

## A Summary on the Route 25A Final Visioning Report

New York Route 25A marks a shallow curving line across ten miles of land at the northern end of the Town of Brookhaven. It connects and, just as much, disconnects five Brookhaven hamlets, while running across the tip of a sixth. In the early twenty-first century, it is a broken zipper of a road. Nearby neighborhoods are not well served and there is a strong sense in the six communities it touches that the road does not link them in any more than a physical way – and does not even do that very well. Fixing the problems Route 25A presents is the purpose of a groundswell of activity in Mount Sinai, Miller Place, Sound Beach, Rocky Point, Shoreham, and Wading River.

An exhaustively organized Final Visioning Report, compiled from professional analysis and public outreach concerning 25A, was completed in September, 2010. It is not itself an action strategy, but instead the necessary precursor to actions to be taken after assessment of community attitudes towards 25A, the assets and liabilities lying along it now, and a judgment of what tools are right for use in the concerted actions to come.

Without going extensively into its history, it is not accidental that Route 25A is in the unattractive, ill-functioning condition it is. Knowing just how that happened helps clarify future solutions, so it is a story worth retelling.

Route 25A apparently follows the route of an age-old Native American trail. That path basically skirted the south edge of the Long Island shorefront far enough inland, one to two miles, that not too many streams and gulleys had to be crossed, but not so far as to be out of easy touch with the Sound. As European settlement proceeded and roads were built, north of the trail-turned-road smaller land parcels dominated on the rolling topography, while south of it, on flatter land, the uses became more large-parcel agricultural. 25A, then, marks an old, natural seam in human use of the land.

That longstanding pattern held sway until the rise of car-dominated culture with its very different settlement patterns, and the associated fast rise in Long Island population after the 1950's. Two key factors then came into play, both having to do with the ways engineers laid out roads and their relationship to different land uses.

First, residential developments were laid out with only local, indirect street connections with major arterials – and on Long Island, residential development often preceded other sorts of new uses growing up along the arterials over which people drove to and from their jobs and their shopping. This meant that the parcels of land along arterials like 25A were essentially leftovers, often helter-skelter in shape, and occupied either by long-standing older uses or by air-dropped new national chains. In this sort of system, where major roads are thought of as mostly only for channeling traffic, ad-hoc mixtures of different uses along them were almost inevitable. 25A is a case in point.

Second, a more subtle but crucially important point for understanding 25A's nature, the post-World War II traffic and highway engineers who laid out Long Island of that era, and all the rest of Suburbia, made overall street patterns which were like trees in their branching geometry. The streets rationally go from smaller locals to larger collectors to

largest arterials. They were linked in a clear, branching way. The laudable thought was to protect the homes out on the local “branches” from through traffic, even of the diffuse, slow-speed kind characteristic of the older way of organizing streets in an overlapping, netlike, network. Arterials like 25A were to take care of faster traffic, while also providing places for non-residential shopping and services.

A diagram from the Federal Highway Administration (1946) shows how different “Modern” street types were supposed to allocate mobility (i.e. speed) versus accessibility (i.e. privacy) in the residential loops and cul-de-sacs.

QuickTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Much of the protracted discussion in the sets of community meetings recounted in the Final Visioning Report – about slowing traffic and making it safer, about maintaining community character under the scour of traffic, about making more walkable communities, and so on -- was in essence about this seemingly abstract diagram. How to assess the diagram’s negative impacts, as they show themselves in 25A, and remediate them with various tools, and how to keep (if possible) all the perceived good aspects of suburban traffic engineering, was at the heart of all the discussions. The essence of the issue now is how to retrofit Route 25A, modifying the principles which originally conceived it, and bringing its character and uses into better fit with what its communities want to be today and tomorrow.

The Final Visioning Report systematically compiles and discusses the strengths, weaknesses, and sites of opportunity in the five hamlets through which Route 25A runs. It summarizes each community's sense of itself; how each sees aspects of itself as unique, worth preserving and enhancing. The consulting team, BFJ Planning, presents overall planning and design guidelines as well as case-study preliminary demonstrations of how, in each community, the pieces of 25A may be changed to better support the locally-defined sense of place.

All this is the necessary groundwork for what must come next. Together, the hamlets, the Town of Brookhaven, and the New York State Department of Transportation must act to make a new Route 25A which is more than a traffic sewer, more coherent in its overall appearance and vital in its overall set of uses. Individual community visions must now contribute to an overall whole. While at times this will not be easy, in the final tally the encouraging thing about the Final Visioning Report is the similarity of what most of the participating citizens and officials voiced as wanting for their communities. Overall coherence, a sense of Route 25A truly connecting a set of contributing communities, each enjoying itself while benefiting from the others, is now the goal now to be aimed for.

*A special thanks to Patrick Pinnell, Architect and Town Planner.*