

The Green Mountain Parkway:

Conflict and Compromise over the State of Vermont

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You probably do not know about the Green Mountain Parkway, a scenic road through Vermont's mountains, because it was never built. Not many people, Vermonters included, know about the proposed parkway, but the idea of the Green Mountain Parkway sparked a serious debate in the state of Vermont that lasted three years. The parkway would be built during the Great Depression, when many people didn't have jobs. Colonel William Wilgus thought the Green Mountain Parkway would draw people to Vermont and provide jobs for Vermonters. While some Vermonters supported the project, many did not, and the debate was intense. The two sides had very different ideas about the future of Vermont. Both sides wanted to preserve the mountains, but they had different ideas about how Vermont should develop. Colonel William Wilgus invented the idea for the parkway in 1933 but the idea was only voted on by the people in 1936. The Vermont Legislature voted on the parkway twice before the citizens were allowed to vote on the idea at hand, and citizens turned it down, choosing to protect Vermont's land.

Colonel William Wilgus was a retired civil engineer who created the idea of the Green Mountain Parkway, a road traveling through Vermont that was modeled after the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia (Gustin). He imagined a parkway that would run 260 miles from the Massachusetts line to the Canadian border along the spine of the Green Mountains (Bushnell 102). He hoped this would create jobs for Vermonters who needed work during the Great Depression. He also hoped it would bring tourists to the state (Bushnell 102). This project would cost Vermont almost nothing because of the New Deal, during which the government paid Americans millions of dollars to build roads and bridges and complete public works projects. The New Deal program would pay for the construction of the Green Mountain Parkway. The federal government would pay \$18 million to build the roadway, compared to the \$500,000 Vermont would have to pay. Vermont would use its contribution to buy land for the parkway and

then give the land to the federal government, which would declare the land a national park so it could begin developing the Green Mountain Parkway (Bushnell 103). In the end, Vermont would have had a 50,000 acre national park.

Wilgus thought he might run into trouble with the Green Mountain Club (GMC), which maintained the Long Trail, because the Long Trail ran along some of the same peaks. He did run into trouble with the GMC itself, but he found help from James P. Taylor, who created the Long Trail and the Green Mountain Club. Taylor supported the project because he thought it would attract visitors. The Green Mountain Club, however, did not support the parkway. They opposed the plan because they thought the parkway would pollute the air and destroy the mountains. They feared that the road would “scar” the mountains and that noisy cars would disturb the peace that Vermonters enjoyed. The GMC thought of the mountains as “unspoiled” and wanted to keep it that way (Bushnell 103).

Officially, the GMC said it wanted to support an expansion of “recreational facilities,” but it did not support the parkway. In a letter to the House of Representatives, Wallace Fay, who was President of the GMC in 1935, proposed the All-Vermont Plan. This would keep the parkway out of the mountains and send traffic through the valleys, where people traveled. This would leave the mountains for hikers and horses. He did offer a compromise. He thought they should improve trails and roads into the mountains so more people would travel through the mountains but more slowly, enjoying the view. “No super highways would invade and desecrate the hidden fastnesses of the Green Mountains,” but visitors willing to travel slowly could enjoy them. His plan would “encourage the leisurely tourist who really appreciates what Vermont has to offer. It would not attract the speedsters, the stunters, the unprofitable through tourists who contribute little or nothing to the communities through which they rush,” he wrote. The other

selling feature of his plan, he said, was that it was a Vermont Plan, creating a state park and not a national park, so Vermont would still be in control of the project and the land (Fay).

In the end, however, Wilgus and the GMC came to a compromise. Wilgus told the GMC that if the Green Mountain Parkway got in the way of the Long Trail, he would move the parkway to a different location so that it would not run into the Long Trail. The GMC still wasn't fully on board with the idea of the project, but it helped that Wilgus would make sure that the Green Mountain Parkway would not run into the Long Trail. Wilgus hoped that because he promised to move the parkway if it came in contact with the Long Trail, the GMC would get on board with the idea. He hoped that the GMC would become one of the Green Mountain Parkway's main supporters because with the GMC, he might get even more people to support the parkway. Wilgus believed that with the support of the governors, the GMC, the President of the United States, and the papers, they would win and the parkway would happen.

