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Brooklynites want to fix the Gowanus Expressway—by burying it

A long-forgotten plan has been revived. But can the state muster the will to get it—or any big project—done?



Photo: Buck Ennis

SCISSURA sees burying the Gowanus as the key to opening the Brooklyn waterfront.

By Joe Anuta

A group of Brooklynites who came close to securing a \$10 billion infrastructure project by suing the Federal Highway Administration in the late '90s is quietly reuniting. Their plan is to revive a proposal they say will transform the southwest corner of the borough by burying 6 miles of the

Gowanus Expressway, a widely [reviled stretch](#) of the BQE that runs from the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel to the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.

Backers of the plan argue that the time is ripe to fix this notorious traffic bottleneck, reduce pollution and knit together waterfront neighborhoods isolated for decades by the aging highway. The federal government appears willing to dole out infrastructure cash, and advances in the construction industry have made boring a tunnel beneath Red Hook, Sunset Park and Bay Ridge even more feasible than the last time it was proposed. Plus, elected state officials looking to grab their share of those federal dollars might be more amenable to such an undertaking.

While government officials are planning crucial transit projects such as the new rail tunnel beneath the Hudson River and the next phase of the Second Avenue subway, lawmakers are not thinking seriously about other grand projects. Carlo Scissura, the new head of the New York Building Congress, says these officials need to start working further ahead, laying the groundwork now for the next wave of big infrastructure improvements even though they won't be shovel-ready until long after their terms in office have expired.

"This is it," Scissura said, arguing that burying the Gowanus would salvage a crucial transit corridor, [open up major development opportunities](#) and be a boon for the environment. "Nothing would do more for communities, commerce and job creation—we have one opportunity to get it right."

Fixing transit blunders has proven a popular way to spend infrastructure dollars. Portions of Riverside Park were created in the 1930s by decking over train tracks that ran along Manhattan's West Side. After a fully loaded dump truck fell through the elevated West Side Highway near Gansevoort Street in 1973, the city tore that highway down, paving the way for the current street-grade boulevard and the creation of Hudson River Park. And in March Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced plans to demolish the Sheridan Expressway in the Bronx, another traffic-clogged thoroughfare that divides the surrounding neighborhoods while blanketing them with exhaust fumes.

But wiping the Gowanus off the map would be enormously expensive. And with the state and the federal government's inability to allocate resources for even rudimentary fixes on the subways and bridges, replacing one of the city's many ill-placed highways may take a backseat to more pressing matters like expanding mass transit. In other words, some past mistakes may be simply too big to bury.



In 1997 community leaders forced the Federal Highway Administration to include a tunnel option in their plans to revamp the Gowanus Expressway. But while the feds envisioned a "dig and cover" trench along one of three routes (the colored lines above), the group proposed a much longer tunnel drilled underground by a giant boring machine (the dotted line). A limited number of exits, at 65th and 39th streets, would ensure that traffic didn't spill onto local streets. The plan's backers hope to put it back on the table.

But one year later, a golden opportunity arose to undo Moses' work. At the time the Federal Highway Administration and the state Department of Transportation were considering a \$600 million investment to refurbish and possibly replace some sections of the roadway. Community leaders from Sunset Park and Brooklyn Heights, including Jo Anne Simon, now a state assemblywoman, and Scissura's boss, former state Sen. Vincent Gentile (now a council member), successfully sued the agencies, forcing them to incorporate a tunnel option into their plans.

Not so lonesome highway

The Gowanus has been controversial since it first opened in 1941 as part of the arterial highway system envisioned by car-centric city planner Robert Moses. Despite protests from Sunset Park locals, who pushed for the elevated roadway to run closer to the waterfront, Moses laid the thoroughfare down a bustling Third Avenue commercial corridor. Folks in Red Hook saw their neighborhood slashed in half by several lanes of traffic. Two decades later Bay Ridge homeowners bristled as the Gowanus expanded in their neighborhood, when eminent domain was used to raze houses to make way for the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.

