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Consumers Vs. Highway Lobby

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON. — The magnificent American Interstate Highway System, the cost of which has risen toward 80 billion dollars, is now nearing completion. On any rational timetable, this is about 10 years behind time, since these great highways essentially were the transportation system most required for the 40s and 50s. Consequently the nation also is running 10 or more years behind in developing the modern urban transit and rapid intercity transit systems that are the next necessary stage in American transportation.

As happened in the 19th Century, when great public and private investments of land and money were made available for building a national railroad system, a political juggernaut has been developed in the building of the interstate highway network.

But the "highway lobby," the conglomerate of industrial, commercial, construction and political interests that have a big stake in building highways, has recently run into a steady build-up of consumer resistance. The uprooting of houses and whole neighborhoods, the destruction of natural beauty, the pollution of the air, the noise and nerve-jangling of multilane highway traffic, the callous arrogance of some highway planners and builders, all have provoked strong resistance and nowhere more so than in and around Washington.

THE ISSUE here ranges a high proportion of the voteless and mostly black citizens of the District of Columbia against the white congressional masters of the district, most of whom represent largely white suburban or rural areas. In 1969, despite its zeal for highways, Congress authorized a 98-mile regional subway system to cost about 2.5 billion dollars, of which 1.1 billion dollars was to be the federal share and 208 million dollars the district's share (also to be provided by federal appropriation). The rest was to be paid by Virginia and Maryland suburbs and by issuance of subway revenue bonds.

Unfortunately, the House appropriations subcommittee that controls the district's share of subway costs also pushed through legislation intended to force certain long-resisted highway and bridge construction in and around the district. For instance, as a condition of letting subway construction begin, the House group insisted on a route called the North Central Freeway, running through the inner city to the Maryland suburbs.

By every conceivable gauge of public opinion, the people of the district are overwhelmingly opposed to the North Central Freeway; its district officials have not started its construction, although voluminous studies are being carried out in an effort to meet the letter of the congressional act. The result was that in the session of Congress just ended, no appropriation was made to meet this year's district share of subway construction costs.

That had the effect of holding up the federal matching grant, whereupon the State of Maryland refused to put up the amount it owed the project. Almost simultaneously, the subway authority announced that due to delays the estimated cost of the system had risen to 2.98 billion dollars. And as if that weren't enough, such uncertainties and set-backs mean that there is little hope of selling this year the first batch of subway revenue bonds. Naturally, the pace of construction has had to be cut back as a result.

SOME OF THIS is being worked out—Maryland's participation, for instance—and Secretary of Transportation John Volpe, who bailed out the subway last fall with a 57-million-dollar loan from the mass transit fund, has again stepped into the battle.

Nevertheless the district must go back to Congress, not only for the appropriation for current district participation in the subway, but to work out long-range funding for the additional half-billion the project is going to cost. And it is clear that the congressional purse-holders are going to demand final compliance with their highway mandate—building the North Central Freeway—as the price for financing the subway.

Washington is, of course, easier prey for the highwaymen than most communities, having no real vote. But other cities planning to upgrade their transit systems had better take note. The highway juggernaut is not easily stemmed.

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(Paul Flowers is ill)

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