

The Tobin Bridge
Its History and Politics

by

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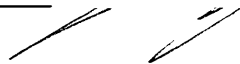
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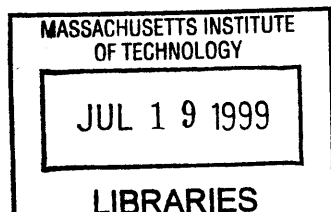
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Abstract

The Tobin Bridge was a significant transportation improvement which gave automobile travelers from Chelsea and the North Shore unprecedented high-speed access to Boston. Through the first 50 years of the 20th century, Chelsea wanted a high-speed bridge but could not afford to build one, and also could not convince the state of Massachusetts or the city of Boston to finance a new bridge.

In 1946, the state legislature created the Mystic River Bridge Authority, a public authority which built a high-level bridge by issuing bonds whose repayment was based upon expected toll revenues. The construction process was briefly delayed by protests from community members and their elected representatives, who objected to the residential displacements the bridge caused. The Mystic River Bridge opened in February, 1950, and was renamed the Maurice J. Tobin Bridge in 1967.

Thesis Supervisor: Tunney F. Lee

Title: Professor Emeritus of City Planning

Introduction

Chelsea, Massachusetts is a small city less than two miles from Boston. In the Boston region today, there are primarily two ways to refer to Chelsea in conversations with people who aren't familiar with it. One is to explain that Chelsea is the city that the state took over in 1991 – its government, city coffers, public services, and educational system were such a mess that the state of Massachusetts literally took over the city – the mayor lost his job, the city charter was voided, and an enormous financial bailout characterized the “state receivership” of Chelsea in the minds of many.

The other common way to describe Chelsea is by acknowledging the enormous bridge towering over it: The Maurice J. Tobin Memorial Bridge. Many people who drive up or down the east coast use The Tobin Bridge – it connects coastal Route 1 to downtown Boston and the highway system of the metropolitan region. Many more who don't drive over the Tobin Bridge see it from Interstate 93; along with the Bunker Hill monument, it's one of the great landmarks signifying one's proximity to Boston. Many who use the Tobin Bridge – even those who use it daily – soar at high speeds through the steel cage of the bridge, never thinking to use the Chelsea off-ramp or even realizing there's a city distinct from Boston, down there. The Tobin Bridge was the transportation “breakthrough” which had been on the wish list for Chelsea residents, politicians, and businesspeople for generations. Then one day, they got their wish.

The impacts of the bridge's construction on the city of Chelsea are still being felt today. Families can still recall the day their houses were torn down to make way for the bridge. Some residents remember the day their house was moved – trucked from one lot to another – breaking up neighbors and neighborhoods irreparably. The city lost

acres of prime waterfront land to the bridge's infrastructure, negatively affecting the value of nearby properties and permanently losing millions of dollars of property tax revenue, contributing to the city's economic downfall in the 1980's. There is no accurate way to measure the changes in quality of life that occurred when the bridge opened in 1950, casting its shadow on the streets below and accommodating millions of cars, with their associated noise and exhaust pollution. Many describe the city as being literally divided in two by the bridge and its associated access roads – and today there are distinct industrial uses to the west of the bridge, and residential areas to the east.

Yet it's difficult to deny the benefits of the bridge – it provides fast and direct access into Boston for commuters from Chelsea and the populous North Shore cities, and particularly for the trucks which serve much of Chelsea's growing industrial sector. Although its current owner, the Massachusetts Port Authority, had to renege on its original promise to make the bridge toll-free, it's difficult to find fault with the stunningly cheap \$1.00 toll (southbound only, it's free northbound)*. And the bridge provides a route for Chelsea's most popular bus line, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's #111 to downtown Boston, which is especially popular with Chelsea's Latin-speaking and Southeast Asian immigrant population. And Jay Ash, Chelsea's Director of Planning and Development, says unequivocally that Chelsea would not be attracting the job-creating and tax-paying businesses it is now if it weren't for The Tobin Bridge.

* By comparison, New York's Verrazano Narrows Bridge charges \$7.00. In Boston, the Callahan and Sumner tunnels charge \$2.00. Joshua Schank, of MIT's Center for Transportation Studies, suggests that the expected toll for the Tobin Bridge, reflecting inflation, maintenance costs and capital improvements, should be \$3.00.

The Tobin Bridge, originally called the Mystic River Bridge, has been both a boon and a bane for the city of Chelsea. Many people in Chelsea still believe that they were taken advantage of – scapegoated to bear this disproportionate burden of the region’s transportation needs because they were a small and inconsequential city. How did this bridge, which in many ways directly responded to the requests of Chelsea residents, get built? What was the process used by transportation officials, politicians, and the public to build a bridge that, many contend, broke more connections than it created?

This paper tells the story of where The Maurice J. Tobin Memorial Bridge came from, who built it, and the pressures exerted on it by different parties. Although a huge public infrastructure project, it was only one in a long line of Boston-based projects, such as , filling in the Back Bay to create hundreds of acres of neighborhoods, building the country’s first subway, and digging the Sumner Tunnel from downtown to the airport. But in many ways it set standards, and provided the lesson plans, for the region’s post-WWII infrastructure projects. Its construction raised, for the first time in the modern automobile era, issues of residential displacement, public good, regional cooperation, and modern financing strategies. Politicians and residents of Chelsea, Boston and neighboring communities learned many lessons from the Tobin Bridge experience, and would apply those lessons to numerous projects to follow – from prohibiting the Inner Belt freeway, to Urban Renewal in Chinatown and the West End, to the Ted Williams Tunnel and Central Artery project. Knowing in what ways the Tobin Bridge set precedents and drew battle lines helps illuminate these issues.

Early History

In 1631, Chelsea, Massachusetts, a rural, hilly hinterland, inaugurated a new transportation link to the city of Boston: a ferry believed to be the first in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (Pratt, p. 5). The land route to Boston from Chelsea was long and circuitous, requiring travel on poor roads which made the journey slow.

Amazingly, though Chelsea was barely 1.5 miles from Boston over water, the road to Boston went through four cities (Medford, Everett, Cambridge, and Roxbury) and covered nearly 20 miles. The boggy marshes of Chelsea's shores covered even the permanent roads much of the time, and transporting wagons heavy with goods was almost impossible. As a result, Chelsea remained a fairly isolated farming town, with a small resident population and not much relationship with Boston to the south or populous settlements, such as Salem, to the north.

Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the ferry service expanded, though it was never sufficient to contribute to any significant population growth in Chelsea. But even the small populations in Chelsea and other northern cities depended on the ferry for access. "The ferry was not merely for the conveyance of the people of [Chelsea], for before the opening of the Salem and Newburyport turnpike to Boston, about 1803, it was the only means of direct travel between Boston, Salem, Portsmouth, and the whole eastern country" (Pratt, 7). Already, Chelsea's transportation "systems" were being seen as a 'through-way' to points further north, and Chelsea was merely providing the launching point.

Towards the end of the 19th century Chelsea land owners, particularly along the waterfront, found their land was much more valuable to industries looking to relocate

out of crowded Boston waterfront locations than it was to farmers and the Boston elite who maintained “vacation” homes in the still somewhat remote town. Landowners in Chelsea began filling in the marshy waterfront land and converting it to industrial uses, capitalizing on the river access from the Boston Harbor. Simultaneously, foreign immigration to Boston was increasing, and many hard-working immigrants were attracted to Chelsea’s affordable housing and plentiful industrial jobs.

