

Discussion of Hon. Thomas H. MacDonald's Talk

PROPOSED INTERREGIONAL HIGHWAY SYSTEM AS IT AFFECTS CITIES

By George E. Spargo at Ninety-first Annual Meeting
American Society of Civil Engineers
(City Planning Division) January 21, 1944

Commissioner MacDonald in his discussion of the Interregional Highway System as it affects cities has given us his views on the need for planning in every community. The whole afternoon could be spent discussing this subject, but I will do it briefly. Undoubtedly there are some in the audience who believe that little or no planning is necessary, and others, like myself, who believe in what Commissioner Moses describes as "limited objectives." He means planning projects which need to be done and can be done with the funds available or in sight, and then executed so that they will meet the needs of the community in the best way possible as far as we can now foresee them.

There will, of course, be the inevitable third group who believe that nothing should be done until a complete master plan of highways, transportation, hospitals, schools, parks, housing, bridges, and all the other facilities which make up a municipality, has been decided upon. Undoubtedly, if pressed, they will go even further and say that none of these plans for local improvements should be adopted until we see how they fit into the national and international program; until we decide whether or not a city of $7\frac{1}{2}$ million people like New York should be permitted to continue as a community, or whether large groups should be told to move on to other sections of the country; whether in the future shipping now entering New York should be moved to another port; or whether in the readjusted post-war world we are to be permitted to import or export the things we have in the past.

Needless to say, I disagree with this latter group. As a whole, they are composed of people who draw pictures in soft pencil and always keep an eraser close at hand so that their picture can be changed with their moods. They never reach the point of inking in a tracing and letting a contract for the construction of a public improvement and, in fact, don't seem particularly interested in doing anything with their plans after they make them.

As an engineer, interested in municipal problems, not only of planning but of execution, I was particularly pleased with Commissioner MacDonald's comment that one of the major reasons why planning bodies have been unsuccessful is that, "As a rule they have not been made up of the officials of city government who are responsible

"for the actual construction of the projects involved through the expenditure of public funds," and in his statement that, "it will surely be accepted that the man whose official position and public reputation are dependent upon his own performance of legally imposed responsibilities, must have an important part in planning the program of his use of public funds."

I thoroughly agree with this statement. As an executive in the Department of Parks of the City of New York, I had an opportunity to watch the New York City Planning Commission from its inception in 1938 to January 1, 1942 at fairly close range. One of my duties was to check their activities on Park Department items. Later, in 1942 and 1943, as an Acting Planning Commissioner representing Commissioner Robert Moses, I got a closer view of its activities. Prior to 1942, the Commission was composed of six members, and only the Chief Engineer of the Board of Estimate had any responsibility for following to completion the proposals they originated or approved. Since 1942, three of the six members have been city officials with other responsibilities under the Charter.

The city administration in New York apparently decided then that the days of theoretical planning were over, and that the days of practical planning were to begin. Those formerly in the minority became the majority and green belts and all the other freak terminology used so glibly by the theoretical planner, were tossed out the window. Instead the ordinary, every-day language of the engineer, architect, and man of the street was used.

I cannot agree entirely with the Commissioner's statements about zoning. We admit that the zoning done in the past has in most instances been inadequate, that it was not thought out as well as it might have been, and that too often zoning decisions were dictated by political expediency rather than by sound zoning principles. To a lesser extent, the same is true of zoning being done today. However, the zoning established did a great deal to curb the undesirable ambitions of speculative builders and unscrupulous real estate operators. The City Planning Commission in New York, under Chairman Salmon and Commissioner Orton, is now working to correct many of the evils which still exist in the ordinance.

A study of the tax delinquent property in New York City will undoubtedly indicate that one of the main reasons for this delinquency was lack of foresight on the part of those who drew up the original resolution. Zoning is young and people have to be taught. It has progressed slowly but sensibly, and there is still time to correct many past errors. The days of zoning business districts in shoestring strips adjacent to all major highways is over in most communities, as is the practice of labeling endless areas for

unrestricted use. Modern industrial areas are now being planned to meet the requirements of industrialists who wish to build their plants so that they will be an asset to a neighborhood. The tendency is to get away from the type of plants which resulted in the old industrial slums where buildings occupied one hundred per cent of the property and depressed values of all adjacent blocks. Today these industrialists see the advantage of low buildings, low coverage and pleasing designs.

I can readily understand the Commissioner's feelings about the multiplicity of governmental units which must be dealt with in advancing his Interregional Highway plans. Fortunately, as Commissioner of Public Roads of the Federal Works Agency, he has established a method of handling this problem which, at least in those communities with which I am familiar, works admirably. For example, in New York, he deals directly with the State Department of Public Works and, in turn, the State Commissioner of Highways (through his District Engineers) works out the problems with the towns, cities, and counties of the State. It is not always smooth going, but with a group of this kind with proper delegation of responsibility, and with the objective clearly defined, it isn't too difficult to reach a prompt, satisfactory decision. He probably has many problems we don't hear about, but on the whole, speaking from our experience in New York, he is to be commended for the efficient handling of this tremendous problem.

