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How The Sound Was “Saved” The Battle of the Oyster Bay-Rye Bridge

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The controversy over the Oyster Bay-Rye Bridge across the Long Island Sound heralded the end of an era. This missing piece in Robert Moses's vision fell pray to well financed opponents taking advantage of a new emphasis on the environment in the public discourse. This was also an era when Moses's parkway vision was increasingly supplanted by planning for public transport. Thus, it is no surprise that the fall of Robert Moses and the fall of the Oyster Bay-Rye Bridge are intricately intertwined. As New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller conceded when the battle ended, in the post-Moses era “the people want[ed] to take a more careful look at decisions which affect the face of their land.”ⁱ

By the 1960s, Robert Moses was over seventy years old and had been in public service for close to a half century. During that time, he presided over the construction of an impressive array of parks, highways, and bridges in Long Island and New York City. But Moses's power was waning. Having successfully outwitted many opponents in the past, he met his match in New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller.

Both Moses and Rockefeller were men of similar ruthlessness, using all methods at their disposal to accomplish their aims. In late 1962, the two came into conflict over Moses's continued chairmanship of the State Council of Parks. At stake was the control of a 100 million dollar bond issue for parks recently passed by the voters; Rockefeller hoped to take credit for the measure and bolster his standing for a future presidential bid.ⁱⁱ Thus, in late November Rockefeller asked Moses to resign in order to ensure “a smooth transition from his long and brilliant career.”ⁱⁱⁱ In response, Moses offered to resign from all five of his state posts, expecting Rockefeller to backtrack. Moses had used similar threats in the past with success; thanks to the popularity of his park system, no Governor wanted to be “the one to fire Bob Moses.”^{iv} But

Rockefeller had called Moses's bluff.

These resignations left Robert Moses with only his three city posts: the most important was the chairmanship of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority. It was in this capacity that he announced plans for a Long Island Sound crossing in 1965.

This bridge was the missing piece in his system of parks and parkways; it would provide a natural link between the Seaford-Oyster Bay Expressway on Long Island and the Cross Westchester Expressway on the other side of the Sound. The link would facilitate commerce and industry and provide a more convenient route between Westchester and Jones Beach, the crown jewel of Moses's recreation empire.

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Figure 1: NY Times, 15 February 1965; p1

On February 15, 1965 the front page of the New York Times announced “Moses is seeking bridge from L.I. to Port Chester.”^v As one of the first public mentions of the project, the February 15 article made the \$100 million bridge sound like a forgone conclusion. Moses was quoted as saying, “crossing of the Long Island Sound is inevitable to meet future traffic needs for direct access north and east of the city's congested core.”^{vi} The location of the bridge had already been chosen; a crossing of the Sound from Oyster Bay to Port Chester was said to be the only “obvious and feasible” location.^{vii} Even the type of construction had been decided after an

exhaustive study; the second page of the article included an artist's rendering. But there was one small legal problem: the Triborough Authority was not authorized to operate outside of New York City. Thus Moses had to make his plans public in order to get the necessary approval from the state. This meant that Governor Rockefeller would play a key role as plans for the bridge unfolded.

So would the town of Oyster Bay and the city of Rye. The later immediately responded to Moses's plans for a new bridge. Rye officials disputed his assertion that the bridge would go through nearby Port Chester, a town with virtually no shoreline, and held that it would go through their city instead. In response to this argument, Peter Reidy, one of Moses's subordinates at the Triborough agency, asserted that “it is premature to even speculate whose backyard we might go through.”^{viii} In denying that a final route for the bridge had been set in stone, Reidy sought to sustain “the illusion that the bridgehead in Westchester would be in Port Chester, mostly through a run-down area” where there was little to no opposition to anything that would revitalize the shore front.^{ix} Thus, Reidy maintained that that the bridge would “probably” make a landfall in Port Chester Harbor rather than nearby Manursing Island in Rye. Residents of the island, among the wealthiest in Westchester county, wanted nothing to do with Moses's bridge.

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Figure 2: NY Times, 16 February 1965; p1

These homeowners and other opponents strongly argued that the bridge should no go through their quiet, peaceful communities. Mayor Johnson of Rye characterized his domain as a

“residential city” and held that the bridge “would destroy costly homes and estates as well as closing important roads.” The intersection of the Cross-Westchester Expressway with I-95 in Rye had just been finalized a few years before. Thus many residents of Rye were opposed to anything that would bring even more roadways, congestion, and, traffic to their locale. On the other side of the Sound, Oyster Bay officials referred to the plan as “the forerunner of the complete destruction of the suburban beauty of the North Shore.”^x

One outspoken critic of the bridge was William Snodgrass, the Rye city representative to the Westchester county board of supervisors. Three weeks before Moses's plans were made public, the Westchester county board of supervisors had voted unanimously to support the bridge. However, once the public was informed of the plan, Snodgrass was among the most vocal of opponents. He explained this apparent contradiction to the Times “on the ground that the resolution did not specify Rye as the site of the Westchester approach.”^{xi}

This was a tactic Moses had successfully used before. In the early 1920s, he hid a provision inside the bill creating the State Council of Parks which allowed the 'allocation' of land for parks without compensation to the owners. The legislature, believing the bill to be a routine measure, passed it unanimously. But the landfall for a bridge was harder to conceal.

