

West Side Studies 6 Highway Plans

By FRANK J. PRIAL

Last April 1, the West Side Highway Project opened for business. Its mandate was to come up with a plan for reconstructing the obsolete, widely criticized and often feared highway.

Twelve months and millions of dollars later, the project group has done more than half of its work and is preparing to make its findings public. There are, at the moment, seven alternatives, including perhaps the most obvious of all—do absolutely nothing.

'We're Not Ready'

The project timetable, based on a 1975 cutoff for applying for Federal funds, calls for public hearings this spring. Lowell K. Bridwell, the former Federal Highway Administrator who heads the project, thinks he can meet his deadlines. "If we do," he said, "I think it will set a record for a project of this magnitude."

Others, both opponents and advocates of a new highway, are not so confident, however.

Said Robert Kagan, chair-

man of a highway committee set up by three West Side community boards: "The real problem is that we are not ready for public hearings and neither are they."

Mr. Kagan's group, called COMBO, represents Community Boards 1, 2 and 4. He insisted in an interview that there is not yet enough available data on traffic projections or on environmental impact, among other things.

The projections of the study groups must be approved by a policy body called the West Side Highway Project Steering Committee before the hearings can be held. The Steering Committee includes the chairmen of four community boards, 1, 2, 4 and 7.

Board 1 is in charge of the area from the Battery to Canal Street, Board 2's concern is from Canal to 14th Street, Board 4 covers 14th to 59th Streets and Board 7 is in charge of the area from 59th north, which is not now part of the project. It is expected to be, however.

Division of Project

The West Side Highway, built in the nineteen-thirties, has been obsolete for most of its four-decade existence. With more than 130,000 cars using it daily at the busiest points, the road is the second busiest highway in the city and one of the busiest in the country. Only the Long Island Expressway, which handles more than 150,000 autos a day, has more traffic.

Along the eastern shore of the Hudson, the West Side Highway and the Henry Hudson Parkway are actually the same road—a 15-mile, six-lane, sometimes elevated artery that is often hopelessly clogged and that three city administrations have declared unsafe.

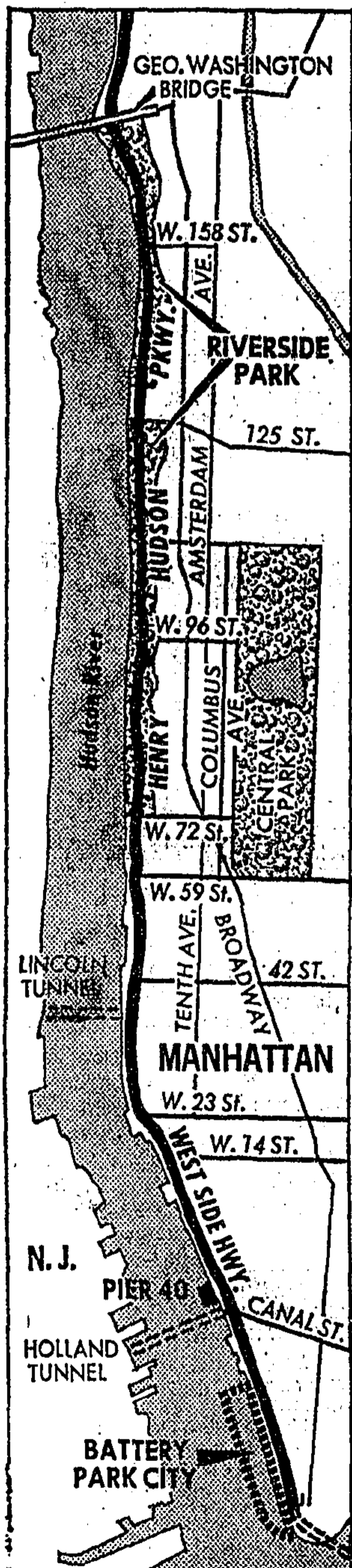
Trucks an Issue

These administrations have all called for the highway's replacement or modernization, but none has had the money to do the job. The Interstate Highway Program can provide 90 per cent of the construction costs, but then the new highway must conform to the program's requirements, which permit trucks on the road.

