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The parkway: Heartbreak on a road never built for the way it's used today

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**Sean Kirst / The Post-Standard**

Jim Commentucci/The Post-Standard

A shattered Megabus is towed away Saturday after the collision with an Onondaga Parkway railroad bridge that claimed four lives.

The fear of tragedy on Onondaga Lake Parkway has been out there for years. You can dig through old clips of The Post-Standard or The Herald-Journal, going back for a few decades, and find voices that warned about what might be coming.

In 1989, after a tractor-trailer collided with a low-hanging railroad bridge above the parkway, a state engineer named Ray McDougall said the only answer might be a kind of mechanical arm that could provide a warning. "It can't be put off any longer," McDougall said. In 1994, following another burst of accidents, state traffic engineer Barry Stevens warned of a "catastrophe" if a truck carrying hazardous waste were ever to slam into the bridge.

And Bill Sanford — then-chairman of the Onondaga County legislature — had an eerily prescient observation in 1995, following a span in which several trucks rammed into the bridge:

"We've sat here for 14 years and watched two to three trucks a year hit it and we kind of brushed it off because no

one gets killed," said Sanford, who called for hanging chains above the road to alert distracted drivers.

The disaster Sanford feared came to be Friday night. A two-level Megabus — operated by a driver whom investigators believe had lost his way — drove full-speed into the bridge in the middle of the night. The bus was filled with sleeping passengers. Four people died, including two teen-agers, a minister and a man from India who had called his wife as he traveled earlier in the day.

Over the years, civic officials routinely called for mechanical arms or chains that might stop oversized vehicles as they neared the low-hanging bridge. Those ideas were studied and rejected, said Stevens, the now-retired state traffic expert. "Our main concern involved with hanging something was the high speed involved," he said. The fear was that potential damage to a truck — or the chance of shattered equipment on the parkway — might be as dangerous as the bridge itself.

The state turned instead to a system of signs and painted warnings that Stevens said dramatically reduced the number of accidents.

Certainly, the dead and injured will compel immediate talk about safety. Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney said Sunday that her thoughts are with the victims, and with municipal rescue crews sent into a traumatic situation. Yet Mahoney also voiced a thought shared by many of us over the past few days:

"I'm not an engineer," she said. "But it just seems as if — with all the brilliant minds we have today, solving what seem to be much bigger problems — that we can solve this one."

Beyond technological questions, the core issue in this tragedy involves civic evolution that outpaced the reach of planners. The road was never built for the way that it's used now. Dennis Connors, curator of history for the Onondaga Historical Association, said the railroad bridge was constructed to allow barges to pass on the old Oswego Canal. In the 1920s, when civic leader Joe Griffin proposed replacing the canal with a scenic parkway, his vision was for a restricted, low-speed road on which the passage of trucks would not be an issue.

The original parkway was lined with attractions, Connors said. Motorists were encouraged to dawdle and pull over. But the community changed dramatically after World War II. The General Electric plant on Electronics Parkway expanded to thousands upon thousands of employees. A wave of city residents moved to Liverpool and the northern suburbs. The parkway turned into a fast if less than ideal commuter route, with a former canal bridge that served as a nemesis of truckers.

For civic officials, the question today — one raised to terrible prominence by the dead and injured — is deciding exactly what the parkway should be. If it is a commercial road, fine. Spend the millions needed for some kind of permanent remedy at the bridge. If it truly is a scenic parkway, make it one. Ban all commercial traffic, and use gates or other means of enforcement to prevent oversized buses and trucks from entering the road.

Linked to it all is a separate question: Is the parkway even the highest use of that land? Across the nation, many communities — notably Niagara Falls — have removed parkways that cut off access to prime waterfront areas. If Onondaga Lake continues to recover, should the parkway be reduced to two lanes, as officials discussed informally

during the tenure of former county executive Nick Pirro? Should the road be relieved of its designation as Route 370, or would switching that obligation to other roads be intolerable to Liverpool residents and merchants?

Those choices, long simmering, need to be aired out now. If nothing else, we owe it to the people on the bus.

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