

EDITORIAL

If only we had done it . . .

Missed chances illustrate why Long Island must be ready to seize opportunities to better position itself for the future

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Newsday's editorial page asked four Nassau County mayors about their experiences with the Long Island Rail Road.

The mayor of Glen Cove was critical, saying poor transportation facilities were the single biggest factor limiting the development of his city. His solution: electrification of the Oyster Bay branch of the LIRR.

"If we are to go forward and grow," he said, "we must have modern transportation facilities."

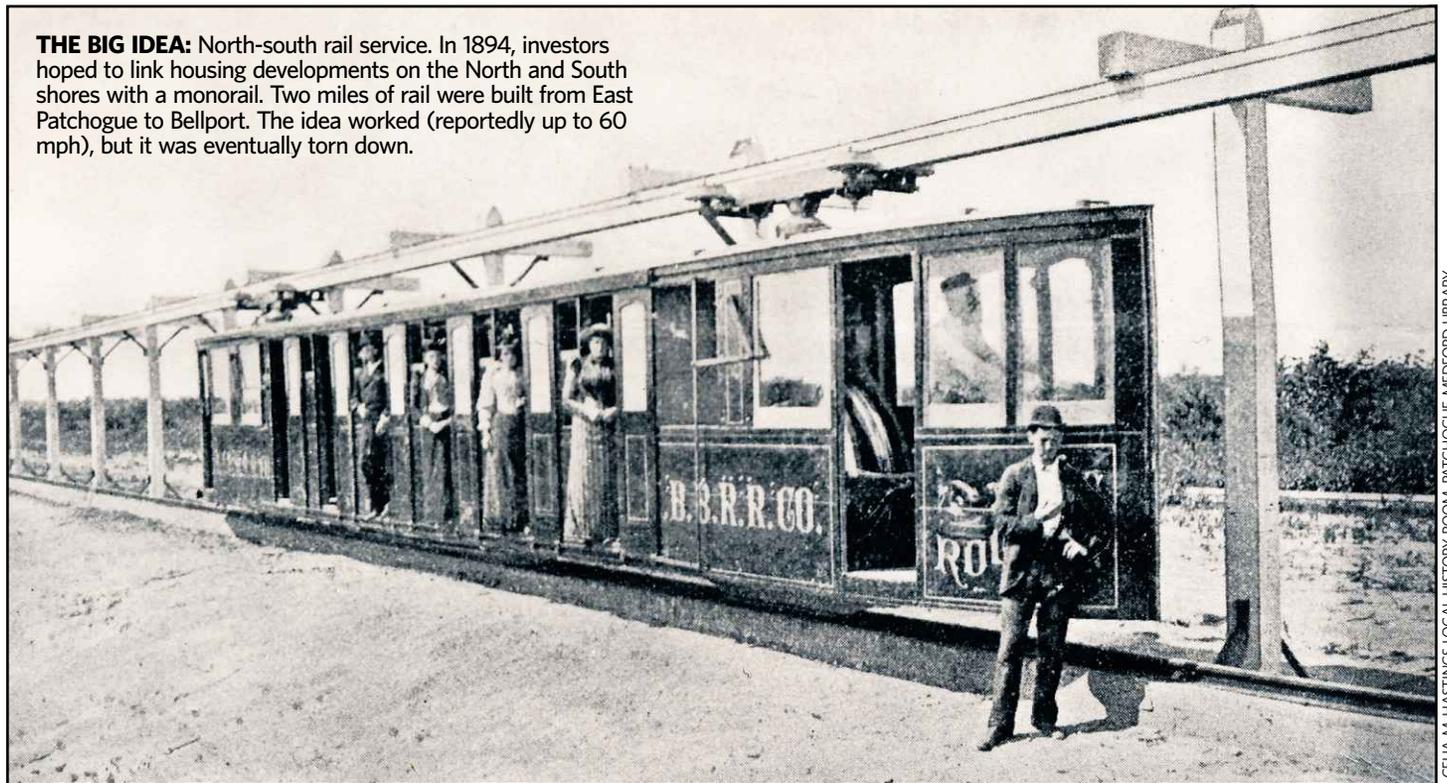
The mayor was Horace K.T. Sherwood. The date was Feb. 14, 1941.

And 78 years later, the Oyster Bay line still is not electrified beyond East Williston, seven stops before Glen Cove.

The history of Long Island is one of continual development — and of wondering whether the region would be better off today if it had embraced big ideas, especially in transportation, that would have transformed or reshaped the Island.

Consider the endless suburban sprawl in vast midsections of Long Island not adjacent to the LIRR. Compare that to the vi-

THE BIG IDEA: North-south rail service. In 1894, investors hoped to link housing developments on the North and South shores with a monorail. Two miles of rail were built from East Patchogue to Bellport. The idea worked (reportedly up to 60 mph), but it was eventually torn down.