The supporters of the parkway wanted the parkway because they thought it would help Vermont's economy. When this debate was going on, the United States was in the middle of the Great Depression, and the Great Flood had just happened. Vermont was suffering badly, and supporters hoped that making the parkway would help Vermont get back on its feet again. Supporters believed that the parkway would create jobs and bring tourism to Vermont to help the state recover from the Great Depression.

President Roosevelt was an important supporter of the project. He wrote to Governor Stanley C. Wilson on December 24th, 1934 to voice his support for the project. He wanted Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York made aware of what was happening in Vermont. He hoped that Vermont's plan would inspire them to develop similar plans in their states. "I do hope we can get something definite started on the Green Mountain Parkway," Roosevelt said

(Roosevelt). The President wanted the parkway built because the project would employ many Vermonters. Vermont's advocates for the project estimated that roughly 16,000 unemployed Vermonters would find work on the Green Mountain Parkway ("Statewide Referendum").

Governor Wilson supported the project as well. In his Farewell Address in 1935, Governor Wilson said there had been "a great deal of misinformation with reference to this project." He worried that the project would not continue when he left office. He hoped that lawmakers would continue to push for the Green Mountain Parkway because it would employ many Vermonters. Wilson said, "Its construction according to the revised plans would largely solve our unemployment relief problem." Wilson was thinking that if Vermont built the parkway, the state would be "the northern link of the parkway chain" from Georgia to Canada. He continued by saying the state would "have the most outstanding advertising feature for her scenic resources of any eastern state." He believed that because Vermont was so beautiful, the state would be one of the main attractions to the long parkway. This would make more people want to come to Vermont to see the the mountains. He did not want another state to take the parkway. "If Vermont fails to grasp this opportunity, New Hampshire or Maine, or both will have the parkway and Vermont will be on a sidetrack." What Wilson meant was that if Vermont didn't take advantage of this major opportunity it had been thrown, Maine or New Hampshire would take it and we would have nothing to show for our small state. We would be just another small state and Wilson didn't like that idea. He wanted Vermont to be more popular and to attract more attention. He wanted more visitors to come see what our beautiful state looked like ("Farewell address").

However, the idea of increased tourism created conflict, too. The Vermonters who thought that the parkway was a bad idea argued that for every one desirable tourist the parkway

brought into Vermont, one hundred undesirable tourists would come with them. This meant that even if we had good tourists who took care of our beautiful mountains, did not litter, and did not disrupt the animals, the Green Mountain Parkway would also bring in people who didn't care about our mountains at all and who caused problems during their visit (Bushnell). Tourists would stay in hotel rooms. They would eat in restaurants. They would buy souvenirs. This activity would help Vermont's economy. But it would also change Vermont's culture. Vermonters were afraid that because of all the tourists, Vermont would turn into a "Coney Island" (Gustin). Vermonters did not want the scenery or the culture of the state to change. In an editorial in the *New York Sun*, the author stated that "with a 1,000-foot swath lined with gas stations and refreshment stands cut through the heart of her most beautiful scenery, Vermont would have been Vermont no longer" (Gustin). Construction of the parkway would have destroyed the very nature of our state.

Vermont's legislature could not decide whether or not to support the parkway, so they left it up to the people. They decided to hold a referendum on the parkway during Town Meeting Day so that Vermonters could have a say in what happened. The debate leading up to the referendum was intense. C. Edward Crane called this debate "the best but bitterest [debate] I have ever seen or heard anywhere" (Gustin). Voters were split and stuck in their positions. "Polarization was so intense, W. Storrs Lee reported, that 'every citizen in the state became a parkway or anti-parkway man'" (Gustin). According to W. Storrs Lee, in the state of Vermont, you were either for or against the parkway; you could not be neutral or just not care at all. Vermonters had strong opinions on the Green Mountain Parkway and did not want to compromise. As a result, the Town Meeting Day on March 3, 1936 was a very important day for Vermont.

The referendum asked Vermonters one question: “Shall an act of the special session of 1935, entitled, ‘An act for the establishment of a national park, known as the Green Mountain Parkway, limiting the lands held therefor, prescribing the jurisdiction to be retained by the state, making an appropriation in connection therewith and providing for a bond issue,’ take effect on the first day of April, 1936?” Basically, they were asking if Vermonters wanted to spend money looking into building the Green Mountain Parkway. In the end, Vermonters did not want to go ahead with this project.

