

While the Herzberg article recounts one of the more successful responses to the city's problems (at least at the time), the second article describes a more controversial and divisive episode in its history. The author, Professor Marilyn Rhinehart, is no stranger to readers of the *Review*. She wrote a fascinating article on the institution where she currently teaches, North Harris County College, which appeared in the Winter, 1982 issue. In contrast to the rest of the nation's reaction to organized labor's demands for increased pay and improved working conditions after the war, the response of most Houstonians in 1946 to the strike of city workers was amazingly mild. Even more surprising was the solidarity expressed by the city's working-class population who marched in mass in support of higher salaries for municipal employees. The display of unity as well as moderation on the part of workers brought a compromise settlement and Houston was spared a bloody confrontation such as those that erupted in other cities. After the union withdrew its demands for recognition, the city agreed to drop its request for an injunction against the union, to allow strikers to return to work without loss of benefits or seniority, and to launch an intensive wage study which eventually resulted in a small salary increase for city employees. The general public proved more sympathetic, however, when in a public referendum engineered by city employees, they voted overwhelmingly for an additional pay raise. Again, it is interesting to note, the figure of Oscar Holcombe looms in the background as a person of leadership and integrity in this crisis as well.

Labor's success was shortlived. Conservatives elsewhere in Texas rose up and persuaded the legislature to enact a right-to-work law which deprived Houston's municipal employees of their hard-won advantages, small as they were, and prevented workers in other cities from gaining similar concessions. This legislation denied public employees the right to bargain collectively or to engage in work stoppages. Although Houston remains the center of strongest union activity in the state, the right-to-work law has successfully kept city employees from taking advantage of the situation.

The final article is a photographic essay on Houston's city halls, compiled by Barrie Scardino, former architectural archivist of HMRC. Since 1841, Houston has had five different city halls, with the first four located on Market Square which is bounded by Preston and Congress Avenues and Travis and Milam Streets. The first three were destroyed by fire, that scourge of urban life in the nineteenth century. The most elegant of these edifices existed for only three years before a towering blaze burnt it to the ground as practically the whole town watched in utter fascination. Then as now, everyone enjoys a good fire.

The present City Hall, an unpretentious building located in what came to be known as the Civic Center, was finally finished in 1939 after years of controversy over its design and location. Again, Oscar Holcombe played a major role in this effort, revealing once more that hardly anything of consequence took place in Houston without his active involvement.

Speed and Growth: The Development of the Gulf Freeway

James Herzberg

No invention of the twentieth century has probably had greater impact than the automobile. Motion pictures, the airplane, and television, as significant as they are, cannot compare with the pervasive effect of the automobile on everything from life-style to foreign policy.

Development of the internal combustion engine was, of course, a product of many minds and efforts. The United States, however, possessed many elements encouraging the perfection and distribution of motorized transport. Ample raw materials; great distances; a large, middle-class domestic market; and experience with mechanized production and standardized output contributed to the need for the car and its use. As well, the negative features of early mass transit, which involved countless delays and encounters with such obnoxious people as pickpockets and drunks, stimulated a public state of mind responsive to private transportation.¹

Extensive middle-class use of the automobile first emerged prior to World War I with adoption of car manufacturer Henry Ford's mass production techniques, permitting major de-escalation in an automobile's price. The strong material demands of the war further increased car use, as railroads were unable to cope completely with the burdensome wartime demands. With the consumer goods revolution of the twenties, the automobile became a permanent fixture in American life. The depression only underscored this achievement, as families economized elsewhere rather than give up the family car. General inelasticity in such demand during the decade merely evidenced Will Rogers' apt and well-known description of the United States as the only nation to go to the poorhouse in an automobile.

James Herzberg has been a lecturer in American history at Baylor University, the University of Houston at Clear Lake, and the Downtown College. He has just received his law degree from the University of Houston College of Law.

¹More vivid commentary described passengers "packed like sardines in a box, with perspiration for oil," forced to "hang on by the straps, like smoked hams in a corner grocery" as cited in Mark Rose, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1941-1956* (Lawrence, Kansas: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979), p. 3, an important reading in outlining national trends in highway development.

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Only temporary restrictions during the Second World War on gasoline and civilian production could diminish private automotive use. With the economic growth in the postwar world, Americans continued their infatuation with the car.² The only questions in consumer demand were ones of style and utility, from the extravagant fender wing-tips of the fifties to the almost ascetic subcompacts of the late seventies.

Paralleling this increased use of the car was rapid provision for all-weather highways. Following their historic function, state and local governments began improving their dirt roads to accommodate cars. The federal government did not significantly participate in road building until the thirties, and only then out of a depression-era impulse to create jobs. Even these efforts abated with diversion to the war effort. Legislation passed in 1944 reinstated substantial federal highway aid, but still on similar prewar terms of preventing postwar unemployment and satisfying various special interest groups.³ Heavy federal investment toward a systematic national highway plan only came later in 1956 with passage of the Interstate Highway Act.

Harbingers of major design had still been apparent. The German government's construction of the *autobahnen* in the thirties, ostensibly to relieve unemployment, provided that country with the first freeway system and a stirring example to the rest of the world of modern highway engineering. The obvious efficiency in travel and continued need for public works furthered American construction of freeways: the Merritt Parkway in Connecticut opening in 1937; the Pennsylvania Turnpike in 1940; and an urban project, the Pasadena Freeway in Los Angeles, in 1940.⁴

As at the beginning of any new major economic sector, many interests and ideas had fostered highway development. Local and special interest groups, government officials at all levels, urban planners, and professional civil engineers had become participants in freeway planning. Their views were as diverse as their backgrounds, predicated their planning on multiple incentives: economic growth, traffic control, urban renewal, communication, national defense and employment.

Houston's first limited access highway, the Gulf Freeway, funded by the 1944 legislation and built largely in the late forties, arose before any consensus

²Merrill J. Roberts, "The Motor Transportation Revolution," *Business History Review* 30 (March 1956), pp. 57-91. Despite the inclusive title, this piece dwells primarily on carrier transport and its relationship with the railroads. There is little said about the growth in use of the private automobile.

³Rose, pp. 16-27.

⁴John B. Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), pp. 79-83. Probably the best single volume on the impact of the automobile, the book's conclusions on the continued use of the automobile and expansion of highways are now somewhat dated in light of possible long-range energy shortages.

in freeway construction had coalesced. The challenges in freeway building and design alone were real enough for the engineers and public officials who participated in the project. But they also had to operate in a complex social and political context at the national and especially the local level. Within this unchartered setting, workers on the project focused narrowly on the objectives of improved mobility and economic growth, eschewing prolonged concentration on such matters as urban renewal or unemployment relief to justify the work. In this way builders of the freeway contributed to a national process of defining major highway goals, as well as aiding the free enterprise ambitions of the community they served.

In a second dimension, local officials did more than just shape the purposes of freeway construction. Ever sensitive to the essentially conservative character and aspirations of the private sector, public leaders were able to calm bureaucratic tensions and mobilize resources to achieve commercial and individual wishes. In so doing, these leaders scored a major public triumph, leading to rapid development of a significant urban freeway system over the next thirty years on the strength of general community support. Although the federal government had a primary later role, local government had mastered the beginning stages.

