

Editorial: Tunnel under LI Sound is intriguing





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Water defines Long Island but also isolates it. It makes life increasingly hard, with frustrating traffic bottlenecks at one end for anyone leaving or entering the region. What if there were a better way to connect Long Island to the mainland - not by going over water, but under it, across the Sound?

That's the notion behind a bold plan unveiled last week to dig a 16-mile highway tunnel under the Long Island Sound to connect Syosset with Rye in Westchester County.

Long Islanders and their power brokers here and in Albany should give serious consideration to this intriguing, privately funded, \$10 billion proposal. Dismissing it out of hand - despite legitimate misgivings and inevitable references to earlier, doomed schemes for a bridge across the Sound - leaves Long Islanders stuck in the same place.

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This is not a pie-in-the-sky dream. It's a credible proposal that should be scrutinized carefully by state and county policy makers. If its claims prove to be valid, it could bring significant benefits to the region.

Proposed by Garden City developer Vincent Polimeni, who already has invested \$250,000 in a detailed engineering study of the tunnel's feasibility, the plan envisions an underground link across the Sound that would connect highway to highway, starting where Route 135 dead-ends just north of the Long Island Expressway and ending at the junction of I-95 and I-287, near Rye.

The study shows construction would not involve any residential neighborhoods on either end. It claims the tunnel would bypass them entirely, with no need for relocations or eminent-domain takings - and no zoning problems -

by remaining more than 100 feet underground. And, for the same reason, it appears not to infringe on the ecosystem of the Sound or its shores. But in-depth environmental studies need to be done.

The toll tunnel may actually improve air quality by lowering emissions and fuel use. And it would cut down travel time and congestion by eliminating the need to use the Whitestone or Throgs Neck bridges to exit or enter Long Island. Equally crucial, it would finally provide a way out of the Island's bottlenecks in the event of a catastrophic emergency, like a major hurricane or a terrorist attack on New York bridges.

Impossible, you say? Ludicrous? Not really.

The same engineering firm chosen for this project, Hatch Mott MacDonald, has had vast experience in building similar tunnels across the world. This one would be the first completely privately built tunnel in North America, which is behind most of the world in utilizing tunnels. The biggest obstacles encountered in all these projects were neither technological nor environmental. They were political and psychological, as they would be here.

Residents of communities over the proposed underground route would have legitimate concerns about disruptions during the construction phase of the project, as well as possible effects on their neighborhoods. That's to be expected for any major infrastructure project, even one that could have significant benefits for the region. So residents should demand that their representatives weigh the merits of the tunnel carefully.

This is a significant leadership opportunity for Gov. Eliot Spitzer, and he should quickly appoint a task force to evaluate the project. Its members must address legitimate community concerns about traffic congestion and air quality in the neighborhoods closest to it. This farsighted proposal deserves a fair hearing, along with stringent scrutiny. Dramatic change may just be good for Long Island.

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