

February 10, 2008

TRAFFIC

Is Sound Tunnel D.O.A. or Just Decades Away?

By CAROLYN NARDIELLO

Oyster Bay

THE \$10 billion plan to charge motorists \$25 each way to drive 100 feet below Long Island Sound in a privately financed tunnel linking Long Island and Westchester is, at best, nearly two decades from becoming reality. But questions and concerns are already in the air.

“Maybe people will start asking, ‘well why not,’ instead of ‘why?’ ” Michael White, executive director of the Long Island Regional Planning Board, said last month.

Some people have already begun to look critically at the proposal to build an 18-mile-long auto-only tunnel linking Syosset on Long Island and Rye in Westchester, which a developer, Vincent Polimeni, proposed in November. Nearly 200 people packed Oyster Bay Town’s hearing room on a Thursday morning last month to hear Mr. Polimeni and his team present their proposal.

The idea first met with smirks and skepticism, Mr. Polimeni told the audience, but “the more people looked at the plan, the larger the circle of intrigued citizens who said, ‘Tell me more.’ ”

The tunnel would run from Route 135 in Syosset to the intersection of Interstates 95 and 287 in Rye. The two three-lane tunnels would accommodate 80,000 cars daily, said Mr. Polimeni’s team, which hopes to finish the project by 2025.

In the 1960s, [Robert Moses](#) proposed building a bridge in the same general area, but never succeeded.

“I was opposed to the bridge, and I’m opposed to the tunnel,” said Judith-Ann Barnett, director of the Oyster Bay Civic Association.

She questioned whether Long Island’s marshy foundation could handle the tunnel and expressed concern about the loss of well water and the suburban feel of Long Island that she said such a tunnel would cause. “We don’t want it to become Queens,” she said.

John Venditto, supervisor of the Town of Oyster Bay, called the plan “mind-boggling and overwhelming,” but said it could create jobs and cut transportation times and costs.

“My knee-jerk reaction to the proposal is that it is unrealistic,” Mr. Venditto said. But he said he had a responsibility “to be open-minded, to be reasonable and to go out and collect as much empirical data as we possibly can.”

Westchester officials have not been as welcoming.

Mayor Steven Otis of Rye, Supervisor Valerie M. O’Keeffe of Mamaroneck and Mayor Drew Fixell of Tarrytown predicted a tunnel would bring more traffic to their already congested neighborhoods.

“Build it and they will come,” Mr. Otis said. “I see no light at the end of this tunnel.”

Randall J. Essex, executive vice president of Hatch Mott MacDonald, the engineering firm working with Mr. Polimeni, disagreed. The right analysis, he said, is not “if they build it, they will come,” but “if it makes sense, they will use it.”

Mr. Essex said the tunnel would reduce traffic on area roads and bridges by 20 to 32 percent and cut fuel consumption by more than 24 million gallons a year because many drivers would not have to go as far.

Mr. Polimeni said his next step would be to conduct a traffic study, but he was unsure when that would be done. If the study does not show that the tunnel is feasible, he said, he will pull the plug.

But Mr. Polimeni seems confident: He said he had spent \$250,000 so far and had lined up Bear Stearns to help raise \$10 billion for land-acquisition and construction costs.

A 10- to 20-acre park and jogging path would cover the ends of the tunnel, and Mr. Essex said construction work would be underground so people would not see it.

But Carl L. Marcellino, a state senator who represents Syosset, expressed doubt. “I would be amazed if this entire project could be done within a shell underground,” he said.

Maureen Dolan Murphy, executive programs manager of Citizens Campaign for the Environment, based in Farmingdale, said Mr. Polimeni’s team met recently with her group to discuss environmental issues but it was waiting for environmental studies before taking a position on the tunnel.

“I think we’re at the beginning of a very long process,” she said.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)