Their achievements marked an often ignored feature in Houston's history. So over-characterized as the capital of free enterprise with a low government profile, Houston has had decisive moments for the public sector. As significant as such businesses as the cotton trade, oil refining, and real estate development have been to Houston's growth, so must the attraction of railroads, the creation of the port, the development of the medical center, the acquisition of NASA, and possibly the current shift to mass transit stand as monuments to public leadership. These instances all demonstrated political figures and public employees applying their talents and resources towards significant public works to benefit the private sector and the general populace.⁵ While business and community leaders outside government were often involved in these projects and frequently enthusiastic over their prospects, the seminal direction and developmental expertise came from public, not private, leaders. With some irony, construction of the Gulf Freeway in its close orientation to economic growth and improved mobility was at once reflective of Houston's business orientation and antithetical to its alleged philosophy in

⁵David G. McComb's book, *Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) gives the best available general economic history. Relevant further studies include Marilyn Sibley, *The Port of Houston* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968); Nicholas Lemann, "Super Medicine" *7 Texas Monthly* (April 1979), p. 110 on the medical center; and Paul Burka "The Subway That Ate Houston" *9 Texas Monthly* (May 1981), p. 148 for a highly critical assessment of mass transit in Houston.

the necessarily strong supervising role of local government.

1. Route Planning and Development

From a freeway-planning perspective in the thirties and forties, Houston's topographical setting was comparable to that of Los Angeles. Neither city had restrictive natural growth corridors, making transportation lines particularly important. Houston's ship channel, of course, partially divided the city; and the location of the railroad lines had already directed much growth. But the city still lacked the physical confinement of the San Francisco peninsula or the heavy business and financial concentrations in downtown Chicago and New York.⁶ As a pattern for economic growth, then, route selection for the future Gulf Freeway was especially significant.

As with Dallas' Central Expressway, first thoughts concerning the project occurred well before its completion.⁷ In the late twenties, Ross Sterling, a Houstonian as well as chairman of the State Highway Commission and later governor of Texas, first suggested the idea. In 1930, state engineer Jim Douglas surveyed the first proposed location for the superhighway.⁸ Yet this planning was highly speculative. Too many elements were missing for major highway construction: the national experience with freeways, the funding, the broad-based local initiative, or administrative momentum in the highway department.

By 1939, however, interest in such an idea was maturing. The growth of Houston, coupled with an increasing number of cars, had created enormous congestion in the downtown vicinity. A major highway could allow easier commuting in and out of the central business district as well as divert cross-town traffic from downtown streets. Individual neighborhoods such as Park Place and the vicinity around Eastwood Park particularly lacked access to the city. Existing routes along Telephone Road and Harrisburg Avenue crossed several railroad tracks, making grade separations a desirable alternative to heavy traffic jams and occasional car-train encounters.⁹

⁶Rac, pp. 242 and 244.

⁷The first suggestion for the Central Expressway, a parallel project to the Gulf Freeway, came out of a master plan for Dallas developed in 1910. Like the Gulf Freeway, it was to follow the former right-of-way of the Houston and Texas Railroad, which had linked the Park Cities with the downtown. Although Dallas citizens voted bonds in the late twenties towards its construction, state and federal assistance after the 1944 act permitted an anticipated major boulevard to become an expressway. Charles Matthews, "The Route of the Problem" *D Magazine* 5 (September 1978), p. 59.

⁸*Houston Chronicle*, July 1952, Gulf Freeway Microfiche, Texas and Local History Department, Houston Public Library (hereafter cited as TLHD, HPL).

⁹Will Sears, city attorney from 1948 to 1955, interview in Houston on March 30, 1981, and Bill Ward, engineer manager, Houston Urban Project, Texas State Department of Highways and

In Galveston County, the existing route—the present Highway 3—was inadequate and dangerous. A narrow, two-lane road, the highway was the site of numerous head-on or sideswipe accidents caused by cars trying to pass.¹⁰ From a more optimistic point of view, the city of Galveston and its Chamber of Commerce also favored better traveling conditions to stimulate tourism.¹¹ Finally, although an all-weather highway already linked Galveston and Houston, a major thoroughfare joining the two cities was a natural and obvious objective for many.

In a farsighted and imaginative move, the then mayor of Houston, Oscar Holcombe, initiated the acquisition of the right-of-way. Since 1911, the Houston-Galveston Interurban Railway had run regular electric trolley service from in front of the Rice Hotel, down Main Street, and all the way to Galveston. Leaving every hour, the trolley ran at normal highway speeds. Ticket prices ranged from \$1 to \$2 for a one-way trip to Galveston. Despite these attractions, increasing use of automobiles had made the line unprofitable, obliging the company to discontinue service in the mid-thirties.¹² With this termination, the railway's franchise now required renovation of the streets wherever there were abandoned tracks. Rather than do this, Holcombe permitted the company to cover its rails with asphalt, not forcing full removal and repair. In exchange, the city acquired absolute ownership of a right-of-way sixty feet wide from downtown to the city limits at South Houston for

Public Transportation, interview in Houston on March 24, 1981; cover letter by William Van London to *Study of Houston Urban Expressway System near the Central Business Area*, April 1950, Texas Highway Department Library, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as THD); presentation by Houston mayor C.A. Pickett and others before Texas Highway Commission, November 24, 1941, Harris County—Interurban Boulevard, Houston, Texas, Highway Commission Files, Records Management, Department of Highways and Public Transportation, Austin, Texas.

Facilitation for commercial trucking and carrying external traffic directly into or through the city were not noteworthy incentives in initial studies for a new highway. Herbert W. Elder, "Houston's Urban Expressways," *Traffic Quarterly* 3 (April 1949), pp. 166-170, and Fred Grumm, *Report on the Proposed Urban Expressway System in the Metropolitan Area of Houston, Texas*, February 1951, THD.

¹⁰Hearing of Galveston County Commissioners Court before the State Highway Commission, September 19, 1938, Improvement of Highway Facilities between Galveston and Houston, January 23, 1939, THD, Austin.

¹¹Brantley Harris, Mayor of Galveston, to State Highway Commission, May 31, 1940, Application for Superhighway, *ibid*.

¹²Sears interview; Roger Grant, "'Interurbans Are the Wave of the Future:' Electric Railway Promotion in Texas" *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 84 (July 1980), pp. 29-48; Mark Foster, "City Planners and Urban Transportation: The American Response, 1900-1940" *Journal of Urban History* 5 (May 1979), pp. 365-396; and Herb Woods, "Galveston-Houston Electric Railway" (Glendale, California: Interurbans Publications, 1976), pp. 38-39. While interurbans were late in coming to Texas, Houston had the distinction of opening the last interurban in the country, the Houston North Shore, and maintaining it well beyond the general national demise to 1949. Grant, p. 48.

small cost.¹³

Holcombe's arrangement with the Interurban Company had a much greater effect on ultimate route selection than was first apparent. The next few years saw a repeated tug-of-war between city hall and the state highway department concerning route location. While the highway department was clearly considering a wide range of factors in planning the highway and selecting the route, from condemnation costs to traffic patterns, the city's position was clear and unequivocal in repeatedly urging use of the interurban right-of-way.¹⁴ Finally, in 1945, when the highway department itself criticized a consulting firm's suggestion of an alternate route, the city's tenacity proved triumphant.¹⁵ Both state and municipal authorities concurred on the interurban route as the right-of-way within the city limits for the later Gulf Freeway. Holcombe's early action had settled the ultimate decision.

The explanation for the city's unvarying stance, even during years when Holcombe was out of office, lay in an underlying issue through all the discussions of traffic control and engineering specifications: cost to the city. Financing of big highway projects at that time put a very heavy burden on local contributions. The city and county typically paid the right-of-way costs, while the state and federal government shared construction expenses.¹⁶ Fre-

¹³Holcombe to Glen R. Blackburn, manager, highway department, Houston Chamber of Commerce, June 1, 1940, Application, THD, Austin, and *Chronicle*, August 2, 1951, Gulf Freeway Microfiche, TLHD, HPL. Removal of the steel rails came later during the war when shortages forced their extraction. Sears interview.