By the early 1900’s, Chelsea was well-established as a small but self-sufficient city dependent upon industry, and particularly waterfront industry. Its relationship with Boston was less residential and more industrial – as few residents in Chelsea worked in Boston and vice versa. Chelsea had a distinct population, heavy with Irish, Russian, Italian, and Eastern European immigrants, most of whom worked right in Chelsea. Chelsea’s industries were important to the region, particularly as home heating fuel storage and distribution, concentrated on the waterfront, and easily accessible to large ships and oil tankers, became more important. The conflict between the need to maintain ship access up the Chelsea and Mystic Rivers, with the need to maintain a through-way to points north for automobile travelers throughout the region, would lead to transportation problems whose solutions required Chelsea to look beyond its own self-sufficiency.

The First Bridge

The first bridge between Boston and Chelsea was built in 1803 as a private toll bridge spanning the neck of the Mystic River from Chelsea’s ferry launch to Charlestown. It was a floating bridge, which could be rotated to allow small ships through to points further upriver. As traffic heading north out of the city increased through the 1800’s, the

bridge became more important as a regional thoroughfare. In 1869, the Salem Turnpike collected its last bridge toll and turned ownership and maintenance of the bridge over to the city of Boston (Chelsea Library archives).

As the nineteenth century came to a close, Chelsea's industry was significant and so was its residential population. The demands for water travel were growing, and ship building technology was creating heavier and larger ships for transporting large amounts of industrial goods. Traffic congestion on the drawbridge, including streetcars, horses, and a growing number of automobiles, was getting noticeably bad by the opening years of the 1900's, and many businessmen in Chelsea believed that better waterway access to its industrial sites upriver was needed. (Pratt, page?)

In 1911, a much-upgraded Chelsea North drawbridge was opened. The new bridge featured a draw that created two 125' channels when fully opened (House, 1934, no. 176). Although this bridge represented state-of-the-art technology at the time, the "art" of bridge-building was changing rapidly. Within 10 years of its opening, the drawbridge was insufficient to accommodate both the growing automobile traffic which demanded the draw closed, and the ever-increasing river traffic which demanded the draw raised. In an attempt to mitigate the automobile back-ups it created, regulations were enacted which limited the hours when the draw could be raised. Still, few were satisfied with the bridge (Chelsea Library Archives).

Those in Boston were still looking to Chelsea as the "through-way" to points further north, and as the northern gateway to the great city that was the Hub of the world, or at

least the northeast at that time. As early as 1922, residents of Chelsea and surrounding cities were advocating for a new, more efficient bridge. (*Record*, 2/25/50).

The 1933 Bridge Report

Despite the need for improvements, no significant changes (other than routine repairs) were made to the bridge through the first third of the 20th century. In June 1933, the State Legislature established a special commission “to investigate the matter of constructing a new bridge, with or without draws, over the Mystic river from a point... in Charlestown... to a point... in Chelsea”. The commission was charged also with considering “whether it is feasible so to reconstruct the present bridge over said river between said Charlestown district and said city of Chelsea as to make it adequate for traffic requirements.” This commission was significant in several ways.

First, it indicated that there was a regional outlook to improving transportation systems in the Boston metropolitan area. That the commission was comprised of representatives from Boston, Chelsea, and Revere by mandate demonstrates the adjacent cities’ interdependence and their willingness to work together on a regional issue.

Second was its attribution to the state House of Representatives. This did not necessarily imply that the bridge was of *statewide* concern, as much as it reinforced the extent to which the state government was truly Boston-centric. Appropriating state resources to the commission (although the commissioners were unpaid, they were allocated \$5,000 to carry out the study) signified the importance of this bridge in the minds of powerful local politicians – and their willingness to allocate statewide

resources to the Boston metropolitan area. The act forming the commission went on to read:

[The commission] shall inquire as to whether the newly constructed or reconstructed bridge, in view of the fact that it will serve as part of a main route of travel, should be taken over and maintained by the commonwealth.

As early as 1933, the “imaginary” replacement bridge was seen as important enough to warrant the support of a larger authority (and budget) than the city of Chelsea, and even the city of Boston, could provide.

By December 1, 1933 the commissioners had filed their report, with comments on the adequacy of the existing bridge and their recommendations for a new bridge. Their report concluded that the traffic congestion associated with the Chelsea North drawbridge was unacceptable, and “there is undoubtedly an appreciable financial loss to those who habitually use the structure” (House, 1933, no. 176). The detailed accounts of bridge openings, numbers of cars using it daily, and length of automobile delays far overshadow the single statement devoted to concern about industrial needs for the region: “This results in some delay to water-borne traffic, and may influence industries dependent upon water transportation against locating above the bridges”. The emphasis was on improved automobile traffic routes for the Boston region, with only a secondary concern for river traffic.

The commission’s report proposed three possible schemes to remedy the problem of traffic congestion on the bridges. Scheme One involved rebuilding the approaches to the existing bridge, and raising the whole bridge higher, so that many ships (about 40% of the ships that year) which required draw openings could then pass through with the

bridge in its closed position. Along with some necessary road improvements on Broadway in Chelsea, the cost was estimated at just under \$1 million.

Scheme Two involved rebuilding the Chelsea North bridge at 31 feet higher than it was, plus widening it so that more cars could pass at a time when it was in closed position. The drawspan would still have been opened regularly, though (as above) for fewer numbers of ships, and the total cost was estimated to be just under \$4 million. The commissioners pointed out that both Schemes One and Two would have required a sustained bridge closure, so a second "temporary" bridge would have been built to allow traffic through until the drawbridge was re-opened.

Scheme Three called for construction of a new, high-level bridge which the commissioners refer to as a "viaduct", to be modeled after the New Jersey viaducts over the Passaic and Hackensack rivers. The new bridge was to be built high enough to eliminate the need for draws, so river traffic and road traffic would not affect each other. An additional benefit to Scheme Three was that the Chelsea North bridge would continue to function throughout construction, eliminating the need for a "temporary" bridge at considerable expense.

According to the report, Scheme Three was estimated to cost \$7.75 million, and surpassed Schemes One and Two in terms of benefit to the public. The commissioners acknowledged, however, that financial times were tight for the state (and indeed for the country in 1933), and so recommended building the high-level bridge at some future time when financing was more easily obtained. In the meantime, they recommended emergency repairs for the short-term safety and protection of its users. The report

concluded with a proposal for an Act authorizing the city of Boston to repair the bridge, with 50% of the cost paid by the state and the remaining 50% paid by Boston and neighboring cities.

There was a dissenting view, however. Although Chelsea's city engineer James O'Brien agreed with the above estimation and recommendation, Leo Bayles Reilly, the city of Boston's bridge engineer, submitted a dissenting Minority Report to the Legislature. In it, he estimated a cost of at least \$8.5 million for the new high-level bridge. More importantly, he was the first to call significant attention to the land damages which this new bridge would have required, both on the Charlestown end (where Reilly worried publicly about the fate of the Catholic churches, convents, and public schools which were "in its path or under its shadow") and the Chelsea side. In his Minority Report, Reilly suggests that:

On the Chelsea end, to make this plan do what it is intended it should do, it would be necessary to widen its approach through Chelsea Square and Bellingham Square to the Revere Beach Parkway, entailing new expense which could not be considered at this time.

