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Opponents Kill Ithaca Highway After Long Fight

Special to The New York Times
Published: July 23, 1989

A large, vocal and relentless group of residents has claimed victory here in a 15-year battle against a four-lane highway.

State transportation officials, announcing that they were dropping plans for a new three-mile section of Route 96 from downtown Ithaca west to Tompkins Community Hospital, cited environmental concerns as their main reason. But the decision headed off a prolonged fight.

If the state had proceeded, "everything we did would be continually challenged," said Richard Simberg, regional director of the Department of Transportation.

Paul Glover, a leader of the highway opposition, said, "We had told them that if they spent the next two years finalizing a highway plan, we would spend the next two years making sure the next city council would be highway opponents."

One goal of the plan was to untangle a bottleneck called "the Octopus," where Route 96 and seven other roads converge at the only bridge over a flood-control channel that divides downtown Ithaca from the city's less-developed western section, where the hospital is.

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Most major institutions in Ithaca, including Cornell University, supported the highway, saying it was needed to provide safe access to the hospital and to accommodate the continuing growth of the city and surrounding Tompkins County.

But opponents fought the highway with many of the symbols of the slow-growth movement that has pervaded Ithaca politics in recent years. At one public hearing this year, a woman dressed as a squirrel to speak against the proposed highway's impact on wildlife.

"It became symbolic of the environmental concerns and attitudes about growth and development," said Daniel Hoffman, a member of the Common Council.

The state now plans to build a second bridge across the flood-control channel to help sort out the Octopus, and it plans to widen the lower end of Route 96, which starts as Cliff Street, a narrow, bumpy two-lane road climbing West Hill to the hospital. But people on both sides of the issue expressed surprise at the state's decision.

"I think the state has had a hard time here in Ithaca, and they want to get something done and get out of here," said the city planner, H. Matthys Van Cort.

"We do want to get going and do something to mitigate some transportation concerns," Mr. Simberg said.

But, he added, the new plan was "probably the best balance between large-scale effects on the environment and doing something that makes transportation better in the area."

Planning for a new Route 96 began in 1947. In 1958, the county hospital moved to the west side of Cayuga Lake, and in the 1960's the Army Corps of Engineers created the Octopus when it dredged a flood-control channel that left only one bridge connecting Ithaca's eastern and western sections.

In 1973, the Ithaca Common Council voted 14 to 0 to urge the state to design and build the four-lane highway immediately. But opponents feared that the highway would encourage development that in turn would threaten the qualities that drew many of them to Ithaca in the first place.

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