

THE MERRITT PARKWAY*

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IN ANY discussion of the Merritt Parkway it is very difficult to avoid repetition. Already much has been said and written. Some of it is so, and a great deal of it is not so. Many articles have appeared in technical magazines, in the proceedings of technical societies and in the metropolitan and local press—all dealing with the same question. Your program re-states some of the essential points in connection with this project.

An estimate of the situation on the Boston Post Road in 1923 disclosed certain essential facts: The Boston Post Road was rapidly reaching its saturation point, and it was becoming difficult, unpleasant and dangerous to operate a vehicle over this historic highway. The first question to be answered was: Would the motor vehicle—both passenger and commercial—increase in number, speed and size; and, if so, what was the solution? After a general survey of the motor vehicle industry at that time, it seemed to be the consensus of opinion that the motor vehicle would increase in number, size and speed for passenger vehicles, and the probabilities were that the commercial motor vehicle would increase in number and size, but not in speed. However, this has proved to be an error, as the commercial motor vehicle not only has increased in number and in size, but also has increased in speed.

If this estimate were correct, it followed directly that additional traffic facilities were required. Could the Boston Post Road be widened? And, if widened, how much could it be widened, and would it meet the present and future requirements? After a considerable amount of work and investigation, it was determined that the extreme width reasonably possible on the Boston Post Road would be a four-lane highway throughout its entire length from Greenwich to New Haven. This was due to the fact that the right-of-way seldom exceeded 66 feet and in some places lesser width; also the works of man had, for the most part, been carried down to the right-of-way line.

And, long before 1923, the towns lining the Post Road had been settled, building lines and street lines were established—all, with few exceptions, without consideration of future requirements. Traps had been established inadvertently through the built-up sections which in most instances were practically impossible to eliminate. It was observed that cut-offs of appar-

*Address before The Connecticut Society of Civil Engineers, Inc., at Stamford, Conn., September 30, 1937.

ent short lengths could be made around certain congested areas and free some of the traps, but even with the widening of the Post Road to a four-lane highway and constructing as many of the cut-offs as were economically possible, it would not be possible to adequately take care of the present traffic which was being forced upon the State of Connecticut and which required an immediate solution; and even when the Post Road was widened, it would not have provided a reasonable provision for future traffic requirements. Therefore, a long range program was necessary.

It was determined that a parallel highway of some sort to relieve the Boston Post Road must be constructed. The question of a truck highway to the south of the Post Road was carefully considered and was discarded as being too expensive to attempt. Now, remember, this decision was made in 1923 before the days of the PWA and before any other similar project had been considered. Therefore, the only possible solution which could be economically considered was a non-commercial motor highway somewhere north of the Boston Post Road. This was considered as feasible and it was advocated, and both the widening of the Post Road and preliminary steps for an investigation of the parallel route were started. I call your attention to an estimate of the situation on the Post Road to show you that the construction of a parallel route was not the only problem at that time, but the widening of the Post Road and the construction of a parallel route were one and the same problem because neither, of itself, would satisfy the present and future traffic requirements.

The reason that the parkway was advocated to provide for passenger vehicles only was that there had been so many local uses of motor vehicles, both passenger and commercial, along the Boston Post Road that it could not be limited to either type, but must carry a combination. Also, at the time there was no east and west road parallel to the Boston Post Road from New Haven to the New York-Connecticut line. Therefore, in advocating the passenger-car highway, no disadvantage whatever would accrue to commercial traffic. Then, too, the least objectionable traffic possible would be carried through the countryside and a good connection could be made with the Wilbur Cross Parkway.

The western boundary of the State of Connecticut is the Gateway to New England. As such, Fairfield County has been placed within the influence of metropolitan New York, and has made it subject to the influences of its rapid expanding area.

The decision by the Highway Commissioner to widen the Post Road and also build a parallel road created the third problem, and, in all probability, the major one of the three. The Merritt Parkway ends at the Housatonic River where we connect the Parkway with the Post Road again.

