A Roadway Evolves

The Long Island Motor Parkway may be getting yet another life.

By Chris Tramutola

This 45-mile raceway was built for speed, but within a few decades it came to a dead stop.

William K. Vanderbilt II

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THE LONG ISLAND MOTOR PARKWAY was once a name recognized around the world. Today, even residents living in the communities containing remnants of the road are unaware of its former glory. This 45-mile strip of land went from farmland to state-of-the-art automotive roadway, to private toll road, to what remains today: a collection of mostly forgotten bits and pieces. Portions of the road in the New York City borough of Queens have been placed on the National Register of Historic Landmarks, while the segments in Nassau County have been left to wither—a not uncommon fate of obsolete utilities.

The skeletons of former utilities and rights-of-way are scattered throughout the country. They are unlikely to be restored to their original uses, but that should not condemn the land and its history to neglect. Sites like the former Motor Parkway offer opportunities for new uses over time.

Today a Nassau County Department of Public Works project is trying to establish a new use for its section of the Motor Parkway. Brian Schneider, assistant to the deputy commissioner at the agency, is leading the project, which aims to reconnect the remaining portions of the Motor Parkway and convert the entire stretch into a 23-mile bicycle trail. The trail would link up with several other bicycle trails as well as parks and town centers.

Although this $30 million project is not budgeted at the moment, a one-mile pilot greenway that partially travels through Eisenhower State Park should be completed this year. Along with providing a new greenway, this will preserve the amazing story of the Motor Parkway.

The glory

At the turn of the 20th century, the automotive world was buzzing with new technologies, but their high cost and exclusivity made it only a hobby for wealthy individuals. Among them was William K. Vanderbilt Jr., a racing enthusiast who noticed that Europe was about five years ahead of the U.S. in automobile innovation. Hoping to bridge the gap, he persuaded top automobile makers from Germany, Italy, the U.K., France, and the U.S. to pit their best cars and drivers against each other in the first-ever international auto-racing event that came to be called the Vanderbilt Cup Race.

The first race took place in 1904 on the public roads of Nassau County—most of them tamped earth with narrow driving lanes. Thousands came to watch the race annually, but tragedy struck in 1906, when a crash resulted in the death of a spectator. It was clear that the local farming roads of Long Island were not built for speed and that a new type of roadway was needed.

What resulted was the Long Island Motor Parkway, developed by the newly founded Automobile Highway Association as a privately owned speedway. W.K. Vanderbilt Jr. was the founder and president of the AHA, which was later renamed Long Island Motor Parkway Inc.

The Motor Parkway stretched from Queens through Nassau County and into Suffolk County for a total of 45 miles. It was the first such roadway in the world devoted exclusively to automobiles; it introduced banked turns, reinforced concrete roadbeds, guardrails, and overpasses and underpasses. These elements allowed for much faster and safer travelling speeds both during the race and during everyday automotive driving.

A changing world of transportation

Over the years daring drivers and rapidly evolving automobiles began to push the

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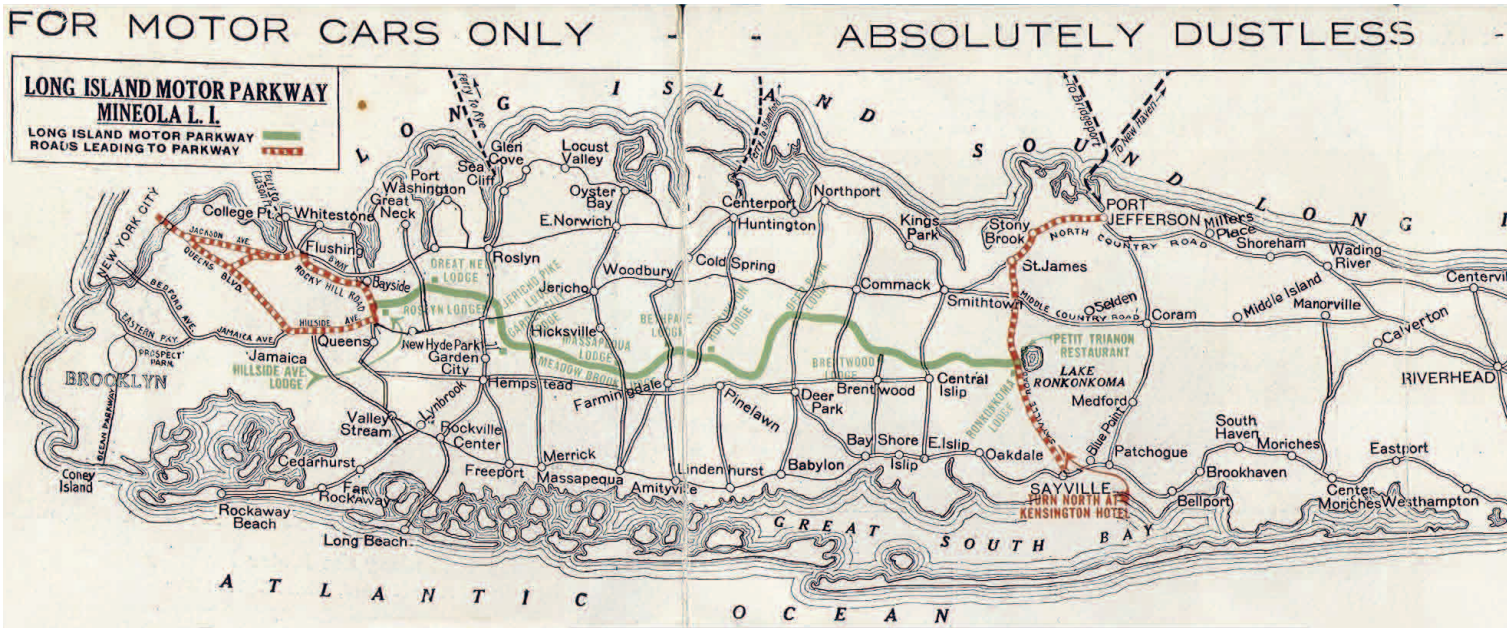


