



# Investigating the CHPC archives

**“It is my strong  
belief that the era  
of parkways is over  
in this  
country.”**

**-William Ballard,  
CPC chairman**

## Citizens Housing & Planning Council

Founded in 1937, CHPC is a non-profit policy research organization dedicated to improving housing and neighborhood conditions through cooperative efforts of the public and private sectors.

## The Lingering Effects of the Unbuilt Shore Front Drive

The Cedar Grove Beach Club has made local headlines recently and, in the process, reignited the debate about eminent domain. The stretch of oceanfront property on the southeastern shore of Staten Island was seized from residents in 1958 to build Shore Front Drive, part of the Richmond Parkway. But, in 1968, the City Planning Commission announced that the parkway would be diverted from its original route to a more westerly path, leaving Shore Front Drive without an origin and terminating the coastal project. The city has been leasing the property to club members since then and the summer of 2010 marks the end of the lease, and the end of the Cedar Grove Beach Club.

The CHPC archival library has many original documents that tell the story of Shore Front Drive, the project that spurred the acquisition of Ocean Grove. A selection of documents are digitized here:

### 1. Staten Island’s “Greenbelt” Map

This map, prepared by Bradford Greene, shows the Staten Island Greenbelt as well as several proposed arterials.

### 2. Staten Island Citizens Planning Committee Position Paper

SICPC outlines the case against the proposed route of Moses’ Richmond Parkway and suggests an alternative route in its December 1965 paper.

### 3. Robert Moses’ Letter to the SICPC

In his letter dated January 1966, Moses rejects the criticisms and recommendations of the SICPC paper, writing, “... I hope you will accept the conclusion that your proposal is not in the public interest.”

By Anna Grosso



STATEN ISLAND'S "GREENBELT"

STATEN ISLAND CITIZENS PLANNING COMMITTEE  
POSITION PAPER CONCERNING RICHMOND PARKWAY

I. Historical Background

In 1870, 22 years after Frederick Law Olmsted had won the competition for the design of Central Park and five years after he had prepared the plans for Prospect Park in Brooklyn, Olmsted was asked by the Staten Island Improvement Commission to help initiate a plan for the Island. Olmsted, in his report to the Commission, advocated "the establishment of a park system" for Staten Island. These plans never came to fruition because of bickering within the Commission and adverse criticism in the local press.

Some twenty-seven years later, Erastus Winan pleaded during a public hearing in Albany before Governor Black that "A wilderness of (such) beauty pervaded this region that no expenditure could improve upon, and it was only necessary to preserve it (Clove Lakes area) and make it accessible by parkways to possess a park of singular beauty in connection with the Silver Lake Park . . . ." Mr. Winan went on to describe a park system interconnected with park driveways through the upland regions as far south as the present Latourette Park.

In 1902, the Committee on Parks of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce recommended a "Proposed Park System for the Borough of Richmond." The Committee advocated six

categories of park land, the sixth being "parkways and driveways connecting the different parks and creating an harmonious general plan or system of parks, while at the same time serving the purpose of those fond of driving and riding." In describing a specific parkway proposed for the Island, the report states "Beyond the Horse Shoe Bend Park the Ocean Terrace is to be used as a driveway until the intersection of the Todt Hill Road and the Ocean Terrace, where a new driveway would have to be constructed, following the summit of Ocean Hill (now known as Todt Hill) until by means of its southern slope the intersection of Rockland Avenue and Egbert Avenue (Manor Road) would be reached, whence Meisner Hill Road could be utilized partly, in following the crest of what is known as Meisner Hill or Richmond Hill and terminating at Latourette Hill." Those familiar with Staten Island will recognize that the Committee was describing precisely the presently proposed route of Richmond Parkway.

The Committee defined parkways as fashioned "after Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, being 150 feet in width and having a space devoted to trolleys in the center of 40 feet, with a row of trees on each side of this, roadways on each end of these each 40 feet wide with a row of trees between them and the sidewalk, which is to be 15 feet wide." Another parkway proposed in the report of 1902 is essentially the same as the Willowbrook Parkway as now proposed.

From 1902 to 1930 (when a special committee was

set up by Mayor James Walker to prepare recommendations for the extension of parks, playgrounds and parkways in New York City) some progress was made in acquiring park lands on Staten Island but no parkways as defined by the Chamber of Commerce Committee were ever built. The Walker Committee again picked up the theme of a chain of parks interconnected by parkways, although again no monies were specifically earmarked for motor parkways.

