



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Timothy M. Kennedy

## With American Jobs Plan Poised to Move Forward in Washington, Higgins, Kennedy, Peoples-Stokes, & Brown Call for NYSDOT to Expedite Environmental Impact Statement for Route 33 Redesign

TIMOTHY M. KENNEDY June 18, 2021

| ISSUE: **TRANSPORTATION, INFRASTRUCTURE, FEDERAL AID**



BUFFALO, N.Y. – U.S Representative Brian Higgins, New York State Senator Tim Kennedy, Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes, and City of Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown joined together Friday to urge the New York State Department of Transportation to expedite the Environmental Impact Statement concerning the redesign of a portion of Route 33 designated as the Kensington Expressway. The federal, state, and city leaders emphasized

that Buffalo needs to have shovel-ready infrastructure projects identified and approved immediately in order to quickly and efficiently secure any incoming federal dollars from the American Jobs Plan. All four leaders underscored the need for significant federal and state investment in the Expressway's transformation in order to reconnect the surrounding neighborhoods and reimagine the vision for the historic parkway.

Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes said "Redesigning Route 33 is a unique opportunity to address the generational harm done by the Kensington Expressway when it tore into the Martin Luther King and Hamlin Park neighborhoods. Restoring these communities is a matter of racial justice, quality of life, environmental health, and community development. Prioritizing investments in the redesign of Route 33 will significantly help to correct these injustices."

"Under the Biden Administration, we've seen an unprecedented commitment to the future of our nation's infrastructure, and a dedication to correcting injustices that have divided hundreds of thousands of communities for decades. When the American Jobs Plan advances, it's imperative that we're forging ahead as a unified front, with a vision for the future and a strong sense of how we want to move our region forward together," said Senator Tim Kennedy, Senate Transportation Committee Chair. "We need to think about the big picture, and we need to move quickly. By prioritizing investment in the redesign of the 33, we're not only prioritizing the restoration of the quality of life for the surrounding communities, but we're also fueling the return of a robust economy and workforce."

Congressman Brian Higgins said, "We need to position Buffalo to make smart decisions. The EIS process is a required step in making projects eligible for federal funding. It will examine the options and provide opportunities for public feedback. The Biden Administration and Transportation Secretary Buttigieg are leading an effort to right historic transportation wrongs that have divided communities. They can start right here in Buffalo. We need to lay

the groundwork to make that happen.”

Humboldt Parkway was originally designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in 1868 as part of the Buffalo Parks System, connecting Delaware Park to Martin Luther King Jr. Park, formerly Humboldt Park. In the 1950s, construction began on what is now known as Route 33 along the route of Humboldt Parkway, citing a need to relieve increased traffic congestion and maintain housing values. However, groups like the Restore Our Community Coalition (ROCC) point to the opposite effect decades later: decimated housing values in the surrounding community, businesses abandoned, and emerging respiratory illnesses attributed to vehicle emissions.

The American Jobs Plan proposed by President Joe Biden largely focuses on addressing the nation’s aging infrastructure and transportation systems, including the modernization of 20,000 miles of highways, roads, and main streets, and the restoration of accessibility in neighborhoods across the country. The proposal dedicates billions of dollars for programming specifically designed to reconnect neighborhoods cut off by historical injustices such as the Kensington Expressway.

The text of Kennedy’s and People-Stokes’ letter to NYSDOT Commissioner Dominguez is below:

June 18, 2021

Albany, NY 12232

Dear Commissioner Dominguez,

As the State Senator and Member of Assembly representing the Humboldt Park community in the City of Buffalo, we write to respectfully urge you to direct the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) to expeditiously complete an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for proposals to cover the Kensington Expressway between Best Street and East Ferry Street, reconnecting a historic neighborhood that was split in half by the construction of this highway through the path of the former Olmsted-designed Humboldt Parkway.

As you know, the construction of the Kensington Expressway, beginning in the 1950s, was intended to provide improved access to Buffalo's growing suburbs and airport. Unfortunately, that came at the expense of Humboldt Parkway, a tree-lined 1.5 mile road that connected Delaware Park to Martin Luther King Jr. Park, formerly Humboldt Park. With the loss of this Olmsted-designed treasure, property values dropped, air pollution increased, and a community that was once united by a world-class parkway became divided by a below-grade expressway. Indeed, the decision to funnel traffic directly through a residential community meant that historically thriving commercial strips such as Jefferson and Fillmore Avenues lost much of the traffic that contributed to their economic strength. In all, the Kensington Expressway's construction had a significant detrimental impact on the Humboldt Park community.

In April 2016, Governor Cuomo announced \$6 million in funding for an environmental and design assessment of covering this highway. With the Biden Administration now in negotiations with Congress over a robust infrastructure package, including messaging from Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg of the importance of correcting historic injustices, we must strike while the iron is hot. It is imperative that NYSDOT complete an EIS of this project in an expeditious manner so that New York State can pursue the federal matching funds that will be necessary to see a project of this magnitude to fruition.

While this project would likely have a price tag in the hundreds of millions of dollars, we have no doubt that would be money well spent. A 2014 economic impact study by the University at Buffalo Regional Institute Urban Design Project that was funded by NYSDOT found that this project could ultimately have an economic impact of more than \$1.6 billion in 2014 dollars and would, in the immediate term, create nearly 1,000 construction jobs. Additionally, it is expected the project would create tens of millions of dollars in household wealth through appreciated property values, helping a historically marginalized community to build generational wealth.

For these reasons, we strongly urge you to direct NYSDOT staff to expedite the production of an Environmental Impact Statement for a project to cover the Kensington Expressway between Best and East Ferry Streets in the City of Buffalo. Thank you for your attention to this important matter. Should you have any questions, as always, we welcome your call.

Sincerely,

Timothy M. Kennedy	Crystal D. Peoples-Stokes
NYS Senator, 63rd District	NYS Assemblymember, 141st District
Chair, Senate Transportation Committee	Majority Leader