Furthermore, Moses had exhibited considerable influence in Albany as a member of Governor Alfred Smith's inner circle. Smith had helped Moses immensely in the park debate by casting opponents of parks as a “few wealthy men” looking to deny the beauty of Long Island to the masses.^{xii} But Moses no longer had such strong support in Albany. Now he faced a governor who had just outmaneuvered him out of all of his state jobs; when asked for comment on the bridge plan Rockefeller called it “completely premature” and said that further study was

necessary.^{xiii}

Despite all of this concentrated opposition, there were still some people who supported the plan, but they were nowhere near as vocal. When asked by the Times, Councilman Edmund A. Ocker of Oyster Bay commented, “We have a considerable number of industrial parks in the central portion of our town which would be greatly benefited by this bridge”^{xiv} James F. McManus, a lawyer from Farmingdale, also saw the bridge as “a thing that would improve this area.”^{xv} These two residents were excited by the potential increase in commerce and industry an additional connection to the mainland could bring to Long Island. On the other side of the Sound, Mayor Johnson expressed the fear that these interests might lead to a “tug of war” between Rye and Oyster Bay.^{xvi} As part of the mainland, Rye would not experience the same jump in connectivity as Long Island. But while this fact led Long Island officials to take a more cautious approach in the early years of the dispute, opponents on both sides of the Sound were equally virulent in their condemnations.

In spite of the controversy, the Times reported at this stage of the battle that “it has been generally agreed that a new crossing is inevitable to meet future traffic needs.”^{xvii} With the conventional wisdom echoing Moses in this regard, opponents of the bridge sought to present alternative routes. For example, Mr. Snodgrass proposed that one end of the bridge be placed at Bryam Point in Connecticut rather than in Westchester. Snodgrass ostensibly made this suggestion so that Connecticut could “share in the hardships of land acquisition as well as the benefits of the project.”^{xviii} However, such a route would undoubtedly be more complicated politically because it would require cooperation and agreement between officials of two different states. Thus proponents of the crossing charged that Snodgrass's purpose in making this

suggestion was either to move the bridge out of his backyard or to kill it entirely.

Another source of contention was Moses's proposal for the Triborough authority to build and operate the span. Moses argued that the agency was the ideal body to do so because it had built many successful bridges in the past and was currently running a surplus. This meant that the cost of marketing Triborough bonds to pay for the project would be less than the cost of marketing bonds backed by a new agency with no track record. However, under Triborough's charter, the bridge would be owned by New York City once the bonds had been paid off. In arguing against this portion of the proposal, Governor Rockefeller and other critics said it made no sense that a bridge in Nassau and Westchester counties should be owned by New York City. Even George V. McLaughlin, a member of Moses's own Triborough authority, was against this part of the plan; he accused Moses of abusing his position by proposing that Triborough build the bridge without seeking the approval of even other members of the agency.^{xix}

It was McLaughlin's opposition that put the nail in the coffin of the bill to extend Triborough's authority. Not willing to give up, Moses presented a new plan in July of 1965. He “grudgingly acknowledged” that the only way to get legislative approval was for a new authority to build the bridge; thus Moses proposed that the chairman of the Triborough (himself) along with one Nassau and one Westchester representative constitute this new body.^{xx} To placate the wealthy residents of Manursing Island, Moses moved the proposed Rye bridgehead several miles to the south. Under this new route, the value of the property in Rye that would need to be seized for a bridge was cut from \$6 million to \$3 million.^{xxi}

Moses's revised proposal failed to quiet opponents; it “merely transferred the heated opposition from one group of residents to another.”^{xxii} Three days later, a New York advertising

executive who had lived in Rye for nearly sixty years commented that he “had never before seen the community so unanimous.”^{xxiii} Emboldened by such strong support for his position, Mayor Johnson declared that Moses's concessions meant that the bridge plan was all but dead.