More importantly, Reilly purported that a big new bridge would only encourage a "bypass" of the cities (Boston and Chelsea), by removing from the city streets "tourists and others who, if brought into the city proper, would add to its business". He stated that Scheme II is the best option – yet he goes on to stipulate that, *if* the new bridge must be built, then the state should pay for its construction, since no local city would benefit from it at all.

Reilly concluded his minority report by recommending that, indeed, the state should take over the entire bridge rebuilding project, creating a state highway of Chelsea Street from City Square, Charlestown to City Square, Chelsea, including a rebuilding of the Chelsea North drawbridge per Scheme II.

Support Builds for New Bridge

Weeks after receiving the special commission's report, the Legislature passed a bill early in 1934 calling for emergency repairs to the Chelsea North drawbridge, with the costs split between the state, Boston, and Chelsea. Unfortunately, the repairs took over one year, and the Chelsea North bridge was closed to traffic the entire time. Residents of Chelsea complained loudly, accusing the Boston Public Works Department of focusing its energy on the Sumner Tunnel to East Boston, keeping the bridge purposely out of commission so that the tunnel would be seen as a greater asset to the region. Chelsea officials worked hard to lobby state and city officials to keep the bridge repairs on track, and it was re-opened about twelve months later in 1935. (*On The Job*, 6).

At the height of the Great Depression, officials and politicians concluded there was simply not enough money to consider building a high-level bridge (LA 3-7350). As the state oversaw the repairs to the Bridge, politicians and local leaders deliberated over the best way to re-build the bridge. Support and endorsement of a new, high-level bridge began to swell through the ranks of state and local political and municipal offices. Every year throughout the 1930's, the State House of Representatives received petitions from local businessmen, city councilmen, and even, in 1941, Boston Mayor James Curley. Each time the petition was heard, submitted, and then deferred to the next annual session.

One regular petitioner of the State Legislature was Chelsea's Chamber of Commerce, whose representatives hoped for a "high suspension bridge" to alleviate traffic congestion and to enhance business opportunities along Broadway. This was in opposition to Reilly's position that a new high level bridge would re-route traffic away from Chelsea's shopping district. The Chamber of Commerce attempted to align themselves with politicians and action groups such as the Boston Maritime Association to create the critical mass needed to have new bridge legislation enacted (*On The Job*, 6).

One of the political allies in favor of a new bridge was state representative Edward A. McCarthy, representing Chelsea. In early 1941, he submitted a bill for a high-level bridge to the state legislature. McCarthy's plan estimated the cost at \$13 million, and depended on funds from the federal government's Public Works Authority to cover up to forty-five percent of the total cost (*Record*, 2/25/50). That bill received approval from the House, but was rejected by the Senate, despite the fact that Senator Edward Staves, a powerful local politician and chairman of the committee on highways and motor vehicles, supported it.

After the defeat of this bill, McCarthy and his colleague Representative Patrick E. Cronin of Chelsea strategized on ways to get a new bridge. They concluded that the only way to get the necessary state or federal support would be to build a toll bridge, whereas the Chelsea North bridge was still toll-free. This appears to be the first time in the history of Mystic river bridge proposals that tolls were discussed as a way of building financial support for the bridge. It was through the efforts of these Chelsea

politicians that initial plans for the creation of a bridge-building authority were discussed, wherein the tolls collected could go towards the cost of the bridge.

Spearheading the opposition to such a plan, even in this preliminary stage, Senator Robert L. Lee, a Charlestown Republican, immediately responded that such a large bridge, one that could collect tolls and encourage high-speed travel, would require displacing over 500 families. He pointed to the acute depression-era housing shortage as reason enough to preclude the building of any bridge (*Record*, 2/25/50).

After intense debates in early July 1941, the Senate approved a resolution instructing the commonwealth's Division of Metropolitan Planning to "investigate the advisability and feasibility of the laying out and construction of a bridge over the Mystic River". They were given only 2 weeks to come up with the preliminary plans and report them to the General Court. The Division had apparently been working on their own bridge plans, because it easily met the deadline with many detailed plans on file within days of the resolution.

Their plans (Proposed Bridge Boston to Chelsea, Plan No. 196) called for a high-level bridge, with associated improvements in roadways on both the Chelsea and Boston side. The plans were referred to in great detail in the follow-up legislative proposal of July 15, 1941. That was the first time any proposal has gotten beyond the petition stage in the state house, and it was endorsed strongly by the Chelsea Chamber of Commerce, Senator Staves and other bridge advocates in public hearings (CLCF). Although the proposed legislation was no doubt considered a breakthrough in the efforts by many to

get a bridge built, it was a meager 3 1/2 pages in length, with generalized directives and absent of necessary details.

This piece of legislation called for the state's Department of Public Works to lay out and construct a bridge across the Mystic River substantially similar to the plans drawn up by the Division of Metropolitan Planning. Under this legislation, the Public Works Department would have the authority to purchase or take by eminent domain such lands as it deemed necessary. The construction would be funded by a typical debt structure, dependent upon issuance of state bonds. The department was to obtain any federal funding available, and borrow the remainder, not exceeding \$10.1 million. After completion, the bridge would operate as a state highway and a toll bridge, with all revenue going to the public works department for debt service on the bonds and ongoing operating costs for the bridge (House, 1946, no. 746).

This act, proposed hurriedly during the summer before the U.S. entered WWII, did not pass, and no further plans were made, publicly, for constructing a high-level bridge for several years. It was not until several years later, when Senator Edward W. Staves got involved with the Post-War Highway Commission that the bridge had the necessary political clout to become a serious proposal (*Globe*, CLCF, 1949).

Public Authorities

In addition to the lack of statewide political endorsement, there were numerous other reasons why building a new high-level bridge had not become a high priority through the 1930's. Among them were some local objections, exemplified by Reilly's references to the displacement of buildings and people in the bridge's path in both Charlestown

and Chelsea. Another was the difficulty of mustering support for such an expensive project - neither city could afford to build the bridge, and some argued that since it would benefit only Boston and environs, it should not be a state bridge or highway. Finally, there were the logistical impediments - the Boston department of Public Works was in the process of building the East Boston (Sumner) tunnel, a major undertaking which would tax the engineering and management skills of the entire department even after its opening in 1936.

Getting the Mystic River bridge project off the ground required a plan that solved for each of those variables simultaneously. Fortunately, in the 1930's, a relatively new government entity was emerging nationwide as the method of choice for accomplishing major public infrastructure projects – the Public Authority.

Public authorities* are entities characterized by substantial autonomy from government control (whether federal, state, or local government), a broadly defined mandate to serve the public, and an organizational structure which combines elements of private firms along with public agencies. Most importantly, they are able to raise capital from private investors (usually by issuing public bonds) to finance public projects, and pay returns based on revenues from the investment. These revenues typically come from collecting fees or tolls to cover payments to the investors at a fixed interest rate (Porter et. al, v; Walsh, 4).