There has long been public opposition to putting trucks on the West Side Highway because it is felt they would add to the already intense congestion and noise and because they would serve further to erode an artery that is literally falling apart in places.

Recently, however, such opposition has been reduced a degree, and many neighborhood groups now view the highway as a way to get trucks off local streets.

Of more intense and emo-



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West Siders Are Studying 6 Proposals on Highway

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tional concern is the fate of widely used Riverside Park, which parallels the highway from 72d Street to the George Washington Bridge. Two years ago when a highway plan threatened the park, residents of the area got their Assemblyman, Albert H. Blumenthal, a Democrat-Liberal, to put through legislation in Albany that banned construction of the highway "in or over" the park.

There is now a movement under way to modify the so-called Blumenthal amendment and some West Siders are already preparing to fight any plan that would touch a blade of grass. But such a view is not unanimous.

Wait and See

"We always knew the new road would be built through Riverside Park," said Mrs. Rita Aid of Community Board 7.

"We had to be against the highway to save Riverside Park," Mrs. Aid asserted. But now she sees the proposed roadway, which would include a special "transit-way" for buses, as a way to get heavy traffic off Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues.

According to Mr. Bridwell, the new highway could be built in the Riverside Park area without touching any part of the park east of the existing Henry Hudson Parkway. This would cut off the waterfront for the period of construction — which could be 10 years—but the current plan would restore a much greater waterfront by extending the park out over the highway, much in the same way that Carl Schurz Park overhangs the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive.

While there is still stiff opposition to the alteration of the Henry Hudson Parkway from environmental and neighborhood groups, the biggest block to the planners remains the Blumenthal amendment.

The various plans for the southern portion of the project already have stirred considerable opposition from a number of quarters and there are many yet to be heard.

Three of the plans call for rehabilitating the present roadway. The key steps in them would be to strengthen and rebuild the roadway, eliminate the dangerous curves at 14th and 23d Streets and cut the road down to four lanes in areas where there are now six. "If it's going to carry trucks," Mr. Bridwell said, "it's got to be cut to four lanes because of the extra weight."

None of the rebuilding plans make the West Side Highway eligible for Federal funds that would provide 90 per cent of the financing. The fourth plan, to do nothing at all — must also be broached at the public hearings.

But the three proposals for a new highway are taking up all the West Side Highway Project's time and money—\$7-million, of which 90 per cent is coming from the Federal Government.

"I'm not sitting here working my tail off to find a way not to do it," Mr. Bridwell explained.

Three Routes Cited

The three routes that have survived the project staff's process of elimination are, in simple forms:

¶A depressed highway following generally the route of the existing West Side Highway. It would run depressed past Battery Park City and rise to grade in the area of the Holland Tunnel to facilitate a ramp connection to the tunnel. Near Pier 40, it would become depressed again, running in a tunnel through the West Village to emerge at Gansevoort Street and become an elevated roadway to 41st Street, the present end of the lower half of the project.

¶A depressed road running through the center of Battery Park City then coming up to grade and proceeding north through the center of the existing Pier 40, at Houston Street. Beyond Pier 40, the road would run depressed through the West Village area. At Gansevoort Street, it would rise to about eight feet above the water line, becoming elevated at 25th Street to make the connections with the existing road at 42d Street.

¶The so-called outboard alignment, which would run through Battery Park City to the edge of that project and continue north at the pier end line to 14th Street, except for a section where it would come up to grade to provide connections to Holland Tunnel ramps. It would be built at grade, but still well offshore from 14th Street to 26th Street, where it would become elevated to connect with the existing road at 42d Street.

The third proposal is the most ambitious, calling for enormous areas of landfill that could eventually be used for housing, recreation and some commercial uses, including new piers for a shipping industry that has all but disappeared from Man-

hattan's West Side. Indeed the only pier still operating along the entire length of the West Side Highway from the Battery to 41st Street is Pier 40.