The opening of the parkway will create a trap at Washington Bridge and, with thirty-eight miles of parkway, this trap would not and could not long be tolerated. At this point traffic, to some extent, splits: first, to the Naugatuck Valley; then, to New Haven, Hartford and Springfield, Massachusetts; and, at New Haven, to Middletown, Willimantic and the Massachusetts and Rhode Island line, and thence along the Post Road to New London and the Rhode Island line.

I felt, when I advocated the construction of the Merritt Parkway, that if I published an estimate of the complete situation at the time I would seriously delay the first step. As it was, it took me fourteen years to get the Merritt Parkway into high; but, knowing the situation, we did not delay the other improvements. Routes 80, 82 and 165 were constructed, reconstructed and improved. The Middletown-Portland Bridge was started and will soon be opened. The last legislature provided for a study for a new bridge at New London. The last legislature also authorized and approved the Wilbur Cross Parkway, beginning at the end of the Merritt Parkway and extending across Connecticut, around New Haven, to the Massachusetts line.

We will be ready with a plan for the next legislature for the further improvement of the route up the Naugatuck Valley and then, after that, the other logical and necessary parkway from the vicinity of New London northwest across the State to Litchfield County.

As it is I could go on and on and tell you of the effect that the construction of the Merritt Parkway will have on the rest of the State. I could tell you why it was necessary for the State Highway Department to complete an air-plane map of the whole State. I could tell you why we are planning a dual highway in the Town of Union—all caused by the construction of the Merritt Parkway, and even if I would take the time to go into these various situations in detail, I would only give you a bird's-eye of the situation. I am wondering at the present moment, with these problems of financing, planning and construction facing us, if we should stop by the wayside at this time and argue about the relative importance of a few miles of connecting road which can be improved to some extent and make good and usable many miles of other roads already constructed, without affecting our main problems.

The first problem that we encountered on the Merritt Parkway was the obtainment of a map of the locality in question, so that a preliminary line could be established and investigated. We collected all the maps possible in the locality and found that, without a great deal of ground work, no preliminary line could be decided upon, so that we were forced to take to the air, and a preliminary air map was made commencing at the Housa-

tonic River, extending over the New York-Connecticut line, and embracing an area about ten miles north of the Post Road. From a combination of the various maps that we were able to collect, and the air map, a preliminary line was decided upon. This line was common to the one adopted from the point of beginning up to about the Greenwich-Stamford town line; from thence it ran northeasterly, skirting Riverbank in Stamford, to the dam of the Stamford Water Company, known as Laurel Reservoir, partly in the Town of Stamford, and partly in the Town of New Canaan. Running just south of this dam, it continued in a general northeasterly direction, passing just south of the New Canaan Water Company dam on Oanoke Ridge, into Wilton, crossing the Norwalk and Danbury Division of the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad Company, close to the Wilton Station southeast of Comstock Knoll. From this point it ran through the southerly part of the Town of Weston, entering the Town of Fairfield and connecting once more with the adopted line near the intersection of Congress Street and the Black Rock Turnpike in the Town of Fairfield.

This section of the line, however, was discarded, due to the extremely rugged topography encountered north of the adopted line. It is to be noted in southwestern Fairfield County that as you go north the topography becomes more and more difficult for an east and west highway location. The more northerly line proved to be forty-one miles from the State line to the Washington Bridge.

In establishing the line adopted, each town had to be carefully considered, for while the project had to be planned as a unit, no two towns affected had the same physical characteristics, nor indeed the same economic structures.

Yet, in one respect they were similar, and that respect immeasurably complicated the location work. On a contour map of Connecticut it is to be observed that the water courses run north and south; ridge and valley lines consequently have this direction, but the parkway traverses the territory from west to east. The many rivers all rise north of Long Island Sound and flow southerly into it. In view of this topographic condition, we were obliged to cross ridges either diagonally or at right angles. Thus, in order to achieve an approximate ruling grade of seven per cent and an average grade of less than three per cent, we were obliged to cut the high formation and fill the low ones and, at times, it meant cutting heavily and filling deeply.

It should be obvious to anyone that such handicaps imposed by nature cannot be overcome by homeopathic doses of landscape architecture. Stern measures are required when ledges and earth barriers must be removed.

