

Opinions

Editorial comment

Byway or highway?

When work began to reconstruct the overpasses that cross the Henry Hudson Parkway, Riverdalians could console themselves for the inconvenience with the thought that by the time the work was completed, not only the bridges but the parkway as a whole might be handsomer, quieter and environmentally sounder than it is at present.

The efforts of the Henry Hudson Parkway Byway Initiative seemed to be bearing fruit. Scores of Riverdalians turned out at meetings to cheer the idea of developing a master plan to guide the city and state agencies responsible for traffic and construction and to bring to an end the hodge-podge of decisions that left the bridges' fieldstone defaced by the huge and monumentally inappropriate highway signs bolted to them; garlanded the cliffs along the road with steel netting; topped the bridges with rusting chain-link and replaced most of the original rustic roadside fencing with ugly steel barriers.

Late last month, however, the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council, an umbrella organization of government agencies, abruptly shut down the effort to create the plan.

By now, the locally-based Henry Hudson Parkway Task Force had thought, the plan would be completed and adopted. Instead, after five years of effort, the task force's founder Hilary Kitasei now fears that a host of changes will be made to the parkway without reference to neighborhood concerns, without aesthetic considerations, and, above all, without a comprehensive vision and blueprint.

"Transportation money is about to rain down on the Henry Hudson Parkway. Millions of dollars in earmarks for the parkway were tucked into the State Transportation Bond Act and the Federal Transportation Bill. But where will it go?" Ms. Kitasei wrote to supporters.

"With the plan now tabled, there is now no forum for pursuing a coherent vision for the corridor. There is no way of stimulating creative ideas to integrate this highway with the parks and neighborhoods it bisects. We will have projects — some good, some bad, most banal, but all of them piecemeal."

The result of this kind of uncoordinated work is there for all to see in Riverdale, at the overpass where 232nd Street crosses the Henry Hudson. The bridge's reconstruction was a waste of money and of spirit. What was to have been a handsome picket fence is overlaid with a sort of high-grade chicken wire. A galvanized steel guard rail of the sort that runs along the Major Deegan Expressway borders the sidewalk.

The result shows the futility of depending on the ad hoc efforts of the community board, community groups and elected officials in the absence of design expertise and a plan.

The scenic byway effort linked communities in a way the parkway itself never had. Residents and representatives of Riverdale, of Washington Heights and In-

wood, of Harlem and of the Upper West Side have made common cause in the effort to restore some measure of grace to the parkway and its surrounding landscape, to halt the proliferation of billboards, to stem the damage run-off from the road does to the Hudson River and to safeguard the neighborhoods the parkway traverses.

Now those residents have one more task: to see to it that the Reps. Eliot Engel and Charles Rangel; Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrión Jr. and Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer; state Sen. Eric Schneiderman; Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz; and Councilman Oliver Koppell, all of whom have endorsed the Scenic Byway initiative, exert themselves to persuade the highway departments that the time to plan is before you spend our money.

Spend first, plan later. That's the procedure the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council has adopted as it prepares for another round of construction on the Henry Hudson Parkway.