

Op-ed: Reaction to Sound tunnel plan is encouraging

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I can't tell you that this is The One.

I can't tell you the eye-popping private proposal to snake a 16-mile tunnel from Nassau to Westchester will survive the Herculean tests it must face - financial, technical, environmental and, most of all, political - before a shovel bites the earth. Or if it even deserves to survive.

But the \$10-billion plan certainly is a Big One. And, for all the unanswered questions, I can say for certain the tunnel represents a test of Long Island's collective will to confront the region's challenges. It's a test of whether we're open-minded and selfless enough - whether we live in a nearby neighborhood that might be affected or we work for a construction company that will get a big contract - to let the questions be answered.



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the area most directly affected on Long Island, have not been quick to dismiss or oppose it.

State Sen. Carl Marcellino (R-Syosset), for instance, would have more reason than most to threaten to throw his body in front of the first bulldozer, if he couldn't stop them a hundred other ways. It's not just that Marcellino's predecessor, Ralph Marino, made his political mark a generation ago by opposing a bridge over the same water and capped his career by single-handedly stopping a continuous, congestion-relieving service road on the Long Island Expressway.

It's not just that Marcellino keeps hearing that the Democrats are recruiting a top-flight opponent to run against him next year when he could be more vulnerable because of national political trends.

No, Marcellino could be excused for taking a hard, not-in-my-backyard line because, well, the proposal literally is in his backyard. "These are serious people who have made a serious proposal, and they deserve serious attention," said Marcellino, who has enough clout to kill any significant proposal in his district. "Every day, my constituents ask me what I'm going to do. I say I don't want to make a flip judgment, and I'm not."

Even the ever-vigilant Residents for a More Beautiful Syosset seem to be holding their most withering fire. "We're concerned and anxious," its vice president Laura Schultz said. "But we're not NIMBYs. We realize Long Island has problems. The impact has to be assessed before a shovel goes in the ground, but we're willing to listen."

Marcellino plans to hold hearings next month. And for now, he is asking all the right questions. How will residents be affected by years of construction using some of the world's largest digging and lugging equipment? Will congestion and pollution increase unacceptably near the mouths of the tunnel? Will these problems really be reduced anywhere else enough to justify the cost and dislocation? How will all the drilling affect water quality and availability?

And though the project is being touted as completely financed by private investors, can they really make a go of it - or will they eventually need a public bailout? Will tolls on existing bridges and tunnels that fund public construction projects lose revenue that taxpayers will have to subsidize?

All these questions must be answered. But it's progress that they're even being asked in what seems to be good faith.

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We not only don't do "big" well, we don't do small much better. We are one of the nation's richest regions, yet we haven't revived our deteriorating downtowns. We have some of the best public schools anywhere, yet more and more students attend our poorest-performing ones. And we are losing the men and women who should lead our workforce because we haven't built enough affordable homes.

And then there's the traffic: We have some of the worst congestion anywhere, yet we have too few and reliable options to get us out of our car. Or, in the case of developer Vince Polimeni's Big Dig of an idea, to divert existing traffic.

But there's reason for hope.

Although I've watched one region-changing proposal after another bite the dust, whether through the ineptitude of the government or individual sponsoring it or through the skillful but selfish abuse of influence, I'm encouraged by the initial response to the plan. Political and community leaders, including in

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