

## THE CENTRAL PARK CAPER

In the transportation world, nothing is easy. There is nothing simple, nothing uncomplicated. There are no miraculous solutions and no quick panaceas. New York City's transportation situation is no worse than, and indeed perhaps much better than, that of many other cities. We have in place a magnificent subway system, at least one that could be magnificent if the needed dollars were plowed into it, and every day millions of New Yorkers get to work, and back again, safely.

In the transportation fraternity, we all know what needs to be done and what should be done to improve the transportation situation here. It is easy to list the goals: keep the bus and subway fare as low as possible; improve existing service as much as possible by rehabilitating, and air conditioning, the existing subway system to the extent feasible; and construct the new lines, particularly the Second Avenue subway and the Queens connection, just as soon as possible.

Having said that, with which few people would disagree, one gets to the problem of actually accomplishing these things. The transportation world in New York City is terribly complicated. There are myriads of jurisdictions and authorities, and built-in conflicts abound, and of course, funds are not abundant. Just think of it this way: the City owns the bus and subway system, a State agency runs them. Dr. Ronan proposes, and the City pays. The City puts up the capital money and subsidizes operating

costs (no State dollars have as yet actually been seen); it is the City that is the applicant to the federal government for any funds that may be available; and, basically, the Mayor of the City of New York is blamed, no matter what happens, if something goes wrong with the bus and subway system.

Any New York City Transportation Administrator will have the same problems I did. Of course, he has to see to it that his four agencies run properly, but basically the meat of his job is to deal on behalf of the City with the myriad of other agencies which have a piece of the action. In addition to the M. T. A., you have the New York City Transit Authority, the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, the Manhattan and Bronx Surface Transit Operating Authority, the Staten Island Rapid Transit Operating Authority, the Long Island Rail Road, the Penn Central Rail Road, the Tri-State Regional Planning Commission, the Port of New York Authority, PATH and many more, not to mention the State of New York Department of Transportation and the Federal Department of Transportation, all of which have tremendous influence on what happens to New York City's transportation system.

It is trite to say, but nothing can really be accomplished unless all of these agencies and jurisdictions cooperate and unless the political figures to whom the agency heads report work together as well. New York City can block a project, be it a highway project, a subway construction project, or indeed almost any public work situated inside the City of New York. There

are sufficient controls residing within the power of the Mayor and the Board of Estimate, so that something which is not desired will not be built. But this does not mean that the City can actually accomplish a project. Often, this is out of the hands of the City and the Mayor, and in the hands of some State agency, or perhaps a bi-state agency like the Port Authority responsive to other needs and less than willing, sometimes, to do what needs to be done for the benefit of the City of New York alone.

Then you always have those people who are interested in stirring up political problems for a project, with their own self-aggrandizement or political career in mind. The fuss over the subway construction in Central Park is a perfect example of this kind of situation.

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Back in 1965, the Legislature of the State of New York passed Section 21-a of the Rapid Transit Law, which specifically stated that the City of New York and the New York City Transit Authority were authorized to effect the construction and equipment of a rapid transit railroad tunnel or tunnels between Manhattan and Queens along a route beginning on a point on East 63rd Street at the westerly line of York Avenue, and extending eastwards towards Queens from that point. Thus, the Legislature itself decided where the 63rd Street tunnel was to be built. Later on, the Board of Estimate approved routes and general plans submitted to it by the Transit Authority for the East 63rd Street line, to connect to the Sixth Avenue and Seventh Avenue lines. Thus passengers coming from Queens will eventually be able to travel to Midtown Manhattan.

The tunnel across the East River has to be quite deep, because it has to be built underneath the two branches of the river. Then, subway trains using steel wheels cannot climb at a gradient of more than four per cent. And, sooner or later, in order to connect to the Sixth and Seventh Avenue lines, the new subway tracks must come up to a point where they can join the existing tracks. Also, of course, trains cannot make "S" turns easily or perform other wiggles that might otherwise be desirable. All of this means that sooner or later the tunnel has to get close enough to the surface so that there is no more rock cover, and cut-and-cover construction, and consequently destruction of trees, becomes necessary. This all seems self-evident, and of course was all discussed with and known to those powers-that-be that were concerned with the project, including the Parks Department. Nevertheless, what ensued was, to my mind, a most extraordinary public fuss, which was compounded by official jealousies and political headline hunting, so that the end result was more delay and more cost for the project.

First of all, I need hardly add that construction of a subway connection seems to me to be a good thing, and to be encouraged and speeded as much as possible. Secondly, I firmly believe that nothing more than patchwork improvement of New York City's transportation system is possible unless that subway construction program is pushed as hard as possible. You cannot relieve the overcrowded Lexington Avenue IRT otherwise.

