

Earth Watch: Tappan Zee Bridge as a walkway? No longer harebrained

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So now Gov. Andrew Cuomo is publicly supporting an idea that his predecessors pretty much characterized as harebrained: keeping the old Tappan Zee Bridge as a park once the new bridge is operational.

He called it “an exciting option.”

I’m guessing some of that excitement comes from potentially saving the \$150 million it would take to break the old 3-mile structure down and float it away.

Turning old structures into parks or walkways has worked with the High Line on Manhattan’s West Side and with the Walkway Over the Hudson in Poughkeepsie, but this would be bigger and badder than either of those.

Imagine if Nike paid to put the “Swoosh” on the side of the bridge/park. That alone could pay some serious bills.

It would certainly beat the current moniker — the Governor Malcolm Wilson Tappan Zee Bridge — which isn’t bringing in much revenue as far as I can tell.

Or, the state could rent space on the deck for kiosks to sell cappuccinos and Frisbees.

At seven-plus lanes across, multiplied by 3 miles long, that would be some serious retail square footage.

I’m wondering if I should run a hang-gliding/bungee-jumping business off the side.

All I’d need is a boat to pick up the patrons who didn’t bounce back and a commuter bus to bring them back to the top.

Speaking of jumping, there for a while, it seemed like people chose the Tappan Zee to be their suicide launching point on a monthly basis.

And that was with traffic whizzing by.

If you've never had the experience of looking down from that bridge, you can't imagine the knee-knocking feeling as you get close to the edge at mid-span — it will take your breath away in more ways than one.

Don't get me wrong. As a bike rider, I've enjoyed a couple of crossings for charity events, and as a reporter I've been on a cherry picker riding along the underside of the deck to look at cracks in the concrete. Both provide extraordinary views.

At that height, however, the state would probably need a special revenue stream just to pay for the liability insurance policy.

When it first came up in a 2002 public meeting on the bridge, making the span a park was a radical suggestion by Tarrytown resident Jean Schneider that was dismissed by most everyone there.

Paul Feiner gets credit for the idea, but I seem to remember Schneider pitched it first. I was one of the people who thought it was more harebrained than practical.

These days it may make economic sense, though Riverkeeper's boat captain John Lipscomb said recently he is concerned about adding a second structure to the Hudson without subtracting the first. He said the effects on sediment and water flows, not to mention habitats, would be significant.

Dan Biederman, a Chappaqua resident, knows a bit about ventures like this.

He was one of the original forces behind the Bryant Park privatization, a move that he said has delivered well more than \$1 billion to the state and city's economy.

"It's doable," Biederman said of the proposed park connecting Westchester and Rockland "If they chose to do it with private funding, it is very viable. As a nonprofit, it would also work."

Erik Kulleseid, executive director of The Alliance for New York State Parks, thinks so as well.

He said \$150 million saved from not tearing the bridge down could pay for a lot of years of maintenance.

“In many ways, the maintenance of a recreational bridge is much lower, because the traffic load is reduced.”

Kulleseid doesn't see the point in taking down a public amenity if it can be re-purposed. Think of it as recycling on a grand scale.

“You don't have to take it down.” he said. “Look at the value that's been unleashed with the High Line, the impact on real estate prices alone. You could certainly have kiosks. With that much space, you could have a ball field.”

I'm guessing if we did that, Nike would be even more interested.