

## Last Link Of I-90 Ends 30-Year Saga

*By Peggy Reynolds, Seattle Times, 9 Sept 1993*

Erica Clibborn's red convertible will be one of the first cars Sunday across the new Lacey V. Murrow Floating Bridge, last link in a project that started before Erica was born.

The University of Washington junior, who will be going home to Mercer Island for Sunday dinner, was born in 1973, the year a federal court sent the Seattle-area stretch of Interstate 90 back to square one.

By then, I-90 already reached most of the 3,063 miles from Boston to south Bellevue, and the final major segment had been in the works for 10 years. It would be another 20 years before that last 7 miles would be finished.

That completion will be marked this weekend with an array of public events, and Clibborn and other drivers should be able to go across the eastbound span by 5 p.m. Sunday.

That opening means that I-90 survived the anti-government sentiment of the late 1960s, the mass-transit worship of the '70s and the budget cutbacks of the '80s - even while other urban interstate projects were biting the dust in New York, Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Washington, San Francisco and Portland.

Nevertheless, whether or not I-90 was really needed was subject to debate at all levels. It attracted a formidable enemies list, and was rescued regularly by a cast of hundreds.

Without any one of its friends in local governments, on the state Transportation Commission, in the Legislature and in Congress, I-90 could have ended in south Bellevue instead of making it to its junction with Interstate 5 in Seattle.

"We used to have a crisis of the week," recalled former legislator and King County Executive Ron Dunlap.

The I-90 saga breaks down into four phases: the design, the political and legal battles, the threat from federal-funding cutbacks, and the 10 years of construction.

The highlights and lowlights:

### **1963: First plan inspires horror**

When the state began its first plan for I-90 in 1963, the interstate highway system was changing the face of the nation - wiping out old towns, spawning tacky strips of commerce, and breeding more and more cars and trucks to roar past homes, lower property values and clog city streets.

The first design for the Seattle-area stretch of I-90 was no exception. "It's going to bury Mercer Island under pillars of concrete," proclaimed a member of that city's planning commission.

The island looked to be the logical spot for stopping a freeway. You can drive I-90 from Boston to Seattle and nowhere will you see the interstate bisecting an upscale residential community remotely resembling Mercer Island.

Mercer Island's residents knew they needed a new road for getting on and off the island, but they preferred not "to see it, smell it or hear it," in the words of former Mayor Aubrey Davis.

In late 1970, Davis persuaded state Highway Director George Andrews to put together a team including engineers, architects and experts in fields such as acoustics, air pollution, ecology and economics to redesign the original plans.

The result: a narrower roadway, covered with lids and platforms and surrounded by parklands with pedestrian and bicycle trails.

While the planners were working to appease Mercer Islanders, however, they still had a problem to the west, where leaders in Seattle's Central Area rumbled about "a white highway through black bedrooms."

Those leaders asserted that their neighborhood, with its large African-American population, would bear much of the burden of the new freeway while reaping no benefits.

John Stephenson, the first I-90 project director, remembers the community meetings on the project as extraordinarily contentious and says there were a number of occasions "when I began wondering what my next assignment would be, as this one seemed to be ending."

A story in *The Seattle Times* in 1971 said I-90 "may be scrapped . . . continued bickering and delays could mean (it) will cost the state millions of extra dollars and hold up completion until as late as 1980."

But the state negotiated with Central Area representatives - Seattle attorney Gary Gayton and Judge Patrick Corbett - to build a 2,000-foot lid over the freeway west of Mount Baker Ridge, as well as a new park and elementary school.

Gayton today acknowledges that the freeway "has improved on what we had before."

Of the original plans, not much remains: the high-level East Channel Bridge from Mercer Island to Bellevue and the Homer M. Hadley bridge, the floating Mercer-Island-to-Seattle span that opened in 1989. The overland portions of I-90, across Mercer Island and Seattle, were transformed into a project new to the annals of public works.

## **Early '70s: Long court battles**

The state highway commission on Nov. 3, 1971, gave the green light to build I-90, assuming the DOT could get approval from the affected communities.

Highway administrator Bob Roberts said he was "all fired up and ready to go" at the end of 1971.

"We'll work around the clock, full-speed ahead," he promised.

State officials thought they would be able to buy both material and land for the corridor over the next year and to break ground on both sides of the lake by spring of '73.

Roberts thought litigation in federal district court seeking to stop the project "presented only technical problems" and would not delay the project.

He was wrong. In January 1972, the state tabled its plans until it could resolve what Roberts called "legal wrenches tossed into the machinery."

State laws proved only temporary obstacles, as judges at all levels rejected the claims of I-90 opponents. But the foes had better success in federal courts, which prohibited the state from purchasing any more property within the corridor except in "hardship" cases, an injunction not lifted until August 1979.

In 1973, the federal appeals court sent I-90 back to "ground zero," in Roberts' words, requiring a new environmental-impact statement and more public hearings.

And the project encountered as many problems in council chambers as it did in courtrooms.