The City's whole push had been to get the new subway system built as quickly, and cheaply, as possible, and we had full confidence the public

was in agreement. Yet, when it came time to let the subway construction contracts, all of a sudden all sorts of enthusiastic, pro-tree fanatics popped out of the woodwork and started to cause trouble for the project, spurred on by ambitious would-be politicians.

Acting in its capacity as coordinator for the City of these massive construction programs, the Transportation Administration had forwarded to the Parks Department preliminary plans for the treatment of the restoration of the Parks surface, back in 1969. Actually, this whole project had been discussed with the Parks Department and its then Commissioner, Tom Hoving, back in 1966, and the damage to the Park assessed at that time.

Thus, as you may imagine, the engineers of the Transit Authority were quite concerned to see, as they walked the site preparatory to taking borings for specifically lining up the construction, that the Hecksher Foundation was just then in the process of building a new Adventure Playground just about where the subway cut would have to go through!

We immediately brought these facts to the attention of officials of the Parks Department, but nevertheless they decided to go ahead with the playground since private funds were being used.

In January 1970 Parks officials were again briefed on the whole subway project, and we thought that matters were under control. Final engineering design work based on the results of the borings continued,

but just at that time a whole lot of second-guessing started, in the middle of which we found ourselves.

It should be stated that Parks Department officials are very stiff-necked in protecting their turf. Likewise, it should also be said that the Transit Authority engineers are equally stiff-necked and protective of their own turf. The Parks Department people felt that the subway could be constructed totally in a rock tunnel or by some other method which would not disturb the surface and require loss of trees, and that the Transit Authority was simply trying to avoid making changes in their plans. The Transit Authority engineers felt that the Parks Department people didn't know what they were talking about, and were not technically qualified to tell them how to build a railroad.

We were, we thought, getting this matter resolved quietly by bringing the two sides together, when the dispute hit the press and, at the request of Community Board No. 8, a public hearing was held on May 27, 1970. I went to that hearing and I may say that the Borough President conducted it admirably, particularly since there were some quite unpleasant speakers. The next day, Senator Roy Goodman entered the fray, and together with him, Dr. Ronan and Commissioner Hecksher, I remember walking through Central Park looking at the site then, with Ronan and Hecksher taking pot shots at each other.

There was editorial comment in the newspapers and on radio and television. Denunciations raged, Queens residents versus Manhattan

residents, and finally the only way out seemed to be to have the City hire an independent engineering consultant to review the work done by the Transit Authority, and to see whether or not it was indeed possible to tunnel the whole section rather than cut open Central Park.

Part of the problem, of course, was the public confusion, particularly among the environmentalists and parks enthusiasts, between the presumably evil "M. T. A.," the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which meant Governor Rockefeller and Dr. Ronan, and the relatively benign New York City Transit Authority, which in many respects is simply another City agency. Parks Commissioner August Hecksher, in particular, thought the subway project was being imposed by the State, and had really not quite realized that this subway construction was basically a City project, endorsed by the Board of Estimate. In the New York Post of May 28th, a story entitled "Parks Boss Warns M. T. A. on Subway" indicated that Hecksher intended to refuse construction permits, but to the M. T. A., not the Transit Authority. It was typical of the misunderstandings that still plague the transportation world.

Also plaguing efforts to reconcile matters was the fact that the Transit Authority, although stating that there were no "plans," had in fact, under date of March 9th, sent out to potential bidders for the construction work a set of drawings describing the two sections, which were to be advertised that June 1970. They were looked on as complete plans by the Parks Department, whereas the Transit Authority kept saying, "No, we have no complete plans as yet."

On June 7th, the Mayor announced that the engineering firm of Singstad, Kehart, November & Hurka had been retained to provide an impartial and unbiased analysis of the practical options available to save that portion of Central Park from open cut construction. That firm was under contract to TAD.

Our consultants were officially requested to investigate a number of points suggested by the Parks Department and the environmentalists. For example, the suggestion had been made that at Sixth Avenue the proposed alignment could be shifted westwards so that more cover might be obtained and tunnel construction could be carried on for a longer distance. It was also suggested that the Seventh Avenue route be depressed under the existing station at 57th Street, and joined to the existing subway some distance south of the station. That would have the effect of making the entire tunnel construction deeper. There were also other suggestions, some pretty far out.