CELIA M. HASTINGS LOCAL HISTORY ROOM, PATCHOGUE-MEDFORD LIBRARY

brant communities with downtown centers that lie mostly along the rails on our North and South shores. Failing to think big and seize opportunities has consequences.

Through the years, Newsday's editorial board has often contemplated bold proposals for change in the month of February. Perhaps the bleak weather — with autumn so distant in the rear view mirror and spring too far around the curve ahead to see — inspires dreamers and visionaries seeking a better future.

In February 1954, the board enthused about then-Gov. Thomas E. Dewey's proposal for a six-lane highway from the Queens

Midtown Tunnel to Riverhead — what became the Long Island Expressway. The board showed some wonderfully naive optimism — our critics are sure to coin a different phrase — writing that it would be "four or five years before the expressway is completed." In fact, it wasn't until 1972 that the LIE reached Riverhead.

But even as we applaud Dewey, we can wonder what would have happened had Long Island embraced someone else's vision a decade later — master planner Lee Koppelman's proposal for a monorail down the middle of the LIE. Where would we be now? With less traffic on

our highways, surely. But we also would have some of the infrastructure in place to make a switch to high-speed rail, right down the spine of Long Island and into New York City.

If only.

In that same 1954 editorial, the board noted that a Danish freighter had landed at Greenport and unloaded 31,000 bags of potatoes from Prince Edward Island: "The potatoes came the short way — by water — without ever going through New York City, or being carried by the Long Island Rail Road."

At the time, the editorial board thought that shipment was proof of the advantages of a deepwater

port in Greenport — or anywhere on Long Island — in relieving traffic congestion in the region by removing big trucks from our roads and cutting the cost of the merchandise. Not to mention providing another way to move exports — and garbage — off the Island.

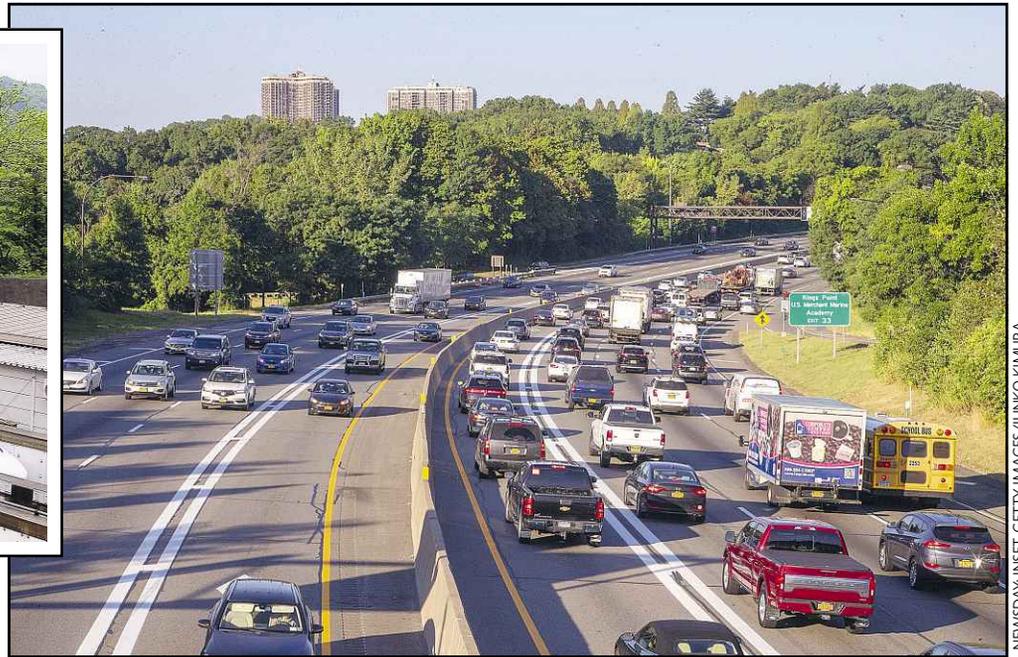
Today, 65 years later, Long Island still lacks a deepwater port. And we're still advocating for one.

If only.

In February 1964, the visionary was then-Nassau County Executive Eugene Nickerson. The board lauded his plan for a new transit center at Roosevelt Field that would "accommodate long-



THE BIG IDEA: Rail service down the center of the Long Island Expressway. A planner envisioned a monorail to get cars off the road. If it had been done, it's possible that the route could be converted today for high-speed rail, above.



distance as well as local buses, Long Island trains on a loop arrangement, and helicopters to serve adjacent airports." The proposal needed more details, we said, but concluded that "if Long Island does not resolve its transit mess, then it will find itself in the same dismal hole as New York City."

Today, as Nassau finally commences with new development at the adjacent Hub, one unsolved issue there is . . . transportation.

And in an eerie echo of Nickerson, in 1990, a Babylon reader named Bruce D. Lowry pitched a similar transit hub at the old Fairchild-Republic aircraft manufacturing site in East Farmingdale that would link road, rail and air traffic, with a monorail or high-speed rail link to New York City airports and Long Island MacArthur. Yes, the site is still largely vacant.