By 1974, the balance on the Seattle City Council, which had previously expressed support for finishing I-90, had tilted against it as dozens of the city's residents intensified their anti-freeway campaign.

Among the most articulate and durable of those foes was Margaret Tunks, a Ravenna-area resident with some legal background. Gov. Dixy Lee Ray called Tunks "the one person who alone has been responsible for the 20-year delay in completing I-90."

Tunks lobbied tirelessly in Olympia and at Seattle City Hall, slowing the project at every opportunity.

"I believe freeways ruin cities," she said in 1977. "They pave over cities just to make driving into town easier for suburbanites."

A frequent Tunks target was Davis, the Mercer Island mayor. "I-90 is just Aubrey Davis' folly," she proclaimed.

While protesting that they gave him "more credit than I deserve," Davis called the opponents' "fixation on I-90 controversy inimical to Seattle's best interests" and urged officials toward agreement.

"You imply that Seattle doesn't want Eastside suburbanites coming into the city, suggesting that we are ripping you off," he wrote in early 1976 in the island's weekly newspaper. "Fortunately, most of us view this as irrational rhetoric, because our businesses, investments, purchases and participation in Seattle are as necessary to Seattle as to us."

The folly, Davis insisted, was in believing that I-90 would result in paving the central city with parking lots, pointing out that less than 30 percent of the cross-lake traffic from both the old Mercer Island bridge and the Evergreen Point Floating Bridge headed into downtown Seattle.

Davis characterized the I-90 opponents as "an anti-suburban clique in Seattle which denies a commonality of interest with the suburbs . . . and responds with knee-jerk reaction that anything good for Mercer Island and Bellevue is bad for Seattle."

### **Mid-'70s: Bids to end the war**

Had the decision been put to a popular vote, work on I-90 would have started in early 1976, when a poll found 62 percent in King County and 58 percent in Seattle in favor of building I-90.

When the Seattle City Council in January of that year again debated I-90, only about 24 people showed up - in contrast to the hundreds who had responded to the subject previously.

"People are getting washed out on I-90," said George Benson, the City Council's most vocal I-90 supporter.

By then, the state had published its new draft environmental-impact statement, 1,300 pages weighing 18 pounds and costing \$770,000.

Still, the jurisdictions involved - in particular, Seattle and Mercer Island - continued to bicker over the details of the project. They debated how many lanes the floating bridge would have and whether or not transit tracks would be included.

A report in the Jan. 13, 1976, Seattle Times noted increasing concern "that lack of unanimity among jurisdictions will sink the project. . . . Federal officials won't touch I-90 with a 10-foot pole."

Over the next few months, however, it appeared the stalemate would be broken. Then-Gov. Dan Evans engaged the University of Washington's Office of Environmental Mediation to get an agreement from all six jurisdictions involved: Seattle, Mercer Island, Bellevue, King County, Metro and the state.

On Dec. 22, 1976, representatives of those jurisdictions signed an agreement that would allow I-90 to proceed once the federal injunction could be dissolved. By the middle of 1977, the final

impact statement was ready for federal approval, and the state resumed engineering design on Interstate 90.

### **Late '70s: Then came Royer**

Then Charles Royer became mayor of Seattle.

Royer wanted to send I-90 back to the drawing board. He said it was too expensive yet too limited in scope - particularly in planning for rapid transit.

He persuaded Brock Adams, who had represented Seattle in Congress and was then President Carter's secretary of transportation, to delay federal approval of the environmental-impact statement.

In August 1978, Royer presented an alternative that was basically what all governments had rejected in 1975: some safety improvements to the existing road and the old floating bridge, plus two separate lanes across the lake for transit. Royer's plan also assumed that the \$900 million in federal funds saved could then be spread around the Puget Sound region to improve transportation in other ways.

However, federal law did not permit such substitution, "and I doubt Congress would change the law for Mayor Royer," said Mayor Ben Werner of Mercer Island.

"If Seattle wants to be the economic, social, recreational and whatever hub of the community, it's got to be possible to get there," Werner told Royer.

Royer had support. Thirteen state legislators, including all Seattle representatives but one, signed a letter to Secretary Adams endorsing the Royer plan.

But 36 other legislators telegraphed Adams, urging him to reject Royer's plan and approve the impact statement.

Adams chose to sign the statement. Royer's alternative, Adams said, "would not provide the transportation service necessary to correct both the safety and capacity deficiencies of the existing highway."

### **1980: Federal money appears lost**

In August 1979, when federal Judge Gordon Thompson lifted the injunction that had stalled I-90 throughout the decade, the weekly Mercer Island Reporter exulted: "Nothing can stop I-90 now!"

Eight months later, the project again appeared dead.

This time, the problem was in the other Washington. In April 1980, President Carter clamped controls on federal spending for public works as a measure to fight inflation. Ninety percent of I-90's funding depended on the U.S. government.

"If these spending lids stay on into 1981, it will make it very difficult to build I-90 - if not impossible," said Bill Bulley, who in 1975 had succeeded George Andrews as state highway director.