By 1930 the Bronx River Parkway was seven years old and the public was beginning to appreciate the esthetic and recreational values of parkways. Westchester County was well on into its system of parks and parkways and Commissioner Robert Moses had already undertaken a notable system of parkways on Long Island. In 1934, when Fiorello LaGuardia was elected Mayor of New York City, Mr. Moses was appointed Commissioner of Parks and immediately projected a vast network of parkways for the entire city. In Mr. Moses' report to Mayor LaGuardia, dated October 8, 1945 and titled "12 Years of Park Progress," Richmond Parkway is described as "the backbone of the future Richmond arterial system." Today, with the Staten Island and Willowbrook expressways completed and interconnecting three of the four bridges to the Island, there is an immediate urgency to bring the fourth bridge, namely Outerbridge Crossing, into the arterial system. Since plans are just about complete and title to the entire right-of-way is vested with the City, Richmond Parkway is ready

for construction. The other two major highways (West Shore Expressway and Shorefront Drive) which could also tie the Outerbridge Crossing with the completed arterial highways are not as ready to be let for construction. Thus Richmond Parkway has priority.

II. Implications of the Present Route

Richmond Parkway, as presently designed, is not a part of the Federal Interstate Highway System and it does not meet the standards for a modern expressway for commercial vehicles. In order to provide an attractive road with several scenic outlooks for the motoring public the presently proposed route climbed rapidly to reach the highest point on the Eastern Seacoast, 3500' south of the Staten Island Expressway. Since this point is 150' higher in elevation than the Expressway, the parkway cannot reach this height soon enough for the public to enjoy the magnificent view. On the contrary, in order to provide an underpass near the intersection of Ocean Terrace and Todt Hill Road the highest point will be excavated so that no one can have the advantage of the view.

This brings up the question of what does Richmond Parkway really serve. In the original meaning of the word, a parkway is a long narrow strip of park land lying between and serving as access to larger park areas. Does Richmond Parkway as presently designed fit into the original concept of a parkway? In the first place its northern terminus is not a park,

but is rather a super-highway. Between this terminus and the proposed interchange with Willowbrook Parkway there is only one point of egress and access and that is not a park. Moving south through the heart of Latourette Park's highlands, the next entrance and exit is for Richmondtown. This is a legitimate parkway function but rather than just connect to Richmondtown it travels the entire west boundary in such close proximity to the restoration that much of its charm and character will be lost. (This brings to mind the story about how Henry Ford, when back in the middle Twenties he decided to restore Longfellow's famous "Wayside Inn" in Sudbury, Massachusetts, paid the costs out of his own pocket to have a new highway built as a by-pass out of sight of the charming old inn.) From Latourette Park south, the parkway is essentially an improvement of Drumgoole Boulevard. With the exception of a proposed spur off to Wolfe's Pond Park and a 192 acre park proposed northeast of the junction of Richmond Parkway and West Short Expressway, no parks are served in this section. And its southern terminus, a park? No, the Outerbridge Crossing! So what does Richmond Parkway really serve but a means to get as quickly as possible from the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge to the Outerbridge Crossing, pure and simple.

We now come to the most serious of the implications of the present route. Staten Island is an oasis of partially developed land in the heart of "Megalopolis." To some it may seem to possess limitless extents of rural woodlands and farms.

Woodland and farmland it does have but the scale of this open space is much more restricted than is generally realized. For instance, the newly acquired High Rock Nature Center is only 60 acres, as compared with Central Park of 840 acres, and at its widest point only 1450 feet across. The minimum width for the parkway is 300' or twice as wide as Park Avenue, in New York City. The virgin woodland, through whose entire length the parkway is projected, varies in width from 500' to 3000' for a distance of 4 miles. The parkway requires considerable cuts and fills due to the rugged nature of the terrain through which it will pass. Consequently, with the exception of outside limits of the right-of-way, every tree, many of 36" to 50" caliper, will have to be removed. The net effect of this swath through the heart of the "Greenbelt"\* will be to change the character on the adjacent lands. The camps to the west, the nature center to the east and Latourette Park woodlands on both sides will be left as thin strips of open woods. In winter one will be able to see right through the trees to the fast moving traffic and the "forever wild" charm of the area will be lost forever.