* Public authorities are one type of Special District. Although Massachusetts never had a public authority before, since 1893 they boasted the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC), a special district devoted to the acquisition, maintenance, and operation of public park land throughout the Boston region. The MDC never sold bonds to finance its operations.

Commonly considered the most famous public authority, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey was established in 1921 and responsible for such massive infrastructure projects as the Holland Tunnel and the George Washington Bridge (Doig, 31). Another famous "authority" was the Tennessee Valley Authority, the pet project which President Franklin D. Roosevelt pushed through Congress in 1933 to help alleviate the economic effects of the Great Depression (Walsh, 27). In both of these cases, the only "permission" needed from the government is passage of an enabling legislation. Once it is legally able to exist, and as long as it meets its obligations to its bondholders, an authority is typically able to operate independently and efficiently, without the encumbrances of government regulation, debt limits, and undue political influences.

One public authority which had a great success in 1937 was the Golden Gate Bridge and Highway District, formed in 1928 after San Francisco politicians pushed enabling legislation through the state legislature some 14 years earlier (Bollens, 80). Building the Golden Gate Bridge was a national obsession – highlighting the growing reliance on automobiles, the need for urban (later sub-urban) expansion, and the engineering prowess of a nation empowered by industrial successes. On the east coast, New York City had a great deal of glory from its famous and beautiful Brooklyn Bridge, plus the recent completion of the George Washington Bridge. Yet Boston, the "Hub of the Universe", had no famous bridge of its own. And until 1946, Massachusetts didn't have a public authority, either (*Record*, 2/25/50).

Mystic River Bridge Authority

Although the legislative proposals for a new bridge from Boston to Chelsea were popular, there seemed to be no way to fund them. While the nation was involved with the second World War, politicians in Boston were putting together legislation which would create the Mystic River Bridge Authority, with the express purpose of constructing a "high level toll bridge between the cities of Boston and Chelsea over the Mystic River". Specifically, this Act was endorsed by the Postwar Highway Commission, a group of state representatives and consulting engineers which required a multi-lane bridge with no draw in order to complete their plan for highway access into Boston from the north, east, and west.

The Mystic River Bridge Authority (MRBA) was authorized by the Senate on June 14, 1946 *. To garner support for the formation of the MRBA, local officials promised that if the state of Massachusetts didn't take this opportunity to finance and build a bridge navigable by large ships, they would be forced to do it by the U.S. War Department as a matter of national security (related to restricted waterway access into Boston Harbor), and at that point would not have the luxury of creating a debt-service structure which relied on no public monies (*Post*, CLCF). The Act itself contained an Emergency Preamble, stating:

...To remove the critical hazards and handicaps in vehicular traffic between the cities of Boston and Chelsea by providing for the construction of a modern high level bridge *without cost to the commonwealth or to either of said cities*, ... this act is hereby declared to be an emergency law necessary for the immediate preservation of the public safety and convenience". (italics added for emphasis)

* Many years later, in a personal interview, Former Chairman of the MRBA Ephraim Brest admitted that passing the act took the form of a very informal voice vote. As a result, the state representatives "thought

This is technically the first authority in the state, and the first Massachusetts project to be financed without any federal or state monies, relying strictly on revenue from tolls so that only the users of the bridge would pay for it (LA 3-7350). (The second authority came in 1948 with the Nantucket, New Bedford, and Martha's Vineyard Steamship Authority, still years before William Callahan proposed the Turnpike Authority to build an high-speed toll road from Boston to New York.) Interestingly, Massachusetts was one of the last states to pass authority-enabling legislation in the post-New Deal era, (Walsh, 28), and revenue-dependent transportation projects had already been built in at least 25 other states by the time the MRBA was formed (LA 3-7350).

Specifically, the MRBA was given the charge of constructing, maintaining, repairing and operating a new bridge without the credit of the state or any political subdivision thereof - meaning that the MRBA must issue "bridge revenue bonds" to pay for its undertakings, and the state would assume no liability for paying off any debt. The Act dictates there will be five Board members, including one Boston and one Chelsea resident, no more than two from the same political party, and the specific expiration dates of each appointment. Importantly, the Act also exempts the Authority from paying any "taxes or assessments upon the project or any property acquired or used by the authority under the provisions of this act,... or the revenue bonds issues under the provisions of this act (including any profit made on the sale thereof)". Finally, the Act carefully acknowledges that

When all bridge revenue bonds... issued under the provisions of this act and the interest thereon shall have been paid or a sufficient amount for the payment of all such bonds shall have been set aside in trust for the benefit of the

they were voting for a study, not the actual project. There was a great uproar when they realized what had happened." (Sullivan, p. 12)

bondholders, the bridge... shall become a part of the state highway system and *shall be maintained by said department free of tolls*, and thereupon the authority shall be dissolved...

The MRBA consisted of four appointees of Governor Maurice Tobin, as follows:

Ephraim Brest, Chairman; a Boston businessman;
Colonel Earle. R. Barnard, Vice-chairman; director of dormitories at Boston University;
Frank Ramacorti, a Boston attorney and Arlington native;
John F. Donovan, Chelsea's city solicitor;
and
Joseph F. Cairnes, who occupied the standing position for the Commissioner of the State Department of Public Works.

Each position paid \$20/day, to a maximum yearly salary of \$4,000. The income limitations were to contribute to the "non-political" nature of the Board, implying that there would be no financial motivation to represent the MRBA, but only one of civic duty. (In 1949, Donovan would be appointed the full-time Executive Director of the bridge, and his place on the Authority board filled by Judge Frank Crowley of Chelsea).

Highway Plans

Under Brest's leadership, the MRBA immediately began an intensive effort to finalize financing and engineering plans for the new bridge. Between June 1946 and February 1948, most plans for the bridge were completed, by working in complement with city and state departments such as the Department of Public Works and the Post-War Highway Commission. Around the same time the Mystic River Bridge effort was formulated and approved by politicians in the state house, the Post-War Highway Commission debuted the Master Highway Plan for the Boston Metropolitan Area, a document whose objectives were dependent on a new, high-speed bridge.

Published in early 1948, the Master Highway Plan is the first attempt at planning state and federal highways for the Boston region (43). Intended to serve as “the backbone of the highway transportation network”, the Master Plan proposes a series of radial highways connecting planned federal interstates with regional roadways, facilitating automobile access into and out of Boston (43). Specifically, the plan laid out the “Northeast Expressway”, an expressway connecting Boston with the cities of “Lynn and the resort area along the North Shore”. The Mystic River Bridge was an integral part of the Northeast Expressway. In 1948,

A considerable amount of traffic otherwise use(s)... Route 1A and the Sumner Tunnel due to the congestion encountered in passing through Charlestown and Chelsea via the Chelsea Bridge. ...When a new northeast expressway is completed a large portion of this traffic will be diverted from the Sumner Tunnel because of the more direct route provided...furnish(ing) needed relief to the Sumner Tunnel.
(58)

Many in Chelsea, Boston, and the surrounding communities saw the Mystic River Bridge as the integral, yet missing, link which would connect northern communities along the Massachusetts coastline with the expressway west along the Charles River (Storrow Drive) and the proposed Inner Belt. (Chelsea General Plan, 21; Master Highway Plan, 58). The Mystic River bridge gained the support of many state representatives because of the regional outlook of the Master Highway Plan. A year or two later, when local issues would complicate the bridge’s construction, local politicians found themselves pitted against powerful coalitions representing statewide concerns and without much sympathy for the plight of small-town residents or their elected officials.