Bulley ordered a halt to buying any more land or material for the freeway. A headline on the Times' editorial page declared "The loss of I-90: a valuable project turned to terrible waste."

Eight months after the federal injunction was lifted, why had there been no visible progress on I-90?

Throughout the nation "projects ready to move got funded, and those dead on their ass were shortchanged," said former Mercer Island Mayor Werner.

Officials from Eastside cities, the county and Metro were in Olympia pleading with the state Transportation Commission to lobby the feds for money. To keep I-90 alive in the meanwhile, they persuaded the commission to dedicate \$13 million, peanuts in the realm of public works, to continue the design and engineering.

In October 1980, officials from government, business and labor coalesced into an organization that called itself the Committee for Balanced Regional Transportation, or CBRT, dedicated "to getting the state off the dime and breaking loose that \$13 billion in the highway trust fund," in the words of its chairman, Merle Adlum.

"The proverbial cat with nine lives," wrote Times Editorial Page Editor Herb Robinson, "could take lessons in survival from the I-90 Lake Washington bridge project."

"There is one simple reason why the I-90 project has withstood 20 years of sustained attacks (of) fury and complexity," Robinson wrote. "The reason is simple necessity. Ask anyone who commutes between Seattle and the Eastside."

### **1981: Reagan era brings hope**

In November 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected to the White House as a fiscal conservative. But his election proved a boon to the I-90 project.

CBRT member Dennis Salvon came back from a visit to Washington, D.C., to report that the new administration "considers the remaining seven miles of I-90 a very critical gap in a system they want to complete. They fully expect it to be funded as currently designed."

Federal officials were encouraging the state to go ahead and start I-90, on faith that federal money would back them up. It was risky.

Duane Berentson, who had left the Legislature to become transportation secretary in 1981, was ready to take that risk.

"We didn't just make a decision; we were in an ongoing four-year struggle to find every possible source of funds," Berentson recalled. "It was a matter of keeping our nose against the windowpane and not backing away."

The federal money came.

### **1984: Things really get going**

The Department of Transportation was "flat out like a lizard drinking, getting the job done" by 1984 when Brian Henkel became project manager.

Henkel had come to this country from his native Australia 30 years before, expressly to learn how to build freeways. Now, he was building a freeway "that nobody'd ever seen the likes of - an environmentally friendly freeway," he said.

Henkel, who was responsible for the westbound and center lanes, the new floating bridge and the new tunnel, was I-90's fourth project manager. His predecessors had waited out the years in limbo, working on design details and acquiring "hardship-case" properties.

"I came in at the right time," said Henkel. "I had the fun."

Once workers started to dig, most of the controversies seemed to vanish. From 1984 until mid-1989, when most of I-90 opened to traffic, construction proceeded on schedule.

The new tunnel through Mount Baker, the floating bridge, and the westbound and center lanes were operational and had few problems.

### **Then, in November 1990, came the most spectacular delay of all:**

The 50-year-old Lacey V. Murrow Floating Bridge sank. The bridge, which was undergoing a major renovation, was broken apart in a storm and its western section tumbled into Lake Washington.

Fortunately, nobody was injured. But the work order was changed from "refurbish" to "build new bridge." Another major setback, totaling \$93 million and 14 months of work.

Now, the new bridge has been built. Interstate 90 is complete, save a few minor details: finishing a transit-carpool ramp from southbound I-405 to westbound I-90, restriping the car-pool lanes, installing a median barrier for bus traffic only in the car-pool lanes west of Rainier Avenue South, building an exit ramp from eastbound I-90 onto Rainier Avenue South.

Although some landscaping work will extend to the end of 1995, all remaining construction is scheduled for completion by the end of 1994, 31 years from the time I-90 hit the drawing boards.

The cost of the last 7 miles of I-90 has exploded from an \$80 million estimate in 1966 to \$1.56 billion today - more than \$200 million per mile.

The interstate will likely remain one-of-a-kind. Planned when the federal highway trust fund was flush, its design was locked in by federal court order although actual construction took place when times had become leaner and meaner.

Other communities with busy freeways may long for I-90-style amenities such as the lids and berms and buffers and parklands, but such things are simply not available under today's funding restraints.

You could say of I-90 that they simply don't build 'em like that any more.

#### ----- Celebrations

The following public events are scheduled in connection with the opening of the new Mercer Island floating bridge this weekend:

-- Saturday, 8 a.m.: "Wheels & Heels of Fire" race. Approximately 130 wheelchair athletes and 7,000 runners will take part in a race across the bridge. \$15 for walkers and runners; \$25 for wheelchair racers. Call 368-3337 for entry form or information.

-- Sunday, noon: Opening ceremonies, east end of Mount Baker Ridge Tunnel, Seattle. Shuttle buses to the ceremony will leave from the Park-and-Ride lots on Mercer Island and in downtown Seattle at Sixth Avenue and James Street.

-- Regular eastbound traffic should be crossing the new bridge by 5 p.m. Sunday.

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