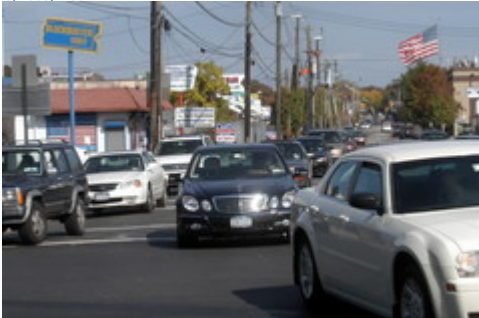


# Staten Island's roads are stuck in the 1800s

By [Ken Paulsen](#)  
October 18, 2008, 1:00PM



Robin George/Just as it was in the 1800s, Richmond Avenue and Amboy Road is one of Staten Island's major intersections.

By MAURA YATES and PHIL HELSEL

Improving traffic congestion on Staten Island's roads is like trying to install an elevator in a skyscraper built only with stairs. The problem is that a firm infrastructure has long been in place -- most major local Island roads were in place by the 1800s -- and efforts to modernize them can move slower than a stagecoach led by a horse on its last legs.

The examples are everywhere. The intersection of Richmond Avenue and Amboy Road in Eltingville teems with traffic, but prospects for widening it are dim: buildings creep to the edge of three corners, and officials have been stymied in their attempts to convince the owner of a vacant gas station on the fourth to part with a piece of land that would ease the flow. On the North Shore, State Sen. Diane Savino is thinking more aggressively. She suggests eminent domain may be needed to turn narrow, twisting Richmond Terrace into the thoroughfare it could be. But that process -- through which the government grabs slices of private property for public benefit -- would result in lengthy court battles. A quick fix it isn't.

It's not just 19th century roads that provide headaches. Although the West Shore Expressway was completed in 1976, a long-requested service road that would at last connect Bloomingdale and Clay Pit roads is inching closer to reality. However, an endangered lizard appears to stand in the way, among other forms of red tape. Construction could begin as soon as 2010, but it would still be a few years before drivers get relief. It can't come soon enough for motorists who've waited decades for the fix.

Both elected and transportation officials have spent the past few years trying to atone for the sins of the past, including missed opportunities to plan for inevitable growth, and old decisions to grant construction waivers that still reverberate today on clogged streets.

The officials are aiming to build on some recent successes such as a partial left-turn ban on the busiest stretch of Hylan Boulevard -- an initiative widely hailed as one of the biggest improvements in traffic flow here in a generation. In the works are plans to convert more streets to one-way status, overhaul difficult intersections such as Travis Avenue and Victory Boulevard, and, possibly, implement a new type of traffic light that analyzes traffic levels and changes the signal accordingly.

## BUREAUCRATIC BARRIERS

Master builder Robert Moses dominated -- some would say bullied -- city planning efforts through the mid-20th century. Starting in the mid-1960s and 1970s, the post-Robert Moses era has brought with it regulations to ensure that politicians, agencies and affected neighbors jointly approve of projects, so that the planning mistakes of the past are not repeated. (For more about Moses, visit [silive.com/transportation](#).)

But the downside of the increased regulation is a grueling bureaucratic slog, and almost absurd levels of scrutiny for road-project proposals that can push improvements back for decades. The nation's current fiscal crisis won't help matters.

Given the long approval processes to contend with, "with each passing day, it takes more energy to get less accomplished," said Mid-Island Republican Councilman James Oddo. "Regulations designed to protect New York City residents are now preventing government from helping New York City residents."

Added state Sen. Diane Savino (D-North Shore/Brooklyn): "We wind up with too many cooks in the kitchen, and none of them speak the same language, and they're all cooking something different. They're not supposed to be an impediment. They're supposed to protect the public interest, but they're not supposed to become opposition to any and all development."

She added: "In my next life, I want to meet Robert Moses. I want to sit down and ask him, how did you do it? How did you get people to cooperate?"

Today, the best example of constructive cooperation has come from the Mayor's Transportation Task Force, which has created a more cohesive decision-making process, including frequent meetings among the DOT, Department of City Planning, Department of Buildings, and others.

The fact that the different agencies are in the same room together is alone an achievement, because little can get done without multi-agency approval. The discussions have led to more thoughtful planning for local roads, especially in new developments where streets were laid out so narrowly in the past that even fire engines couldn't access them.

The new rules have required developers to pay for street widenings in key locations, such as a Dunkin' Donuts that opened at the busy corner of Richmond Avenue and Victory Boulevard in Bulls Head. In the past, such a store opening would have resulted in more traffic, with no effort to ameliorate the conditions.

## BAD DECISIONS

Staten Island's legendary traffic crisis was partly brought about by decades of officials granting waivers with wild abandon, to allow buildings and homes to rise on land that, on the borough map anyway, is set aside for future street widenings.

Today, Staten Island is home to only 5 percent of the city's population, yet more than 15 percent of the Big Apple's registered vehicles, with more than 262,000 cars registered to Staten Island drivers last year.

Several of the borough's most heavily-traveled roads, Forest Avenue, Victory Boulevard, Amboy Road and Richmond Road, are only one lane wide in each direction in spots. A look at a [historic map](#) explains why: Those roads were all designed in an era when horse-and-buggy was the preferred mode of transportation. Victory, for example, was laid out in the first decade of the 1800s. The origins of Amboy and Richmond roads go back even further.

Some easy fixes have been implemented to make travel easier. The city's Department of Transportation began a new parking restriction to keep the parking lane on Richmond Road clear for buses during rush hours. It has made a noticeable improvement.

To improve traffic flow through choke points, officials, including Oddo, Conservative Borough President James Molinaro and South Shore Republican Councilman Vincent Ignizio, have launched a vigorous campaign to widen the roads to their mapped width. They have worked with developers case by case, to construct new buildings outside the boundaries of streets that could someday be paved to their ideal width.