Building a Bridge

As early as January, 1947, the MRBA had surveyors near the existing Chelsea North Bridge taking sightings to determine the best location for the new structure (CSM, 1/27/47). One of the first steps the MRBA took to plan for traffic demand was surveying motorists at the existing Chelsea bridges. Each driver at the Chelsea North bridge, Meridian Street bridge, the Sumner Tunnel, and the Malden and Wellington bridges was handed a postage paid postcard questionnaire. This was the first attempt to get an idea of the necessary dimensions of the bridge to support the existing traffic and projected increases (*Traveler*, 1/28/47).

The MRBA's preliminary plans, released in March 1947, had the bridge cutting through a residential swath of Charlestown, angering some residents who complained to their state representatives Jeremiah Brennan and David Cleary. The plans for the Chelsea side, however, looked fine, and everybody in Chelsea was "thrilled with the prospect of a new bridge" (*Herald*, 3/6/47).

By June 1947, the MRBA was informed that the bridge must have at least 110-foot clearance to meet U.S. War Department regulations. The vague wording of the MRBA legislation stipulating its Chelsea approaches must be "adjacent to or near...Broadway in the city of Chelsea" was not sufficient for them to site the bridge far enough inland to meet the War Department's height regulations. To remedy this incongruity, the MRBA went back to the Legislature with a revision on June 28, 1947. This revised legislation read

...the approaches thereto extending... to a point in Chelsea, as the authority may determine in order to provide proper grades to the main spans of the bridge at the elevations

required by the War Department of the United States, together with all property, rights, easements, and interests acquired by the authority for the construction or the operation of the bridge. (Chap. 626, 656)

Although these words would sound ominous to residents of Chelsea in the near future, at that time their spokesman in the Senate, Joseph A. Melley of Charlestown, did not object to the wording. In fact, his friend Chairman Brest had convinced him that it was primarily a response to the early protests in Charlestown, and was a change in technical legislation which would not negatively affect any residents of either city (*Traveler*, 11/17/47; 2/19/48).

Meanwhile, on October 1, 1947, the MRBA offered \$27,000,000 in bonds to the public via First Boston Corporation, F.S. Mosely and Co., and Tripp & Co., due March 1, 1980. They were offered at 99 1/2 and would accrue interest at a regular intervals to yield approximately 2.9 percent upon maturity (*Globe* 10/1/47). Chairman Brest released a statement saying “ It is the first revenue financing in the history of the Commonwealth” and “will serve as a model for financing future projects here, if traffic congestion is to be relieved and other greatly needed public improvements constructed” (BLCF: News Release from Mass. Federation of Taxpayers Associations, 11/2/47).

By the close of 1947, the MRBA had concluded its structural and traffic research, and final plans were released for the bridge. This final plan received full approval from the State Department of Public Works. One major deviation from the original draft was the double-deck design of the bridge – so that opposing directions of traffic were on different levels, making the bridge several lanes narrower than in preliminary plans.

The narrower bridge was the MRBA's concession to the scarce land at either end of the bridge, since it would lessen the total land needed for approaches at either end. The MRBA's engineer confirmed that primary consideration was given toward displacing as few people as possible without destroying the economic value of the bridge (*Record*, 5/20/48).

The final plan put the approaches at both ends of the bridge in the middle of residential neighborhoods in Charlestown and Chelsea. Residents and their political leaders began clamoring in protest, asking for alternative routes, plans, and even (by State Representatives Jeremiah Kamens and Joseph Melley) a tunnel, instead of the high-level bridge (Senate, 1948, no.181). Chelsea officials noted, moreover, that the approach put the major on-and off-ramps to the bridge almost in the heart of Chelsea's business district, in a congested section of lower Broadway where traffic facilities were already inadequate and couldn't handle the increased traffic that the bridge was sure to bring (*Post*, 2/1/48).

As it was becoming increasingly apparent that both cities would be greatly affected, the emphasis of the protest began to shift toward the households that would be affected, and the family homes which would be demolished under to the proposed plans. Chelsea insisted that over 500 families would be displaced if the bridge took its proposed form, and in Charlestown, the number was just under 200. The original legislation had, of course, given the MRBA the power to purchase or acquire through eminent domain any land it deemed necessary for this bridge, and officials in both cities were trying to put together a tactical plan that would ensure their residents were treated fairly and the cities didn't end up paying for the MRBA's unchecked authority.

After reviewing the final plans, Senator Melley revoked his support for the new bridge, and led Chelsea in a unified protest based on the number of displaced families that would result. The MRBA's plans required removing several hundred homes on Chestnut, Poplar, Williams, and Walnut Streets and Washington Avenue in Chelsea. Led by their mayor, Charles Keating (elected in Fall 1947), Chelsea filed a suit in Suffolk Superior Court to enjoin the MRBA from taking by eminent domain any of the buildings, citing displacement without arrangements for relocation, as well safety hazards for schoolchildren who walked back and forth to school every day (CSM, 10/31/47). (The case was dismissed within two weeks, with the presiding judge ruling that he "had no authority to override by injunction an act of the Legislature" (*Record*, 2/25/50)).

When he took office in January, 1948, Mayor Keating lead a politically charged protest on the placement of the bridge. After the lawsuit prohibiting the bridge was dismissed, he accepted the reality that families would be displaced, and focused new efforts on finding funds to help them. He rounded up the support of republican senators Leverett Saltonstall and Henry Cabot Lodge, and the three made a trip to Washington, D.C. to appeal for some federal emergency funds to help relocate any displaced families through the federal Reconstruction Finance Commission (RFC) (*Traveler*, 814/48).

Meanwhile, throughout early 1948, Chelsea and Charlestown state politicians were making futile attempts to prevent the bridge's construction (or destruction as many saw it). Numerous bills and petitions for bills were introduced to the House and Senate, primarily backed by Kamens, Melley, Brennan, and Cleary. The petitions attempted to

- repeal the MRBA enabling legislation of 1946
 - suspend the MRBA legislation until 1952
 - build a tunnel instead of a bridge
 - force the MRBA to pay the city of Chelsea for any damages from removing taxable land from the tax rolls
 - repeal the MRBA revision legislation of 1947
- and
- prohibit demolition of any houses until new housing was secured.

None of these proposals received much support, and all were relegated quickly to oblivion, often on “technical” reasons, such as only 1/5 of the necessary voting representatives were in attendance when they were presented.*

Naval Hospital Easement

To build the bridge in their plans, the MRBA had to convince the U.S. Navy to allow an easement across their Naval Hospital land in the city of Chelsea. On November 3, 1947, the U.S. Navy issued a permit to the MRBA certifying that according to Naval standards, the bridge right-of-way would not harm the operation of the naval hospital or the grounds. This was basically a preliminary (and small-scale) environmental impact assessment for the Naval hospital, stating that the process of construction and operation of the bridge would not create undue hardship for the employees, residents, or patients at the hospital. However, that permit was not a final authority, and the MRBA had to win approval of a bill from Congress authorizing the Secretary of the Navy to grant the easement in perpetuity.

