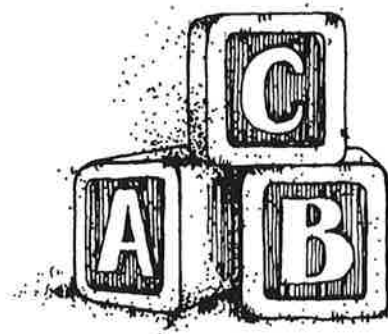


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# A Crisis in the Organization

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## ***Governmental response to a thruway disaster, resulting in maximal effectiveness in a minimal time frame***

■ DAVID LAYNE, SR/WA

**D**uring the first week of April 1987, as the spring runoff crested in streams causing localized flooding, the New York State Department of Transportation (DOT) closed a bridge in upstate New York, locally known as the Mill Point bridge. The closing, made for safety reasons, affected through traffic, but its major impact was on area residents and farmers. On April 5, 1987, a New York State Thruway bridge, also over the Schoharie Creek, collapsed and four cars and a tractor trailer fell into the water 80 feet below. Ten people were killed. On April 7, the DOT, after inspection, closed the Fonda-Fultonville bridge that carried Route 30A traffic across the Mohawk River. It reopened a few days later, with weight limitations. Finally, on April 11, a section of the Mill Point bridge collapsed. In just 8 days, the state and interstate highway systems in upstate New York had been dealt near crippling blows with major impacts extending throughout the entire state highway system.

### **The Plan**

Governmental bureaucracies in particular sometimes have reputations for being

slow moving and unresponsive. In this case, nothing was further from the truth. The normal table of organization and the normal work flow gave way to what Peters and Waterman called, in *In Search of Excellence* (Harper & Row, 1982), "organizational fluidity." The two principal organizations, DOT and the N.Y. State Thruway Authority, were able to "cultivate the right people getting into contact with each other. . . ." There is no doubt that this informal network resulted in maximal effort in a minimal time frame.

The crisis helped to create an organization that was classic Peters and Waterman:

fluid, informally organized, open, and with a bias for action. This bias for action was achieved through commitment of the people involved.

Although there was no conscious effort to subscribe to the "theory of chunks," (again referring to Peters and Waterman), that was exactly what happened. "... the key success factor in [government] is simply getting one's arms around almost any practical problem and knocking it off—now." The theory goes, make each problem manageable and then blitz it.

Initially, DOT identified and established detour routes and distributed announcements outlining alternate routes. In addition, to facilitate the dissemination of information on the detours, the Traffic Information Project (TIP) was reactivated. Third, emergency bridge inspections were conducted on more than 300 bridges in the flood area.

Next, it was necessary to start the bridge restoration process as soon as possible.

### **The Fonda Fultonville Bridge**

At the time the bridge closed and subsequent weight limitations were imposed, DOT was designing a replacement bridge and acquiring the necessary right of way to let a construction project. The work continued. That took care of "Chunk" number 1.

### **The Mill Point Bridge**

Work immediately began to design a temporary structure to reconnect Route 161 that now ended on both sides of the



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Schoharie Creek. Rights of entry were obtained from property owners to allow the state and its contractors to enter on the area before the property acquisitions. The design and initial right of way work were completed in only 33 days to meet a May 14, 1987 contract letting. The removal of the collapsed span and construction of a Bailey type bridge was completed and opened to traffic on June 18. The time from the start of design through construction was approximately 2½ months. The normal completion for this type of project would have required 1 to 2 years: "Chunk" number 2.

### The Thruway Bridge

This "chunk" was the largest, most difficult, and, eventually, the most controversial one. The first problem was to establish immediate detour routes using existing state highways. At the same time, DOT and the Thruway Authority began to develop shorter detours and to prepare design plans for the permanent Thruway bridge replacement.

The first detour bridge involved the construction of a new Thruway toll plaza and ramp from Route 5S to the Thruway. Located just east of the collapsed bridge, it shortened the distance for eastbound travelers by approximately 3 miles and reestablished westbound Thruway traffic to Amsterdam, New York. Again, the time from project inception through design, right of way acquisition, and construction was amazingly short, a total of 19 days.