Now the fact of the matter is that a tunnel through loose earth is simply not feasible. Furthermore, Manhattan rock is aged, cracked and dangerous to work in. Miracles do not happen, and if there is no rock, or if the rock is loose and cracked, tunnelling is impractical, if not impossible. The work of the consultants was also continually hindered by lack of cooperation from the Parks Department, most of whom were nice people, but enthusiastically anti-subway. The Parks Department even went so far as to file objections with the Corporation Counsel to the method of construction

of the subway, despite the formal approval of the Board of Estimate. There were the usual leaks to the press, as well.

No matter how the consultant tried, it became obvious, due to the disappointing depth of the ledgerrock as determined by new borings, and by the height of the water table encountered, that it would simply not be feasible to tunnel the proposed cut-and-cover section of the Sixth Avenue subway connection. Nevertheless, it was apparent also that the Transit Authority had arrogated to themselves a quite comfortable working area, and that in point of fact, it could be considerably restricted. By constricting the Transit Authority, some 60% of the park area originally proposed to be disturbed could remain undisturbed. The proposed alterations, which had been informally agreed to by the Transit Authority, would add about 2.3 million dollars to the originally estimated cost of 30.2 million dollars, but the work would take about a year less, in a crucial area.

On January 6th, Transportation Administration personnel met with Commissioner Hecksher and his people. The Parks people pushed as hard as they could for all sorts of different kinds of construction methods, which from an engineering standpoint were ridiculous. A memorandum to me stated that, "The tone of the Parks Department's response at this meeting left us with the impression that they were not willing to face the limitations of subway operation such as grades, curbs, etc.,; were not technically familiar with heavy tunnel construction under difficult ground water conditions; and refused to recognize the needs of subway operation in the

comfort and convenience of the subway rider.”

Then, Richard Oliver on January 21, 1971, broke the story in the Daily News, writing that the City had decided to stick with the original plans proposed by the Transit Authority, somewhat modified. I personally do not know how he got hold of this information, but the net result was a memorandum from Commissioner Hecksher to the Mayor, mighty upset. After a call from me, another, more reasonable memo went to the Mayor from Hecksher, as of February 9, 1971, and at the same time, I submitted the report of the consultants to the Mayor, with my recommendation that it be adopted. In my memorandum to the Mayor, which was also dated February 9th, I pointed out that essentially we had prevailed upon the Transit Authority to accept a major restriction in the area of park lands assigned to the contractor's operations and had shifted the storage and equipment areas from landscaped park surface to presently paved areas. We gave the Mayor a draft statement as well, and the necessary process of briefing City officials began. In the draft release I submitted to the Mayor, it was stated that Commissioner Hecksher reluctantly concurred in the conclusions of the report, and a thick release finally went out on February 27th.

There was not much play at the time, but there had been nine months' worth of work in order to reach this compromise position. I thought things would be in pretty good shape, and at least the Parks Department was being more cooperative.

Then Assemblyman Tony Olivieri, on March 29th, charged to the attack, relying on information provided by an engineer (not professional) named Stephen Dobrow, President of the Committee for Better Transit, Inc. George Spitz, a so-called East Side civic leader, also joined in. Under their new plan, only the Seventh Avenue line would be connected to the 63rd Street subway tunnel. The new line would go from 63rd Street and First Avenue diagonally southwestwards to 59th Street and Second Avenue, then westerly along 59th Street to Seventh Avenue. The plan also called for stations to be provided both at Second Avenue and Lexington Avenue, so that transfers could be made to both the East Side IRT and the proposed Second Avenue line.

My engineers looked at these proposals, and I must say they laughed. For one reason, to connect to the existing tracks and switching facilities on the Seventh Avenue line would have required a greater incursion into Central Park than proposed in the original plan. If an incursion into the park were to be avoided, the suggested route could be continued to 59th Street if the existing Seventh Avenue subway station were moved southwards approximately 500 feet. This would have required demolition of properties along the east side of Seventh Avenue, due to the existing shallow subway construction along Seventh Avenue. The New York Athletic Club building, the Hampshire House and the Essex House on 59th Street would also have had to be demolished. The total cost increase was 95 million dollars.

Nobody paid much attention to the good Assemblyman, except, I suppose, his misinformed constituents. In an effort to be reasonable, however, TAD staff plus Transit Authority staff met on April 15th with the Assemblyman. The good Dr. Dobrow described his plan, without benefit of maps or dimensions, and finally after hearing of the problems, the Assemblyman stated that he would review the discussions with Dr. Dobrow and then seek another meeting. I don't know of any other requests for a meeting, but in any case Assemblymen Olivieri and Berle introduced bills into the State Legislature specifically banning disruption of the surface of Central Park in constructing extensions of the Sixth and Seventh Avenue lines. They did not pass.

