by Hilary Hinds Kitasei
Tuesday, February 14, 2006 12:00 AM -

Snow can make parks look like heaven â€“ and roads feel like hell. But it was a previous snowstorm that made it clear how much New York City's parkways -â€“ which are both parks and roads â€“- are in a weird kind of limbo.

Scenic byways prevent the proliferation of billboards

Mayor John Lindsay had reorganized the city's agencies so that, when the blizzard of February, 1969 hit, it was unclear whose responsibility it was to clear the parkways â€“ and they remained unplowed for three days, paralyzing the city.

No mayor will ever make such a politically costly mistake again; the Department of Sanitation

very clearly now has the job of removing snow from the parkways.

But a complicated bureaucratic system remains in place, which is causing real damage year-round.

Last year, a great stone wall in Washington Heights collapsed onto the Henry Hudson Parkway, the most visible evidence of the sinking fortunes of America's first and once-glorious urban parkway. Last month, a deal to restore the parkway collapsed as well. Even the prospect of millions of dollars in new federal funds for the city was not enough to overcome a system set in place that values roads over parks.

Many people may hear "parkway" and just think "highway." Others realize that a parkway is in fact a road through a park. But a parkway is not just the road itself; it is also the parkland on either side. New York City's parkways, a monumental public works project achieved jointly in the 1930's by FDR, LaGuardia and Robert Moses, were designed as the most extensive urban park system in the world. The Henry Hudson Parkway alone, which runs from West 72nd Street in Manhattan to the top of the Bronx, links together four major parks, nine smaller ones, countless pocket parks and great swaths of untouched nature. Even now the beauty and coherence of the vision is clear to anybody who takes the time to notice—not just the stunning natural and manmade features revealed with each curve and dip of the road, but the details that highlight the character of each section: art deco and rustic wooden guard rails, cultivated wilderness, esplanades for promenading and trails for meandering â€¦and lovely stone walls.

It becomes harder and harder, though, to miss the damage. Concrete jersey barriers cover miles of stone walls and steel hairnets cover natural rock outcrops. Signs and billboards clutter the stone bridges of the Bronx and the skyline of Manhattan.

If that's the motorist's experience of the city, the resident's is even sadder. Pedestrian tunnels and stairs that once led to the waterfront are abandoned. The expressway aesthetic spills over to neighborhoods. Huge parkway entrance signs loom over quiet streets in Riverdale. Harlem residents look out at billboards instead of the river.

Five years ago, I was one of the concerned residents who formed the Henry Hudson Parkway Task Force to reverse its fate. The way we realized this could happen is by getting the state

government to agree to designate the parkway a Scenic Byway, under a special program created in 1992 to preserve the nation's most beautiful roads. Scenic Byways are eligible for special federal funds—and not just transportation funds. When the 8.2 mile Pasadena Freeway (also known as the Arroyo Seco Parkway) was designated a Scenic Byway a few years ago, its state transportation department received a billion dollars in federal environmental funds to restore its landscape and bridges.

The New York State Department of Transportation, which administers the Scenic Byways Program, was enthusiastic about the Henry Hudson Parkway being the city's first candidate. Besides its historic credentials, the parkway had acquired new importance. It is the site of the Hudson River Valley Greenway, the walking and bicycle trail that will eventually go from Battery Park to Saratoga, New York. Since the city and state are both pouring millions of dollars into building the greenway and revitalizing Manhattan's west side waterfront, it made sense to include the parkway in the plan.

An example of paths and stairways under the parkways that are neglected (south of the George Washington Bridge).
It leads to the beautiful Ft. Washington Park.

But the application to make the Henry Hudson Parkway an official Scenic Byway was withdrawn. The reasons why are not known to the public: Though the agencies that make these decisions are public, they deliberate in secret.

What is known is that, like all of the city's parkways, the Henry Hudson is an entanglement of jurisdictions. Decisions about its future are determined by a combination of agencies that meet together as the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council, which acts as the official regional planning body. The most important agencies within that body are the city's and state's transportation agencies. The most irrelevant agency is the city's Department of Parks and Recreation. Even though the parks department is officially a co-owner of the city's parkways, it is not a member of the transportation council, nor is it even part of its advisory board. It has the smallest budget and the least political clout. Even if the parks department were part of the transportation council, however, it might not make a difference because the council is organized to protect the fiefdom of each member -- a rule requiring "unanimous consensus" gives each member a veto.

So, apparently, at least one of the transportation agencies involved in the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council got cold feet about the parks-oriented requirements of a Scenic Byways designation.

Parkways are designed to conform to the natural topography. Curves like this are what provide the

A scenic byway is about design guidelines. One can address the problem of graffiti in a parkway by painstakingly removing the graffiti and maintaining the beauty of the stone wall, or by quickly painting over it. One can mow the daffodils in a field so that they never come up again â€“ or one can mow the field after it has become fallow, and keep the daffodils spreading for the next 20 years. To preservationists and parks enthusiasts, how one takes care of graffiti or daffodils makes a huge difference. But efficiency might be the by-word to those shortsighted enough to look at the parkway only as a means of transportation.

The city Department of Transportation may not want to have to keep the kind of wooden guide rails that are used along the Northern Parkway in Long Island or the Merritt Parkway in Connecticut (both scenic byways). It has its preferred way to protect stone parapets on the city's bridges -- with jersey barriers topped with chain link. The problem is compounded by the entanglement of jurisdictions. What one agency builds, another maintains. Each government agency is jointly and severally liable; even individual engineers can be held liable for projects they sign. The consequence is a hodgepodge of defensive design -- overbuilt and overpriced.

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Fifty years have passed since the enactment of the 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act, the nation's interstate highway system has been fully built for a decade, and our auto companies are now in open retreat. Yet none of this seems to have loosened the grip of the highway builders over the design of New York City. Having a metropolitan planning organization was supposed to stop the city from being strong-armed by the state transportation agency. Instead it is strong-armed by four transportation agencies and authorities, each fiercely protective of its prerogatives.

The scenic byway plan couldn't have been derailed at a worse time. Both the new New York State Transportation Bond Act and the Federal Transportation Bill contain substantial funding for the parkway. Some of the money will be used to enhance the parks and waterfront. But with no plan in place, and no declared attention to the aesthetics, much of the money may well be spent in ways that undermine the park part of the parkway.

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