On April 24, the same day the first detour opened, the state announced the location of the proposed "permanent" detour. Once again, activities moved quickly. A contract was let on April 30, with completion of the \$5.7+ million project scheduled for the July 4th weekend. The detour actually opened on June 29, a few days ahead of schedule.

One project remained: the design and construction of a new permanent Thruway bridge over the Schoharie Creek. The new structure was designed to correct the probable contributory factors in the collapse. As the bridge would be replaced on existing alignment, there was no need for right of way acquisitions. Preliminary plans were announced by the Thruway on April 23, with the completion of the first two lanes scheduled for December 1987 and the remaining lanes scheduled for completion in May 1988.

That was it. In an extremely short span



*View of the collapsed New York State Thruway bridge looking west.*

of time, the N.Y. DOT and the state Thruway Authority responded to a catastrophic assault on the road system. Bridges and roadways were designed, right of way acquired, contracts let, and construction

**Bureaucracies are at times reputed to be slow moving and unresponsive. In this case, nothing was further from the truth.**

started on contracts totaling millions of dollars.

There is absolutely no question from a technical point of view that the projects started, those in progress, and those completed were total successes. But was that, in fact, it? A picture perfect operation that was universally hailed by all people and groups alike? Hardly.

### The Reaction and Re-Reaction

Generally, there were few adverse comments to the closing and later weight limitations on the Fonda-Fultonville bridge, the replacement (even by a temporary Bailey bridge structure) of the Mill Point bridge, the construction of the first detour to the east of the collapsed Thruway bridge,

and the letting of the construction contract for the replacement of the collapsed Thruway bridge. The local citizens believed that the decisions and actions were necessary to preserve the people's safety and to restore the highway network to normal as quickly as possible.

There were adverse comments, however, on one aspect of the overall plan. Some of the local officials and citizens were critical of the decision to construct a second detour to maintain Thruway traffic, citing economic and safety factors.

On April 23 at a public information meeting, state officials disclosed their plan. The detour would place eastbound Thruway traffic over the existing Route 5S bridge and the westbound traffic over an adjacent former Penn Central Railroad bridge. Four lanes of traffic, two in each direction, would be reduced to one in each direction as the Schoharie Creek bridges were crossed.

The reasons for the detour as stated by the Thruway Authority's Chief Engineer, Daniel Garvey, were to improve safety and to end congestion on local roads.

The reactions of some of the area residents to the plan were quick and negative. Approximately 100 people attended the meeting, and only one individual commended state officials for their decision. The criticisms could be categorized in two general areas. First, many people criticized the plan because although it would restore the Thruway to as near normal as possible, it would be done at the expense of the local road system and area residents. The state

contended that the detour was the most feasible plan and the other options considered would not be able to handle the traffic volumes, which had increased on Routes 5S and 162 from a total of approximately 4,700 cars to over 19,000 vehicles daily. Additionally, the Thruway Authority argued that the other alternatives studied were unsafe.

The second major criticism that surfaced at the April 23 meeting was the belief that DOT and the Thruway had not kept the locals fully informed. This view was summarized by one person at the meeting: "We've got zip out of these (state) people. We shouldn't have to be calling them for information." Dan Garvey contended that Thruway officials "... tried to disseminate information as quickly as possible once plans were solidified. [But] there was no sense in us getting out and talking about schemes that may or may not work."

**The theory goes, make each problem manageable and blitz it.**

In an editorial a few days later, the *Amsterdam (N.Y.) Recorder* succinctly stated the views of the two sides on the impacts and reasons for the detour. The editorial, however, also stated, "There is a serious problem beyond the pros and cons of the detour: Lack of communications from the state. At Tuesday's Montgomery County Board of Supervisors meeting various comments alluded to being left in the dark."