But the plan was far from dead. In a December meeting to discuss the proposal, Moses announced that he would in fact not need to destroy any houses at all. Instead, he would use Playland Amusement Park for the Westchester county landfill. As the property was in the process of being refurbished anyway, Moses argued that allocating a small portion for the bridge would greatly contribute to the redevelopment of the remainder of the land.^{xxiv}

However, despite this surprise move, Westchester and Oyster Bay officials geared up for a fight in the state legislature. They decried the bridge as “unnecessary, unwanted, and fiscally impossible.”^{xxv} In order to prove the first contention, they commissioned a report that showed that only 4 percent of the traffic from three existing bridges would be diverted; in addition to the Whitestone and Throgs Neck, the Triborough was included in this figure despite the fact that the later bridge was an unlikely route for Long Island to Connecticut traffic.^{xxvi} Mayor Johnson noted that Moses seemed to be the only one actively supporting the bridge and derided him for having an “egotistical notion of his exclusive talents.”^{xxvii} Finally, they argued that the Triborough authority's good bond rating could not carry over to a new authority simply by importing Moses to that authority; thus the bridge would be too expensive. This charge was made despite that fact that some of the very same bridge opponents had previously argued for modifications to the plan which would make it even more expensive or unfeasible. The suburban communities of Rye and Oyster Bay were doing all that they could to preserve what they saw as their home and identity.

But in 1966, Robert Moses had problems of his own. The new mayor of New York was an idealist; John Lindsay had campaigned on the promise to end the Moses-style way of doing things once and for all. The Oyster Bay-Rye bridge all but disappeared from the headlines in 1966 as Moses focused his energy on defeating Lindsay's transportation merger plans. As an advocate of public transportation, Lindsay wanted to merge Moses's Triborough authority which was running large surpluses with the Transit Authority which was running large deficits. The chair of the new authority, who would be more closely tied to the mayor, would be able to use Triborough money to advance Lindsay's mass transit goals. Lindsay thought that since both agencies he wanted to merge served the city, he could accomplish this easily; instead, he wound up with a nasty political fight in Albany. Moses, lined up all of his allies in the state capitol who accused Mayor Lindsay of “trying to destroy confidence in Triborough bonds; trying to put all transportation under the thumb of city hall; and trying to halt highway and bridge progress generally.”^{xxviii} Noticeably absent from the controversy was Governor Rockefeller who had earlier expressed support for Lindsay's plans.

Meanwhile, public opinion had turned against Moses. In a strong editorial, The Times blamed “chicanery by it's opponents in City Hall and Albany” for the defeat of the transportation merger.^{xxix} Another opinion piece referred to the “Moses Problem.” Rockefeller, sensing the public mood, moved in to take control of the situation. While Lindsay's bill was stuck in committee, Rockefeller was making transportation plans of his own. Instead of unifying only two agencies, his plan would create one umbrella group for the entire metropolitan transportation apparatus. This new Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) would be headed by his own man: Dr. William J. Ronan.

“Bill Ronan is going to have so much power under Rockefeller's transportation plan that Bob Moses will look like a schoolboy with a small allowance,” one politician commented on the merger.^{xxx} However, despite Ronan's proposed control of the Triborough, these powers spilled over into in an area that Moses had never been a fan of: mass transportation. Moses was a builder; his projects were automobile-centric and meant to stand as part of the infrastructure for generations. By contrast, Ronan was an academic; as a close aide of Governor Rockefeller he rose to prominence as head of the state takeover of the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR). Thus his tenure as head of the MTA would not be characterized by controversy over many large-scale public works; instead, he was most identified with disputes over subway and LIRR fare increases in the years that followed.^{xxxi}

But in 1967 Moses still had a card left in his hand that had the potential to derail this shift of power to mass transit. Rockefeller's plan would be financed by a \$2.5 billion dollar bond issue that needed the approval of the voters. To sell the plan to upstate voters who would not derive any significant benefit from the new authority, Governor Rockefeller maintained that Triborough surpluses would free the state from worrying about mass transit deficits. However, putting pen to paper, Moses found that not only was this claim false, but the bond issue would cost taxpayers \$1 billion in interest alone.^{xxxii}

On March 9, 1967 Moses, about to release his numbers to the press, had one last meeting with the Governor. No one knows precisely what was said, but Moses, who came in as a staunch opponent of the plan, came out as a strong supporter. The public reason for this change of heart was that Moses was “won over by Rockefeller's assurance on safeguards for Triborough bonds.”^{xxxiii} However, two other reasons seem more likely. One idea was that Rockefeller

promised Moses a seat on the MTA board; thus, Moses would still have power under the new setup. The second held that Rockefeller gave Moses his support for the Oyster Bay-Rye Bridge.

