

A Moment in Time: Project Chicago

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A Moment in Time: Project Chicago

By **Richard F. Weingroff**

When President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 on June 29, he launched construction of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, as it was called. Officials in the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) and in State highway agencies had every expectation that the Interstate program would be one of the most popular and important Federal-State programs in history.

Then they went to Hartford, Connecticut, on September 9-12, 1957, where the Connecticut General Life Insurance Company sponsored a symposium on "The New Highways: Challenge to the Metropolitan Region." Some thought the conference was the company's penance for moving out of Hartford earlier that year to a 280-acre site in suburban Bloomfield, where the symposium took place. The company's president, Frazar B. Wilde, told the 400 government officials, planners, and business leaders in attendance that the new highway program could help them achieve a "renaissance of American cities." The company is now part of Cigna, which has retained the headquarters site along Cottage Grove Road in Bloomfield.

FHWA Administrator Bertram D. Tallamy told the attendees that he was proud of the impact the new freeways would have on cities. "We have the chance of a century to make our cities sparkle brightly among our Nation's brilliant collection of really wonderful cities. Great care must be taken," he said, "to make certain that urban areas will obtain the maximum amount of benefit from arterial highway construction."

Tallamy's speech reinforced positive statements by Administrator Albert M. Cole of the Housing and Home Financing Agency (HHFA), which administered urban renewal and housing programs, and would run the early Federal-aid transit programs before creation of the Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1965. He said that improving the life of urban dwellers could not be separated from the difficulties of moving people and goods. If the highway and housing program work "in opposition to each other," he said, "we will be hell-bent for Slobovia, Lower as well as Upper."

The final speaker, nationally known author, historian, and urban critic Lewis Mumford, embodied the views of the many critics who had addressed the conference. "We have good reason to be anxious," he said, referring to Tallamy and Cole as the two men most directly involved in the future of cities, because they had not met until the day before the conference. It was obvious "that neither of these Administrators had the slightest notion of what they were doing."

He didn't blame them - he blamed Congress, which approved the 1956 Act based on a study of highways, "not a study of the real problems." It had been "jammed through Congress so blithely and lightly," Mumford said, because "Americans have an almost automatic inclination to favor anything that seems to give added attraction to the second mistress that exists in every household right alongside the wife - the motor car."

Shocked by the criticism of urban freeways during the conference and resistance by residents and business owners where cities were getting ready to build the freeways, the highway community embarked on a public relations (PR) campaign. The idea was that if the truth of highway benefits, instead of the misrepresentations of critics, were known, people would support urban freeways, stop trying to block them, and cooperate in their construction. To provide facts to counter the critics, the PR campaign included national planning conferences to identify ways to fit freeways into city life, National Highway Week for States to highlight good highway news (the first was called by President John F. Kennedy for May 21-27, 1961, "in recognition of the vital role of highway transportation in our way of life"), aggressive

campaigns to rebut myths (for example: no, the highway builders didn't want to pave over America) and a moment in time called Project Chicago.

Project Chicago

In November 1956, the American Municipal Association (AMA) and the American Association of State Highway officials (AASHO) formed a Joint Committee on Highways to help advance the expanded highway program by gathering a wider range of urban data than was available and to cooperate with highway and city officials. On January 18, 1962, the AMA-AASHO Committee developed an Action Program, with the support of the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads (BPR), HHFA, and the National Association of County Officials (NACO), for stimulating greater voluntary planning of urban transportation, particularly in smaller cities. The larger cities, the committee concluded, were already employing new techniques for predicting metropolitan area land use as the basis for transportation planning.

The Action Program called for regional meetings where State and local officials could discuss the cooperative planning process the committee advocated, the sources of funds for the studies, and the availability of technical assistance. The goal was for each State to identify a pilot city, in the population range of 50,000-250,000, to serve as a model for other similar areas.

The first Action Program conference took place in Chicago on May 10 and 11, Thursday and Friday, 1962. The first regional Urban Transportation Conference sponsored by AASHO, AMA, and NACO was nicknamed Project Chicago. Participants included top officials and staff of the State highway departments in the five-State region (Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, and Wisconsin) as well as mayors, county officials, HHFA personnel, and staff from the sponsoring organizations, including BPR.

Newspapers, television and radio news, and talk shows covered the conference locally and nationally. As BPR's news clip service, *Public Roads Round-Up*, put it:

Project Chicago gave millions of radio listeners and television viewers, as well as newspaper readers, an opportunity to learn what the United States Bureau of Public Roads is doing to provide the nation with a modern highway system.

FHWA Administrator Rex M. Whitton (1961-1966) was one of the featured speakers. Whitton, a Missouri native, had risen through the ranks to become State Highway Commissioner, the position he held while testifying before Congress as AASHO's president in the critical period before the 1956 Act. After President Eisenhower signed the legislation, Whitton proudly claimed for Missouri the honor of the first State to award a contract with the new Interstate construction funds. Under President Kennedy, Whitton took the oath of office as FHWA Administrator on February 10, 1961, and held that post through December 1966.

As part of his PR reply to critics, Whitton probably participated in the opening of more Interstate highway segments than any BPR or Federal Highway Administration leader. At the same time, he helped transition BPR and the highway community to an understanding of the social, economic, and environmental issues that were at the heart of protests against the Interstate System.

In Chicago during May 1962, he was in full PR mode, appearing on an aggressive schedule of local and national television and radio programs throughout the week. Typical was his appearance on *NBC's Monitor*. During the introduction, the announcer referred to Soviet cosmonaut Gherman Titov, who became the second man to orbit the Earth on August 6, 1961. When Titov toured America in early May 1962, he said he found big city traffic more frightening than traveling through space.