* 1948 Senate bills: nos. 10, 11, 181, 182, 184. House bills: nos. 1237, 1721.

Mayor Keating and others opponents of the bridge saw this as an opportunity to affect the bridge placement, and tried to use the federal approval process to their benefit. Starting in December, 1947, state representatives on Beacon Hill who supported Chelsea's position had introduced legislative amendments to the Authority act which would have provided for several different bridge approaches, most of which brought the bridge's terminus closer to the Everett town line, west of Chelsea's residential neighborhoods. Of the several informal alternatives proposed by the city of Chelsea and supported by a minority in the state house, all were dismissed because they "failed to invoke the most modern principles for the handling of traffic", according to the MRBA's consulting engineers (*Record*, 5/15/48).

When the Armed Services Congressional Subcommittee considered issuing the permanent right-of-way across Naval land in May, 1948, it heard arguments both for and against the easement. Representatives of the MRBA argued that this planned location for the bridge, with an approach route through the Naval hospital grounds, was the only feasible route. They insisted it made the most sense economically, and resulted in displacement of the fewest number of homes and families. The naval representatives concurred, saying "is in the public interest and that no other feasible location for construction exists" (*Record*, 5/20/48).

In reply, Chelsea's Mayor Keating argued that it would still displace over 500 families in 360 houses. Keating added that over \$1 million of taxable land would be removed from the city's revenue rolls and taken over by the tax-exempt MRBA (*Herald*, 5/20/48). Keating's arguments were supported by State Representative Jeremiah Kamens, who also was in Washington D.C. to argue before to the Subcommittee. In addition to the

alternative approach arguments, he pointed out that no provisions had been made for finding housing for the 500-plus displaced families. The city of Chelsea (and Charlestown, too, although they weren't involved in this particular easement argument) wanted some guarantees from the MRBA and/or the state that they would have help relocating the families and paying the associated costs.

The subcommittee ultimately stayed away from getting involved in what it saw as state issues. A spokesman for the subcommittee said their oversight was limited to the extent that the bridge would harm federal land, and since the current approach would *not* harm naval land, that the permit the navy had authorized was still valid and couldn't be revoked. With this endorsement from the subcommittee, both the House and Senate approved the permit in June, 1948, giving the MRBA a permanent easement across the Naval hospital grounds (Boston Herald, 5/20/48).

Eviction

With the engineering plans for the new bridge finalized and the land acquisition process pretty much settled, the MRBA thought they could get on with building the largest bridge in New England. But they didn't anticipate the resistance they'd get from the 500 or so families whose homes would be demolished in the face of progress.

As early as 1946, local activists and newspaper editorial boards were expressing surprise at how fast plans for the bridge were moving along and warning that the MRBA's "efficiency" might not be holding a high enough regard for the neighborhoods which would bear the brunt of the construction: Charlestown and Chelsea. In an

editorial, the Boston *Traveler* said that the MRBA should be careful not to disturb residential sections of the cities in light of the post-WWII housing shortage (6/7/46).

The MRBA seemed to be aware of the battle it was in for, based on their arguments before the Armed Services Subcommittee that this would displace the least number of families. However, elected representatives, including the new Republican governor, seemed not to realize that they would become embroiled in local issues before the bridge would be completed. Many residents whose homes would be destroyed escalated a protest against the bridge which was loud and public. Primarily, city officials and the residents wanted guarantees of help in relocating the families. When it became clear that the state Legislature would not endorse relocating the bridge, bills were proposed that would prevent eviction of any families until alternative housing was provided for them. These bills languished, despite the endorsement of outspoken officials such as Chelsea's John McLeod, a respected judge from the district court (*Globe*, CLCF). As late as June, 1948, the Legislature defeated proposals to amend MRBA's authority and/or force the state to take responsibility for their displacements. One particularly creative petition to the House, proposed by Brennan and Cleary, was to create a new Mystic River Bridge Housing Authority, which would mimic the MRBA itself by floating bonds and building housing for displaced families. In June, 1948, it received virtually no support, and was officially deferred to the next year's legislative session.

One tack which proposed anti-bridge legislation followed was to try and delay or change the construction – such as Senator Melley's and Representative Meyer Pressman's approach of suing on behalf of the city which would lose substantial taxable

land (Senate, 1948, no. 182). Another strategy was Representative Andrew Quigley's approach which claimed reparations for the people who were being evicted from their homes. Neither tack swayed the majority of legislators who believed the demolitions were a small price to pay for the regional and local traffic improvements that the bridge would provide (House, 1949, no. 2597).

The membership of the anti-bridge faction grew through the summer of 1948. In addition to the residents whose homes were affected, prominent spokespeople, such as Mayor Keating and Judge McLeod were influential and outspoken protestors. The *Boston Traveler* spoke out against the bridge, calling it "a dragon... crawling over the Mystic River. It[s construction will devour] scores of homes... as though a mythological monster were on the march in a more credulous age... the tail pointed toward Charlestown and the front claws spreading toward Revere and the North Shore" (6/5/49). The anti-bridge camp also received support from national representatives such as Senator Thomas J. Lane, a Massachusetts Democrat, who took advantage of the eviction publicity to denounce the Republican party's inaction on a long-range housing plan for the country. Lane called particular attention to the plight of WWII veterans whose homes were being destroyed (8/2/48, CLCF). The *Boston Traveler* published an editorial condemning the bridge plans and called upon Governor Robert F. Bradford to bear responsibility for the displaced families' housing needs (8/7/48). The residents of both cities were stymied by the state's lack of concern, and a protest rally on August 2, 1948, drew 2,500 people, primarily from Chelsea and Charlestown, all united in opposition to the bridge. This was a substantial number of people, considering that fewer than 550 families were to be affected directly. One WWII veteran even sent a

futile telegram to President Harry S. Truman asking him to intervene on their behalf (*Post*, 8/3/28).

Just days later, Mayor Keating led a smaller protest on Beacon Hill. The first eviction notices had been delivered to families in Chelsea, and Keating publicly announced that the Chelsea police force would offer no help in removing the residents from the condemned houses. A member of Governor Bradford's (republican) staff met the protestors, and offered only apologies, also using the opportunity to party-bash. The spokesman said that the MRBA had been created under Governor Tobin's (democratic) administration, and there was nothing Bradford could do to force the MRBA to either stop evicting families or to make provisions for them upon eviction. But Charlestown state representative Cleary reminded the protestors that Bradford's administration had supported the amendment which increased the geographic scope of the MRBA's authority, and thus was fully responsible for the repercussions (*Traveler* 8/5/48). Another housing advocate, Reverend Wolcott Cutler of St. John's Church in Charlestown, concurred, saying "With the traffic problem in Greater Boston... the highway and the bridge are a necessity. We are not blaming the bridge authority... we are complaining to the State Legislature and the federal government for their ineptitude in solving the housing shortage" (CLCF, 1948).