Less than two weeks after Moses's pledge of support for the MTA, Governor Rockefeller announced that he was in favor of the immediate construction of the Oyster Bay-Rye Bridge and the investigation of a second span from Port Jefferson to Bridgeport, Connecticut. In arguing for the bridge, the Governor held that “Long Island, with its growth, must get an independent passing out to Connecticut without going through New York.”^{xxxiv} This assertion, contained in a report just submitted to the Governor by Dr. Ronan, put a new spin on Moses's previous justifications. While Moses had simply warned of unimaginable traffic on the East River bridges, Rockefeller's argument sought to spin the bridge as a positive improvement for Long Island. At the same time, he acknowledged opposition by stating, “I'm aware of the fact that nobody wants any more bridges, roads, or anything built in their area.”^{xxxv}

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Figure 3: NY Times, 23 March 1967; p1

However, legislators from Nassau and Westchester agreed only with the later sentiment. Faced with the possibility that they would derail his transportation merger over the bridge controversy, Rockefeller agreed to tone down the legislation. Instead of calling for construction to begin immediately on the Oyster Bay-Rye link, the bills merely authorized the MTA to build both that bridge and the one from Port Jefferson at some later date.^{xxxvi}

Thus the bond issue passed and the MTA merger went through. On March 1, 1968 when the MTA formally took over the transportation network, it was revealed that Moses was not on the agency's board. Instead, he was offered a position as a consultant with no decision-making

power. From Moses's meager public statement, “The Metropolitan Transportation Authority has offered me an advisory part in the metropolitan transportation enterprise and I have accepted,” it is clear that he expected something more.^{xxxvii} Rockefeller had outwitted him again, and this time he had no positions of power left. All that remained was a hope that the Governor would allow him to build what he called “a fetish with me, my obsession”—the Rye-Oyster Bay bridge.^{xxxviii}

But six months after the merger, the city of Rye sued seeking to block the bridge. The new mayor of Rye, Edmund C. Grainger held that the law authorizing the bridge was illegal under “log-rolling” prohibitions of the state constitution. This provision outlawed “the passage of a legislative 'package' of various miscellaneous measures, often of a local nature, in which enactment results from the mutual exchange of backing from legislators who support respective parts thereof.”^{xxxix} The suit held that Rockefeller's 2.5 million dollar transportation program which included the bridge authorization and created the MTA was in violation of this provision. As any ruling against the bridge on these grounds could have potential far-reaching effects on other parts of the state transportation apparatus, this lawsuit showed how far opponents of the bridge were willing to go to derail it.

While this lawsuit was pending, J. Brunch McMorann, the State Transportation Commissioner, announced that the Oyster Bay-Rye bridge was going forward. Construction was slated to begin immediately following the necessary public hearings in early 1969. The favored route would closely follow the one originally proposed by Moses, although that was subject to change following the hearings. In Rye, this meant the bridge would pass through the estates on Manursing Island; in Oyster Bay over 200 homes would have to be demolished to make way for the bridge approach.^{xl}

Opposition, reignited by Rockefeller's announcement the year before, went into full swing with this latest development. Again, Rye took a leading role. Mayor Grainger remained hopeful that “the fact that the state appears to be moving ahead will prompt Rye citizens to raise additional funds to fight the bridge.”^{xii} Residents of Manursing Island did not move out despite the growing specter of demolition. Bridge critics became even more vocal and caustic. In a letter to the editor of The Times Helen Z. Lippincott of Rye denounced the appointed state official in charge of the bridge as having “the gall to ask Rye if we would prefer to have our town carved up sideways or down the middle.”^{xiii} Unlike five years earlier when even critics had acknowledged that some kind of crossing was inevitable to meet traffic needs, this letter made a point to say “we have been given no justification whatsoever.”^{xiii} Opponents of the bridge had dug in.

All of the vitriol spit at the state for going ahead with the bridge has it's affect on public opinion. The editorial board of the Times, which had responded to Moses original plan with a call for more study and a statewide agency to build the crossing, had now swung toward bridge opponents. In concluding that the case for the bridge was 'not proven,' The Times cited a study conducted by the city of Rye that maintained that only 2.2 percent of the traffic from the Whitestone Bridge and only 11.1 percent of the vehicles from the Throgs Neck Bridge would make use of the Sound crossing.^{xiv} While these numbers alone added up to a higher percentage than the 4 percent figure for three bridges from the original fight, they suggested to the Times that a bridge was not yet necessary.

But the state also had numbers to support its position. Their engineering report did not look into how much traffic would be diverted, but instead purported to show that the bridge

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Figure 4: Response of boatmen to bridge details released by the MTA in December 1972; All clearances would be 25 feet high except at two points. NY Times, 25 February 1973; p87

would be financially self-sustaining and save people time. They estimated that net revenues would be \$10.1 million after the first year with a \$1 toll for cars. As for time, the average user would save a half hour of driving. While both Rye's figures and those from the state report may be equally valid, each side of the dispute framed the numbers in the way it believed best supported its view.

