

Brooklyn groups urge more talk before BQE action

BY RY RIVARD | 12/14/2023 05:00 AM EST

There's a flood of federal money available that could help upgrade the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. Now it's a question over how to ultimately spend it.

A new coalition of groups from Sunset Park, Brooklyn Heights and Williamsburg say the city and the state are rushing ahead with plans to repair a city-owned section of the BQE near Brooklyn Heights and is asking everyone to slow down.

The coalition — which includes El Puente in Williamsburg; UPROSE in Sunset Park; the Brooklyn Heights Association and the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance — are urging Gov. Kathy Hochul in a letter provided first to POLITICO to “create a comprehensive community-led plan” before moving ahead with major BQE upgrades.

Their message: “A new way, not the highway.”

The groups have the support of Brooklyn Borough President Antonio Reynoso, who said people from different demographics in the borough came together because whatever happens with the city-owned section will also affect the north and south sections of the BQE, which runs from the Verrazzano Bridge to Queens.

“We don't have a comprehensive plan,” Reynoso said. “Right now, we're just plugging in holes but with permanent infrastructure.”

The BQE is a product of the car-friendly Robert Moses era, when residents' concerns were swept aside to make way for roads built to his specifications along routes of his choosing for reasons often his own. For decades, there has been a push to undo some of his work, which divided and polluted communities on either side of the roads.

While elements of this same debate raged during Mayor Bill de Blasio's administration, he ultimately punted. Now, thanks to the bipartisan federal infrastructure law and the Biden administration, there's as much money as there may ever be for both traditional road upgrades and imaginative redesigns.

Reynoso and others argue there needs to be a major rethink of how people and goods are moved, and simply replacing or even expanding parts of the BQE would reinforce bad habits of the past. For instance, maybe boats are a better way to get some goods back and forth than trucks.

Known as the triple cantilever, the Brooklyn Heights section of the BQE is a series of road decks, which are topped at one point by a promenade looking across the Hudson River and out over New York Harbor. The groups want to use the push to repair the aging cantilever as leverage to force the larger rethink — and they worry a project that simply replaces the cantilever would reinforce the status quo for another generation.

The groups, calling themselves the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway Environmental Justice Coalition, worry that the community engagement process to date, involving a mix of transportation officials at all levels of government, has been to check boxes rather than truly involve the communities along the BQE.

In the south, communities have pushed for a greenway in Sunset Park. In the north, advocates have asked for 3.5 acres of park-like areas. In both cases, it's not clear officials plan to pony up.

In Williamsburg, groups such as El Puente have pushed to cover part of the roadway to create 3.5 acres of parklike land atop the BQE, a plan de Blasio's administration brushed off as too costly.

El Puente's executive director, Marco Carrión, said transportation officials should do repairs to make the cantilever safe, but not do anything permanent there until there has been a thorough reimagining of the BQE. Now, he said, is a golden opportunity to do things everyone can agree to.

“Give us the time and buy us the time to come up with a plan we all feel good about,” he said.



The Brooklyn-Queens Expressway is long overdue for a rehabilitation, city and transportation advocates say. | Drew Angerer/Getty Images