### III. The Advantages of the Alternate Route

#### A. Standards of Design

The route suggested by the Staten Island Citizens Planning Committee will follow generally the contour

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\* See attached article describing the Staten Island Greenbelt.

of the land at about 300' above sea level. The design gradients and curvature can meet the standards for commercial traffic, so that, if it is desirable in the future to convert from a parkway to an expressway, it can be done without reconstruction.

B. Economies in Cost and Conservation of Natural Features

Since the alternate route will require less cuts and fills and since the length of this road is at least 1000' shorter than the presently proposed route, considerable savings can be made in construction costs. Shallower cuts and fills will automatically reduce the constructed width of the highway, resulting in the preservation of more trees, ponds and other natural features within the right-of-ways.

C. Efficiency in Relationship to Surrounding Land Uses

The alternate route can serve many more adjacent land uses than the presently approved route. Exits to reach easily the Staten Island Community College, Susan B. Wagner High School, Sea View Hospital, the Farm Colony, Latourette Golf Course and the projected central business district as well as many more residential communities can be provided along the alternate route. The approved route provides egress and access only at Ocean Terrace, Willowbrook Parkway and Richmondtown, all of which are better served

under the projected S.I.C.P.C. route. In other words, this alternate route is a more efficient urban parkway rather than a high-speed rural limited-access thruway.

D. Preservation of Open Space

Implicit in the acceptance of the alternate route is not only the preservation of the integrity of the virgin woodlands but a whole new chain of public parklands becomes available to the nature-loving public. Since the City has acquired the land, it can now be used for nature trails, bicycle and bridle paths, picnic areas, scenic overlooks and retreats for communion with nature, all devoted to the walking rather than motoring public.

IV. Recommendations

It is the position of the Staten Island Citizens Planning Committee that the following considerations be instituted immediately by all official agencies concerned with the development of the arterial highway system on Staten Island.

1. Postpone the advertisement for bids for the construction of Section One of the Richmond Parkway until a careful review of the factors presented in this paper has been undertaken.

2. Re-examine the priorities for all projected arterial highways. Relate the problem of vehicular traffic

movements to a complete study of transportation potentials and comprehensive planning of all aspects of land use and shorefront development on Staten Island.

3. If the Richmond Parkway is to be built in its entirety, accept the alternate route for Section One of the Richmond Parkway and assign the abandoned right-of-way to the Department of Parks.

LETTER FROM ROBERT MOSES, CHAIRMAN OF TRIBOROUGH BRIDGE  
AND TUNNEL AUTHORITY DATED JANUARY 4, 1966.

Mr. Terrence H. Benbow  
40 Wall Street  
New York, N.Y. 10005

Dear Mr. Benbow:

We have made a thorough study of the Position Paper of the Staten Island Citizens Planning Committee concerning the Richmond Parkway which you sent to me with your letter of December 8, 1965.

The curious concept of a parkway put forth by the Committee is entirely impractical and visionary. The plans for Richmond Parkway are similar to those successfully adopted and used on all well designed parkways beginning with the old Bronx River Parkway and including all the parkways developed on Long Island. In the design of Richmond Parkway, these older parkways were used as guides by experts in parkway design and landscape architecture, employing tried and proven principles. The firm employed by the State in this instance was staffed by many experienced professionals who were directly involved in the development of previous model parkways.

The entire remapping of the present right of way of the parkway into a strip park for the nature loving public is not feasible. Development of the "forever wild" virgin woodlands with paths, overlooks and retreats would be impossible to finance, difficult to construct and maintain and impossible to police. The inevitable sale of the increasingly valuable abutting private property (the Greenbelt) to building developers would convert the park strip into the familiar dump surrounding neighborhoods.

The alternate route you propose has hopeless defects. It traverses the Sea View Hospital and New York City Farm Colony and would destroy a major part of the Latourette Golf Course, 75 homes housing 83 families, and several more now under construction would be demolished. Construction of marginal streets costing approximately \$2,000,000 would be necessary. This new right of way would cost \$6,000,000. Re-design of the parkway, reconstruction of the golf course, demolition of buildings, additional bridges and removal of previously deposited sanitation fill would entail a total additional cost of \$11,000,000.

Letter from Robert Moses (cont)

I cannot recommend to the State the expenditure of fantastic additional funds for the construction of a road which is grossly inferior to the original route in every respect including scenic appeal. I am equally reluctant to map a route which would needlessly dispossess 83 families from their homes for no good reason.

You know our record in the developing of parks throughout the State, and I hope you will accept the conclusion that your proposal is not in the public interest.

Very truly yours,

Robert Moses  
Chairman