a substitute road would still be needed. It would have to meet air quality standards and, if well designed, include some park development and pedestrian access to the waterfront. All this would cost, some say, \$250 million. If so, the trade-in would yield no more than two-thirds of the Westway subsidy. That is not a sum to be sniffed at, if it were ever within reach. But the larger the trade-in, the less likely that Congress will respond. The smaller the trade-in, the worse the deal for New York. Worst of all, by choosing a trade-in, Mayor Koch and Governor Carey would be competing with — and diminishing — every other New York request for Federal aid. The trade-in is not worth it. We would be amazed if the Mayor decides otherwise.

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The arguments against a trade-in, in any case, go well beyond the financial ones. Sad to say, the debate has been carried on in the pro-highway/anti-highway terms that were appropriate 20 years ago, when arteries destroyed neighborhoods and cut cities to pieces. Westway incorporates the lessons learned since then: that no road can be viewed only as a way to move traffic; that roads need to be related to their surroundings; that a highway's design can lead to more desirable, comprehensive land development.

Land use alone ought to resolve this issue. Westway is an unparalleled opportunity. It does present some dangers, and one pernicious effect of the debate has been that those most concerned about design and environment are emotionally opposing a project that they could be policing to good effect. The real choice, increasingly, is between a grand Westway project of lasting benefit and some small ventures that patch up a West Side road or two and buy new subway cars at a slightly faster pace. The choice is whether to spend a huge available sum imaginatively or much less money on nothing much at all.

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