

The Surfside condo collapse and NYC's BQE

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The catastrophic collapse of the Champlain Towers South condominium in Surfside, Fla., should be a serious wake-up call to elected officials who have failed to heed warnings and address our crumbling, dangerous urban infrastructure. While President Biden's infrastructure bill may provide the necessary federal funding to achieve some of these repairs, without local elected leadership and community engagement, many of the most dire projects are at risk of collapse.

We have a glaring example right here in NYC. The triple-cantilever section of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, or BQE, [is in danger of failure](#). This unique feat of engineering features two stacked three-lane highways cantilevered off the bluff of Brooklyn Heights, topped by a third cantilever, the world-famous Promenade with its iconic views of Lower Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty. All of this is perched above the wildly popular tourist destination, Brooklyn Bridge Park, which welcomes more than 5 million visitors a year. This precarious section of the BQE [was designed to carry](#) 47,000 vehicles a day but now carries a whopping 150,000 vehicles daily, including 15,000 trucks. It is not hyperbolic to assume that a collapse of this section could claim the lives of pedestrians above and below the double-decker highway, in addition to countless motorists.



Views of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway and Brooklyn Heights Promenade as seen from Manhattan. (Theodore Parisienne/for New York Daily News)

The conditions described in the Champlain Towers collapse, including spalling concrete, salt and water infiltration, and exposed reinforcing bars, are frighteningly reminiscent of recent engineering assessments of the BQE.

Yet because of the expense and complexity of the project, it has become the proverbial can that has been kicked down the road for longer than 15 years. The city and state are well aware of the situation but cannot work together. Like so many complex problems with no obvious solution, nobody wants to take it on. As New Yorkers know, our current mayor and governor appear to be more interested in besting one another than working collaboratively for our safety.

In 2006, the state Department of Transportation convened a conference of engineers to assess repair options for the cantilever section of the BQE but abandoned the project in 2011, citing a lack of funds. In 2014, the city DOT picked up where the

state left off and in 2016 concluded that the deterioration of the cantilever could cause sections of the road to become unsafe and unable to carry existing levels of traffic by 2026.

In the fall of 2018, the city put forth a repair plan which involved a six-lane highway temporarily replacing the Promenade. This ill-conceived proposal was met with outrage from the communities affected and elected officials. In response to this opposition, Mayor de Blasio appointed an independent Expert Panel in 2019, which reviewed and flatly rejected the “Promenade Highway” proposal and concluded that while the cantilever was indeed in dire need of urgent repairs, its life could be extended with the implementation of traffic-reducing measures and certain repairs. Critically, the panel recommended that the future configuration of the cantilever be considered as just one part of a reimagining of the entire BQE corridor.

As the current federal government prioritizes infrastructure, and the secretary of transportation publicly acknowledges the destructive and racist impacts of past urban highway construction, New Yorkers can look forward to the transformation of the entire BQE corridor — if there is the leadership and political will to do so. This is a historic opportunity to invest in our city’s infrastructure, address the need for more green space, combat climate change and undo historic inequities. Investment of this sort is especially relevant to the historically marginalized communities adjacent to the BQE who have suffered the most from the air and noise pollution wrought by the highway.

But our city must keep us safe while working toward a re-imagined, 21st century BQE corridor. The mayor must agree to the implementation of his own panel’s

recommendations for measures to reduce the stress on the cantilever, now.

To date, the city’s DOT has focused on low-tech monitoring and Band-Aid repairs on some of the most troubling conditions. This past year was a missed opportunity to implement substantial repairs while traffic was at an all-time low. We urge the mayor to take bold measures: limit traffic on the cantilever with lane reductions and close the road to trucks altogether, if necessary, while a longer-term plan is developed. We urge the governor and the state to come to work collaboratively with the city and the impacted communities to finally fix the BQE.

It would be an unforgivable failure of leadership if a collapse occurred because those tasked with keeping us safe failed to act creatively and decisively in the face of known and present dangers.

Jager, Worth and Vogel are among the founding members of The Coalition for the BQE Transformation.