Although there are numerous conflicting statements on the exact location of the former interurban right-of-way, the present Gulf Freeway does seem to follow it for a considerable distance. At the Ellington Air Force Base turnoff, the freeway goes further to the west. From that point, the old interurban right-of-way is currently an easement for Houston Lighting and Power Company, easily distinguishable by the high voltage lines now occupying it. The old route runs on the east side of the freeway down to Galveston. While the rails and small stations are all gone now, the grading is still quite evident, especially near League City.

¹⁴Consulting engineers Charles R. Haile, M.C. Nichols, and O.H. Koch in their report, *Traffic Way Plan for Houston Metropolitan Area and Harris County, Texas*, May 1939, THD, pp. 7-8, 42-45, urged routes around the perimeter of the downtown to spread the business area and stabilize property values, while City Director of Public Works, J.M. Nagle, encouraged use of the interurban in his cover letter. The study of the City Planning Commission, *The Major Street Plan for Houston and Vicinity* (City of Houston, 1942), pp. 4 and 6, amplified Nagle's view with fuller criticism of the study's proposals in their dependence on local traffic use and frequent intersections.

¹⁵Engineers H.G. Bossy and Arnold Staubach to Road Design Engineer J.L. Dickson (memo), February 19, 1945, Houston Highways File, THD, concerning *Report on Houston-Beaumont Interregional Highway System* by J.E. Greiner Company (November 1944). See also "Texas Urban Expressways Being Designed from Center Out," *Roads and Streets* 88 (November 1945), pp. 65-68, and clipping, *Houston Press*, January 26, 1945, Houston Highways File, THD.

¹⁶Elder, p. 172.

quently reduced to the expedients of using existing rights-of-way or relying on donations to defray costs, local governments found their ultimate solution for freeway construction with federal absorption of these responsibilities on interstate projects under the 1956 highway act.¹⁷ But in the forties, given the enormous estimated expense of the freeway, far beyond any previous highway project, cost was a recurring concern, to which city officials were deeply sensitive.¹⁸ Having the beginning of a route, a fiscally conservative community and city government could at least entertain the idea of a major highway until collateral sources became available. For this reason, the city kept urging the interurban route, despite all suggestions for alternatives.

Finally, passage of federal legislation in 1944 combined with further city bond approvals dispelled once and for all these financial anxieties regarding the Gulf Freeway.¹⁹ In addition, support for the project had been growing since the late thirties with even more arguments to urge the highway's development: the need for public works delayed by the war; employment for returning soldiers in face of the anticipated postwar recession; and relief of the additional burden placed on highways by local military facilities developed during the war.²⁰ When the freeway resolution came before the city council, reading by caption and unanimous passage revealed the council's enthusiasm.²¹

Design of the freeway followed the most up-to-date and innovative stan-

¹⁷An attempt to use state funds for local use failed in the courts. *County of Harris v. Sheppard*, 291 S.W.2d 721 (Tex. 1956); *Chronicle*, December 30, 1955, Houston Freeways File, TLHD, HPL.

¹⁸For example, a bond issue for over \$5 million submitted in 1943 prudently avoided specific mention of a single expensive highway project and lumped freeway funds under the general needs for permanent paving. An earlier 1941 bond issue for the much more modest sum of \$200,000 had definitively identified its use for the "Galveston-Houston Expressway," *Major Street Plan*, p. 10; *Houston Post*, October 10, 1944, Bond Issues File, TLHD, HPL; *Chronicle*, November 10, 1944, Houston Elections File, 1944-1946, TLHD, HPL.

In another instance, City Manager John Edy tried to modify freeway plans to save money, urging elimination of intersection overpasses as more feasible than the "costly Interurban Boulevard." Edy to Public Works Director John Turney (memo), August 22, 1944, THD.

¹⁹William J. Van London, "Modern Expressways Under Way in Houston," *Houston*, November 1947, p. 19; Jim Douglas, "Highway Construction in the Houston Area," *ibid*; *Chronicle*, January 20, 1952, Gulf Freeway Microfiche, TLHD, HPL.

²⁰Presentation by Mayor C.A. Pickett and others before the Highway Commission, November 24, 1941, Harris County—Interurban Boulevard, Houston, Texas; A.J. Peterson, President of Galveston Chamber of Commerce, to State Highway Commission, Application; Glen R. Blackburn, manager, highway department, Houston Chamber of Commerce, to DeWitt Greer, July 2, 1940, THD, Austin. E.A. Lyons, Harris County Commissioner, interview in Houston on August 21, 1981.

²¹Resolution Number 3329, City Council Minutes, May 9, 1945, p. 82, TLHD, HPL.

dards. Lack of engineering experience was an obvious spur to creativity. The feeder street system of synchronized traffic signals offered a low-cost system of taking traffic out of the downtown areas to the freeway.²² In a wise move in light of later subsidence and flooding problems, initial designing of underpasses at railway intersections gave way to the more novel overpass arrangement.²³ Instead of the typical driven pilings for bridge supports, engineers utilized drilled concrete columns with undermanned footings.²⁴ Doglegging the freeway to avoid a long, straight, monotonous route followed accepted construction standards.²⁵ Even the provision for divider islands along the center of the freeway was something of an innovation at a time when Texas had no completed freeways and only a few were in use throughout the country.²⁶

With the city providing a right-of-way approximately four times the width of the original sixty-foot-wide interurban tract, actual construction began in late 1946. Brown & Root Construction Company received the first contract to widen and pave the four feeder streets in the downtown area.²⁷ Farnsworth & Chambers of Houston was the main contractor for the freeway, building in both the urban and rural areas.²⁸ The first section to Telephone Road opened in September 1948.²⁹ By August 1952, ceremonies just north of Dickinson Bayou at the midpoint marked the formal opening of the freeway. Final construction cost came to approximately \$24 million. The state paid roughly 60%, while the federal government supplied the remaining 40%. The city of Houston contributed \$3.5 million right-of-way costs, and Harris County furnished another \$322,000. Ironically, the city of Galveston, a primary beneficiary of the new highway, made no financial offering, as construc-

²²Elder, p. 171; City of Houston, Traffic and Transportation Department, *Economic Evaluation of the Gulf Freeway* (Houston, July 1949), p. 7; "The Houston Expressway" *The American City*, 1948, pp. 116-117.

²³Fear of flooding was the main drawback to underpasses. Urban Engineer H.W. Elder to Van London (memo), February 19, 1944, THD.

²⁴"Houston Expressway," pp. 116-117.

²⁵*Houston Post*, January 25, 1948.

²⁶*Economic Evaluation*, p. 4, and Elder, p. 167.

²⁷*Chronicle*, October 10, 1946, Gulf Freeway Microfiche, TLHD, HPL.

²⁸*Ibid.*, May 7, 1947, January 18 and February 18, 1949, August 17, 1950. Besides Farnsworth and Brown & Root, other construction companies involved included Harry Newton; M & J Construction Company; R.B. Smith; Gulf Bitulithic; and Holland, Page, & Harrison Engineering Company; *ibid.*, August 3, 1952.