During this period, bridge opponents argued with increasing frequency that the bridge would damage the environmental and recreational aspects of the Sound. For example, Lippincott's letter decried "the destruction of conservation, recreation, and aesthetic values of the Sound."^{xlv} Environmentalists held that dumping steel into the Sound would do irreversible harm to the plants and animals that called it home. Boatmen alleged that the limited underpasses would force sailboats into the shipping lanes; their fears are best illustrated by the cartoon in figure 4. These two groups sometimes advocated a tunnel rather than a bridge citing the success

of the recent Chesapeake Bay crossing and calling the increased cost “a small price to pay” for the preservation of the Sound.^{xlvi} In response to one such petition in early 1968, Moses denounced its proponents as “aristocratic sportsman” and their proposal as “a contrived bit of heavy handed social satire” in a deteriorating economy.^{xlvii} But environmental concerns were more important in the late 1960s and early 1970s than they had been when Moses had first come to power. These kinds of arguments were used with greater and greater success both by opponents genuinely concerned about the environment and by opponents who took advantage of the mood of the day. “Do not dwell on private clubs and or houses affected by the bridge,” read one group's strategy memo in early 1973; by contrast, early critics in 1965 focused mainly on harm to residential neighborhoods.^{xlviii} This exploitation of environmental concerns was a key factor in the defeat of the Oyster Bay-Rye Bridge.

An excellent example of this strategy is the gift from the town of Oyster Bay to the Department of the Interior in late 1968. The state's announcement of the near-final route prompted the town to donate 3100 acres in the bridge's path to the federal government as a wildlife reserve for the expressed purpose of putting up another barrier to construction.^{xlix} Now, the state could no longer use this land for the bridge without the permission of Washington. To ensure that this would never happen, the gift included a provision that if the Interior department allowed encroachments on the preserve, the property would revert back to the town. Not only were no homes affected by the gift, but the new sanctuary was entirely underwater!

While this sneaky action by Oyster Bay was reported in a four paragraph article on page ninety-four of the Times, the Rye lawsuit continued to be the skirmish of the day. On January 3rd, 1969, State Supreme Court Justice Samuel M. Gold issued an injunction against the hearings

in Rye and Oyster Bay. One month later, he found that the bridge was unconstitutional because the MTA had no authority to build bridges according to the law that created the agency in 1965, before the merger with Triborough. Gold ruled that such a project would thus require an additional act of the legislature.¹ But unfortunately for bridge opponents, the state Court of Appeals did not agree. By a 4-3 decision, it reversed Gold's ruling in late April. It is interesting to note that a statement released by MTA chairman Ronan did not focus on the bridge; he instead framed the case as one of “basic questions regarding the powers of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the constitutionality of the law creating it.”ⁱⁱ Clearly, the bridge was a hot topic for state officials to touch. Local officials had it worse; in the 1969 election an incumbent Republican town board member on Long Island who expressed support for the crossing was not only defeated, but was actually burned in effigy.ⁱⁱⁱ By this time the debate was so vitriolic that even through the Court of Appeals had given the go ahead for hearings in April of 1969, they were postponed until after the November 1970 election in which Rockefeller was seeking another term.

No help was to come from Connecticut. In June of 1969, plans for the second crossing from Port Jefferson to Bridgeport proposed by Governor Rockefeller suffered a setback in the Connecticut House. The bill, identical to one that had already become law in New York, would have set up a bistate eight member commission to begin planning the span. This bridge was strongly supported by Suffolk County Executive H. Lee Dennison who maintained that the Oyster Bay-Rye Bridge was too far west to help with his county's transportation problems. However, the Connecticut legislature thought differently; one member explained to the Times that “the thinking was that it [the bridge] would not be of any benefit to Connecticut, only to

New York.”^{liii} The new access point for Long Island trucks to the mainland, they feared, would bring increased traffic to Connecticut and might even necessitate widening of major roads in the state.

Meanwhile, Governor Rockefeller, fearing for his reelection, issued another concession to critics of the Oyster Bay span. The hearings were postponed indefinitely in favor of a new all-inclusive study of transportation across the Long Island Sound. Rockefeller billed the study as a way to “determine once and for all the transit needs of these areas” bordered by the Sound.^{liv} Opponents of the bridge agreed; Assemblyman Joseph M. Reilly of Glen Cove asserted that “a good long comprehensive study is the thing that is needed.”^{lv} One might wonder from his choice of wording if he wanted the study to go on indefinitely.

This concession by Governor Rockefeller points out an important political difference between Rockefeller advocating for the bridge as Governor and Moses advocating for the bridge as the head of an authority. In theory, an authority such as as Moses's Triborough should be able to put broad regional interests ahead of narrow provincial ones, removing a measure of political pressure from public improvements. For example, it would hardly benefit anyone if a bridge was left unfinished because a new mayor or governor who had been bitterly opposed to its construction came into office just as the project was about to be completed. When an authority was commissioned to build the same bridge, it should in theory run the project like a business until all the bonds were paid, at which point the bridge would revert back to city or state control. However, not every element of the theory held in practice; Moses, for example, was often most concerned with amassing power and implementing his master plan of parks, bridges, and highways. In order to defeat the sunset clause, Moses had sunk a provision into Triborough's

charter that allowed him to issue new bonds when the old ones were about to expire. Thus, as a powerful independent chairman who was not directly responsible to the voters, Moses in his heyday had been able steamroll and demonize opposition, move quickly to make his vision a reality, and then gain public support by showing how wonderful the final product was. But now with Moses out of power, Rockefeller was the chief public advocate of the bridge. Indicative of this shift, a rendering of the bridge in the Times now carried the caption “proposed by Governor Rockefeller.”^{lvi} On one hand this change meant that critics of the bridge were more likely to have their voices heard. On the other hand, this meant that plans for the bridge would proceed on a political schedule.