Critics of this project will, it is to be deplored, fill the press with comments on details of construction in certain places, and have compared certain locations in the process of construction with other locations on similar parkways that have been completed and nature has had an opportunity to correct some of the scars of construction. Yet, there is no answer to the question of working on an east and west road through north and south terrain except dynamite, power-shovels, trucks and bulldozers. Yet such cuts and fills by proper treatment of the slopes, stand now as indisputable evidence that they are not at variance with beauty.

But in other respects these eight towns are dissimilar. From the standpoint of the value of their land and the extent of their improvements compare Greenwich and Trumbull. Greenwich, with an area of over twenty-seven thousand acres, a population of thirty-three thousand and a grand list of one hundred and seventy-four million dollars; and Trumbull with an area of fifteen thousand acres, a population of thirty-six hundred, and a grand list of six million dollars.

And, let it not be forgotten on the eve of its opening, the problems presented to the State Highway Department in acquiring a three hundred foot minimum right of way, when the problem was new, and the property owner, the press and the public generally were almost solidly massed against it, were tremendous.

It may be well to point out that in all the length and breadth of this country, no similar project had been attempted at the time of equal scope and effect in the fields of suburban highway engineering. We were obliged to seek a location in territory extensively taken up and improved—not for the development of real estate but for traffic requirements.

Those who have lived in Fairfield County, and others familiar with it, know that it is one of the most attractive places in the east in which to live and work, and is one of the most popular in the entire metropolitan New York area. Its excellent facilities for residential purposes, the diversified physical features with lakes, salt water, picturesque wooded areas, rolling fields, and its many spots unchanged since Colonial days have given it a charm which is almost unrivalled.

Through the long cold winters and hot summers, the survey went on. Like a string being unfolded on a relief map, the line of the parkway was etched across the territory, a work truly pioneering which is now taking shape and will, in the near future carry burdens of traffic with a measure of safety, comfort and pleasure, through countryside as lovely as can be imagined. In each town an attempt was made to plan a line which would be possible from the standpoint of a reasonable cost in right of way and construction.

When property acquisition was commenced in Greenwich in 1931 after a line had been adopted, when seven others had been discarded as too costly or indirect, betting among the real estate agents and land owners was against the State going through that town on any route with a three hundred foot right-of-way for less than four million dollars. Today, in this town, the State owns ninety-one units of property, has acquired a right-of-way seven and seven-tenths miles long, purchased four hundred twenty-eight acres of land and many buildings at a cost of two million, one hundred and fifty-four thousand dollars, of which one hundred and fifty acres is surplus and taken because of severing large units of property. This may later be sold, still further reducing the cost.