If only. The longest-running and most-discussed big idea has been a bridge or tunnel across Long Island Sound to Connecticut, Rhode Island or Westchester County. The first proposal came from U.S. Sen. Royal S. Copeland, in 1938. Original master builder Robert Moses had a bridge plan in 1966. More recent talk is of a tunnel. Various incarnations of Newsday's editorial board have supported the idea, except for a brief time in the early 1970s. One typical expression of backing came in 1978, when the board wrote, "Bridging Long Island Sound between Connecticut and eastern Suffolk is an idea that makes sense in every way but two, and their names are Carey and Grasso," a reference to then-governors Hugh Carey



THE BIG IDEA: A deepwater port anywhere on Long Island to facilitate seaborne shipping and reduce road truck traffic. Greenport, above, was suggested in 1954. Shoreham is a frequent suggestion today.

of New York and Connecticut's Ella Grasso.

Such a structure never has been built, of course, in the face of civic and political opposition, and the region still is choking on traffic, and Long Islanders still have no easy way to get to New England and no emergency route out except through the city.

If only.

Long Island used to harbor big dreams, and big accomplishments. Tesla once labored here. That's Nikola Tesla, the famed inventor and engineer who experimented with the wireless transmission of electricity in his Shoreham lab for a few years beginning in 1902.

Hempstead Plains was an early center of aviation; pioneer Glenn Curtiss made the first powered flight there in 1909. Charles Lindbergh began the first nonstop flight across the Atlantic Ocean from Roosevelt

Field, in 1927. Grumman Corp. in Bethpage built the spacecraft that landed American astronauts on the moon in 1969. A decade later, Grumman engineers developed the revolutionary Maglev technology by putting high-powered magnets on a prototype of a

monorail line for much faster rail-road travel. Yet true high-speed rail exists nowhere on Long Island or in the United States — and California Gov. Gavin Newsom recently pulled the plug on that state's bullet train from Los Angeles to San Francisco, opting for a much shorter and less urgently needed route that still faces major hurdles. Meanwhile, high-speed rail is common in China, Europe and Japan.

How do we recapture that spirit? Is it too late? Have we become too worried about problems that we fail to embrace opportunities? Change — truly groundbreaking change — is not possible without courage and vision and the willingness to seize the day.

A poignant reminder of that came two weeks ago, when NASA declared its Mars Opportunity rover finally had died — after its 90-day mission turned into 15 years of transmitting troves of data and photos that changed our understanding of

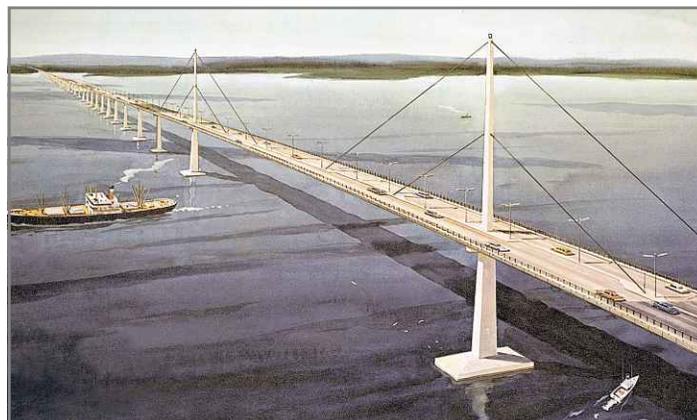
the Red Planet. And all because NASA shook off the failures of many previous Mars missions and sent up one more rocket.

Long ago, Long Island had its own such failure — but never tried for an encore. In 1894, some local entrepreneurs built a working monorail. The intention was to link the North and South shores, but they finished only 2 miles of track from East Patchogue to Bellport. The bullet-shaped car, called The Rocket, reportedly hit 60 mph, but the enterprise lasted only a few years before collapsing in economic failure. And Long Island still lacks rapid north-south transportation.

Rekindling that sense of boldness is not an impossible task. It was there in the decision two years ago to add the third track to the LIRR's Main Line between Floral Park and Hicksville, a move 70 years in the making; and to launch the LIRR's East Side Access project to connect Long Island to Grand Central Terminal, a development first slated for completion in 2009 and now scheduled to open in 2022; and in the long-discussed, now-completed second track between Farmingdale and Ronkonkoma.

Look how the region is poised to benefit from those decisions. The greater passenger capacity, the faster trips, the redundancies in storms and mechanical breakdowns, the access to Manhattan's East Side, the possibility for reverse commuting out of the city, the economic development and jobs. Now imagine that daring writ large, and picture what seizing the day and saying yes more often could mean.

Only if.



THE BIG IDEA: A bridge or tunnel (or combination) across Long Island Sound is the oldest and most-discussed idea. The latest proposal was abandoned in June, in part because of local opposition.