Bridge opponents also recognized the potential political impact of the bridge as they mobilized for the 1970 election. In order to cast their position in a favorable light they organized the “Committee to Save Long Island Sound,” thus taking advantage of the prevailing environmental wind and painting bridge proponents as out to destroy the Sound. The committee was headed by Mayor Grainger from Rye and Martin Victor from the Nassau Civic Association. They distributed petitions urging fellow opponents to “write, yell, complain, vote, cause a commotion” in order to elect candidates who opposed construction of the bridge.^{lvii} In a clever move, the committee sent ballots to all candidates for state elective office asking them to indicate their stance on the issue. In the face of such intense political pressure, it is not surprising that only one candidate publicly indicated opposition to a proposed resolution repealing the MTA's authorization to build the bridge. Out of the 575 ballots sent, the tally as of October 17th was 134 in favor, 1 against, and 3 uncommitted.^{lviii}

The opposition was so politically outspoken that they succeeded in getting the bill to

repeal the bridge authorization out of committee the following year. The measure passed overwhelmingly: 136 to 9 in the Assembly and 49 to 4 in the Senate.^{lix} But Governor Rockefeller had other plans; he vetoed the bill, urging legislatures to wait until the completion of his study before taking any action. But not even the Governor's political clout could stop an attempt to override his veto; although the measure came up seven votes shy of the required two-thirds majority, Rockefeller was becoming increasingly isolated in his advocacy of the bridge. The Times editorial board had moved from sympathy to outright opposition. In commenting on the recent legislative action, it held that the bridge would turn communities on both sides of the Sound "into fume-filled shrines to the automotive god."^{lx}

Why had the situation changed so drastically? While the response to Robert Moses's original proposal had drawn the most irate opposition from Rye, the plans for the bridge were now the subject of equal vitriol in Oyster Bay and were being pummeled in the court of public opinion. Not only did bridge opponents use every political weapon at their disposal as already described, but they had the economic resources to do so. The areas through which the bridge was expected to redirect traffic were home to predominately upper middle class and wealthy suburbanites. In Long Island alone, three major county clubs stood along the right of way.^{lxi} Not only were there expensive homes on Manursing Island on the Westchester side, but the vicinity of the proposed bridge in Oyster Bay was also a prime location for many upper class estates. In other words, opposition to the bridge came from the section of society most skilled in organizing political campaigns. Some residents of Oyster Bay were among the wealthiest families in the country; for example, Governor Rockefeller's sister had a home in the affected Long Island area and was rumored to have contributed to a fund opposing the bridge. By 1971, this well-

organized and well-financed opposition was successful in making it seem as if Rockefeller was the only one who wanted the structure built.

However, this portrayal was not entirely accurate. Labor and business interests also saw the bridge in a favorable light. These proponents held that the giant public works project would not only provide jobs but would do much to strengthen the local economy. The new outlet for Long Island's goods, they argued, would cause freight rates to drop. However, since proponents did not generally see the bridge as crucial to their livelihood, their voices were drowned out by opponents during the period in which it seemed that the project was most likely to begin. As one outnumbered advocate of the bridge in Rye put it, opponents behaved “much as a virgin about to be raped.”^{lxii}

Meanwhile, the study that Rockefeller commissioned prior to the 1970 election was released to the public in January of 1972. It analyzed eight possible crossings for their financial cost and economic, environmental, and community impacts. The final report concluded that “higher travel costs, greater travel times, unnecessary roundabout travel, and the congestion-induced isolation of Nassau and Suffolk Counties” would result if no bridge were constructed. The conclusion then eliminated the five possible Suffolk County bridges from consideration on the grounds that they would have “much lower traffic volume and much higher construction costs.”^{lxiii} A proposed span from Sands Point in Long Island to New Rochelle in Westchester was removed from consideration on the ground that it would disrupt too many existing communities. Only two of the original eight bridges remained: one from Glen Cove to Rye and the Oyster Bay-Rye bridge. In language that echoed Robert Moses's original rationale, the study concluded that only the later “would immediately complete a metropolitan circumferential

expressway” and would thus not necessitate the building of many miles of access roads.^{lxiv}

Before recommending the Rye-Oyster Bay bridge, the study looked into several issues raised by bridge critics. While admitting that the bridge would have an impact on wetlands it crossed, the study held that no species would be forced into extinction. Although residents near the bridge might notice some additional air pollution, the study concluded that the overall effect on air quality in the entire metropolitan area would be minor. Furthermore, the report offered engineering suggestions to reduce both air pollution and vehicular noise and held that a good design could make the bridge “the most beautiful anywhere.”^{lxv} From an economic standpoint, the study found that the Oyster Bay-Rye bridge would create an additional 22,000 jobs by 1980 in Westchester and on Long Island.^{lxvi} The bridge would also impact several daily sailing races which would have to move to different locations on the Sound.

