

POLICY BRIEF

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This is No Way to Build a Highway

Based on what's happening now it would appear that the final leg of the Mon –Fayette Expressway might be at death's door. The terminal disease is the process to which the new roadway is being subjected. It is the equivalent of the death of a million cuts by which the US nuclear industry was destroyed. Simply put, it is impossible to finish anything you can't start, and opponents of the Expressway have apparently learned that lesson well.

Nothing, it seems, can be built anymore around here without first subjecting it to the whims of our self-appointed environmental and social protectors. These philosophical fundamentalists believe in their hearts that only environmentally positive, and socially "equitable" economic development can be allowed to proceed; which means, essentially, that no economic progress is allowed. "Sustainable Pittsburgh" is now about to weigh in on the Expressway, coming from this exact position: that environmental health and social equity must be the overarching goals of economic development.

All of this seems part of a devilishly clever plan of an anti-progress coalition gripping this region, and now bleating loudly that the highway is too costly and should be scrapped in the interest of saving money. They favor replacing it with mass transit projects that would come in at \$285 million per mile--the cost of constructing the Expressway is less than \$29 million per mile. Worst of all however, is the fact that the mass transit projects proposed would do nothing to solve the transportation problems of the corridor the Mon Fayette Expressway will serve.

Of course, it is difficult to convince such people with rational arguments. For example, Joe Kirk of the Mon Valley Progress Council insists that the Expressway has the potential to reduce congestion on the Parkway East by as much as 75 percent. That suggestion is lost, however, on individuals who believe that new highways actually *cause* congestion. Or, consider this viewpoint: *The 21st century I envision includes far fewer car trips and far less motoring as a general thing. Americans will be lucky to find towns and cities that are worth living in — many have been so badly disassembled and disaggregated that there is not much left to work with. But that will be where we will have to reestablish a civic fabric — that is, if we are really interested in carrying American civilization forward.* —James Howard Kunstler in "Wake For A Fading Suburbia."

There you have it. Carrying American civilization "forward" means returning to a bucolic fantasyland based on a largely imagined era when Americans lived in charming "villages" producing "items of value" and "food" rather than "infotainment" and "non material services." Of course, we suspect that those "items of value" Kunstler mentions represent manufacturing, and

we have no idea how, precisely, manufacturing can be accomplished absent an effective and efficient road system.

But in the “once there was a utopia” view, we need to return to the era when our villages were “connected by farmland in between” rather than “separated” by the vast highway system that now only divides us into haves—suburbanites—and have-nots—urban dwellers. And this pabulum is what motivates and drives the Pittsburgh opponents of the Expressway. Highways are inherently evil; they drive everything wrong with society: consumerism, industrialization, pollution, poverty, crime, injustice, despair and probably hair loss.

More absurd than this viewpoint is the fact that these ideas are accorded weight and equal time when projects such as the Mon Valley Expressway are being considered. Under normal circumstances, such nonsense would not be allowed. But the region’s infrastructure development and even the idea of progress itself have been hijacked to Absurdia. It now seems absurdity may soon dominate the process to such an extent that nothing productive can be developed.

This is particularly true when apocalyptic visions, no matter how unsubstantiated or fantastical, can be entered into the record and thrown up as obstacles to development. How absurd is the contention that the Expressway will “create congestion in the city, pollute the area visually and environmentally, and destroy neighborhoods by taking property and dividing communities from the riverfront.” This nonsense resides nowhere in reality, but provides a hysterical downside to the project to energize those who oppose progress of any kind in the name of “preservation.” These imagined costs are presented as facts, while any suggestion of economic benefit to be derived from the new road is dismissed as fantasy, or worse, labeled as the scheming of “developers, the banks, the highway engineers, the planning officials, the corporate cannibals,” all of whom are engaged in a plot to destroy the perfection that is now Pittsburgh.

It used to be that highways were conceived, planned and designed, then built within a matter of years. Here it takes at least a decade to provide enough psychological counseling to the “affected communities” so that work can actually begin. Even then there is no guarantee that the discovery of a salamander or rare flora in the road’s path, or the persuasion of some leftwing judge that “psychological harm” may ensue will not interrupt progress or end it entirely.

Keep this up and we can all watch the world continue to pass us by.

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Note: Tribune-Review Editorial Page Editor Colin McNickle will be the guest speaker at this month’s Rascals meeting on Saturday, January 26, 9:00 a.m., at the Holiday Inn, McKnight Road. Breakfast cost is \$10.00. RSVP to Woody McVicker by Wednesday, January 23 at 412-487-3065, fax 412-487-2969, or e-mail: woodymcv@telerama.com.

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