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Westway, As Transit Crumbles

By Ross Sandler

transferred to rehabilitate buses, subways, commuter lines, and even to repair potholes. It is because of that transfer option that Mr. Koch is rethinking his support of Westway.

Mayor Koch has to decide how much of the region's available transportation capital will be spent on a West Side road and how much on transit. In 1970 and 1975, the issue was getting Federal dollars into the city. But in 1980, the city must ask what it wants to buy with those transportation dollars. That debate has never been joined. Instead, the arguments roll on as they have for 10 years with successively more refined claims, most of which could not be proved until Westway is or is not built.

Could New York City in 1980 justify Westway's disproportionate claim on transportation capital? No. Commuters are marching on picket lines, staging fare strikes and enduring a breakdown of system-wide proportions. The dirty, deteriorating subways and buses are old and failing; all suffer from "deferred maintenance" — that is, no maintenance. Governor Carey, to create an impression of balance in funding transit, adopted a hollow accelerated transit program complete with public hearings on unfunded transit projects, blamed the Government for shortchanging the state and city, and criticized the Environmental Protection Agency for revealing that the state

had no plan to rebuild transit. Yet public relations cannot disguise the disproportionate diversion of the city's transportation capital to Westway.

Westway comes at a staggeringly high price — the major share of this region's transportation capital for the next 10 years. That diversion of transportation capital would not be accepted today if newly proposed, but a \$2.3 billion juggernaut with 10 years of economic-development drumbeating appears unstoppable.

How then, if Westway is to be built, are those supporting Westway going to pay back capital to the transportation system? Perhaps the developable land atop Westway should be leased with every penny going annually to the region's transit systems. The land rents would be "dedicated" to transit — for example, to bridge tolls. With a dedicated cash flow, the M.T.A. could sell bonds, just as Robert Moses did to build many of the region's highways and bridges.

Those backing Westway can probably devise a better plan to provide transportation capital. They should be forced to by Mayor Koch as the price for his support. Until now we have heard mostly false promises and blame-shifting by people who otherwise claim credit for pragmatic maneuvering to get Westway. Mr. Koch should ask: Where is their pragmatic plan to pay for buses, subways, and commuter lines? Without a plan, he has no alternative but to reclaim the city's transportation capital for transportation.

New York City cannot afford to divert its transportation capital for the next 10 years to a "golf course" in Manhattan while the real transportation system of the region collapses.

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Even as Mayor Koch reconsiders whether he will continue to support Westway, and before the controversial construction permits have been granted, Westway supporters have announced design and construction schedules. Victory is assured, they say. Well, assuming the long fight is over, it is timely to look back on how we got a \$2.3 billion, 4.2-mile highway on the Hudson River.

Why did New York City decide in 1980 to build a Manhattan highway when the city's buses, subways and commuter rail lines are underfunded and deteriorating? Because Westway is not a highway; it's a land-development deal that skims off more transportation capital for development than officials of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority ever dreamed of for transit.

Westway's \$2.3 billion price tag makes it the region's largest single commitment of transportation capital ever. Westway will use up about five times more dollars than this past year's Federal transit aid to the city's buses, subways and commuter rail lines combined. This is because Westway's developers tapped the Federal Highway Trust Fund for nontransportation projects — the developable land and parks atop the landfill.

As Edward N. Costikyan, who was a close adviser to Mayor Koch, wrote in 1978, "The genius of Westway" is that it takes advantage of one Federal program designed to support transportation and turns it into another, the creation of dry land for development and parks. He continued that New York was being as "sophisticated as people in other cities that use poverty funds intended for the poor to build golf courses for the rich." So the city opts for Westway in 1980 because it is our federally funded "golf course."

Does New York City have to build a "golf course" in Manhattan to get the Federal money or is there a choice? There is a choice. Federal law allows Federal transportation funds to be