

Whose name will go on the new Tappan Zee Bridge?

Thomas C Zambito, The Journal News 5:17 p.m. EST January 8, 2016

State officials won't say if they have picked a name for the new bridge but that hasn't stopped some local officials from getting the debate rolling. How about the Gov. Mario Cuomo Bridge?



(Photo: Tappan Zee Constructors LLC and New York state Thruway Authority)

Quick, what's the full name of the Tappan Zee Bridge?

Give up?

It's the Gov. Malcolm Wilson Tappan Zee Bridge.

Didn't know that? Don't feel too bad. You've got plenty of company.

An unscientific survey in downtown Yonkers — the city where the Republican Wilson staged his political ascent in the late 1930s on the way to representing Westchester County in the state Assembly for 20 years — turned up a half-dozen quizzical looks and just one who knew the bridge was named for Wilson.

"His name rings a bell but I'm not too sure what he did or what he's affiliated with," said Zane Shatz, 18, a college student from Yonkers.

With Wilson's bridge coming down to make way for a new bridge, will anybody notice if his name goes down with the old one? Wilson died in 2000 and last held elected office in 1973.

Like the twin mysteries of how high tolls will go and who's killing the Atlantic Sturgeon, it's one of the unanswered questions still swirling around the new bridge.

And state officials won't say whether there's a plan to rename the bridge.

Montebello Mayor Jeffrey Oppenheim is among those who want the debate to get rolling so that once the twin span is fully opened to traffic in 2018, the naming issue will have already been resolved.

"The dialogue and debate should happen now and not be thrust upon people," Oppenheim said.

There has been talk of naming the bridge for the late folksinger Pete Seeger. The longtime Dutchess Junction resident was 94 when he died a little less than two years ago, on Jan. 27, 2014.

The Grammy winner and civil rights activist enjoyed a career of varied moments and accomplishments, ranging from introducing Martin Luther King Jr. to the song "We Shall Overcome," offering advice on living long to President Obama, and inspiring an album released by Bruce Springsteen.

However, Oppenheim doesn't believe it would be the best way to honor Seeger.

"Why not Pete Seeger?" Oppenheim said. "He probably would have opposed the bridge. Name somebody else. I'm all ears."

Oppenheim, a Republican, has tried to get the discussion going by offering up his own front runner.

But first a quick history lesson: In 1958, Wilson left the Assembly and ran for lieutenant governor, a post he held for nearly 15 years until Rockefeller stepped down in 1973. Wilson would finish out Rockefeller's term, serving little more than a year, before losing the general election to Democrat Hugh Carey the following year. His obituary in the New York Times referred to him as "the enduring No. 2."

Some 20 years later, a group of Westchester County Republicans pushed for the bridge to be named for Wilson. There was bipartisan support for the Fordham University grad whose occasional lapses into Latin may have been a liability in large groups but endeared him to his colleagues, those who remember him say.

Gov. Mario Cuomo would back the plan to rename the bridge for Wilson. Some recall it was actually Cuomo's idea to rename the bridge for Wilson.

"I keep coming back to Mario Cuomo," Oppenheim says. "I really admire the guy for his accomplishments. He's one of the best speakers in New York history ... I admire people who stand on their principle even if I don't agree with their principle. Who's better than Mario Cuomo?"

He doesn't think bridges should be named for the living, which would exclude Cuomo's son, the current Gov. Andrew Cuomo, whose administration spearheaded the bridge project.

How about keeping Wilson's name? "I don't have anything against him," Oppenheim says. "It's a new naming opportunity."

Not so fast, say those who knew Wilson, including his daughter, Katharine Wilson Conroy.

"I would like to see it stay the Malcolm Wilson Tappan Zee Bridge," said Conroy, a White Plains lawyer. "But all I can do is say that. I'm not the boss of anything. It was a well-deserved recognition and that doesn't change."

Conroy said her father had a great affection for the bridge and the role it played in opening up the state to downstate travelers. Soon after the bridge was opened to traffic, Wilson put his family in the car and drove the length of the New York State Thruway for a two-week vacation, with stops along the way, she recalled.

Others say no matter whose name is attached to the bridge the state should find a way to honor Wilson.

Among them is former State Sen. Nick Spano, who sponsored the bill in the Assembly that led to the bridge being named for Wilson. He can still recall

the day the new bridge sign was unveiled. Workers had inadvertently left off the second "I" in Malcolm on the sign commemorating the bridge

"I think it's a call that the current members of the Legislature or the Administration has to make," said Spano. "I think there would be some way to appropriately remember Gov. Wilson. Malcolm Wilson was a member of the Assembly when I was a kid growing up in Yonkers. His roots are in Westchester and he had many friends in Westchester County."

SUNY New Paltz political science professor Gerald Benjamin agrees. Benjamin got to know Wilson after he and Robert Connery published "Rockefeller of New York: Executive Power in the Statehouse" in 1979. Benjamin recalls Wilson gently chiding him for not turning to him more while he was researching the book so he could have gained a greater insight into the inner workings of the Rockefeller administration.

In the years that followed, the two men would spend hours together on an oral history project, as Wilson detailed how state government had changed in the decades since his first election to the Assembly in 1938.

"Malcolm Wilson was a great lieutenant governor and an under-appreciated governor," Benjamin said. "I would be very pleased to see him recognized when the new bridge is opened. He was a person of extraordinary character."

And there are those who think talk about a new name is largely a waste of time since most will continue to use the name commonly associated with the Tappan Zee, itself a nod to the region's Dutch and Native American forebears. Tappan for a Native American tribe and Zee for the Dutch word for a large expanse of water.

Ruben Gonzalez sees no need to change it now, especially since it trips off the tongue with such ease. "It's easy and we're used to it," Gonzalez said, in between selling hot dogs from a cart near the Yonkers train station. "The Tappan Zee Bridge. Take the Tapp."

Philip Plotch agrees. Plotch is the author of a book titled "Politics Across the Hudson," about the current Cuomo Administration's efforts to build a new bridge.

"Once upon a time, we gave most of our river crossings names that explained where they were and what they connected," Plotch said. "Unfortunately, that's changed in the past few years and it confuses people. The Brooklyn Battery Tunnel connects Brooklyn with the Battery in Lower Manhattan. It is now the Hugh L. Carey Tunnel. The Tri-borough Bridge connects three boroughs. That's a brilliant name. It is now the RFK Bridge. It used to be pretty darn easy to find the 59th Street Bridge. Ask someone where the Edward Koch Bridge is and you'll get lots of quizzical looks."

Plotch would just like to keep things simple, avoiding the rancorous debate that would likely follow a member of one political party being chosen over another.

"So, what's a good name for the Rockland-Tarrytown bridge?" Plotch wondered. "How about the Lower Hudson Valley Bridge or the Rockland-Westchester Bridge? Or, maybe we could name it after the estuary and call it the Tappan Zee Bridge."

Who do you think should be honored?

Whose name should go on the new Tappan Zee Bridge? Pete Seeger? Mario Cuomo? Someone else?

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