²⁹*Ibid.*, October 1, 1948, and *Economic Evaluation*, p. 4.

tion and right-of-way acquisition were all outside its city limits.³⁰

Excitement at the opening of such an engineering accomplishment diminished in coming years. The unanticipated effect of generating new trips because of superior freeway driving conditions as well as the increase in car use led to rapid congestion. By 1950, traffic flow reached the expected 1960 levels.³¹ Use of minimum and maximum speed limits, considerations of closing certain entrances and exits, even plans for *another* freeway marked efforts to deal with the problem in the ten years after its completion.³² By 1978, *Texas Monthly* ranked it the second worst freeway in Texas, following only Dallas' Central Expressway.³³

These later difficulties should not obscure the wisdom and vision of earlier planning. Political and professional elements had operated well together in achieving a notable accomplishment. Neighborhood dislocation was moderate, and the economic growth was even greater than projected. Each of these elements deserves closer attention.

2. Administrative Relationships

Since 1917, the Texas Highway Department had been responsible for a statewide road system. Before World War II, major attention went to the rural areas. Recognition that cities were annexing rural areas and needed some coordination with external routes beyond a conventional city street plan encouraged passage of legislation allowing state highway construction within city limits. The transition in the early forties from blacktopping old farm to market roads to superhighways represented a remarkable progress in less than thirty years.³⁴

Historically, little or no scandal had marked the highway department. In other states, the vast sums of money available and the ease with which payoffs could go to friends often led to favoritism and bribery. But in Texas, apart from the Ferguson gubernatorial administration in the twenties, heavy political patronage had not been the rule. Creation in 1946 of the constitutionally-protected Dedicated Highway Fund promised the department a reliable revenue from vehicle registration fees and fuel taxes, free of political interfer-

³⁰*Chronicle*, August 1, 1952, Gulf Freeway Microfiche, TLHD, HPL.

³¹*Ibid.*, July 29, 1950.

³²*Ibid.*, March 5, 1953; July 10, 1953; August 10, 1956.

³³John Bloom, "O Freeway, My Freeway" *Texas Monthly* 6 (September 1978), p. 133.

³⁴*Chronicle*, January 20, 1952, Gulf Freeway Microfiche, TLHD, HPL. *Texas Highways*, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition, Vol. 14, September 1967, pp. 11-30.

ence, rather than from biannual pleas for legislative appropriations.³⁵

Financial immunity from political forces certainly improved the professionalism of state highway engineers. More than that, the influence of DeWitt Greer, state highway engineer from 1940 to 1967, raised the integrity and standing of the department. In an office similar to an executive director, he picked a generation of like-minded, middle-level administrators, who were professional, efficient, and honest in their activities. His practice was to select capable subordinates and allow them as much latitude as practicable.³⁶

The engineer manager for the Houston area, William J. Van London, conformed to this expectation. Born in Canada in 1893, he immigrated to the United States with his parents as a child. A veteran of World War I, he became an engineer and joined the Texas Highway Department in 1922. He worked in West Texas for several years and then moved to Houston in 1938 to become the district engineer. With the creation of the office of engineer manager, he filled that post from its inception in 1945 to his retirement from the highway department in 1955.³⁷ Possessing a forceful personality, he was an early enthusiast for the freeway project and commissioned the studies done in 1939 and 1944. While on good terms with the state highway office, he maintained equally cordial and close relations with city hall.³⁸

The personalities of the two men blended successfully in work on the freeway project. Greer, competent and tactful, more the diplomat, implicitly understood the limits and needs of local government. Sensitive to financial restraints, he assured state support at a timely moment when federal aid seemed doomed.³⁹ On one occasion, he even had the city council appear before the three members of the State Highway Commission to discuss their bonding limitations.⁴⁰ For his part, Van London supplied the drive and energy on the scene necessary to inspire action and concentration. Letter after letter emanated from his desk, treating every detail from passage of a city council resolu-

³⁵Griffin Smith, Jr. "The Highway Establishment and How It Grew," *Texas Monthly* 2 (April 1974), pp. 78-81. This article gives a more critical view of the highway department than their own publications, particularly regarding departmental inbreeding and its insulation from outside influences by the Dedicated Highway Fund.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 78 and 82; Texas Highways Anniversary Edition, p. 40.

³⁷*Chronicle*, August 20, 1951, Gulf Freeway File; *ibid.*, July 1952, and March 17, 1955, Gulf Freeway Microfiche, TLHD, HPL. After a brief involvement in uranium mining, Van London died in the late fifties. Ward interview.

³⁸Ward and Sears interviews.

³⁹Dickson to Van London, November 29, 1943, Interurban Boulevard File, THD.

⁴⁰Memo of telephone conversation between Edy and Greer, December 8, 1943, Interurban Boulevard File, THD; Sears interview.

tion to grading requirements. One the commander and the other the field officer, the combination proved highly productive.

The administrative structure, as well as the personalities of the principals, was equally beneficial. There had been no real changes at the state and local level, but Van London did occupy a novel position as engineer manager. Created in Houston because of Van London's interest in the expressway, the office spared him the responsibilities of routine maintenance in favor of locating, planning, and building selected projects in the metropolitan area.⁴¹ He could choose his own staff and employ outside consultants. Reporting directly to the state highway engineer, he enjoyed substantial independence.⁴²

The office, while unique, followed the Texas Highway Department's policy of diffused authority in a large state with an extensive highway network.⁴³ Its chief advantage was the centralization of authority and expertise at one level. Other states, such as California, required a closer relationship with the state highway commission, thus limiting the effectiveness of the district engineer. Still others, such as Maryland, employed consulting engineers, whose experience and authority could be quite varied.⁴⁴ However limited experience may have been in early freeway development, the growing expertise at least rested in one responsible quarter rather than jammed with numerous other concerns at the state level or parceled out to occasional consultants.

At the city level, the central figure in regard to the Gulf Freeway—and much else in Houston's history—was Mayor Oscar Holcombe. Chosen mayor some ten times from the twenties to the fifties, he managed efficient, honest government while demonstrating enough personal showmanship to maintain his repeated election. On one occasion in the twenties, when he refused to fire three Catholics from his administration, the Ku Klux Klan started a campaign of vilification against him. One week before a mayoral election, he had the Baptist Ministers Association "try" him of Klan charges in a public hearing at the Rice Hotel. A "jury," including nine Klansmen, acquitted him—and guaranteed his election.⁴⁵

⁴¹Greer to O.B. Kercher, Senior Highway Engineer, Public Roads Administration, July 13, 1945, Interurban Boulevard File, THD.

⁴²Ward interview; "Texas Expressways" pp. 65-68.

⁴³Ward interview.

⁴⁴Resume of Meeting of Board of Urban Consultants to Public Roads Administration, June 10 and 11, 1947, Interurban Boulevard File, THD.

⁴⁵Holcombe could also press his luck too far. He later lost an election after swinging an umbrella at a Houston newspaper publisher during a heated argument. *Time*, Vol. 52, December 27, 1948, p. 19.

Holcombe's own zeal for the freeway project probably stemmed from several sources. A building contractor professionally, he was closely allied with the business community. As such, he fully understood the advantages of improved accessibility to downtown Houston and encouraging further growth through freeway development. As a politician, he equally appreciated the advantages of public works, which physically manifested the use of voters' tax dollars. As Governor Huey Long in Louisiana and Commissioner Robert Moses in New York had similarly realized, roads could claim virtually universal public use and thwart nearly all criticism.⁴⁶

As mayor, Holcombe took several actions that helped in traffic control. In 1940, he had established a Division of Traffic Engineering in city government, which later developed the first downtown one-way street and sequential traffic light system in the United States.⁴⁷ In a later action, Holcombe saved the city heavy future condemnation costs by supporting an ordinance preventing construction along possible future freeway routes.⁴⁸ Although his initiative in securing the interurban right-of-way was crucial to the freeway's development, he did not stop there. Ever the extrovert, Holcombe was especially capable at selling the highway.