During Town Meeting Day on March 3, 1936, Vermonters voted on whether or not Vermont should continue with plans to build the Green Mountain Parkway. In total 73,215 Vermonters voted on this topic. All fourteen counties submitted results to the state government. In total 30,897 Vermont citizens said, “Yes. We should move forward with the Parkway.” On the other hand, 42,318 citizens said, “No. We should not move forward with the Parkway”. The end margin was not that large with the parkway only being defeated by 11,421 votes (“State Referenda”).

In the end, the counties that would be touched by the parkway voted against the parkway. Rutland was one of the counties that would be touched by the parkway. Its end vote was 1,960 in favor to 9,169 against, so their county had a 7,209 vote gap. Rutland voters were against construction of the Green Mountain Parkway and made their opinions clear. In the counties the Green Mountain Parkway would not touch, the votes leaned heavily in support of building the parkway. Chittenden County wouldn’t be touched at all by the parkway. Their county’s end vote was 7,550 yes to 2,067 no. They had a 5,483 vote gap in the end. The counties that would not be touched by the parkway obviously didn’t care about the parkway traveling through Vermont and

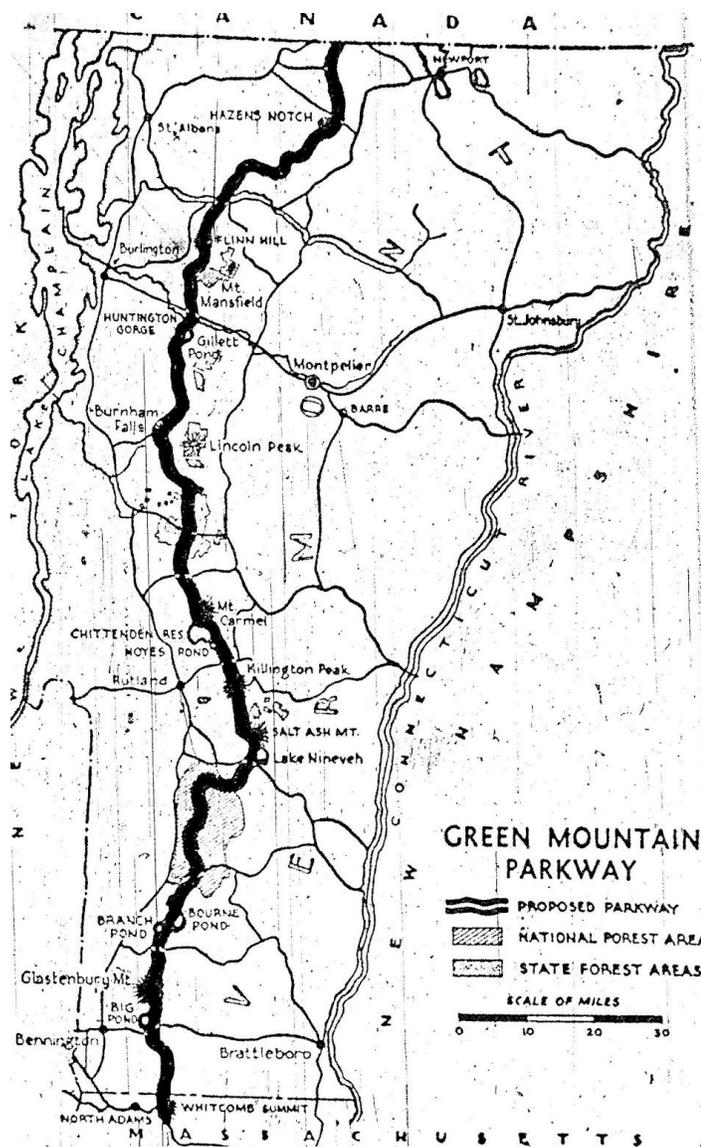
comfortable with supporting it. The counties that would be touched by the parkway obviously cared about the issue and did not want the parkway anywhere near them.

