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Cuomo's Legacy? It May Be Big New York Projects

By **THOMAS KAPLAN** and **PATRICK McGEEHAN** JULY 30, 2015

It is a commonly held belief among political leaders: Long after they have left office, they will be remembered in large part for legacy projects that outlast their political lives, if not their natural ones.

In less than five years, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York, a Democrat, has managed to move ahead on two such projects: a replacement for the Tappan Zee Bridge over the Hudson River between Rockland and Westchester Counties, and an overhaul of La Guardia Airport in Queens.

Political analysts say the governor's penchant for large-scale projects is unmatched among his recent predecessors, and is reminiscent of the administration of Nelson A. Rockefeller, the Republican who was elected to four terms as governor and whose lengthy construction resume included state office buildings and college campuses.

"It's in the sinews of Andrew Cuomo's very way of viewing what the role of a governor is," said Bruce N. Gyory, a political consultant who served in the administrations of three New York governors. "In that sense, we haven't had a governor who had both the interest and the financial underpinnings to sustain a building agenda since Rockefeller."

But Mr. Cuomo's zeal for marquee construction projects has come with some consequences. It remains unclear how, exactly, the state will pay for the estimated

\$3.9 billion Tappan Zee replacement, and how high the tolls may climb for those who cross it.

The state had hoped to use a \$511 million loan from a clean water fund toward the Tappan Zee project, but the federal Environmental Protection Agency rejected most of that plan.

As for the improvements at La Guardia, Mr. Cuomo has said the first phase of the ambitious plan, which involves replacing the central terminal, would cost \$4 billion. In January, he proposed constructing a rail link that would connect the airport to the subway system in Queens; he was vague about where the estimated \$450 million needed to build it would come from.

Likewise, Delta Air Lines has not said how much it would spend to help achieve Mr. Cuomo's vision of a "unified" La Guardia, but the company said this week that it was committed to redeveloping Terminals C and D in conjunction with the replacement of the central terminal.

And then there is the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which continues to have glaring needs in its capital plan.

Yet Mr. Cuomo has seemingly adopted the strategy that voters will remember the big-ticket items, as he seeks to build a legacy out of concrete and steel.

Tom Wright, president of the Regional Plan Association, said Mr. Cuomo had taken a page from the playbook of Robert Moses, New York's master builder, by pushing ahead without working out every financial detail. In the process, Mr. Wright said, the governor was bucking the tendency of "policy wonks" who "let the perfect be the enemy of the good and spread their limited resources around instead of concentrating on a couple key strategic priorities."

Mr. Cuomo's willingness to team up with private builders and to press state and federal agencies to accelerate the approval processes that govern major infrastructure projects had increased the likelihood that he will be remembered for taking on such big jobs, Mr. Wright said.

"He is changing attitudes about infrastructure by actually solving problems,"

Mr. Wright said.

As the governor tells it, his desire to build is bolstered by history. He speaks fondly, and often, about the Erie Canal, citing it as a symbol of the state's legacy of tackling seemingly insurmountable challenges.

"We lost that energy," the governor said in a speech on Tuesday. "We lost that mojo. Now we're getting it back."

Mr. Cuomo has called the Tappan Zee replacement a "metaphor for government performance." He has even gone so far as to suggest that fundamental human lessons can be extracted from the undertaking, calling it "a story about life."

"You can actually accomplish what you set your mind to," he said in June.

Mr. Cuomo's approach to construction projects has resembled his handling of other issues.

He moves with great speed, leaving little space for public deliberation; government, he has said, "is not a debating society." He overhauled the state's income tax in a matter of days and won passage of sweeping gun control legislation only weeks after the school shooting in Newtown, Conn. (though key elements of that law turned out to be unworkable).

Mr. Cuomo's record on big projects is not unblemished. In 2012, he unveiled plans to build the nation's largest convention center at the Aqueduct racetrack in Queens. Within months, those plans had fallen apart.

He has also disappointed transit advocates by showing limited interest in the future of the transportation authority. More than halfway through his first year as governor, he admitted that he had not taken a single ride on the subway during his time in office.

For much of this year, he did not address how he planned to finance the agency's capital plan. Recently, he called on New York City to increase its contribution to that plan. He said the state would pay billions of dollars, but has given little indication about where the money would come from.

“His infrastructure legacy will ultimately hinge on what he does with the subways,” said Nicole Gelinias, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, a right-leaning think tank. “Allowing them to deteriorate really harms New Yorkers’ quality of life more so than an airport that’s in bad condition.”

Gerald Benjamin, a political scientist at the State University of New York at New Paltz, said he would rather see the state’s financial resources go first to fixing the subway system. But, he acknowledged, “You get credit for things you build, not things you maintain.”

The governor’s father, former Gov. Mario M. Cuomo, is not remembered for getting things built, with the exception of prisons, Professor Benjamin said.

“My criticism of him was that he thought everything was important, so nothing was important,” he said of Mario Cuomo. Andrew Cuomo, the professor said, is “not subject to the same criticism that his dad was; he has priorities and he takes risks for the priorities.”

In pursuing big construction projects, Governor Cuomo may be afforded another legacy-building opportunity: naming them.

The Tappan Zee is officially known as the Gov. Malcolm Wilson Tappan Zee Bridge. Whether the governor might want its replacement to bear the name of another governor — Mario Cuomo, for example — remains to be seen.

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