

New York governor postures at bridge dedication while transportation infrastructure crumbles

By Philip Guelpa
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At the end of August, New York state's Democratic governor Andrew Cuomo inaugurated the westbound span of the new Mario M. Cuomo Bridge across the Hudson River, about a dozen miles north of New York City. Construction on the eastbound span is ongoing.

In a display of shameless self-promotion, the new bridge is named after Cuomo's deceased father, also a Democrat, and former governor of New York State. It replaces the 62-year-old Tappan Zee Bridge (TZB), which was in severely deteriorated condition. Planning and construction of the new bridge lasted two decades and will ultimately cost \$4 billion.

When originally constructed in the early 1950s the TZB had a projected use-life of only 50 years. This was due to its being built using substandard materials due to shortages during the Korean War. Despite this, state officials waited years before finally committing to construction of its replacement in 2011, six years past the "expiration" of the old bridge.

The Tappan Zee Bridge is a critically important road link in the New York State Thruway, connecting New York City and its suburbs with the rest of the state to the north and west, known as "upstate." It crosses the Tappan Zee (Tappan Sea), named by early Dutch settlers after a local Native American tribe. The Tappan Zee is the widest portion of the Hudson River north of the city. Placement of the original bridge at this wildly inappropriate location was dictated not by engineering criteria, but by a jurisdictional rivalry between city and state officials. The new bridge is 3.1 miles (5 km) long and is projected to handle 140,000 vehicles a day. Once completed, it will be among the widest cable-stay bridges in the world.

The long-overdue replacement of the old bridge

highlights the crumbling state of infrastructure that characterizes not only New York, but also the entire US. The ostentatious "ribbon cutting" ceremony, at which Cuomo officiated along with an array of self-satisfied dignitaries amidst effusive praise by the media, served as a diversion from the critically deteriorated and dangerous condition of the entire transportation system.

The crumbling state of the Tappan Zee Bridge, which carries tens of thousands of vehicles every day, had been evident for years. During the ceremony, Cuomo joked about the steel plates placed over gaping holes in the bridge deck, which would otherwise be open to the river below.

The horrendous state of the New York City subway system, which has suffered from inadequate maintenance and upgrade for decades, including a severely antiquated signaling system, resulting in severe overcrowding and increasingly frequent delays, is one glaring example of the failure of the capitalist system to make the investments necessary to support transportation and other basic systems. Commuter rail networks that carry tens of thousands of workers in and out of the city every day are also in deteriorated condition. A number of accidents, some causing fatalities, have resulted.

Not only are the existing systems in need of billions of dollars in repair and upgrade, but also significant investments are needed to prepare for the effects of climate change.

One example is the North River Tunnel, which crosses the Hudson between New Jersey and New York City. The more-than-century-old tunnel is an essential passenger rail link along the Northeast Corridor that

stretches from Boston, through New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, to Washington. It provides commuter train access from New Jersey to New York City for thousands every day. The tunnel was flooded with seawater and severely damaged during Superstorm Sandy and is kept open only by constant, stopgap repairs. There is no alternate rail crossing. Loss of this tunnel would create transportation chaos throughout the region.

Construction of a new tunnel, estimated to cost \$20 billion, is in the early planning stages, but will not be open for years. An earlier proposal to build a new tunnel was killed as too expensive. Recent negotiations with the Trump administration seeking financial assistance for the project have been “inconclusive.”

In another indication of the short-sightedness of the ruling class in the face of the region’s critical transportation needs, proposals that the replacement for the TZB be built to accommodate rail traffic or even a bus rapid transit system were rejected as too expensive.

Funding for the new bridge’s construction has been patched together. The governor sought financial support for his project from a variety of sources, some of them questionable. At one point, Cuomo attempted to obtain \$500 million in clean water loans from the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); an effort that was rejected. Some money is coming from a low-interest federal loan and some from a legal settlement received by the state.

The majority of the \$4 billion price tag of the new bridge is being funded by borrowed money, in the form of bonds and loans, not all of which have yet been secured. Therefore, due to the debt service, the ultimate cost will likely be significantly higher, lining the pockets of wealthy investors, and inevitably resulting in increased tolls. The existing toll on the TZB is \$5. Cuomo has pledged that the toll will remain unchanged until 2020, though that is not guaranteed. After that, he says, the toll rate will depend on the condition of the state’s budget. The current toll for the George Washington Bridge, the next Hudson River crossing to the south, is \$15, indicating what is likely to come.

The new bridge was built under the rubric of a so-called “Public Private Partnership,” also known as a P3, in which a private firm was awarded a highly lucrative “design-build” contract, overseen by the Thruway Authority, a state agency. The US is

estimated to have backlog of at least \$4.6 trillion in infrastructure construction costs. With the Trump administration signaling its intent to employ P3s widely, the example of the TZB replacement project foreshadows greatly expanded opportunities for huge transfers of wealth from the working class to the financial and corporate elites.

The cobbled-together funding for the bridge highlights the fact that, while the financial and corporate elites continue to amass obscene amounts of wealth, and trillions of dollars are spent on the military, basic infrastructure, essential to the functioning of society, to the extent that it is considered at all, is seen as a further opportunity for private profit.

Such isolated, high profile, and publicity laden projects as the TZB replacement provide the opportunity for politicians, like Cuomo, to posture as supporters of public improvements while serving to mask the deplorable state of infrastructure and the transportation system as a whole.

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