Things hardly improved from there. By the 1990s the Gowanus was clogged with more than 170,000 vehicles a day, pushing frustrated commuters and truckers to begin searching for shortcuts through local streets. All the automotive wear and tear, in addition to the elevated support structure's exposure to the elements, required constant and costly maintenance. In 1996 Scissura had just taken his first job in government, working for a state senator. He can vividly recall what it was like to traverse the roadway. "There were potholes, pieces were crumbling," he said. "It was just a disaster."

The benefits, they argued, would be huge: A tunnel would not only push all the traffic below ground, but it would also block motorists from jamming local streets when trying to find a less infuriating route. Better still, ventilation systems could be used to filter exhaust fumes and mute the din of traffic that plagued local neighborhoods. If the elevated portion of the roadway were torn down, Third Avenue could become a tree-lined boulevard able to accommodate denser development along its 3.8-mile stretch, creating housing and jobs and boosting the economy. The portions of the roadway that run in concrete canyons through Bay Ridge could be decked over with green space and help reconnect neighborhoods.

The spoils of their legal victory included \$375,000 for consultants to work on the tunnel proposal, leading to a Simon-chaired steering committee and a series of maps for potential subterranean routes.

Despite all that effort, the feds wound up scrapping the entire project, opting instead to help fund ongoing maintenance. But now Scissura and Simon argue that the problems have only worsened—thanks in part to the more than 200,000 vehicles that make the trip every day—and that the time has come to dust off the plans and restart the project.

"Those of us who have chaired the steering committee have recently had some conversations about picking the ball up again," Simon said.

Many state bureaucrats who were wary of the tunneling idea are gone, and boring methods have become more sophisticated and more common. The Trump administration has floated the idea of a \$1 trillion infrastructure funding package, and New York's governor has shown a willingness to champion big projects like the Second Avenue subway and the Sheridan Expressway. Plus, taxpayers are already flushing away big money on interim repairs, which have cost more than \$350 million since 2005 but will last for only 15 years. Future repairs will become more frequent and more expensive while merely delaying the day when the Gowanus will need to be replaced altogether.

"A tunnel will have a shelf life of 200 years instead of 50," Simon said. "It really is the only environmentally and fiscally sustainable way to go."

Pricing priorities

Burying the Gowanus won't come cheap. Scissura estimates the price tag has now doubled to \$20 billion. That's nearly as much as the Gateway project, which is meant to fix a commerce bottleneck affecting the entire Northeast. It's also the amount the Metropolitan Transportation Authority estimates it needs to modernize the subway's woefully antiquated signal system. As such, many planning experts say the only way to justify the Gowanus project would be to toll the tunnel and make the ultimate goal a complete redevelopment of the waterfront neighborhoods that surround it.

"You don't do something like this without trying to create better connectivity, access and ultimately making [the waterfront] much more attractive for redevelopment," said Richard

Barone, vice president for transportation at the Regional Plan Association, the organization that originally conceived of the tunnel idea in the 1990s.

Engineering firm AECOM has proposed extending the 1 line from lower Manhattan to Red Hook, where thousands of new apartments and flood-resistant parkland could be built. Development of a similar scale also might be needed along the Sunset Park waterfront.

Other planners say there are far more pressing needs that would serve a greater number of New Yorkers. Transit expert Sam Schwartz, who was a consultant on potential improvements to the roadway, said a cheaper solution to the Gowanus conundrum is to undo another quirk of Moses-era planning and eliminate the distinction between expressways, which allow trucks, and parkways, which were envisioned as a way for car owners to take more pleasurable drives through natural surroundings.

"There are better ways to appreciate trees than driving on the Belt Parkway," said Schwartz, who grew up in Brooklyn. "Believe me, it has not been a pleasure."

Unfortunately, backers of any major infrastructure project, the Gowanus tunnel included, face a far more systemic problem. In New York and the entire tristate region, many transit improvements are born out of disasters or accidents, not thoughtful, long-term planning. The MTA, for example, didn't begin its signal-replacement project until after five people died in a 1991 train derailment, and the West Side Highway was only torn down after that dump truck crashed through the roadway.

"This region is the most transit-oriented in the country, and nobody is stepping up and offering any kind of comprehensive plan," Schwartz said. "We are asleep at the switch."

Grim as it sounds, Brooklyn residents' best hope for a better Gowanus may be another dump truck.