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Lifting local spirits

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COMMENT: The traffic reports on New York area drive-time radio have revealed that the Bayonne Bridge will be seeing closures on weekends and during overnight hours, as work continues on the 'Raise the Roadway' project, writes Barry Parker.

Local residents, hauled to town meetings by Democratic organisers, have already been complaining about noise and traffic from the construction.

Sometimes port interests are vilified around here for various logistical woes that they did not cause, and embroiled in broader politically-motivated scandals. Indeed, the entire New York area suffers from a 1920s-1950s infrastructure that is upgraded incrementally.

Unlike our brethren in Singapore, we can't simply move the port way out of town. Around here, the Port Authority is raising a portion of the antiquated roadway so taller vessels can transit underneath, in a move supported by all the political parties.

Rather than blaming the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, another imperfect relic of the 1920s, one local commentator, Jaffe Communications (from northern New Jersey), had a different, and very sensible take. In its widely read daily briefing, it suggested: "Someone must be the villain here. Let's randomly point fingers at Othmar Ammann, who built the bridge in 1928, and stuck it so close to land where homes – unbeknownst to him – would ultimately be built. Curse you, Othmar." Good urban planning? No.

The PR flacks, including Jaffe, need to work overtime now, because the Bayonne Bridge project is being subsumed into broader political inquiries into the workings of the Port Authority, and the influence of Chris Christie (a Republican- NJ) and his political operatives. When the project comes up, its detractors need to be reminded that its benefits will accrue to the entire New York metropolitan area.

Readers know that I have my doubts about New York's place in the hubs and spokes of teu flows. Still, the port is an enormous economic engine for the entire region - even if we don't see lengthy queues of 10,000 teu vessels waiting to glide under the raised roadway, into Port Elizabeth and Port Newark - so let's celebrate efforts to get ready for the new generation of ships.

Political poison has been poured over other area bridges, notably the George Washington span (the subject of 'Bridge-gate') and the Pulaski Skyway replacement.

While the Bayonne Bridge project will slow down traffic for a while, the raised roadway will keep the port in the game. Even if the project helped Governor Christie score points with unions and other stakeholders, so what? It has the potential to benefit multiple states and tens of millions of people. Huge economic gains are not a sure thing, but it sounds like very solid politics to me.



Uplifting: residents need to look beyond the inconveniences of the Bayonne Bridge raising works to everyday life. Credit: Matt Green

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