The next day the crowds at the State House showed up again, and Mayor Keating asked that their eviction notices, which were to take effect September 1, be delayed until a special legislative session could be called for the express purpose of creating, approving, and implementing legislation to create new public housing projects to accommodate the displaced residents in both Charlestown and Chelsea. Governor

Bradford, who did not meet with the mayor or other protestors, issued a statement saying he would not call the session, because public housing projects cannot be planned to “spring up like mushrooms overnight” (*Traveler*, 8/6/48).

However, Governor Bradford did pressure Chairman Brest into delaying the eviction notices by one month, until October 1. Chairman Brest issued a statement that afternoon, saying the MRBA would grant an even longer delay “if immediate steps are taken to provide housing, temporary or permanent, for the families affected”, by either the state or the cities involved. The statement also pointed out that the delay would cost thousands of dollars per day, both in interest charges on construction loans and in penalties with their contractors and suppliers (*Traveler*, 8/6/48).

Meanwhile, with the evictions looming, Chelsea and Charlestown officials were intent on finding some way to help the displaced families. Fortunately for Chelsea, the final count of destroyed homes and displaced families was smaller than the 500 they had initially claimed: a total of 186 homes would be lost, affecting 326 families. One plan which was particularly feasible for Chelsea was to *move* the homes from their current location to another location in the city. After a survey of the affected houses, it was determined that of 186 homes, 63 potentially could be relocated, and it was hoped that the emergency RFC funding which Keating and others had applied for could be used to pay for some of the relocation costs (*Traveler*, 8/11/48). On August 14, Chelsea learned that its funding application had been approved, but the RFC insisted it would take several months to process the actual loan, so Chelsea would have to find an alternative means of helping the families in the short-term (*Traveler*, 8/14/48).

Back on Beacon Hill, Keating and others managed to get Governor Bradford's cooperation in making alternative arrangements for the Chelsea families.

Bradford and Chairman Brest announced a cooperative plan that would move 76 houses accommodating 181 families in Chelsea*. Although the new sites were not all known, the city had some ideas of where the houses could be relocated. In addition to moving 76 houses, their plan would help an additional 70 families move to new building units to be constructed under the auspices of the Chelsea Housing Authority and the State Housing Board. These units were an emergency addition to a veterans housing project already under construction in Chelsea, so its cost would be borne by the state and city with the help of federal funds for veterans. This part of the plan never happened, as the *Chelsea Record* reported on 8/18/49 that the House Ways and Means Committee "had been informed that only 32 of the 70 families in the project were veterans' families... and [it] would set a bad precedent" by allocating veterans' fund money to non-veterans. Representatives Quigley and Pressman, who had proposed the legislative bill, again blamed partisan politics – although in this case Quigley had to denounce some of his own Democratic counterparts who were opposed to the 70-home allocation. (*Record*, 8/18/49).

To pay for relocating the 76 houses, each house would be sold by the owner to the city of Chelsea for \$1. Then, the MRBA would pay Chelsea \$700 for each home that was moved. Once the homes were relocated, the city would put the houses on the market, giving first preference to the previous tenants. It was hoped that the sale proceeds, plus the MRBA payment, would be sufficient to pay the cost of moving them. The homes

* This is 13 more homes than Chelsea had projected could be moved, but no Chelsea officials complained that the state was offering to help move even more families.

were to be offered for sale at values set by the board of assessors, with oversight by the board of aldermen. According to Chairman Brest, all these houses would be settled in their new lots by January, 1949. (*Traveler*, 9/25/48; *Record* 12/13/49). With this plan on the books, contractors began demolishing houses in Chelsea on October 7, 1948 (*Post*, 10/7/48).

Meanwhile, in Charlestown, no deal had been struck, and the number of families receiving eviction notices there remained at the original estimate of 180. Their eviction notices had a November 1 deadline, and Boston's Mayor Curley, following Keating's approach, appealed to Governor Bradford for help in relocating these families. Curley wanted the state to pay for erecting 100 pre-fabricated steel homes to accommodate the displaced families – but Governor Bradford refused. Instead, he again appealed to Chairman Brest to offer assistance, which Brest did. In an October 15, 1948 statement, Brest assured the residents of Charlestown that new homes will be found for all Charlestown residents forced out by eviction. The city and MRBA had already cooperated with residents to find homes for many of the evictees through the private market, and he was confident that could be repeated for all families who were forced to move (*Traveler*, 10/16/48).

Brest's predictions and assurances were sufficient, and by early 1949, the eviction process, house-moving construction endeavors, and resident hand-holding came to a close, and the Mystic River Bridge entered its final stage of construction and completion.

Opening Day

On a blustery Saturday, February 26, 1950 a ceremony, parade, and ribbon-cutting celebrated the opening of the Mystic River Bridge. The next day, Sunday, the bridge was officially opened to the public. Its car-carrying capacity was 65,000 vehicles per day, although it didn't reach that level for years due to shortcomings in highway infrastructure that fed the bridge. The long-heralded tolls to finance the bridge were set at 10 cents for cars with commuter stickers and 15 cents for cars without commuter stickers, with higher rates for commercial vehicles and trucks.

Press releases and newspaper odes to the Mystic River Bridge referred to the "engineering marvel" and the "sheer drama of this bridge, the mountainous work that went into it and the construction skill which has made this country the world's "fastest of wheels" (*Post*, 2/26/50). The Mystic River Bridge was higher than the Golden Gate Bridge and longer than the Brooklyn Bridge, and despite being finished several years after the Golden Gate, had been completed at a lower cost (just under \$27 million). The *Boston Traveler*, an outspoken critic of the MRBA's tactics, said "By every criterion except scenic magnificence, it is one of the great bridges of the world. Thanks to the MRBA we have the most important facility in what must become an integrated highway system for Greater Boston" (2/24/50). And at the dedication ceremony, Governor Paul A. Dever (a newly-elected democrat) said it was a sign of "a modern and greater Boston", while former Governor Tobin (then U.S. Secretary of Labor), said its contribution to the highway system "will be surpassed by no other section of the country".

The *Chelsea Record* accurately summed up the bridge trials and tribulations in an editorial the day of the bridge opening:

Whether one believes that the advent of the Mystic River Bridge is for the best or is for the worse, insofar as Chelsea is concerned, there is no denying that it has and will bring about the greatest changes made in the community since the disastrous fire of 1908.

Perhaps the most stunning achievement was that the entire process of building the bridge, which took only 4 years start-to-finish, was completely unmarred by any hint of scandal. At the time, many observers rightly called the public works project a “a tribute to sound planning and efficient administration”, with the fairly well-mitigated hurdle of evictions and house demolition posing the biggest problem to the project (*Traveler*, 2/25/50).

After its opening, many felt that the bridge’s relative obscurity (compared to the Golden Gate bridge) was due to its unglamorous name. A small contingency began clamoring for a new, grander name for the bridge, and some newspapers received suggestions for bridge names (*Traveler*, 5/8/40). The State Legislative Committee on Highways and Motor Vehicles entertained bills to name the bridge after FDR, General Patton and other icons of the day. No renaming took place until after the MRBA had been dissolved, and on June 14, 1967, the bridge was officially renamed the Hon. Maurice J. Tobin Memorial Bridge, in honor of the man who governed the state during the planning and initial implementation stages of the project.