Ironic as this may seem in retrospect, the novelty of this type of road in the late forties was such that many members of the public were afraid to use it. Planners feared the highway would achieve nothing if few drove on it. To counteract this, Holcombe and other officials staged ribbon-cutting ceremonies with real fanfare. The first opening at the Calhoun overpass was relatively modest, with the mayor throwing a switch to turn on the freeway lights, while a phonograph played his theme song, "Happy Days Are Here Again," in front of a crowd of five hundred. When the road was open to Park Place, dignitaries drove through the ribbons in vintage cars. The completion ceremony at the freeway midpoint passed all expectation. Getting front page coverage in the *Post*, *Chronicle*, and *Galveston Daily News*, the spectacle drew the governor and chairman of the State Highway Commission to dedicate the "longest toll free super-highway in the United States constructed since World War II." A parade of cars to Galveston for a reception at the Galvez Hotel followed the actual ceremony, with a Miss Texas Beauty Pageant and fireworks display on Stewart Beach. For national attention, comedian Groucho

⁴⁶See T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970) and Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).

⁴⁷This system later connected through the feeder streets with the Gulf Freeway. Don F. Carleton, "The Oscar F. Holcombe Collection," *The Houston Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall 1979), p. 136. City of Houston, Department of Traffic and Transportation, *Traffic and Transportation Improvements* (1948), pp. 1-3.

⁴⁸*Chronicle*, November 3, 1948, Houston Freeways File, TLHD, HPL.

Marx mentioned the opening on his television show, "You Bet Your Life."⁴⁹ Holcombe's hand in developing public support was even more direct when he personally offered a \$100 prize to anyone who could name the freeway, up to that time variously called the Interurban Boulevard or the Houston-Galveston Expressway. Of the 13,000 suggestions submitted, Sara Yancey, an employee of Citizens National Bank, hit the simple and obvious choice: the Gulf Freeway.⁵⁰

Holcombe, of course, was far from the only person promoting the project. State and county officials, engineers, newspapers, and many others spoke publicly and privately of the freeway's benefits.⁵¹ Van London himself hosted engineering delegations from Sweden, India, and Argentina as well as providing a helicopter sight-seeing tour for members of the American Road Builders Association.⁵² The Chamber of Commerce magazine, *Houston*, ran a special transportation issue, to name only a few others.⁵³ Such efforts were very important at this stage in convincing the professional and general public of the worth of freeways. But as mayor and an experienced politician, Holcombe above all had the position and personal capacity to exploit this to the fullest.

At a deeper level of working administration, Holcombe maintained a respectful distance from his own city government and the State Highway Department, apparently having brought no political pressure, for example, to route the freeway past certain property or to employ certain contractors. Rumors circulated, of course, about his personal profiteering from the freeway project, but they seem to have had little substance. Although he was involved in the development of the nearby Palms Center and Greenway Addition of Park Place, where property values naturally increased once the freeway opened, he had acquired the land prior to final route determination and was out of office when the city and state finally agreed to the ultimate location.⁵⁴ In another personal involvement, he spent years in court fighting a

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, October 1, 1948, January 24, 1952, and August 1, 1952, Gulf Freeway Microfiche, TLHD, HPL; *Galveston Daily News*, August 2, 1952.

⁵⁰*Chronicle*, December 17, 1948, Gulf Freeway Microfiche, TLHD, HPL.

⁵¹J.M. Page, district engineer of the Public Roads Administration to Van London, November 29, 1948, Interurban File, THD.

⁵²*Ibid.*, April 2 and July 7, 1947; Page to Greer, October 6, 1947, Interurban Boulevard File, THD; *Houston*, Vol. 22, December 1951, p. 41.

⁵³Including articles by Douglas and Van London, *supra*, *Houston*, November 1947.

⁵⁴Stories at the time of the construction of the freeway alleged he owned the land now the site of the Gulfgate Shopping Center. This seems to have been a confusion with his ownership of the Greenway Addition immediately adjacent to it. Lloyd Dutel, resident of Park Place neighborhood, interview in Houston on April 1, 1981.

low condemnation award for land he had owned near Park Place—with little final success.⁵⁵ Such incidents hardly revealed a man orchestrating every move of the highway department or city government for personal gain.

Similarly, Holcombe's business supporters seemed to have made little direct profit through state or municipal contacts. Unelected civil servants in the State Highway Department in Austin, not the city's political leaders, awarded the construction contracts on an impartial basis. While several local businesses such as Brown & Root and First National Bank, a predecessor to First City National Bank, participated in construction and investment related to the freeway, the picture is much more of informed, community business interests, knowledgeable of local opportunities and ready to take advantage of them, rather than of penny ante inside tips and string pulling.⁵⁶ However endemic some influence-peddling and waste may be to any public project, there was never a grand jury investigation or even a newspaper editorial to support such allegations regarding the Gulf Freeway. Quite the opposite seems to have been the case.

Looking to administrative relationships regarding county operations, the overall picture is far less precise. In the highway department, Jim Douglas, the state district engineer following Van London's promotion to engineer manager, worked in the Harris and Galveston county sections. However, the scarcity of remaining documentation and lesser county involvement in this particular project, demonstrated in the respective financing, create much difficulty in discerning administrative relationships. The traditional tension between populous urban counties financing a considerable portion of the state highway budget and a highway department primarily accountable to a legislature dominated by rural representatives was far less apparent here. Obviously, the willingness of the department to spend millions on a major local project and lesser legislative control over the particular funding scotched any such criticism. As with the city, the highway department was also extremely adept in dealing with county concerns. Worries about the safety of grade separations near LaMarque, for example, evoked a meeting between engineers and citizens, which readily quieted any ill will.⁵⁷ Far more vehement

⁵⁵Trial transcript, *City of Houston v. Holcombe*, pp. 8, 9, and 52, Cause Number 72,857, Texas State Library, Archives Division—Local Records Department, Regional Historical Resource Depository, HPL (hereafter cited as RHRD).

⁵⁶Frank Mann, former City Councilman, interview in Houston on March 26, 1981.

For a good discussion of the Houston power structure at that time, including the redoubtable 8-F Club, see Craig Smyser's article in the *Chronicle*, June 27, 1977.

⁵⁷Greer to Galveston County Judge Theodore H. Robinson, May 11, 1950, County Judge Office Files, Record Group: County Judge of Galveston County, RHRD. Judge Robinson's files were the best available county records, holding clippings, reports and correspondence with officials and citizens at all levels. The minutes of the Harris County Commissioners Court and Houston City Council were less illuminating, as they only recorded actions taken and not underlying discussions.

exchanges, in Galveston County at least, existed between the county government and local press.⁵⁸ On the whole, memories of county-state relationships on this project, substantiated by the record, were positive.⁵⁹

Van London's leadership at the state level, Holcombe's at the city, and good county relations, helpful as they were, matched a similarly agreeable relationship at the federal level. Correspondence between the engineer manager's office and the federal funding agency, the Public Roads Administration, revealed little disagreement between the two. Van London's office drew up plans and federal engineers generally requested only a little more information, offering only a few, occasional suggestions. There is little sense of bureaucratic inertia, or condescension, or nit-picking, from the federal agency.⁶⁰ The autonomy of the engineer manager's office, the general newness of freeway construction, the relatively low federal profile in funding, the local nature of the project, Van London's own competence, the absence of political interference—all of these factors account for the independence and discretion granted the state office.