As a reporter from the *Rutland Herald* said, “the highway would perpetuate and emphasize the geographical split between east and west-side Vermonters.” (Gustin) The other counties’ votes were similar. For example, Chittenden County wouldn’t have been touched at all by the parkway, so they didn’t care about the mountains, but they wanted jobs. Rutland, on the other hand, would have fallen right on the Green Mountain Parkway. They were saying that they didn’t want it because it would affect them more. A total of five counties voted for the Green Mountain Parkway: Chittenden, Franklin, Grand Isle, Lamoille, and Washington. On the other hand, a total of nine counties had an overall vote against the Green Mountain Parkway. Addison, Bennington, Caledonia, Essex, Orange, Orleans, Windham, and Windsor all voted with Rutland to protect the mountains.

While many voters in Rutland opposed the construction of the Parkway because it would cut through their county and scar the Green Mountains, early in the process, then Governor Stanley C. Wilson believed that he could change people’s minds. In a letter he wrote to then President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on December 19th, 1934, Wilson reported that he had talked with the editor of *The Rutland Herald* (and with the son of the paper’s owner) and that he had changed the editor’s perspective. “I told you last Thursday that much of the opposition to the parkway in Vermont has come about through the active opposition of the Rutland Herald and the Green Mountain Club. The additional information that I gave the last two gentlemen caused the editor to immediately declare himself that he was convinced the project was desirable and the matter is to be discussed with the owner. I have strong hopes that we may find a decided change

in attitude as a result of this talk.” Wilson was an advocate for the Green Mountain Parkway and was convinced that he could change people’s minds. Obviously, he did not.

Would you have wanted to build the Green Mountain Parkway in Vermont? In 1936, you would have had to decide whether to support the parkway or not. Now many people don’t even know that the parkway was the center one of Vermont's major debates. They were fighting about the future of Vermont. I am glad with the decision the voters made because our mountains are still just as beautiful as ever.



The Proposed Green Mountain Parkway Route

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:

“220-Mile Parkway Up in Vermont Vote.” *New York Times*, 1 Mar. 1936.

This is an article from the New York Time that was written in the year 1936. This newspaper told me that back then they were estimating the parkway would cost about \$18,000,000. They also stated that the parkway would be in between 220 and 260 miles in total. It then tells you where they think the route will be and where they thought it would be at that point in time. The article tells me then that the plan was to buy and set aside 1,000 feet in width. The road would be in the middle leaving maybe 500 feet on either sides. It then tells you why they would have had 500 feet on either side and who would be watching over the build of the parkway. It ends with the writer telling you about all of the debate over it.

Fay, Wallace. “An All-Vermont Plan.” Received by Vermont House of Representatives, *Journal of the House of the State of Vermont, Biennial Session, 1935*, Capitol City Press Printers, 6 Feb. 1935.

This is a letter from Wallace Fay, who was the President of the Green Mountain Club. He talked about the All-Vermont Plan. He did not support the Green Mountain Parkway. He wanted a parkway to run through the valleys instead of the mountains. He would improve trails and roads in the mountains so people who were willing to move slowly could move through our mountains and enjoy them.

Lane, Sarah. "Certificate of Votes, Cornwall, Vermont." Received by Secretary of State's Office, Vermont, 4 Mar. 1936.

This is a letter from the town clerk in Cornwall, Vermont. It includes the language of the referendum. Vermonters voted on Town Meeting Day in 1936 to either support or be done with the Green Mountain Parkway. [REDACTED]

National Park Service. "Green Mountain Parkway Reconnaissance Survey, 1934." *Vermont State Archives*, 1934.

While visiting the State Archives website, I found out that the State Archives had the original map of the proposed Green Mountain Parkway: the "relations of the proposed Green Mountain Parkway to Vermont and its forest areas, towns and cities, and the major highway of the state." I went to the State Archives to see this map, which showed me how the Green Mountain Parkway would have affected our state and where it would have traveled. The map was written by the National Park Service in 1934. The *Green Mountain Parkway Reconnaissance Survey, 1934* is available in the State Archives.

Roosevelt, Franklin Delano. "Letter." Received by Governor Stanley C. Wilson, 24 Dec. 1934.

At the State Archives building in Vermont, the librarian told us we should look at the mail that Governor Wilson received about the Green Mountain Parkway. Governor Wilson received a letter from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who wanted the Green Mountain Parkway built because the project would put many people to work during the Great Depression.