Epilogue

Within weeks of the bridge's opening, critics attacked the MRBA for not adequately addressing infrastructure needs within the city of Chelsea, whose residential and commercial streets were now clogged with gridlock almost daily. Just as the MRBA's authority had not allowed it to finance relocating houses, it was not authorized to build or upgrade the feeder roads which brought the thousands of cars to the bridge. The bridge "was built from nowhere and ends in confusion", Democratic Senator Edward C. Peirce said of the poor Charlestown and Chelsea roadway connections. Chelsea did not have enough money to build new roads, or increase the capacity of existing ones, and so once again it turned to politicians in the state house for financial assistance.

Many leaders, including Senator Staves, now chairman of the Committee on Highways and Motor Vehicles, lobbied for another state bond issue to pay for the necessary access highways. Staves submitted a proposal for a \$100 million bond issue, with \$37 million of that appropriated to the city of Boston specifically for access highway improvements for the Mystic River Bridge. Although there were objections from those representing more rural and smaller cities further from Boston (such as Peirce), again the argument of "national defense" convinced a majority to support the bond issue and appropriation. Senator Chester A. Dolan, Jr. of Boston said "Boston is the number one military objective in the United States. It is the nearest to Europe and if we are attacked, Boston would be first". On August 1, 1950, Governor Dever signed the bond issue (and appropriation) into law, saying that the opposing view of a few minorities was selfish, and did not take into account the war and security benefits of the improvements (*Record* 6/25/50).

Although Chelsea had been eager to receive funds to help alleviate traffic troubles, getting their wish fulfilled was, again, more than they had bargained for. One of the “few minorities” voting against the appropriation was Representative Quigley, who foresaw the 6-lane highway that would displace yet more families and remove more taxable land, not to mention the physical effects of building a massive highway through the center of such a small city. But the region’s transportation needs – bolstered by arguments of national security as the cold war escalated, and endorsed heavily by State Commissioner of Public Works William Callahan – won out again. Callahan’s office released highway plans for Chelsea on August 23, 1950, and today State Route 16 is a 6-lane highway which feeds traffic directly off the Tobin Bridge and northward through the center of Chelsea.

In addition to the traffic troubles and hastily-devised solutions, there were other difficulties associated with the opening of the bridge. Within months, the city of Boston and the Commonwealth sued the MRBA “to settle controversies as to whether or not the authority is obligated to reimburse them for expenses relating to water mains as a result of the removal of the old Chelsea North Bridge” (*Post*, 8/8/51). Additional controversies would surface within the year relating to the use of the land under the bridge, the diminished value of private property underneath the bridge, and the amount of money paid to the cities for acquiring the land (*Record*, 12/25/50; *Herald*, 6/21/51).

The MRBA and state politicians continued expending efforts to make the bridge and the associated highways, including the Central Artery, a transportation success. But building and maintaining transportation routes was getting more complex, and under

Callahan's guidance and advisement, the MRBA was dissolved in 1956 and the bridge was absorbed by the newly-created Massachusetts Port Authority. The Sumner tunnel, and the already-under construction Callahan tunnel, fell under the auspices of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, headed up by Callahan himself.

Lessons Learned

The story of the Tobin Bridge and the role Chelsea played in its construction is rich and allusory on its own, and is especially telling when viewed through the lens of history. The sniping of Chelsea politicians, sometimes even at their own party colleagues, bodes of the accusations of corruption and inefficacy which would later drive Chelsea into state receivership. The cries from hundreds of relatively low-income immigrants that their homes were being destroyed in the name of progress foretold the experience of thousands of West Enders during Boston's first major urban renewal project a decade later. And the concept of inconveniencing, and possibly destroying, local businesses for the good of the traveling public is one amplified in the 15-year struggle to bury Boston's Central Artery underground.

The building of the Tobin Bridge also set the template for relationships that Chelsea, rich in land resources and industrial heritage, continues to have with larger governmental entities. In the first 50 years of the 20th century automobile travel became of primary importance. Chelsea responded to these new transportation demands and ended up in a love-hate relationship with the MRBA and the Tobin Bridge. In the 50 years since the bridge has opened, airline travel has increased in importance, and Chelsea now has a love-hate relationship with Logan Airport (and its owner the Massachusetts Port Authority). Today, Chelsea wants the jobs and increased tax

revenues that are a sure product of Logan Airport's expansion, but has learned to be wary of glamorizing transportation "progress". Today, Chelsea is creating a long-term plan and goals for airport-related development in Chelsea, and attempting to balance transportation needs with the need for more housing, open space, and a continued commitment to waterfront industry.

In the near future, Chelsea will have to carefully structure its relationship with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, as the MBTA forges ahead with plans to expand their rapid transit system with a new Urban Ring line, giving Chelsea unprecedented access to public transportation funds and several new public transit lines and stations. But again it will find themselves balancing the transportation needs of Chelsea residents with the needs of the greater metropolitan region, and despite the transportation burden Chelsea has borne with the Tobin Bridge for 50 years, they will no doubt be asked to bear more in the name of "public good".

Finally, Chelsea's position in the local, regional, and statewide political scene has changed dramatically since the Tobin Bridge was built. Despite the driven attempts of Mayor Keating, Representative Quigley, and others, Chelsea had virtually no leverage during its fights against the State House and the MRBA's intention to take city land, displace families, and build highways without regard for the community that might be destroyed. It was handicapped by its old-world political maneuverings and dependent on back-office deals and rampant corruption, as later convictions of many Chelsea officials, including several mayors, would prove. Today, with a new city charter and new government structure since coming out of receivership in 1997, Chelsea is less likely to be seen as the "poor kid" who can get beaten up repeatedly, and keeps asking

for more. Strong and just representation, such as that provided by Chelsea native Thomas Birmingham as Senate President in the State House, means Chelsea residents have a legitimate opportunity to be involved in the planning projects which affect their city.

Through history's lens, and with the objectivity of modern planning principles, it is possible to see how the Tobin Bridge can be interpreted as both boon and a bane for this city. But knowing how the story must have read to those who witnessed its telling, it is even easier to understand why such rigid stands were – pro-Bridge or anti-Bridge. When you're in the midst of a struggle such as the over the Tobin Bridge presented, it can seem as if there is no middle ground. If the people of Chelsea are to continue to strive for infrastructure and transportation improvements, they would do well to try and seek a comprehensive understanding of all sides of the issue, and continue their short-term needs with long-term goals before they make compromises.

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Boston Traveler

Boston Post

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Newspaper Sources - Continued

Christian Science Monitor

Beebe Library Clippings File. Clipped newspaper articles organized by topic at Boston University's School of Communications' Beebe Library. Where possible, I traced the "clipped article" to its publication date and newspaper. When that wasn't possible, I have referred the reader to the file at Beebe Library.

Chelsea Library Clippings File. Clipped newspaper articles photocopied and inserted into a binder at Chelsea's Public Library. Where possible, I traced the "clipped article" to its publication date and newspaper. When that wasn't possible, I have referred the reader to the file at the Chelsea Public Library.

Chelsea Library Archives: Documents, articles, letters, and historical materials available upon request at the Chelsea Public Library.

Abbreviations:

BLCF: Beebe Library Clippings File

CLCF: Chelsea Library Clippings File

CSM: Christian Science Monitor

House: Legislative Journal of the House of Representatives

Senate: Legislative Journal of the Senate