George Spitz also sent a telegram to the Mayor on July 5th, warning Mayor Lindsay that the proposed excavation of Central Park for a subway might provide his opponents in the 1972 presidential primaries with an ecology issue that could cost the Mayor votes. He urged another change in the plan. The Mayor replied stating that he had referred the telegram to me. I replied to Spitz that all appropriate officials concerned had approved of the present plans, after a long process of evaluation by technical staffs and public hearings.

Spitz then called my office, stating that he had received an insulting letter from me in answer to his telegram to Lindsay, and that this could be a political (presidential) issue. Lindsay then wrote another letter to Spitz, pointing out that everyone would have been delighted if the consultant

had been able to come up with a method of avoiding any open cut construction in Central Park, but that that had not been possible.

Dick Oliver of The News on Sunday, July 25, 1971, wrote:  
Central Park South, July 24 (Special) - "The war over the trenches has ended. The heavy equipment is now poised due south of the old battlefield, and in the coming weeks and months and years, the casualty reports will be coming in. The M.T.A. has won."

Actually, it was a defeat for common sense. A nine-month delay, far too many additional costs, both in terms of inflation and in terms of simply spending more money to do what could have been done cheaper; and very little was gained except by those seeking notoriety. The public, of course, lost most of all.

Despite what seemed to be a resolution of this particular problem, life with the Parks Department continued to be difficult. For example, the contractor, as part of the new arrangement, had been required to construct his tunnel northeasterly towards Fifth Avenue from the Seventh Avenue subway station area, and then to double back and tunnel towards Sixth Avenue. Complicated requirements with regard to the storage of blasting material were imposed, and the contractor had to "muck out," that is to remove drilled and blasted material, along specified routes only.

At one point, the contractor decided that it was necessary to drill three holes from the surface of the park, so that the geometrics of the

alignments could be doublechecked. Simply speaking, it is not possible to close out a traverse or survey without dropping a line to the tunnel from the base line at the surface, because you cannot close your traverse. That approval was denied, in January of 1973. However, the Parks Department quickly reversed themselves shortly thereafter due to a rather remarkable incident.

A large amount of rock, some forty tons or more, slumped down off the ceiling of the newly drilled tunnel.

Fortunately, before falling down, the rock had begun to creak and groan and sing, and all the workmen had gotten out. However, the rock fall took place right underneath the Elephant House of the Central Park Zoo, and my staff, in their go-between or coordinating capacity, got a panic-stricken call from the contractor, who said that it might be necessary to evacuate the elephants, and how on earth did one do that?!

They did not, thank goodness, have to be moved and the difficulty was resolved by boring a hole in the floor of the elephant house and pumping concrete down to stabilize the rock and the elephants!

After that, of course, they had to adopt slightly different construction methods and proceed extremely carefully.

We also had problems with the Bird House. The contractor had been required to try to soundproof the Bird House, so that the birds would not be disturbed during the construction. The Transit Authority, and ourselves,

had suggested that the contractor move the birds to some convenient place, such as the Bronx Zoo, which we thought would have been delighted to receive them. However, I suppose because the Central Park Zoo does not like the Bronx Zoo, that suggestion was vetoed.

Instead, the Parks Department permit indicated that the Bird House and the small horned animal houses should be climatized and in the event that in the Parks Department's opinion the climatizing was not effective, the birds should be relocated. We did not have any idea, neither did the Transit Authority, as to what acceptable climatizing could be, in terms of humidity, temperature, air flow, and so forth. Finally, after the Mayor got involved, a tentative agreement was reached with the Parks Department whereby the Bird House as well as other additional park lands were made available for the contractor's use. Approximately 180 exotic birds were transported to Flushing Meadow Park at the expense of the Transit Authority, i. e. , with City money.

The Parks Department did agree to use its own personnel to transport the birds, and the entire cost of renovating the existing Bird House in Central Park plus transporting the birds to and fro will amount to some \$350,000.

One may ask why the New York City Transportation Administration had to become so heavily involved in this entire project. The reason was that we took seriously the Charter provision that stated that the Administration "shall perform all those functions and operations of the City of

New York relating to transportation.” TAD is the coordinator for over half the City for any construction problem involving the use of City streets, and is also charged with acting on behalf of the City in securing necessary permits from the Parks Department, or from any other agency of the City, which might be required for any transportation project.

It is a little-understood, little-known, and little-ballyhooed job, which a small unit of fine professionals handles with great sensitivity and delicacy. However, I sometimes wish people were not so stubborn and were more willing to see what the other fellow's problems were. Certainly, needed construction would go much faster in the City of New York, and one would not have the kind of nonsense that the Central Park Caper represented.

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