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Road kill: The Expressway detracts from the stunning views available at the Waterworks.

How life along one urban waterway can rise from the ashes.

by **Steve Conn**

A wonderful conversation has blossomed about the future of Penn's Landing, now that that future no longer includes mall guy Mel Simon. And while it isn't clear that anyone at City Hall is listening, good ideas for the Delaware River abound.

Meanwhile, on the other river, another project has been languishing for about as long as the Penn's Landing fiasco. Recently, I was crawling around the perpetually almost-finished renovated Fairmount Waterworks, wondering if it will ever really re-open, and what the place will be like if it does.

On the face of it, the Waterworks -- a Greek Revival engineering marvel of the antebellum era -- and Penn's Landing would seem to have little in common.

Yet they are each plagued by the same problem: a highway.

Amidst all the different ideas that are swirling about what Penn's Landing might be, there is a consensus that any plan is doomed unless something is done about I-95 -- cover it, bury it, close it; anything to better link the Delaware with the rest of the city.

Likewise, however lovely the renovation of the Waterworks turns out to be, it will be hard to appreciate over the din of the Sure Kill Expressway.

Standing on the gorgeous plaza, in the shadow of the Art Museum, one ought to enjoy one of the greatest river views in America. What you get instead is the Sure Kill.

The Expressway, even more than I-95, is surely Philadelphia's worst road planning mistake, and I have no doubt that there is a special level of Dante's Inferno for those responsible for its planning and construction.

Building that road the way it was built permanently severed much of West and Southwest Philadelphia from the rest of the city. It has all but ruined the potential of West Fairmount Park to serve as the urban refuge it was intended to be. (Can you imagine six lanes plowed straight through Central Park?!) It stole an entire waterfront from the city, along with whatever creative, recreational use that might have grown there.

And it completely overshadows the Waterworks, the gentle rush of the water over the falls all but drowned out by the roar of high-speed traffic.

Indeed, the sight of and noise from the Expressway may well overwhelm the park path currently under construction to connect the Waterworks with the Schuylkill River Park. Running along the east bank of the river, the park's major view will be of traffic, and the central experience that the new park's user will have will be the Expressway. As it is, the



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ground at Schuylkill River Park is regularly punctuated by the belch and

ning disaster; there can be no argument about that. But it isn't likely
ic things to get rid of terrible urban expressways, none more so than
Boston. There, the Big Dig is burying the Central Artery and re-uniting the city that this highway fragmented a
generation ago.

Much as it pains me to acknowledge, Philadelphia probably won't find the money and could never muster the political
will necessary to bury the Expressway out of the way of more important urban functions.

Still, some of its worst effects could be mitigated, and pretty easily too.

If the Expressway can't be made to disappear, then hide it. Put it behind a wall of those sound barriers that people out
in the suburbs demand every time a big road goes through their enclaves. In fact, such sound barriers are going up
further west on the Expressway, where it runs through Montgomery County. Run the wall from South Street past the
Art Museum. Let vines grow on it. Let the artists from the Mural Arts Program go wild.

When it opened, the Waterworks was an engineering triumph of the new nation, and a must-see destination on the
itineraries of European tourists. However, they didn't come simply to marvel at the engineering that brought a reliable
source of fresh drinking water to a growing city. They also admired how that engineering had been designed so
beautifully, an Arcadian vision serving a useful purpose. The Waterworks represented a perfect marriage between the
useful and the aesthetic.

In the recent past, those two have suffered a bitter divorce. There is no better way to measure the distance that now
separates function and beauty than to stand at the Waterworks and stare at the Expressway. It isn't enough, alas, to
restore the Waterworks itself. In order to be truly appreciated, the Waterworks needs its location back, too. To do the
Waterworks justice, the Expressway needs to be banished from its sight. And ours too.

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