The Motor Parkway, shown here in WHAT YEAR—WRITER NEEDS TO SUPPLY THIS?, was once among the most advanced roadways of its time. Built for racing, it later became a popular tollroad before becoming obsolete, thanks to more modern—and free—thoroughfares that ran parallel to it.

This remnant of the Motor Parkway in Nassau County is badly in need of repairs like those outlined in the section drawing below. The county hopes to revamp 20-plus miles of the abandoned roadway into a pedestrian-scaled trail for walkers, runners, and bikers.

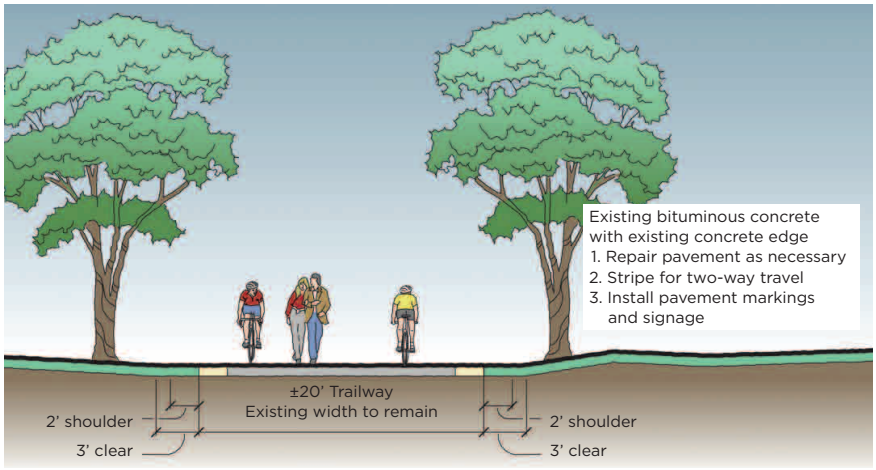
limits of the course. Another tragedy occurred in 1910, when mechanics for two different teams were killed and a number of spectators were injured. Soon after, automotive racing was outlawed on public streets in New York State. This put an end to the Vanderbilt Cup Races on Long Island, but not the Motor Parkway. The winding route became a toll road for a rapidly growing population of pleasure drivers.

Cars became wildly popular—and with them the demand for automobile-exclusive roads. By the late 1920s more than 200,000 cars traveled the Motor Parkway each year. At the same time, Robert Moses's Garden Parkway Development produced Long Island's Southern State Parkway (1927) and Northern State Parkway (1931). Both ran parallel to the Motor Parkway—toll free and designed for newer cars.

By 1938, the Motor Parkway declared bankruptcy. Its right-of-way was forfeited to absolve its unpaid tax debt, and Queens, Nassau, and Suffolk counties each inherited a portion of the road.

The forgotten remains

Closed to automotive traffic, the Queens Borough portion was reopened as a three-mile bicycle path in 1938; no comparable planning or implementation was performed in the suburban counties. After years of neglect, sections of the road were redeveloped as modern roadways under different names, sold to developers, used by utility companies, and in a number of areas completely abandoned. Now, more than 70 years after the Motor Parkway closed, only remnants remain. But the pilot project led by Nassau County could spark the interest and motivation needed to save the parkway from continued neglect. This is a great step in the right direction.



Utilities and rights-of-way are constantly planned, built, modified, and eventually repurposed as new technology evolves the standard. How can planning ensure that the structures and landscapes left over from an obsolete technology adapt to the needs of the surrounding communities in the future?

New York is no stranger to abandoned infrastructure; with the proper planning and support, the Motor Parkway will most certainly find a new use. Just as the abandoned elevated railroad on the west side of Manhattan was converted to the esteemed High Line park, the Long Island Motor Parkway could once again be replete with Sunday drivers of a new era and scale. ■

Chris Tramutola is a licensed landscape architect specializing in academic and recreational landscapes. His interest in the history and evolution of landscapes has led to an exploration of the future of analysis and design.

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