Undoubtedly, as the Commissioner says, many communities will find in the Interregional Highway System an opportunity to reshape portions of their city. However, I am afraid that in most cases cities will find that the choice of locations for these routes is limited. We cannot tear everything down and start over. We must deal with existing conditions and not with theories. We have billions of dollars invested in good residential, business and industrial property which cannot be scrapped. Again taking New York as an example, let's look at the possible routes, good and bad, for the so-called Washington-to-Boston Highway. Starting on the southeast, in Jersey, we could tap traffic near Perth Amboy, take it across the Arthur Kill over Outer Bridge, Crossing at the south end of Staten Island, and travel the length of the island to the Narrows. Here, we are stopped because we lack a vehicular crossing. Preliminary studies have been made for a tunnel, but few people familiar with the cost and with existing and potential traffic will seriously suggest that this be built for many years to come. However, the city highways and parkways are being planned on Staten Island so that when a crossing is built it will be a simple matter to connect it with the arterial system. Once this traffic reached the Brooklyn shore, it could proceed north on existing and proposed express arteries through Brooklyn and Queens to the Triborough and Bronx-Whitestone Bridges, thence through the Bronx to New England. On a portion of the route, traffic would use highways now being designed with city, State and Federal funds.

The second alternative would be to tap the traffic at the Holland Tunnel. At this point, there would be a choice of two routes, one going north on the West Side Highway, and the other across Manhattan on a proposed express highway to the East River Drive or to the Williamsburg Bridge. If vehicles chose to cross the Williamsburg Bridge into Brooklyn, they could proceed north through Queens to the Triborough or Bronx-Whitestone Bridges and thence through the Bronx to New England. The portion of this latter route, known as the Downtown Elevated Highway, approved by the Commissioner of Public Roads, was recently taken out of the immediate State-Federal program because of the opposition of the New York City Tunnel Authority. They claimed that it would provide a free substitute for their proposed toll crossing at the Battery. Many of us still believe that other considerations will ultimately force the construction of this route.

The third alternative would be to tap the traffic at the Lincoln Tunnel, but numerous studies in this area have indicated that for various reasons a crossing on the island at this point is not practical.

The fourth alternative would be to tap traffic at the George Washington Bridge, take it across Manhattan Island by way of an existing tunnel, which will be enlarged when necessary, thence to the Bronx by way of Washington Bridge, where it will connect with the newly planned Cross-Bronx artery which taps all the north-south express arteries leading to up-state New York and New England.

I give this detail to show that after studying all the routes through New York City, we finally narrow it down to two where the cost is not prohibitive and which we believe will be built within a reasonable length of time; that is, the one crossing Manhattan north of Canal Street, and the other going directly across Manhattan and the Bronx from the George Washington Bridge. Both of these are on the Federal Aid Highway design map. I have seen similar situations in other cities. There are few places to start the route at one end of the city, and few places to end it at the other, and the number of feasible routes between those two points is limited.

While I do not completely agree with Commissioner MacDonald that "the proposed Interregional Highway System may well constitute the key to the functional rebuilding of our cities," I do agree that our experience in New York City has taught us that the arterial highway system is the backbone of the city plan. It forms the framework upon which it seems safe to rebuild those portions of the community which need it. The establishment of parkways and other properly designed arterial highways has stabilized and increased values all over the city. This step must be followed by proper, adequate zoning. Where this has been done the results have been most satisfactory and have proven the sound economy of the expenditures.

In passing, let me remind you that the Federal Aid highway formula as it stands does not provide an equitable share of funds for the more populated areas of the nation. The present basis of one-third population, one-third area and one-third mileage should be changed to a higher proportion for population. The highway bill now pending before Congress, H.R. 2426, changes the formula to one-half population, one-fourth area and one-fourth mileage. Although this will not entirely correct the condition, it is at least a long step in the right direction. Public hearings on this bill will be held shortly in Washington.

We have been told by many people from other sections of the United States and from other countries, that we have made great progress in solving our arterial problem in metropolitan New York. We take pride in our accomplishments, most of which were thought of and placed on maps of one kind or another years ago. However, there are still many missing links, some of which would not be built for many years to come if it were not for Commissioner MacDonald's far-sighted policy in carrying these Interregional Highways through communities. I think he has sounded the death knell of the practice of bringing highways to the city line and then leaving motorists to wend their way to their destination as best they can. As the Commissioner states, in most communities city finances will not permit the expenditures required to remedy this arterial problem completely. Recognition of the need for carrying these routes through cities, even though only a comparatively small percentage of the traffic crosses the city from one end to the other, was a long time coming. Now that it is here, it is safe to say that we are on the way toward the solution of many of the major traffic headaches in this section of the country.