Perhaps most important in bureaucratic dealings, affecting relations at all levels of authority, was the need for central direction of the freeway project. A major purpose of the 1944 highway bill had been to replace the wasteful, local methods of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration with more permanent, major projects.⁶¹ Such a goal necessitated firm direction from the local supervisor and general deference to his authority. The piecemeal, uncoordinated efforts of the thirties were memories still too present for revival through a multimillion dollar project such as the Gulf Freeway. Assimilation of particular desires for an exit here or a bypass there was possible, so long as insistence on them did not destroy the project.

Despite the general attitude, the harmony existing in the Houston-Galveston area was rather unique. Other communities achieving similarly positive relationships did so by different methods. In Boston, the construction of Route 128 went along without serious conflict largely because the expressway was in the state capital and state officials were more in touch with

⁵⁸Galveston *Daily News*, October 7, 1945, and Judge Robinson's statement, October 9, 1945, *ibid.* Criticism by the paper that the county was delaying property acquisition for the highway out of greater interest in a tunnel to Bolivar Peninsula evoked a strong refutation from County Judge Robinson.

⁵⁹Lyons interview.

⁶⁰See, for example, J.W. Courter, District Bridge Engineer, to Van London, December 7, 1945, Interurban Boulevard File, THD.

⁶¹"Highway Highlights," Texas Good Roads Association Newsletter, August 16, 1944, County Judge Office Files, Record Group: County Judge of Galveston County, RHRD.

metropolitan problems. Michigan had gone to the other extreme of diverting taxes to the local level to assure local autonomy. Other communities opted for tollway authorities, which essentially removed the potential conflicts out of government altogether.⁶² Within a unique administrative arrangement, the leadership and forbearance, especially of Greer, Van London, and Holcombe, deserve their celebration.⁶³

The later creation of the interstate highway system in 1956 by the federal government allowed the state and national government to pay the greater part of the costs in an accelerated highway construction program. The system greatly facilitated land acquisition and highway construction, as well as recognizing the limited funding available at the city and county levels.⁶⁴ Cost-consciousness expressed throughout the planning process on the Gulf Freeway no doubt contributed to this changeover.⁶⁵ Conflicting local interests, community disharmony, political manipulation, and bureaucratic infighting, while evident elsewhere, to judge from the experience of developing the Gulf Freeway, had not encouraged centralization of interstate construction. A meeting of the highway commission, as the Gulf Freeway was nearing completion, with much mutual commendation and back-patting among city and state officials, showed how blissful relations had been.⁶⁶ The virtues of local public initiative and enterprise, however great the financial burden, had been more present.

3. Neighborhood Impact

Indicative of the economic and traffic control incentives behind the Gulf Freeway's purposes, there was little consciousness of the effect on neighborhoods. Formal studies on community and environmental impact were products of a later day. At the national and local level, and with some justification, conventional wisdom urged routing superhighways through low-income neighborhoods because of lower land acquisition costs and possible urban

⁶²Wilfred Owen, *The Metropolitan Transportation Problem* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1956), pp. 105-114.

⁶³A further silent tribute to their ability as administrators is the general absence of litigation over the project. No group of citizens sought an injunction, nor did courts proceed to administer the project themselves through the few cases before them.

⁶⁴Rose, pp. 48-50, 69-94; Ward interview.

⁶⁵Bloom, p. 131; *Post*, August 11, 1957, October 11, 1957, Vol. 43, Holcombe Scrapbook, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, HPL (hereafter cited as HMRC).

⁶⁶Presentation by the Houston Chamber of Commerce and city representatives, July 1, 1950, Continued Development of Houston Expressway System, THD, Austin.

reclamation.⁶⁷ The disruption to the community involved and uneven success in eradicating slums, which usually only moved to a new location, were realizations that arose after much more experience.

Nonetheless, along most of the Gulf Freeway's route, community cost was minimal. The freeway, in fact, directly affected very few structures or neighborhood centers. One main reason for selection of the Interurban route had been the sparse development of abutting land, necessitating less community impact and condemnation costs. Even in Galveston County, where the route swung west of the old Interurban line, it still mainly crossed pasture land and met few obstructions.⁶⁸ Indeed, largely for these reasons, the county governments had opposed the early alternative suggestion of widening the old Galveston road through the several small communities along its way.⁶⁹ This setting for Houston's first freeway was clearly a stark contrast to the congested neighborhoods of New York City or environmentally sensitive areas around Austin.⁷⁰

Where condemnation was necessary, it did not seem too onerous. While the process is never popular, complaints and contested awards, characteristic of any public project, were fairly small in number.⁷¹ The greatest dislocation occurred in the downtown area, where the feeder system was to funnel into the freeway, and in a low-cost housing area immediately adjacent to it, comprising some two hundred residential properties. The first section had historically

⁶⁷Grénier report, 1944, pp. 4-5; "Build Expressways Through Slum Areas" *The American City* 66 (November 1951), p. 125.

⁶⁸County Commissioners estimated 40% of the right-of-way tracts were donations. Landowners were willing to do this in return for the county's promise to fence the land bordering the freeway. Presumably, this was an attractive proposition in situations where the value of the land was below the cost of fencing. Judge Robinson to the Commissioners Court, March 30, 1946, Galveston County Judge Office Files, RHRD.

⁶⁹Harris County Judge Roy Hofheinz to DeWitt Greer, state highway engineer, May 31, 1943, Continued Development of Houston Expressway System, THD, Austin, and *Post*, January 25, 1948.

⁷⁰Skirting the edge of the city, highways like the West Side Expressway in New York avoided enormous condemnation costs or neighborhood upheaval. Only well after the acceptance of expressways did Commissioner Moses attempt to slice through neighborhoods with the Cross-Bronx Expressway. Caro, pp. 526 and 838. On Austin see Jim Neff, "Fighting Back on MoPac" *Texas Observer* 67 (October 31, 1975), pp. 12-14.

⁷¹Only one eviction appeared in the newspaper coverage. An unemployed mechanic saw the sheriff coming, attempted to lock the screen, while his wife ran upstairs to jump in bed. The sheriff arrested the resident, but the wife remained upstairs as the workmen began tearing down the house. Approximately 150 neighbors and passersby watched the drama, generally sympathetic with the residents. "'There was even a little mumbling,' some of the deputies commented," *ibid.*, March 28, 1949.

been a better class residential area, but before the freeway's construction, was deteriorating to a mixed business, apartment, and rooming house neighborhood. The second tended to be tract houses built around the railroads.⁷²

Because the area had come to have little value, with a large number of absentee owners, many were happy to accept condemnation for property they could sell for very little otherwise, even considering the postwar housing shortage.⁷³ For their part, the city officials were still sensitive to the difficulty of some of the owners in finding new homes and moved slowly in condemnation.⁷⁴ Quite often, depending on the individual owner's preference, the city would only buy the land and pay house moving costs rather than take all the property. Renters, on the other hand, faced a much more difficult prospect of finding new quarters at a time of rent control and acute housing shortage.

When litigation did surface, the city emerged in a generally positive light. In the Holcombe case, ironically resolved against one of the major freeway proponents, the court upheld the city's means of assessing property market value in not requiring identical comparisons with adjacent property.⁷⁵ The city lost in another action when the state appellate court would not allow admission into evidence of a compromise agreement for a lower award from the city to the owner of condemned property. But the court's opinion was less a comment on the fairness of the condemnation process and more an application to eminent domain law of the general rule in civil litigation of not admitting settlement agreements at trial.⁷⁶

Such general restraint may have indicated a somewhat special desire by the city in this instance to avoid protracted litigation as well as unfavorable

⁷²Norris and Elder, *A Study of Land Values and Land Use along the Gulf Freeway*, 1951, THD, pp. 6-29.