While critics of the span obviously disagreed with the study's conclusion, they were able to use some of its findings to buttress their criticisms. For example, an analysis of the different approach roads in Oyster Bay and the detrimental effects of each was incorporated into the arguments of some opponents. Others seized on warnings that the Sound's dwindling wetlands needed to be preserved. Critics further took note of statistics that showed that out of the eight bridges studied, noise from the Oyster Bay-Rye bridge would affect the most residents.^{lxvii} Opponents also found fault with the fact that only bridges and no tunnels had been studied.

Bridge opponents now focused their attention on the 1972 session of the New York State legislature where a bill to rescind the MTA's authorization to build the bridge had again been introduced. As before, the bill passed by overwhelming majorities only to be vetoed by Governor Rockefeller. Charging that the rationale for a bridge had been “amply demonstrated”

by the state study, the Governor decided that the bridge needed to be built.^{lxviii}

Why did Rockefeller stick to his bridge plans in the face of so much opposition? The most bitter opponents of the bridge speculated that Rockefeller's insistence was simply a product of a promise he had made to Robert Moses in order to get Moses to agree to the MTA. However, Rockefeller had not kept his first 'promise', a Moses seat on the MTA board, thus it is unlikely that his support for the bridge came solely from a desire to fulfill the second. Asked to comment on this question, Assemblyman Joseph M. Reilly of Oyster Bay said of the Governor, "He's a builder, no doubt about it."^{lxix} In other words, Rockefeller was not only convinced of a need for the bridge, but probably hoped to take credit for the project much like Moses had received credit for many of his public works. Author Robert Caro, in his well-known biography of Moses, takes this line of reasoning a step further. Caro maintains that Rockefeller was not doing more to end the construction delays because he wanted to hold off construction until Moses was too old to take part in the project, thus depriving him of the credit.^{lxx} However, this argument has two flaws. First, having already removed Moses from power, Rockefeller could have easily bypassed him in assigning responsibility for the project. Second, as already demonstrated, the political pressures on Rockefeller to delay the bridge cannot be underestimated.

But at the end of 1972, the state was still moving ahead. In late November, the Federal Highway Administration approved the state's environmental impact study which maintained that the bridge would have only a small negative effect on the "human and natural environment of the metropolitan area."^{lxxi} This report would not have been necessary had the bridge not been delayed by Rockefeller in early 1969. It was a new requirement introduced by the National Environmental Policy Act passed by Congress later that year, a milestone in the rise of

environmentalism. Despite this prevailing public mood, the state's study included an insistence that the Long Island approach to the bridge go “through or over” the Oyster Bay National Wildlife Refuge.^{lxxii} In asserting that there would be minimal damage to the wetlands, the report held that the other two Nassau bridges included in the state's January 1972 study would do more harm to the “human and natural” environment. It is interesting to note how the word “human” is used to allow for a more expansive definition of what constitutes the “environment.” According to the January 1972 study, the bridge originating in Glen Cove would disturb far less acres of wetland.^{lxxiii} But despite the fact that the environmental impact study seemed not to catch on to the rise of the environment as a political issue, the state scheduled hearings on bridge approach roads for mid January 1973.

Opponents of the bridge promptly responded with two lawsuits in federal court. In the first case, they sued the MTA and the State Department of Transportation, claiming the state had not given the proper advance notice or released enough information to hold hearings. In February 1973, bridge foes, angry over federal acceptance of the state report, also served the Federal Highway Administration with a lawsuit.^{lxxiv} As one resident of Bayville, Long Island (the town in Oyster Bay where the bridgehead would be built) commented, “the list of possible objectors is endless.” And opponents were determined to pursue every avenue available; not only did they have the will to do so, they also had the resources.

As the controversy entered 1973, this strategy began to bear some fruit. In early January, declaring “there is no urgency in this matter whatsoever,” Judge Loyd F. McMahon postponed the hearings until the case could be heard.^{lxxv} In February, he ruled that the state had violated Federal law by failing to provide enough information on the “economic, social, and planning”

factors and thus could not yet hold hearings.^{lxxvi} It took the MTA another month to come up with a plan that was accepted by the judge under these requirements.