“Vermont Debates Skyline Highway.” *New York Times*, 6 Aug. 1933.

This is from the New York Times and was written on August 6, 1933. This newspaper article told me about how Vermonters are proud of our mountains, that we are divided on if we should have a skyline drive, who was with the plan, who wasn't with the plan, where the idea came from, and about how much money we would need to make this happen. All of this was very good information because it told me some good background facts.

Vermont Office of Secretary of State. “State Referenda, 1847-1976.” Vermont State Archives.

Also on the State Archives site I found another primary source, the *State Referenda, 1847-1976*. This one “consists of canvasses of votes (by county and state summary by counties), certificate of votes and returns of votes.” This means that it has all the votes from all the counties all over the state, the number of votes and how many won over the vote. I could even see how individual towns had voted for or against the Green Mountain Parkway. I was able to use this information to understand where Vermonters supported the project and where they did not want it.

Wilson, Stanley C. “Farewell Address of Stanley C. Wilson As It Appears in the Journal of the

Joint Assembly 1935.” www.sec.state.vt.us/media/49111/Wilson1935.pdf.

This document is the *Farewell Address of Stanley C. Wilson As it appears in the Journal of the Joint Assembly 1935*. This document talks about what Stanley C. Wilson's views on the Green Mountain Parkway. He talks about how much it costs, it then talks about what the parkway will do, then where it will be. After all of that it talks about how the federal government is trying to do it. This consists of him talking about the fact that Vermont should take the deal

because if it doesn't we will be at a loss. He thinks that if we turn it down, New Hampshire and Maine will both have parkway's and Vermont will not.

Wilson, Stanley C. "Letter." Received by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt., 19 Dec. 1934.

This is a letter Governor Wilson wrote to President Roosevelt. Wilson says that he thinks he has convinced people in Rutland to support the Green Mountain Parkway. He sounds very optimistic. I can tell that he wants Vermont to get the project moving so Vermonters can go back to work during the New Deal.

Secondary Sources:

Bushnell, Mark. *It Happened in Vermont*. GPP, 2009.

In this book, it talks about how William Wilgus had retired and imagined the mountains and their peaks having a highway run over them. It talks about how he thought that it would bring needed jobs (because of the Depression that was going on), would cost Vermont almost nothing, and increase tourism. It then goes on to explain why it would cost almost nothing, how much Vermont would have to pay, how much the federal government would pay, and how Wilgus started to gain some allies. It then talks about James P. Taylor, the newspapers writing to get the idea publicised, and about who was against it. You read about how the opponents didn't want the parkway, the supporters thinking the opponents were crazy, the supporters starting to get the upper hand, and that the results of the vote were tight.

Duffy, John J. *The Vermont Encyclopedia*. University Press of New England, 2003.

This website was some pages taken out of a book called *The Vermont Encyclopedia*. It told me about who proposed the plan (Colonel William J.), where he planned for it to go, that he planned on getting some of the money that was needed from the New Deal's National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), who were some main people who debated over the topic (James P. Taylor, William Wilgus, ext.), what James P. Taylor and William Wilgus were doing during their partnership, why the Green Mountain Club was split on the issue (some believed that if this was made, people who hike the Long Trail would be forced to converse with not so nice hikers), and who thought because of this our state would be split in half.

“The Green Mountain Parkway.” *Regional Visionaries and Metropolitan Boosters*

Decentralization, Regional Planning, and Parkways During the Interwar Years, by Matthew Dalbey, Springer Verlag, 2014, pp. 139–175.

This chapter talked about what the two sides, the opposing and the proposing, wanted for the state of Vermont.

Gustin, Amanda. “The Green Mountain Parkway.” *Vermont Historical Society Home*, Vermont

Historical Society, vermonthistory.org/research/research-resources-online/green-mountain-chronicles/the-green-mountain-parkway-1933.

This website told me about how Col. Wilgus got money quickly, that some people didn't like the idea of the plan because it would cost a lot, what the opponents thought, it tells you about all the times the House of Representatives vote with the Senate, and it tells you about what happens when the people in Vermont voted.

Klyza, Christopher McGrory., and Stephen C. Trombulak. *The Story of Vermont: a Natural and Cultural History*. Middlebury College Press, 1999.