⁷³*Chronicle*, July 1, 1947, Gulf Freeway Microfiche, TLHD, HPL.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, February 1, 1946; memo, Courter of the Public Roads Administration, March 7, 1946, THD.

⁷⁵*Holcombe v. City of Houston*, 351 S.W. 2d 69 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1961, no writ). Holcombe had objected to use of expert testimony at trial regarding neighboring land values compiled a few years before his property faced condemnation.

⁷⁶Condemnation proceedings were special only in that the state was involved with its superior authority. If settlement agreements are kept from trial for fear of misuse before the jury by private citizens in relatively equal bargaining positions, all the more reason to exclude them when one of the parties is in a much more dominant position. *City of Houston v. Derby*, 215 S.W. 2d 690 (Tex. Civ. App.—Galveston 1948, writ ref'd n.r.e.).

Subsequent citations to the case more broadly interpreted it, often referring to the holding that exercise of eminent domain powers should be "strictly regulated." *Coastal States v. Pate*, 309 S.W. 2d 828 (Tex. 1958), *Rotello v. Brazos County*, 574 S.W. 2d 208, 212 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1978 no writ).

newspaper coverage, which might attach to the freeway itself. A new project like this required careful handling to maintain its community support. The process, in fact, proved so smooth and efficient that it drew special commendation from the highway commission and encouraged further urban highways.⁷⁷

Communities more distant from the freeway, and unaffected by condemnation, largely benefitted economically from its completion without community disfigurement.⁷⁸ Pasadena saw its building permits double in 1952. Dickinson anticipated further home building and more recreational use of its bayou.⁷⁹ Entirely new subdivisions, such as Sagemont, grew around the freeway. Decentralization, expected in the planning process, was not completely harmful, as property values equalized and the urban center still maintained its vitality.⁸⁰

Thus helping many communities or requiring little disruption where necessary, construction of the freeway still had its most adverse impact on the Park Place neighborhood. Laid out in 1912 along the Interurban, Park Place at one time had been a gracious, upper middle-class neighborhood with wide, diagonal streets, large lots, and numerous trees in a pleasant setting on the banks of Sims Bayou. A half hour Interurban ride—at a few cents a ticket—connected it with Houston. Separately incorporated, residents had petitioned for annexation to Houston in 1927 to have easier property financing as well as better fire and police protection. In words that might haunt present residents, Park Place's last mayor said, "We all think it is about time for us to get in out of the bushes and form the southern outpost in the march of Houston toward Galveston. It will be only a matter of time, anyhow, until we are in the center of the city."⁸¹

So long as Interurban service continued, Park Place retained its original character. However, a few years after its shutdown to Galveston, the Interurban ceased running to Park Place. Residents, virtually all of whom worked in

⁷⁷Presentation by the Houston Chamber of Commerce and city representatives, July 1, 1950, Continued Development of Houston Expressway System, THD, Austin.

⁷⁸Ironically, before construction had begun, several of these towns along the old route had urged its expansion rather than an entirely new highway. Actually, such appearances were deceptive. The owner of a bus line running along the old route and his employees had stiffened public resentment by spending several days in these communities circulating petitions. Enthusiasm for the project was much more general, particularly as economic benefits developed. Hofheinz to Greer, May 31, 1943, *ibid.*

⁷⁹*Post*, August 2, 1952, Gulf Freeway File, TLHD, HPL.

⁸⁰Greiner report, p.4.

⁸¹*Chronicle*, February 29, 1927. Subdivisions—Park Place File, TLHD, HPL.

downtown Houston, now had access only along two narrow, inadequate roads. The coming of World War II brought wartime industry and an active Ellington Field to the vicinity, reviving it somewhat; but the community's long-term tenure still depended mainly on its citizens' civic pride.⁸² The development of a better transportation link with the downtown to replace the defunct Interurban was critical to the community's economic survival and a significant justification for the freeway's construction.

Unfortunately, the narrow focus of planners on transportation imperatives ignored the negative side-effects resulting from the freeway's completion. The route cut through the center of the business district and, while careful to overpass the intersection of the main neighborhood thoroughfares, necessarily segregated large sections of the community. When traffic increased along the freeway, Park Place residents' dreams of free and easy access to the city turned into a bitter reality of congestion. Traffic tangles at the crossing of Broadway and Park Place Boulevards underneath the freeway overpass became such an intense maze of stops and turns it gained a new local description as "Suicide Circle."

Even the much-lauded commercial growth evolved into tawdry and garish strip development, obscuring the more settled and dignified neighborhoods behind the billboards. High density housing brought a more transient population. As older resident families died or moved away, their heirs or successors rented out the homes, eroding further the number of stable, rooted citizens. Aided by the persistence of the local civic club and the growing trend to move closer into town, the neighborhood has only recently begun to regain its former stature.⁸³

It is, of course, a gross oversimplification to attribute these negative effects completely to construction of the Gulf Freeway. Traffic problems in the area are as much a function of the city street plan and the close location of Hobby Airport as the freeway. Outdoor sign regulation, tighter deed restrictions, or even zoning might have spared Park Place from the crasser features of commercialism.⁸⁴ There is a strong defense as well that the extraordinary growth and traffic both of Houston and freeway corridors would have taken

⁸²Norris and Elder, pp. 58-64.

⁸³The only specific community records I was able to discover were the minutes of the Park Place Women's Club, which noted a communication from the city public relations department on solving the downtown traffic problems, perhaps in reference to the freeway. April 23, 1946, HMRC. Upon hearing of the project, residents hired a consulting engineer to contact Van London, Duller to Van London, June 8, 1944, THD. Dutel interview and Norris and Elder, pp. 58-61.

⁸⁴Another neighborhood, Bellaire, similarly affected by freeway construction, having retained its status as a separately incorporated municipality, avoided such problems through zoning.

exceptional perspicacity from the most clairvoyant urban planner in the later forties. Nonetheless, the overall silence of engineers and city personnel at the time in even considering these prospects very clearly illustrates their overripe enthusiasm for the project and heavy preoccupation with economic and traffic concerns.

The program for the dedication of the freeway emphasized the safety, cost and time savings, increased land values, and economic links resulting from its completion.⁸⁵ These were commendable achievements, but purchased at some price.

4. Economic Effects

Legitimately concerned over the justification of nearly \$30 million for freeway construction, participants in the project devoted a great deal of attention to economic matters both before and after the highway's completion. For their part, the engineers generally kept to cautious calculations of improved time savings, transportation, and safety through use of the freeway.⁸⁶ Local press and businessmen, on the other hand, were typically far less guarded and more optimistic over growth prospects. Excessive boosterism spoke of "billion dollar" programs in "virgin territory," of a "trade corridor" and even an "open door" among "the great economic spheres of the United States, Canada, and Latin America."⁸⁷ Even before completion of the Gulf Freeway, planning and construction began on the LaPorte Freeway to connect traffic to the ship channel industrial area, Pasadena, and Bayshore.⁸⁸ Very quickly, leaders around the state were discussing a vast, regional "superhighway net."⁸⁹

The irony of these varied predictions is that the less scientific business projections proved more accurate and ultimately more compelling for future freeway construction. As mounting traffic congestion undercut arguments for time savings, the highway proved a boon to light industry, manufacturing, residential, and retail centers. Improved visibility and greater accessibility allowed low-cost advertising for corporations such as Finger's Furniture Center and Schlumberger.⁹⁰ The heavy use by intra-city traffic of the freeway

⁸⁵Gulf Freeway File, TLHD, HPL. Neither the *Post* nor the *Chronicle* carried any comment from Park Place residents on the day of the opening.