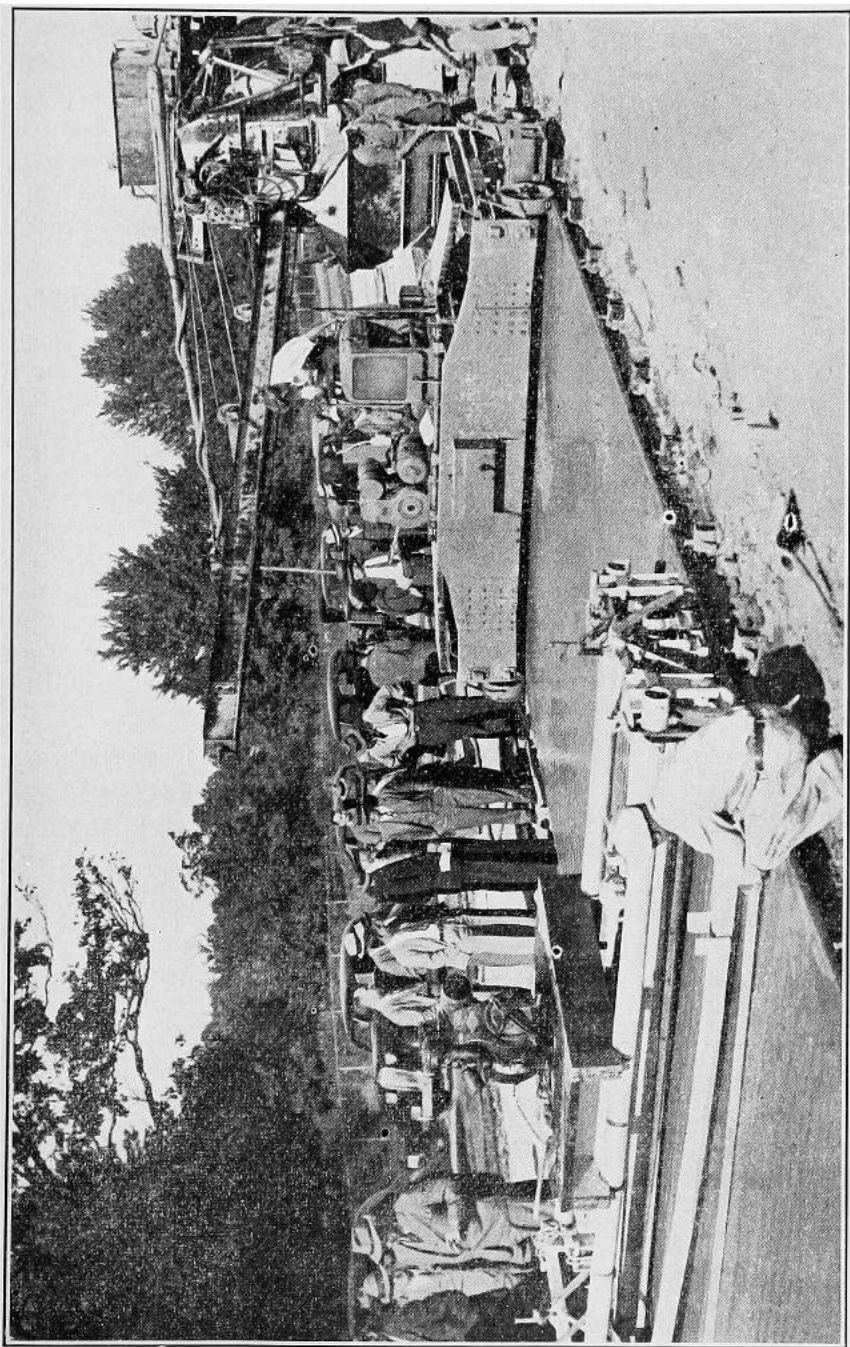
Before any contacts with the owners took place, exhaustive study of the logical line in each town had to be considered; then the way in which the entire line was affected by the line in each individual town. In most towns, from three to five lines were studied as to feasibility and cost. On these lines mosaics of property ownership were, built up from information gleaned from Town Clerks' records, from assessors maps, from private surveys, from inspection of bounds, and from special air surveys—all obtained without going to the owners so that no speculation against the State's interest should start.

When portions of the lines were determined, a detailed title examination was made of each property going back on the chain of title for more than one hundred years, listing each encumbrance, and arming the right-of-way purchasing agents with a title abstract, a detailed map, a detailed deed plan and, where possible, records of past sales and full assesment data.

In addition to this, surveys were required of each intersecting road crossed by the Parkway, each river or large water course. From this it can be seen that the preliminary work was really very vast in identifying more than one thousand parcels of land, asking detailed title examinations of more than five hundred and fifty parcels, and purchasing to this date more than three hundred separate units of property, represented by twenty-six hundred acres of land, one church, fifty-one houses, thirteen barns, three stables, twelve garages, a greenhouse, a studio, a shop, a playhouse and thirty-two other buildings, and running out in the aggregate more than seven hundred miles of line with supporting physical characteristics, detailed and partial, with the necessary accompanying vertical control.

The task of acquiring these twenty-six hundred acres of land, together with the improvements thereon, has presented many problems.

Early in the work it was soon learned that all of our difficulties were not confined to sentimental reasons expressed by owners as objections to our taking their property in whole or in part.



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THE SOCIETY INSPECTS THE LAYING OF CONCRETE PAVEMENT, SEPTEMBER 30, 1937