But on March 16th, the Bridge was delivered a blow from which it never recovered. The United States Department of the Interior moved to protect the wildlife refuge it had received from the town of Oyster Bay. When asked for comment by the Times, deputy assistant secretary William W. Lyons said that the decision had been “based on the terms under which the town of Oyster Bay” had turned over the land.^{lxxvii} Since all three proposed access routes went through the refuge, these clever terms forced the state to search for alternative routes. At the very least, this would mean another delay before construction could begin. Despite this, Governor Rockefeller was still defiant. In words that could have been uttered by Robert Moses, he told reporters who asked how the bridge would still go through, “That's up to me. You'll find out more as the scenario unfolds.”^{lxxviii}

Unfortunately for Rockefeller, the scenario was unfolding in favor of anti-bridge forces. Senator Ribicoff of Connecticut, a bridge opponent, inserted an amendment into a federal highway bill that barred federal funds from highway projects that would “significantly affect” a state without the state's approval.^{lxxix} When the amendment was approved by the House in April, the Oyster Bay-Rye bridge had been dealt another serious blow. In order to receive federal funding to construct the approach roads, Rockefeller now needed the approval of both the New York and Connecticut legislatures. As evidenced by the annual bills against the bridge in the first body and the scuttling of the Port Jefferson-Bridgeport crossing in the second, this was unlikely. In other words, the state would now have to bear the full cost of \$70 million for the roads in addition to \$168 million for the bridge itself.^{lxxx}

On June 20, Rockefeller finally gave up. Citing the increasing prevalence of environmental concerns, he halted all plans for the bridge. While maintaining that the bridge still held economic advantages, Rockefeller explained that by the early 1970s, people were “beginning to look at the quality of life as well as the quantity of our gross national product.”^{lxxxix} He held that it was this concern for “good land use” that ultimately defeated the bridge.^{lxxxii}

Robert Moses disagreed. In a speech to the Southampton Garden Club a few days later, he decried what he characterized as “snobbish social opposition to change” and held that bridge critics had “confused the public with irrelevant objections.”^{lxxxiii} “On the basis of such crazy reasoning,” Moses maintained, “there would have been no ... access except by boat to Jones Beach and Fire Island.”^{lxxxiv}

Meanwhile those who had fought the bridge celebrated their victory. An opposition group in Rye released a statement which read, “We regard it as a victory for many environmentalists, regional planners, and mass transit proponents.”^{lxxxv} Noticeably missing from this list were the home and estate owners who had stood in the bridge's path and had been the subject of the original statements of opposition in 1965.

Which of these three views on the defeat of the bridge was correct? The answer is parts of each. For example, the estate owners missing from the Rye group's list saw the value of their property rise in the wake of the bridge's defeat.^{lxxxvi} While Moses was correct in asserting that wealthy interests had defeated the bridge, Rockefeller correctly gauged the mood of the times. Bridge critics had been so successful in advancing environmental arguments because these arguments resonated with the general public. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, concern for the environment was on the rise. During this period Congress passed many major environmental

laws including the Clean Air Act in 1963 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. In 1970, America celebrated the first Earth Day. Thus, Moses's dismissal of conversationalist arguments as “irrelevant objections” indicates that his vision was formed during an earlier time. But as illustrated by the defeat of the bridge, the Moses era was over; a new period of concern for the natural environment had begun.

This new era also included a focus on mass transportation. To this end, Governor Rockefeller tried to turn his bridge defeat into a victory by taking onto the end of his announcement a bond proposal for new mass transit projects. While the bond issue was defeated that November due to a lack of support from upstate residents, Rockefeller had a broader view of the entire transportation picture than Moses. To prohibit buses on his picturesque parkways, Moses had made sure that the bridges were too low to allow them to pass safely underneath.^{lxxxvii} By contrast, Rockefeller's plan for a unified MTA was aimed in part at giving a boost to mass transit. Officials who replaced Moses after his fall from power in the 1960s took a broader view of the transportation picture and were thus not as willing to force projects such as the Oyster Bay-Rye bridge down the throat of an unwilling public. As evidenced by the constant controversies over LIRR and subway fare increases that tied down Ronan's MTA, mass transit was now an important issue in crowded suburbia.

But the ghost of the Oyster Bay-Rye Bridge would resurface in the late 1970s. With unemployment rising, a cross-Sound bridge was seen as a potential economic stimulus. Acting on the support of business and labor interests, Suffolk country politicians explored possible crossings, focusing mainly on the eastern bridges from Suffolk to Connecticut. But Connecticut's position had not changed since the early 1970s, thus proponents were forced to

look west. In April 1980, two assemblyman from Suffolk introduced a bridge bill in Albany.^{lxxxviii} But despite Moses's repeated statements that the bridge was “inevitable,” the bill was doomed from the start. Governor Carey of New York cited financing problems plus environmental and community impact when he ruled out the idea in March; instead, he proposed improved ferry service to Connecticut.^{lxxxix} In the new era of mass transit and environmental concerns, the Oyster Bay-Rye Bridge had become a political football too hot for any top official to touch.

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