The cost? Mr. Bridwell is almost casual when he says: "Between \$700-million and \$1-billion, exclusive of land acquisition."

Acquiring the land could be cheap or it could be very expensive. All of it is owned by the city. "If the city wants to sell," one planner close to the project said, "it will cost millions. But the city has got to keep in mind the fact that the real boss of this project is the State of New York. Outright sale would mean that New York State owns literally, most of Manhattan's North River waterfront."

The alternative is an easement. The city could cede the property for highway use for \$1 plus considerations. In this way the state would build the new highway but the city would retain ownership of the property.

The community boards in the affected areas have hired consultants of their own with \$100,000 provided by the Board of Estimate to study the impact of highway change. As a result, they are reluctant to come down on either side of the issue.

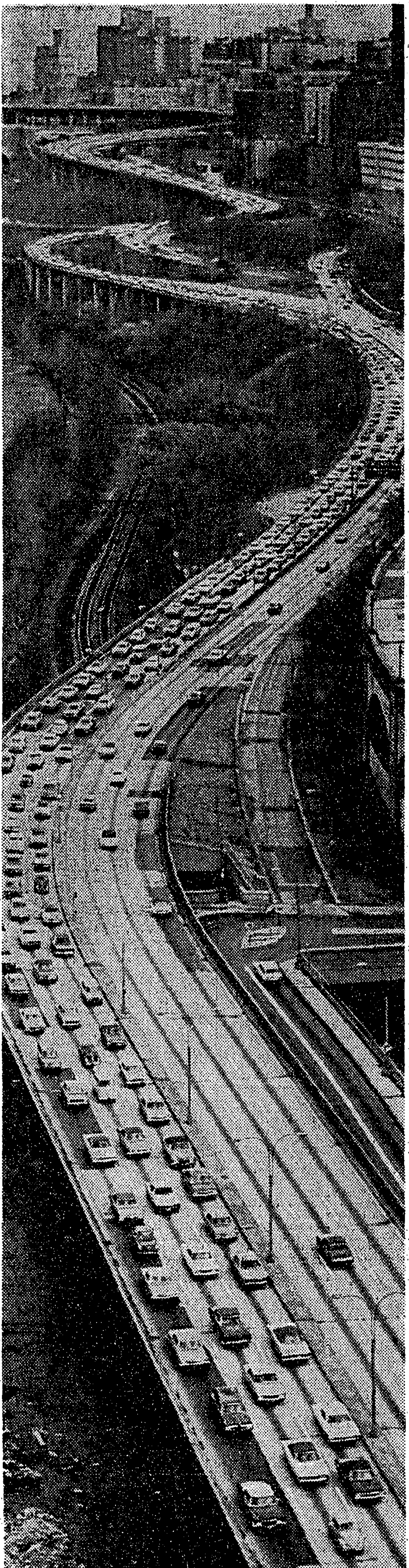
"We are waiting for our own consultants' reports and for the public hearings" is a typical statement from community board officials, except for those on Board 1 from the Battery to Canal Street.

"We're sitting it out at the moment" said Frank Waldron, the chairman. "Right now it's between Bridwell and Charlie Urstadt." Mr. Urstadt is chairman of the Battery Park City Authority, and in conferences with the West Side Highway Project staff he has rejected any route that might cut into the Battery Park City area.

Several plans call for sending buses through the Penn Central freight yards in the mid-30's and up through the Penn Central tunnel under Riverside Park. West Side Highway project studies indicate that the Penn Central yards are underutilized and could handle the bus lanes with no problem. "I don't expect the Penn Central will agree," Mr. Bridwell said with a smile.

Once the community boards have heard from their consultants and reported their conclusions to the project group the public hearings will be held. The results of the hearings will be evaluated by the Steering Committee, which includes city and state officials as well as community board presidents.

Then the Steering Committee will select a plan and assuming it is not the option to do nothing, will pass it on to the Federal Government. If Washington approves the state can start acquiring the right-of-way. After that come the contracts and construction.



View of highway, looking north from the West 150's

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