

Riding the Westway Roller Coaster

Westway is having so many ups and downs that it is beginning to look more like a roller coaster than a spectacular replacement for the crumbling West Side Highway. Six weeks ago, we assessed the costs of Westway as compared with Federal funds that could otherwise be used for mass transit. Westway seemed to us clearly preferable. But since then, there have been four consequential developments. Two essential permits have been held up. A committee studying the relative economic impact of Westway and mass transit has completed its report. And Federal legislation has been proposed to fund highways and mass transit more equally. If you are still riding with us, this is two swings down, one up and one mysterious ride through the Federal tunnel of finance. After it all, the case for Westway remains compelling.

In one permit episode, the New York State Commissioner of Environmental Conservation, Peter Berle, has denied Westway's air quality permit pending submission of more satisfactory calculations of levels of traffic and pollution. In the other, the Federal Environmental Protection Administration has recommended that the Army Corps of Engineers refuse a waterways permit on grounds of potential damage to aquatic life in the Hudson. The first decision is legally binding; the second is not. Both have been hailed as victories by Westway's opponents.

Commissioner Berle's doubts about the city's traffic forecasting methodology seem reasonable to us; this is a notoriously uncertain statistical art. But the Commissioner did not close the door to Westway; the city will recalculate according to his directives and resubmit its application, with time for opponents to respond. There is no reason to believe that Westway's case has been weakened.

In fact, the case could be strengthened by Commissioner Berle's call for an immediate, binding agreement on the creation of the parkland in the Westway plan. Still more safeguards are desirable, to guarantee both air and environmental quality, and to allay the fears of adjacent communities. The city must, through special zoning districts, assure that development will reinforce, not disrupt these communities. There must be mandated design review by local community boards and the City Planning Commission. The real job of the environmental watchdogs will be to see that Westway's exceptional opportunities are not betrayed by speculative abuse.

The committee appointed by Governor Carey and Mayor-elect Koch to study the economic impact of Westway versus mass transit offers more evidence in the project's favor. The study makes no recommendations, but its data come down decisively on Westway's side in terms of jobs, impact on New York's economy, costs to city, and the comparative efficiency and speed with which Westway or mass transit projects could be carried out.

A change in Federal funding policy toward highways and mass transit, as now proposed by the Federal Department of Transportation, would be a mixed blessing. At present, cities must put up 20 cents for every 80 cents in Federal matching money for mass transit. Now, it is proposed that the match be changed to 90-10, as for highways. The good news is that the city would, under this proposal, have to come up with less matching money. The bad news is that it will get less total money, because state aid would almost surely be cut in response to the smaller matching obligation. Since the Federal trade-in sum would be unchanged, the total available for mass transit would be less than before the proposed change.

All of these considerations, however, evade the central issue: There is much more at stake in the Westway debate than methods of transportation and their economic fallout. Westway promises something for New York that has not been proposed anywhere else: a large-scale, long-term, balanced program of transportation and economic and environmental planning. This is what Westway really is, not just a road. And that, not just moving traffic, is what the money is for. Westway will also be an instrument for creating parks and recreation facilities, a reclaimed waterfront, and, eventually, controlled commercial and housing development. Westway brings enlightened land planning to highway design, using lessons learned from years of destructive road building. Thoughtful consideration of these critical issues has been the victim of highway backlash.

The confrontation between Westway and mass transit is not the struggle between the forces of good and evil that the project's opponents have made it. Westway and mass transit are both necessary and both can, and should, be pursued. To force a choice loses sight of Westway's far larger goals and misjudges the city's needs. We urge Mayor-elect Koch to proceed with Westway.