

EFFECTS ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES

For nearly half a century, proponents and opponents on both sides of the Hudson River argued about a crossing between Tarrytown and South Nyack. Proponents in favor of a bridge offered rosy forecasts of growth in tourism, expanded business, employment and real estate development opportunities.

Opponents claimed that a bridge across the 3-mile-wide Tappan Zee would desecrate the pristine landscape and, especially on the Rockland County side, destroy not only homes and businesses, but wipe out entire neighborhoods, along with hundreds of family farms. In the 1930s, when a bridge first attracted government support, technical limitations made construction impossible. By the late 1940s, however, engineering innovations would solve the challenges, making the possibility of a bridge a reality. Eventually, opponents accepted the inevitable—a bridge over the Hudson at the Tappan Zee. The predictions of both the advocates and the opponents were prophetic: while business, development and opportunity would boom, so would the losses felt from those would see their homes, farms and small businesses destroyed to make way for the new span.

When the Tappan Zee Bridge opened in 1955, its impact on both sides of the Hudson River was dramatic, but not all of the effects were welcomed, particularly in Rockland County. Less than a decade after the opening, Rockland had been transformed from an isolated area of small rural communities and farms into a sprawling, fast-growing suburb. In South Nyack, more than 125 homes were either destroyed or moved to make way for the bridge. At the same time, of the 400 Rockland County farms that were active before the coming of the bridge, all but 50 were sold to real estate developers to be converted into housing developments.

The population also exploded in Rockland—by 50 percent in the first 10 years, and by 150 percent in the first 20 years after the bridge opened. A growing population brought in its wake a need for new streets, housing, schools, stores, places of worship, post offices and more. New businesses and social organizations moved in and created jobs, which in turn spurred even more growth. As the population continued to rise, crowded conditions began to appear in formerly wide-open areas.

Over in Westchester County, the transportation connections created by the new bridge and the recently completed New York State Thruway generated substantial economic opportunities, even as once-quiet village streets filled with automobile traffic. In Tarrytown and its adjoining communities, the addition of the Tappan Zee Bridge to the county's transportation corridor attracted hundreds of millions of dollars in new residential development to house a booming population along with industrial construction including the corporate headquarters and manufacturing facilities for companies such as General Motors, General Foods and Kraft.

The opening of the bridge in 1955, and the Cross Westchester Expressway (I-287) just five years later, connected Rockland and Westchester with Connecticut and New England. This connection would provide fertile ground for a new corporate development zone along Westchester Avenue, which runs parallel to I-287 that is known today as the Platinum Mile. Newly available jobs stimulated population growth and housing demand on both sides of the river, while industry gained a faster, more reliable gateway for the movement of goods, services, and materials into and from Rockland and beyond.

According to historian Roger Panetta, who detailed the impact of the bridge in his 2010 book, *The Tappan Zee Bridge and the Forging of the Rockland Suburb*, observed that in the decade before the construction of the bridge, politicians and government officials received many warnings about the need to prepare and plan for the coming changes of a new bridge. The advice went unheeded. "The bridge was underbuilt," he said, pointing to the massive volume of traffic it attracted, "and the way it would create a boom in Rockland was underestimated," pointing to suburban sprawl and growing traffic congestion as unintended consequences. "Bridges are more than marvels of engineering," he says. "They're also social, commercial, political and economic connectors, and that is of equal consequence to their remarkable technology and engineering."

Over the years since the opening of the Tappan Zee Bridge, urban planners, community leaders, politicians and engineers have increasingly come to recognize that there's more to a bridge than its engineering and, in the same vein, that there's more to a community than its street grid. The Governor Mario M. Cuomo Bridge has integrated the idea of connection into many aspects of its design and development. One of many examples is the way bridge engineers worked closely with representatives of Tarrytown and the Nyacks on the visual appearance of the span and on the design of the bridge's distinctive shared use path, which adds pedestrian and bicycle mobility to connect the communities at either end. In its forward-looking Comprehensive Plan, completed in September 2018, the Village

of Tarrytown also echoed the theme. The Village is more than a collection streets and buildings, the plan begins. "Tarrytown is connected: to a wealth of trails and parks that provide significant access to open space and the Hudson River; to the regional economy via rail, roadways, and bridge; to its enduring network of cultural, social, and educational institutions; and through a sense of place and community that endures."

Learner Outcomes

Students will be able to use the Tappan Zee Bridge as a lesson in community development, economic growth and both related benefits and challenges—for instance, the benefits of economic progress versus the challenges of disrupting established ways of life. The history of the bridge can also serve as a lens through which students can consider infrastructure renewal, and weighing social, commercial, political and economic factors against advances in engineering and technology.

Materials

United States Census-Rockland County

www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/rocklandcountynynewyork/PST045217

United States Census-Westchester County

www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/westchestercountynynewyork,rocklandcountynynewyork/PST045217

How the Tappan Zee Changed Rockland

www.lohud.com/story/news/local/tappan-zee-bridge/2016/05/26/tappan-zee-bridge-rockland/84786904/

How the Tappan Zee Changed Westchester

www.lohud.com/story/news/local/tappan-zee-bridge/2016/05/26/westchester-tappan-zee-bridge/84846556/

Activity

- 1 Students can collect data about population, number of households, density and business establishments in Rockland and Westchester counties to create a quantitative portrait of the changes that occurred as a result of the Tappan Zee Bridge in terms of population, housing, and employment pre- and post-construction.
- 2 Large-scale development projects such as bridges often force communities to choose between preserving the status quo and welcoming change. Students can break up into teams and find examples of development that went forward, were stopped or found a middle ground (example: The High Line Park in Manhattan). Within the teams, students will argue for or against their projects, presenting evidence to support their points of view.

Additional Assignments

- 1 Each student develops a personal essay for or against construction of the bridge, detailing the arguments that swayed his/her thinking, and which arguments presented in class gave the student a different perspective that he/she hadn't considered before. Students should include specifics on how the construction of the Tappan Zee Bridge affected them and their family.
- 2 Write an essay describing your personal reaction to a project that changed your community - whether positive or negative. Interview family members, friends or other "stakeholders" who might have been in favor of the project or opposed to it. How did it turn out? If opposed, what factors would get their "stakeholders" to be for the project? If in favor, what factors could impact their decision to make them be opposed to the project?
- 3 Mobility is a powerful force in community development. The growth of automobile use following World War II created the need for a river crossing between Rockland and Westchester Counties. The continued expansion of automobile traffic overwhelmed the capacity of the Tappan Zee and created the need for its replacement. Write an essay expressing your opinion on the following question: What changes in mobility can you envision over the next 10 or 20 years, and what might their impacts be in terms of daily life, infrastructure, society and culture?