Ignizio and Molinaro recently convinced a developer of a new medical building at the corner of Nelson Avenue and Amboy Road to build a new turning lane at his own expense, to ease traffic through the congested spot. The building that had once stood on the lot had been built into the roadbed many years ago, after the owner was granted a waiver.

Down the road, on Amboy in Eltingville, the builder of what is now a King Kullen and shopping center was granted a waiver in the 1970s to build the center's sidewalk on land set aside for a future road widening. Starting with the 1980s building boom, the spot became a traffic pinch point for cars flowing through the intersection of Amboy and Richmond Avenue, and contending with traffic entering and exiting the parking lots on either side of Amboy. Ignizio and Molinaro are working on striking a deal with the owner of a former gas station at the intersection, to widen Richmond and ease the crunch.

The decision to grant the original waivers was made decades ago during the city's fiscal crisis. At the time, "some deals were made without any forethought," Borough DOT Commissioner Tom Coccola said.

## SUCCESS STORIES

Following the 2006 left-turn ban at key Hylan Boulevard intersections, police reported a significant percent drop in accidents along the street after the first few months of its implementation, and traffic has been noticeably smoother.

"Anybody who drove Hylan Boulevard three or four years ago can certainly appreciate driving on Hylan Boulevard today," said Coccola.

Major intersection improvements, including a makeover at Amboy and Seguine Avenue, have made turning easier at congested points. Work is under way now at Victory Boulevard and Travis Avenue, where turning bays will be added in the coming weeks, and a left-turn arrow will be added.

Moving forward, "we'll go back to things we did well," Coccola said, pointing to the "channelization" of Van Duzer Street in Stapleton to tame speeding by painting lines to narrow the roadway.

And he plans to expand his one-way streets initiative, which is already in place in Midland Beach and Tottenville.

Coccola plans to announce the next round of one-ways later this month in South Beach, where a section of streets will be converted. He also plans to do the same in sections of Great Kills and Eltingville.

"There's always another opportunity or challenge out there," he said.

## TRAFFIC TAMING

On one of his trips to Sarasota, Fla., a city that has inspired some of the borough's recent traffic innovations, Molinaro discovered "smart light" technology, which changes traffic lights according to traffic volumes, not a pre-set timer.

With the feasibility of such a system now being considered by the city's DOT, Molinaro hopes to soon test a smart light at the busy Victory Boulevard entrance to the College of Staten Island in Willowbrook. That way, cars won't be needlessly backed up on Victory on days when the campus is closed, for example.

It's too soon to say if the technology can work on Staten Island's congested roads, but if it catches on, Molinaro would like to see it introduced at other high-traffic intersections, including Richmond Avenue and Victory in Bulls Head, and Hylan Boulevard and New Dorp Lane in New Dorp.

Meanwhile, the Island was the first borough to get upgraded traffic signals, which use more efficient and reliable solid-state technology.

The new signals malfunction less and contain as many as 30 timing profiles, which can be changed to meet needs with the touch of a button from a computer system at the city DOT's Traffic Management Center in Queens.

## TURN TOWARD TRANSIT

"This is not going away," said Jonathan Peters, a professor at the College of Staten Island who has been using CSI's super computer to study traffic issues here for the past six years.

According to Peters, traffic jams on Victory Boulevard and New Dorp Lane have everything to do with the Staten Island Expressway and the failure of city planners to build a complete system of highways that other boroughs have.

About 142,000 cars pass by the Todt Hill Road exit on the Expressway each day -- the equivalent of almost 11 hours of full-capacity traffic. That ultimately pushes cars into chokepoints never designed to handle the load, like New Dorp Lane and Hylan Boulevard, which sees traffic swell from about 8,000 cars per hour to 25,000 in the evening rush hour, or narrow Amboy Road.

"When you ask why I can't get down New Dorp Lane on a weekday afternoon, it's because the system is incomplete," Peters said. "The mayhem you see on the surface streets is in part based on the failures of the Expressway."

Peters sees potential short-term solutions in expanding Capodanno Boulevard to Great Kills Park and opening roads through the former Fresh Kills landfill to connect Richmond Avenue with the West Shore Expressway.

But ultimately, with the borough's population expected to swell to 630,000 by 2030, according to census estimates, the solution lies in getting cars off the road, Peters said.

The city could immediately ease traffic by setting up a bus rapid-transit line from the Bayonne Bridge, along Richmond Avenue and to the Korean War Veterans Parkway, he said. That plan would involve tearing up medians on Richmond Avenue and reserving one lane in each direction for bus traffic, leaving three each way for cars.

Opening a Staten Island Railway station in Rosebank would put 11,000 people within a half-mile walking distance of the train line that runs alongside busy Hylan Boulevard, Peters suggested.

"The only real option is to get people off the roads," said City Councilman Michael McMahon (D-North Shore), a congressional candidate.

"So many of us still have that suburban frame of mind; we just want to get into our cars and drive everywhere," he said. "As we reach that critical mass ... sooner or later we're going to find people are demanding mass transit."

McMahon has been a vocal backer of the proposed North Shore Rail, a project that could cost \$400 million and would reactivate commuter service on the abandoned line from Arlington to St. George.

McMahon said that he doubts major infrastructure fixes to narrow arterials like Victory, Forest and Amboy, will ever happen because "You can't do that without taking people's property."

But with limited room to expand, Sen. Savino has said it might have to come down to taking some land through eminent domain if things keep getting worse.

"Eminent domain should only be used when it is for the public good," she said, adding that she doesn't take such matters lightly.

Though she said she has no immediate plans to pursue eminent domain, she pointed to the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge as an example of infrastructure that wouldn't be here without it.

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