⁸⁶*Chronicle*, August 4, 1949; August 1, 1952, Gulf Freeway Microfiche, TLHD, HPL; cover letter to *Economic Evaluation* and p. 18; "Freeways Don't Cost—They Pay!" *Houston*, June 1954, p. 33; and November 20, 1954, Houston Freeways File, TLHD, HPL.

⁸⁷*Chronicle*, October 10, 1948, August 1, 1952, Gulf Freeway Microfiche, TLHD, HPL.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, March 16, 1947; November 23, 1950; and December 15, 1952.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, August 1, 1952.

⁹⁰*Post*, August 11, 1957, Vol. 43, Holcombe Scrapbook, HMRC.

strengthened the marketing possibilities among local customers in a way that an expressway drawing mainly cross-country traffic could never have done.⁹¹ Facility for moving persons and goods further heightened industrial and commercial use.⁹²

Economic development even marked areas few thought would materialize. Because the limited access feature would restrict traffic mobility in certain immediate areas, most had anticipated only a small number of retail outlets along the freeway.⁹³ This analysis was correct in terms of contemporary retail outlets and shopping centers, requiring open access roads. It did not, however, envision another innovation paralleling freeway development: the shopping center mall. The relatively low cost of land, largely undeveloped, permitted its construction. The freeway itself allowed a much wider range of customers, who could now travel greater distances in just a few minutes. Perceiving these benefits, a syndicate of Houston businessmen attracted a Boston corporation to develop Houston's first shopping center mall, Gulfgate.⁹⁴

From another perspective, many of the negative anticipations did not happen. Although many thought the downtown area might deteriorate with urban sprawl, encouraged by the freeway, the downtown actually improved from greater accessibility. Certain personal services—movie theaters, retailers—tended to move out; but large corporations and law firms for the most part remained. Coupled with a vigorous annexation policy, no exodus from the central city crippled its tax base or forced urban decay.⁹⁵ As well, older street routes used before the freeway did not suffer the predicted decline in property values once it opened. In fact, they momentarily experienced increases with the relief from traffic congestion.⁹⁶ Finally, feared commercial strip development was relatively moderate at first, sparing the city for a time the visual cacaphony of motels, fast-food places, service stations, and small businesses, typical features of open access highways near a city's outskirts. The controlled access feature of the freeway tended to localize such businesses at major intersections rather than allow them to stretch out along the entire

⁹¹Grumm, p. 7.

⁹²*Economic Evaluation*, p. 19.

⁹³*Ibid.*

⁹⁴*Chronicle*, May 11, 1953; June 24, 1956; August 29, 1956; Gulfgate Microfiche, TLHD, HPL; Sears interview.

⁹⁵Bloom, p. 199; *Economic Evaluation*, pp. 21-22.

⁹⁶*Economic Evaluation*, pp. 21-22. Subsequently, property values in these areas did not maintain relative strength. Inflation and general area growth may have enhanced values, but the freeway seems to have had a long-term negative economic impact.

route.⁹⁷

The effect of this commercial growth for the construction of urban freeways was highly beneficial. Land value studies published in 1949, 1951, and 1956, confirmed the overall increase in adjacent property.⁹⁸ With a parallel rise in taxes, the freeway quickly paid for itself.⁹⁹ Dissemination of these reports, particularly the 1949 study, was persuasive to other cities considering urban freeways.

Yet as important as this growth was, it also lacked any overall control or quality. The generous available land and continual burgeoning of Houston unfortunately did finally produce nearly solid development. Worse, what commercial growth did occur lacked the high quality of a Greenway Plaza or Galleria for attraction and appreciation.¹⁰⁰

Depending as such matters do on decisions in the private sector, there was little freeway planners and public officials could have done through highway development to control such growth, nor would they have desired too much control. A less singular concentration on traffic and business needs, however, and greater aesthetic consciousness might have moderated the resulting pattern of seemingly perpetual signs, and parking lots, and buildings.

In fact, such ideas had been apparent even at the planning stages. The 1939 study had advocated routing highway traffic through parks and residential areas.¹⁰¹ In the early forties, the highway department had itself placed oleander along Broadway in Galveston, pursuant to a report stressing the practical quality of such plantings as a screen for service roads and a boundary between traffic ways and adjoining property.¹⁰² Elsewhere, New York's West

⁹⁷Rudolf Hess, "Land Values Before and After Freeway Development" *The American City* 67 (October 1952), p. 117.

⁹⁸*Economic Evaluation*; Norris and Elder, 1951, and *A Fifteen-Year Study of Land Values and Land Use Along the Gulf Freeway*, 1956, THD.

⁹⁹Houston, June 1954, Houston Freeways File, TLHD, HPL.

¹⁰⁰Even this development, in the view of the independent-minded, former architectural editor of the *New York Times*, Ada Louise Huxtable, is not altogether negative: "The strip is full of intuitive wit, invention, and crass, but also real creativity—a breathtaking affront to normal sensibility that is never a bore." *Kicked a Building Lately?* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Company, 1976), pp. 143-149, and *Texas Monthly*, May 1976, p. 39.

¹⁰¹*Traffic Way Plan*, p. 13.

¹⁰²Landscape Report, July 15, 1940, Galveston County, US 75, C51-4-16, Old Construction, Folder 128, Box 7, General Correspondence, 1940-41, State District Engineer, District 12, THD, Houston, Texas.

The records of the State District Engineer, while much more voluminous than the engineer manager's office, were not as helpful. The filing system for this period did not have separate general correspondence files. The relevant construction files largely contained work orders, contracts, correspondence with individual contractors, and other material dealing essentially with construction details under control of the State District Engineer.

Side Highway had capitalized on great natural advantages with views of the Hudson River and Palisades, garden terracing, and drives past the Cloisters, Riverside Church, and Grant's tomb.¹⁰³ The potential for such magnificent achievements may never have been present for the Gulf Freeway. But landscaping at major intersections might have been highly feasible. Greenbelting along the freeway or at bayou crossings would have involved greater right-of-way expense, but could still have augmented commercial development nicely in staggering strip building and enhancing their settings. Coordination in land use with local and city government might have resulted in some highly imaginative and impressive projects, useful to the general public and suggestive to later private development. Later work along the Southwest and Katy Freeways exemplified the possibilities.

Very likely, such ideas failed in the department not only because of the overall orientation to commercial and traffic concerns, as well as cost consciousness on the project, but also since they were more frills and window-dressing to many at that time, not worthy of substantial expense or staff time. As later projects demonstrated, however, highway beautification became an important element in inspiring public appreciation and respect for freeway development. While city routes may never have compared to river walks, urban freeways, necessarily involving considerable commercial development, had more such possibilities than many then realized.

Retrospective criticism is, of course, always an easy matter. Its purpose is only to illustrate oversights in order to avoid such problems elsewhere or encourage remedial efforts where possible. In its negative features, construction of the freeway had accentuated the process of urban sprawl, community decentralization and automotive dependence already apparent before the project began. Regrettable neighborhood impact and heavy commercialism suggested a too casual regard among freeway proponents for community and human values in face of exciting technical and economic achievements.

Yet struggling with functional and economic priorities rather than community or aesthetic values necessarily drew first attention at such an embryonic stage of freeway development. Far from criticizing past planners because they did not think of everything, posterity should admire more the imagination and enterprise that resulted in a public project of consequence. A high degree of engineering competence and shrewd local political skill had surmounted technical problems, overcome financial restrictions, organized an effective managerial framework, addressed legal issues, and persuaded others of an ultimately necessary and worthwhile objective. Development of the Gulf Freeway became a positive case history for others to follow.

¹⁰³Caro, pp. 553 and 555.