

Rough start for the Thruway

Dewey's superhighway has long been a political battleground

By Bruce W. Dearstyne

Highways rarely make headlines. But Gov. Andrew Cuomo's veto of higher truck tolls on the Thruway and his subsequent order to the Thruway Authority to save money by eliminating jobs and having the state assume the costs of State Police patrols is big news.

Cuomo also approved a \$3.14 billion contract to replace the aging Tappan Zee Bridge and is working on a combination of state borrowing and federal loans to pay for it.

Governors have wrestled with Thruway politics and funding for nearly 70 years.

At the groundbreaking in the Syracuse suburb of Liverpool in 1946, Republican Gov. Tom Dewey declared that the road would boost New York's economy like the Erie Canal had done more than a century earlier. Dewey promised to pay for it from tax revenues. But tax revenues fell short of the governor's projections. Repairing state roads whose maintenance had been neglected during the Depression and World War II exceeded his projections.

By 1949, only 48 miles of the Thruway had been completed.

The next year, in a stunning reversal, the governor proposed to create a Thruway Authority to manage construction and operation, and to shift financing to long-term bonds backed by the state that would be paid off by tolls.

The president of the Automobile Club of New York called it "little more than a shakedown of the motorist." But Dewey shrewdly built endorsements. He secured support from the Republican Westchester County executive by committing to negotiate on the exact route through that county and to begin

construction of the New England Thruway, long a Westchester priority. He got the endorsement of New York City's Democratic Mayor William O'Dwyer by committing to a connection with the Major Deegan Expressway, a major feeder route into the city, and promising to help speed construction of city expressways with state and federal funds.

Republicans who held comfortable majorities in the Legislature pushed the measure through. Floating new bonds with state backing required voter approval. The Thruway Authority mounted an effective public relations campaign in the fall of 1951 that emphasized construction jobs and rising land values and projected commercial development. Voters approved it by a four-to-one ratio. Flush with money from the first bond issue in 1952, the authority accelerated construction.

Despite Dewey's partnership with O'Dwyer, Democrats consistently opposed the enterprise. Their 1946 gubernatorial campaign included slogans of "Forget about highways, let's have houses!" and "Hospital beds, not road beds!"

They accused Dewey of political maneuvering and extravagance. Dewey scoffed at the Democrats' claims of overspending.

"Democrats running on an economy platform? Now I've seen everything except sunrise at seven o'clock at night" sneered the governor during his 1950 campaign for re-election.

Selecting the place for the road to cross the Hudson added to the controversy. Dewey insisted that it had to be near New York City. Too far north, though, and more of the road would run through Westchester County, where settlement was dense and land values high.

Too far south, and it would be in an area where bridge-building authority was reserved by law to the Port Authority of New York, predecessor of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. The optimal point, engineers said, was an opening in the mountains near Nyack on the west bank, connecting to near Tarrytown on the east.

Opposition quickly mounted at both ends of the proposed bridge. The mayor of Grand View said his community was "the beauty spot of the Hudson, which should not be destroyed by a bridge." The Nyack school board expressed alarm at loss of taxes, village trustees protested a threat to their water supply, area merchants had visions of shoppers streaming across the river to Tarrytown.

State surveyors in October 1953 were chased away by armed Nyack village police and a trustee who shouted "get out of here! Governor Dewey is not the king of New York state yet!" A Yonkers homeowner refused to vacate her house until contractors' bulldozers advanced right up to her back porch.

But the governor and the Thruway Authority held firm. Gradually the

opposition subsided and construction proceeded.

By the time of the Tappan Zee's dedication by Dewey's successor, Gov. Averill Harriman, on December 15, 1955, pride and support had replaced opposition at both ends of the bridge. A newly completed Ford assembly plant near Suffern and the Cross County Shopping Center in Yonkers symbolized the boost the new road was already giving the local economy. It was an official holiday in Nyack and Tarrytown, high school bands played and Air Force jets flew overhead. After the governor's speech at Nyack, drivers in the official motorcade piled into their cars, paid the 50-cent toll and hurried across the bridge. The spectacular bridge had cost about \$60 million — about \$510 million in today's dollars.

Dewey had retired by then, but... the road was officially designated the Governor Thomas E. Dewey Thruway in 1964. Dedicating a major segment of the road on June 24, 1954, Dewey had called it "the greatest superhighway ever built at the lowest cost and totally self-supporting."

It was a triumph over short-sighted opponents who had derided it as "Dewey's Upstate Boulevard." The road's critics reminded him of politicians who had opposed Gov. DeWitt Clinton and the Erie Canal.

"What astonishes me about the business of government is how the centuries pass and the names and projects change, but politics remains the same," Dewey said.

That's an old story here in New York.

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GOV. TOM DEWEY



LORI VAN BUREN/TIMES UNION

THE PRESIDENT of the Auto Club of New York in 1950 called Thruway toll collections "little more than a shakedown of the motorist." Exit 23 of the Thruway, above.