

# ADVOCATES & PROTESTORS

**A Hudson River crossing at the Tappan Zee had gained supporters as far back as the late 19th century, but the issue only became immediate—and incendiary—after the U.S. Congress approved funding for a bridge between Nyack and Tarrytown in 1935.**

Proponents argued that a river crossing would attract revenue from tourists as well as new businesses in both Westchester and Rockland counties, and that it would allow Rockland farmers to more freely access New York City produce markets. Opponents decried the destruction of what they considered a uniquely beautiful stretch of the Hudson River, and worried that a bridge would upend their “country village” way of life.

Determined protesters blocked bridge surveyors, held demonstrations, conducted and published opinion polls and engaged in large-scale letter-writing campaigns. Much to the opponents' delight, the subject was tabled in 1936 because construction costs at the time were impractical, due to geological conditions that would require exceptionally deep borings.

The battle flared up again after World War II as the need for a crossing in the 44 miles between the increasingly congested George Washington Bridge to the south and the Bear Mountain Bridge to the north became more urgent. By the late 1940s, as Americans increasingly relied on motor vehicles to transport people and goods, the construction of a nationwide highway system was underway.

Opponents continued to argue that a bridge would mar the beauty of one of the Hudson Valley's most scenic areas and destroy homes and businesses on both sides of the river. Supporters, however, were now able to argue the bridge would be an integral link in the proposed New York State Thruway system that promised safe and speedy travel from Buffalo to New York City. Advances in engineering technology would make it possible to overcome the obstacles that had halted the bridge in the 1930s. Supporters also could now point to the contribution to the future economic growth of the state with the construction of the new bridge.

Supporters pointed to the Tappan Zee site as the optimal—if controversial—location because of its proximity to New York City and access to the Thruway, and its distance from the target area for an atomic bomb (during the height of the Cold War such concerns were common). Local advocates also insisted that without a bridge, Rockland County would fall behind during a period of significant national economic growth.

There was one other important but not at all obvious reason for locating the bridge at the Tappan Zee site: it was just north of the area controlled by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PANYNJ), whose jurisdiction covers a radius of 25 miles extending in all directions from the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. If the bridge were located within that range, the PANYNJ would be able to keep the toll revenue then-Governor Thomas E. Dewey planned to use to pay for the bridge that would link up the two parts of the Thruway.

Public protest resumed after the passage of the Bridge Authority Act in 1951, which allowed the New York State Thruway Authority to apply for a permit to build the bridge at the Tappan Zee site. Again, residents argued that bridge construction would needlessly destroy commercial and residential property, especially on the Rockland County side of the river. The untested design of the bridge, its cost, appearance—one critic called it “freakish”—and potential disruption of navigation on the river were among other complaints. The protests primarily centered on the physical disruption of the communities on both sides of the Hudson River and the fear the impact of construction would have on homes and livelihoods. Those fears were proven true for some in Rockland. South Nyack’s entire downtown was destroyed, with more than 125 homes either torn down or relocated, and eventually as many as 300 Rockland County farms disappeared to make way for housing developments to satisfy the demand that exploded once the crossing opened in 1955.

During the 62 years it remained in service, the Tappan Zee Bridge saw traffic volumes increase from 18,000 cars a day to more than 140,000—far more than originally intended. One expert observer, historian Roger Panetta, argues that the bridge was under-planned and underbuilt from the start. Painstaking analysis throughout the 1990s, along with extensive research into the 2000s, showed that replacing the bridge rather than repairing it was the best solution from both a cost and safety perspective.

Proponents and opponents once again faced off to debate the pros and cons of a new bridge to replace the old one, with major issues including cost, design, and environmental impacts, along with questions about how construction might affect the communities at either end of the bridge—recalling the debates of the 1930s

and 40s. But the decision-making process this time was broad and inclusive, with hundreds of public meetings, educational outreach, a robust community grant program, and input from a collective of stakeholders on such issues as historic preservation and aesthetic quality. The new crossing, named the Governor Mario M. Cuomo Bridge, was fully opened to traffic in 2018.

## Learner Outcomes

Students will be able to discuss what economic growth means; how population growth affects the way a community provides services and affects residents' daily lives; and how transportation and connectivity shape the way people live and work. Students will be able to discuss reasons why people oppose or support large-scale building projects, what factors contribute to local reaction; how decisions on large-scale public projects are reached; and the process of compromise and public versus individual interests.

## Materials

### How the Tappan Zee Changed Rockland

[www.lohud.com/story/news/local/tappan-zee-bridge/2016/05/26/tappan-zee-bridge-rockland/84786904](http://www.lohud.com/story/news/local/tappan-zee-bridge/2016/05/26/tappan-zee-bridge-rockland/84786904)

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### How the Tappan Zee Changed Westchester

[www.lohud.com/story/news/local/tappan-zee-bridge/2016/05/26/westchester-tappan-zee-bridge/84846556](http://www.lohud.com/story/news/local/tappan-zee-bridge/2016/05/26/westchester-tappan-zee-bridge/84846556)

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"Bridge Site Defended," New York Times, Jan 19, 1951, p. 18.

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"Tappan Zee Bridge Called 'Error': Span Held 'Unsightly, Costly,'" New York Times, Jan. 2, 1951, p. 31.

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Joseph C. Ingraham "Thruway Opened With Dedication of Last Toll Link," New York Times, Dec. 16, 1955, p. 1 & 32.

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The Tappan Zee Bridge and the Forging of the Rockland Suburb, Roger Panetta, 2010

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## Activity

- 1 Small groups of students present contemporary arguments for and against a bridge crossing the Tappan Zee. Within those small groups, students discuss why residents supported the bridge and why others opposed it. Each group is assigned a role: Rockland County resident, Westchester County resident, New York State Thruway planner, local environmental group organizer, local economic development board member, and local government council member. Each group must decide the best course of action after listing the pros and cons relevant to its role in the community. Also note whether the vote within the group on which side to take was unanimous.
- 2 Historian Roger Panetta has said that the debates about a Hudson River crossing weren't so much about a bridge as about the larger issue of modernization—between people who wanted to maintain the status quo and those who saw change as the pathway to a better way of life. Small groups of students can prepare arguments to support both points of view: the value of maintaining and preserving a way of life versus the value of transforming it. Either approach has costs associated with "life as is" or "life moving forward." Identify what these are and make a case for the costs and benefits of both perspectives.

## Further Questions for Students

Some communities pursue economic development during times of large-scale construction projects such as the Governor Mario M. Cuomo Bridge. How might communities benefit from a large nearby construction project? What challenges might they face? If in position of decision-making, what would you propose to boost economic growth? What would you reject? Why?

## Additional Assignments

- 1 The new Governor Mario M. Cuomo Bridge implemented measures and strategies regarding construction, design and outreach in response to community concerns. Create a scorecard (e.g., from most effective (1) to least effective (5) that identifies some of these, providing a brief description of each measure or strategy, and a personal evaluation.
- 2 Identify another large public project in this or another community. What issues caused a conflict? What measures were used to address community concerns? Provide a brief description and a personal evaluation.