

Kensington Expressway - A Boulevard Option



The Kensington Expressway carries 70,000 vehicles per day thru the portion once occupied by Frederick Law Olmsted's Humboldt Parkway in East Buffalo. The freeway created the conditions for unsustainable suburban sprawl, blighted a once beautiful and desirable neighborhood, and devastated East Side retail corridors by robbing them of traffic. The year the freeway opened, Genesee Street, Broadway, Fillmore Avenue, Jefferson Avenue, a score of important commercial corridors in East Buffalo, were vacated by cars that sustained vibrant storefronts and active neighborhoods.

Options now being considered by NYSDOT to "mitigate" the Kensington Expressway by "capping" the freeway fail to take into account its negative economic impact in sapping East Side commercial districts of traffic and commerce. NYSDOT estimates, at minimum, the cost of capping only a single mile of the freeway to start at \$260 million and could top a half billion dollars. If implemented, the resulting "cap" would represent the most expensive grass lawn ever constructed in history. The multimillion dollar grass lawn would not support large shade trees, would not allow the street network across Humboldt Parkway to be restored, would not reconnect neighborhoods, and would not bring new life to desperate East Side commercial strips. The project would either require blasting through solid bedrock to lower the elevation of the freeway, or building an earthen mound over the trench of the freeway that would not exactly resemble Olmsted's vision or function properly as a public space. The concepts now being considered by NYSDOT are unworkable.

But there is another option. NYSDOT can conserve the corridor as a high-capacity arterial while restoring Olmsted's vision by filling the trench of the highway and replacing it with an at-grade, lower speed, multiway boulevard. Olmsted designed multiway boulevards, themselves based on the boulevards of Paris and Berlin, to accommodate large amounts of traffic and create central recreational corridors connecting parks and public spaces. The closest applicable American model is Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn, photographs at left, which carries 70,000 vehicles daily without considerable congestion while creating vibrant public spaces and framing high-value residential areas. It is a long successful model that should be considered in Buffalo.

Filling the Kensington trench, from East Delevan to Best, and replacing with a high-capacity, at-grade, eight-lane boulevard (six inner lanes, two outer lanes, separated by wide landscaped medians) would lower speeds, diffuse some highway traffic to local corridors, support East Side commerce, and recreate an Olmsted vision for Humboldt Parkway. Under this scenario, based on the width of the ROW, 52% of the width of the boulevard would be greenspace. Filling and replacing the highway with a traditional boulevard would be cheaper, faster, and better.

In 2010, NYSDOT is merely considering options that should be evaluated. All feasible options for mitigating the impact of the highway should be considered. The Boulevard Option would meet project needs, restore an important Buffalo neighborhood, and could be implemented at a manageable cost. It deserves to be studied!