Although the April 23 meeting did not end with a consensus, it did end with promises by state officials that they would listen to suggestions from members of the community and try to avoid future communication lapses. Several of the locals, although still not happy with the detour proposal, offered comments and suggestions for improving the safety features and minimizing its impact on the surrounding community. However, one local farmer commented, "You screwed up [the original Thruway bridge] before and we're not going to let you screw it up again." The farmer, Walter Dufel, and the uncompromising tone and attitude he adopted would serve as the focal point of opposition and protest to the construction of the detour.

## **Implementation of the Thruway Detour Plan**

DOT and the Thruway Authority moved quickly to get the detour in place. It only required an additional 7 days from the announcement to complete design work and acquire the necessary right of way and let to bid a construction contract. In addition to property already owned by the state and the Thruway Authority, the detour involved land from five private property owners. One of those landowners was Walter Dufel.

Mr. Dufel, a local farmer, had a reputation of growing some of the best sweet corn in New York State's Schoharie-Mohawk valley. Mr. Dufel also had the reputation of being one tough farmer who would not let the state nor anyone else take advantage of him. Some of Mr. Dufel's reported past battles with government included opposition to full value assessment, opposition to the creation of a county park, opposition to a proposed county bicycle path, and opposition to the United States' participation in the United Nations. With the exception of the last issue, Mr. Dufel had been successful to varying degrees in having his position known and counted.

He proved to be a perfect focal point for the opposition to the detour proposal. He held extremely strong views on the issue and was articulate, colorful, personally affected by DOT and the Thruway Authority's actions, definitely not afraid to challenge governmental authority, and, last but certainly not least, Mr. Dufel was a farmer.

Acquisition of the property and the detour construction contract letting witnessed the start of numerous meetings and protests, both scheduled and impromptu. On May 4, the first organized demonstration, attended by approximately 30 people, was held at Dufel's Scho-Mo farm. Although issues started to get a little fuzzy and many people had their own particular reason for concern or opposition, one of the protestors was able to state the major points in opposition to the detour plan on a 3- by 4-foot placard:

**SAVE OUR BRIDGE  
SAVE OUR ROAD  
SAVE OUR LAND  
N.Y.S. THRUWAY AUTH  
JUNK YOUR ILLEGAL UNSAFE  
PLAN!**

On May 7, approximately 35 people blocked construction equipment working

on the new detour ramp. The Thruway Authority, while in state supreme court to stop the protests that affected construction, also attempted to negotiate directly with Walter Dufel. A couple of meetings were held, and although the Authority extended additional incentives over and above the appraised value to Mr. Dufel in the hope of reaching a negotiated settlement, no agreement resulted.

Words such as "battle" and "fight" were appearing more and more in the local newspapers as almost daily protests were held. On May 10, a major demonstration by the Dufels and their supporters resulted in the removal of temporary fencing and some of the earthwork embankment placed by the contractor.

As the protests, demonstrations, and negotiations continued, both sides filed lawsuits with the state supreme court. On May 11, the Thruway Authority succeeded in obtaining a show cause order that barred Mr. Dufel and his supporters from entering the area acquired for the detour. Dufel's attorney filed to have the injunction lifted. Meanwhile, the town of Glen, the location of the project, issued a stop work order contending that the detour violated the National Flood Insurance Program. On May 14, the state supreme court issued a restraining order that nullified Glen's action—go, stop, go.

**A bias for action was achieved through commitment of the people involved.**

As construction continued, much more legal action followed:

*May 16:* State Supreme Court Justice James White refused to issue an order to stop the construction.

*May 21:* The town of Glen voted to appeal the nullification of the stop work order issued on May 13.

*May 29:* Justice White upheld the state and Thruway Authority as having met the requirements for a preliminary injunction.

*June 10:* A state supreme court ruling upheld the state and Thruway Authority against Glen.

*June 15:* The state supreme court appellate division upheld the preliminary injunction.

tion against Dufel and dismissed the application for a stop work order.

June 25: U.S. District Court Justice Neal McCurn said the federal government should take a hands-off policy as the state court system had decided the matter.