This book starts off by telling readers about what the Green Mountain Parkway is, where it was going to go, how many acres it would take up, what they were modeling the parkway after, and what they were going to try to fix with this Parkway. Then it continues by telling us about that there was immediately a split in between people, what the supporters believed, what the opposition believed, who was on the opposing side, and what Aldo Leopold wrote in the newspaper (“There seems to be something approaching an epidemic expensive unneeded roads invading the last remnants of the wild country in the United States....I can assure you that any desire to revisit the Green Mountains would be forever canceled and destroyed if your state goes ahead with this road.”). It goes onto talk about how the opposition didn’t like the fact that the federal government would control all this land and that they voted down the project in the end.

Liptak, Andrew. “The Green Mountain Parkway and Vermont's Future.” *Andrew Liptak: Blog*, Squarespace, 19 Oct. 2010, andrewliptak.com/2010/10/19/the-green-mountain-parkway-and-vermonts-future/.

This website talked about the guy Andrew (I don’t know his last name because it doesn’t tell me) telling us readers that on the radio he heard them talking about a comparison of the Green Mountain Parkway and a road that they wanted to make in Tanzania. He then goes onto talk about what the Green Mountain Parkway was and when it was proposed. He goes and talks about the two times it was voted on and that it failed. Then he starts talking about all of the different major roads that we have and where they start and end. At the end he starts talking

about how he would have liked to have the Green Mountain Parkway and about how the state of Vermont can't really keep businesses around the state.

Merrill, Perry Henry. *Vermont under Four Flags: a History of the Green Mountain State, 1635-1975*. Merrill, 1975.

This book starts off by telling you that Colonel William J. Wilgus created the plan, about the fact that there were three hearings, and that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave our state \$18,000,000.00 for the building of the parkway. Then it says what side the press was on, what day they voted on, how many votes that were yes/no, and that the plan was turned down.

“The New Deal in Vermont.” *Freedom and Unity*, Vermont Historical Society, 2006, freedomandunity.org/create_image/new_deal.html.

This website talks about where the parkway would go, what supporters said, what the opposition said, the controversy lasted three years, and what the end vote was. It then continues by saying that the Vermonters didn't want want the federal government to control their land and that they didn't want the government to to be a regulator of the land as well.

Sherman, Michael, et al. *Freedom and Unity: a History of Vermont*. Vermont Historical Society, 2004.

This book starts of by telling readers that this parkway created great controversy, that Colonel William J. Wilgus created the idea, what he planned on doing, and who Wilgus got to join him. The author's then continue to write about them trying to get money, how this sparked a huge debate, who wrote what in the newspaper, and that the opponents thought it would scar

Vermont's natural beauty. Then there was also a nice map that showed me exactly where the parkway would go.

Slayton, Tom. "In This State: Green Mountain Parkway Might Have Preserved the Mountaintops." *In This State*, VTDigger, 25 Mar. 2012, vtdigger.org/2012/03/25/in-this-state-green-mountain-parkway-might-have-preserved-the-mountaintops/#.Wh60LQ-e2w.

This website told me about what the proposal was, about how Bruce Post (someone who knows a lot about the Green Mountain Parkway) actually would it's sad that stuff like this is being lost, and it was voted on for a year. You then get to read a quote that the writer took from Bruce Post, it then tells you where Mr. Post heard about the parkway, and that he became fascinated when he started to do some research of his own. They end it with Mr. Post saying that "It's been all downhill for our mountains ever since then" and then he explains why he thinks that.

"Vermont Green Mountain Parkway Act (1936)." *Ballotpedia*, [ballotpedia.org/Vermont_Green_Mountain_Parkway_Act_\(1936\)](http://ballotpedia.org/Vermont_Green_Mountain_Parkway_Act_(1936)).

This website talks about how long they were planning to make the parkway, Act 17, Act 243, how much money it would take to make it, and what the end vote was. They believed that they were going to make a 260 mile scenic highway, Act 17 approved the Green Mountain Parkway, Act 243 repealed the Green Mountain Parkway, they would have to pay \$500,000.00 to buy the rights of way, and that the end vote was 30,897 saying yes, 41,318 saying no.