As the detour neared completion, the pace of demonstrations increased. There were almost daily get togethers at the Dufel farm, and a major demonstration was scheduled for June 27. Approximately 100 protesters gathered and blocked the Route 5S detour, delaying traffic for about 1½ hours.

Also, as the work on the detour neared completion, rumors started to circulate among the local community that the permanent detour would not provide for the continuation of local traffic on Route 5S. The locals were concerned that if this happened, delays for emergency vehicles as well as negative affects on area business and tourism would result. The issue of maintaining local traffic in the detour area first surfaced in May when a spokesman for the state's Disaster Preparedness Commission stated that a study would be made to determine the feasibility of keeping the former railroad bridge open to local traffic. This position was later confirmed when the Thruway Authority announced that it was only an option under consideration and not a definite plan. On June 24, the *Amsterdam Recorder* reported that "A mixed, but cool reaction greeted the state announcement Tuesday that Route 5S would be closed at Fort Hunter when the Thruway detour becomes operational about July 1."

Work proceeded amid legal complications and rumors in the community.

DOT said the decision not to allow local traffic on the detour had been made for safety reasons. The railroad bridge was too narrow to safely accommodate both Thruway and local traffic. Further, the state pointed out that a system had been developed to ensure the safe passage of emergency vehicles using Route 5S and to provide local traffic toll-free use of the Thruway between the Amsterdam and Fultonville exits.

On June 29, 1987, the detour opened to traffic: "Chunk" number 3.

As court action, demonstrations, and discussions were going on, so was the construction of the permanent Thruway bridge. At 11 a.m. on December 7, one eastbound lane was opened and in the days that followed, an additional eastbound and two westbound lanes opened, all on the newly built eastbound structure. The westbound bridge is currently scheduled for completion in spring 1988.

## Causes of the Collapse

The December 4, 1987 edition of the Albany, N.Y. *Times Union* reported that "A series of design, construction and maintenance failures led to... [the bridge collapse]." Specifically, the engineers hired by the state and Thruway Authority concluded that the bridge fell as a result of the Schoharie Creek flood waters scouring out the creekbed under one of the support piers, causing the pier to "slide out from under the roadway." The report stated that "four items interacted to make the pier footing susceptible to scour. . . ." At a news conference, Charles Thornton, a partner of Thornton-Tomasetti, said, "the failure to install and maintain the riprap properly was critical."


## Conclusions

The failure of the road system in Montgomery County New York was a significant problem for the New York State DOT and Thruway Authority. The solution was to return the highway network to its precrisis condition as quickly and as safely as possible. This was accomplished with amazing speed. Within the short span of time from the beginning of April, when the Mill Point bridge closed, to June 29, the date the "permanent" detour opened, DOT and the Thruway Authority let to construction a series of contracts that totalled in excess of \$18 million. The contracts included the construction of a new bridge at Mill Point, as "temporary" detour to the east of the collapsed Thruway bridge, the "permanent" detour around the collapse, and the construction of the permanent Thruway bridge. Truly, a technically outstanding job.

In addition to the technical expertise, there were at the time of the crisis several other excellent procedures in place. New

York had a state Disaster Preparedness Commission. The Department of Transportation had a duty office system similar to that of the military to alert officials to real or potential problems with the transportation network. The Transportation Information Project (TIP) existed to provide information on alternate routes.

Further, to help restore public confidence in the highway system and to eliminate chances for additional crisis, DOT immediately began "profile checks" of more than 300 bridges in the 13 county flood areas. DOT also started profile checks on the remaining bridges that crossed waterways.

Marion K. Pinsdorf, in *Communicating When Your Company Is Under Seige* (D.C. Heath and Co., 1987), sets forth several actions that should be taken and pitfalls to avoid at times of crisis. The actions by the state and Thruway Authority certainly met any reasonable definition of appropriate response. State officials acted quickly in releasing information, establishing functional priorities, and formulating and implementing action plans to restore confidence in the transportation system. On a longer-term basis, the problems were analyzed and appropriate solutions were developed that will result in the complete restoration of the Thruway system in about 1 year's time: "Chuck" number 4. 

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