"I wouldn't want to drive on American roads, they're too dangerous."

While Americans did not agree with all of Titov's views, the announcer said, "the Russian cosmonaut struck a responsive chord when he described the bumper-to-bumper traffic jams as unbearable." The Chicago conference was

about "how to get America out of the traffic jam."

Interviewer Jim Hurlbut, an NBC news reporter, began by asking Whitton when America could expect relief. Whitton summarized the status of the Interstate System. "When completed, the Interstate will handle more than 20 percent of the total traffic volume in this country. This, of course, is a major step in breaking bottlenecks and speeding the traffic flow."

Mentioning the estimated \$41 billion cost, Hurlbut asked, "Isn't this going to mean a large tax bite on us â€" the suffering public?" Whitton replied, "Not at all, Jim. The Federal highway program is paid for by highway users and no one else. And it is on a sound pay-as-you-go basis. It is the highway user alone who pays for these road systems which will serve our people, our economy, and our defense for generations."

Hurlbut asked when city motorists could look forward to "relief from this trying, time-wasting problem of congestion. One reason our freeways are so crowded today is they are incomplete links of the designed system," Whitton explained. "It might surprise you to know that not one single city â€" that is, major city â€" in the country has a complete freeway system."

As more freeways were completed, the results would be dramatic.

"And when the whole system is working, it will solve many of our most serious traffic problems."

Hurlbut told him, "Rex, when that happens, you highway engineers will be the heroes of every taxi driver in Chicago. Every car commuter, too."

Whitton replied, "If our people were as willing to spend money for new model roads as they are for new model cars, there wouldn't be any traffic jams."

Hurlbut concluded the interview:

"To that I can only add AMEN! Keep the bulldozers working, Rex. We need more and better roads for an America on the go."

Whitton also appeared on Alex Dreier's *Commentary on the News* (ABC Network), Don McNeill's *Breakfast Club* (ABC Network), *Paul Harvey and the News* (ABC Network); and Irv Kupcinet's *At Random* (CBS-TV).

Whitton delivered his feature speech, "Squaring the Circle for Cities," during the luncheon on Friday, May 11. The title of his speech referred to a problem raised in high schools where geometry students learned that squaring the circle was a problem without a solution "within the narrow limits of the geometry of Euclid." For too long, groups participating in the Chicago conference had "warily circled around the urban transportation problem," with each group "limited in both the scope and the concept of our efforts by our own individual radius." Using the "limited techniques and under traditional, even hide-bound, approaches," squaring the circle for cities â€" that is, solving urban transportation problem â€" seemed impossible.

Today, with a widened vision, "we have forged new tools" for doing just that. Certainly, he said, there were "strong forces of gravity that are pulling us together â€" the gravity, in one sense, that is the plight of cities; and the gravity, in another sense, of mutual attraction toward the common objective of solving the cities' problems."

He endorsed the Action Program, as did HHFA. The Action Program's plan for pilot city planning programs in smaller cities would, Whitton thought, "promote wide and important acceptance â€" and endorsement â€" of the program." He liked the idea of confining the pilot program to smaller cities. "Most of the larger metropolitan urban areas already have undertaken comprehensive planning studies or are preparing to do so."

He discussed the provision in the Kennedy Administration's proposed Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962 that would condition Federal-aid highway funding for metropolitan areas after July 1, 1965, on a continuing, comprehensive transportation planning process carried on cooperatively by State and local officials. "We believe that by encouraging balanced transportation planning, the quality of general metropolitan planning will be improved." The Action Program would "put us so far along the road by 1965" that he anticipated that he would not have to withhold Federal-aid funds from any urban areas after July 1, 1965. "We certainly hope that it works out this way."

The Action Program would, he said, "lead to serious consideration and actual undertaking of the planning process in every city in the country, during the next few years." The result would be "transportation developments actually undertaken, within the economic means and according to the desires of the people of each community." He added, "I know of no other undertaking that can serve better to improve the economy, the working conditions, and the pleasure of the American people." It was up to everyone in the conference, working together, "to square the circle for the cities."

On Saturday, May 12, Whitton held a news conference where he discussed the proposed requirement for planning. "The measure provides that if cities, states and counties do not have their plans completed by July 1, 1965, they will not share in the federal funds." He emphasized the need for "more flexible use" of Federal-aid highway funds as well as more urban freeway construction "to crack traffic bottlenecks."

Big cities such as Chicago and Detroit "have done an excellent job of highway planning." The smaller cities "are lagging." He added, "We just don't want to spend federal money without a plan. There has been too much of a hodge-podge in the past."

Whitton emphasized that the rush hour traffic jams in Chicago were "a distorted traffic picture." He said, "What's happening now is called induced traffic. Drivers are being induced to go out of their way from using other streets to drive on the Congress, Northwest and Edens Expressways" into central Chicago even though their destination was other parts of the city or the suburbs. A recently announced north-south expressway, to be known as the Crosstown, would divert motorists who are not going to or from the central city.

Following years of controversy, the Crosstown Expressway was withdrawn from the Interstate System in the 1970s at the request of Governor James R. Thompson and Mayors Michael A. Bilandic (1977) and Jane Byrne (1979).

Stemming the Tide of Criticism

Section 9 of the *Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962*, which President Kennedy signed on October 23, 1962, required that after July 1, 1965, Federal-aid highway funds could not be used in urban areas of 50,000 or more population unless projects were "based on a continuing comprehensive transportation planning process carried on cooperatively by State and local communities" — what became known as the 3C planning process. By July 1, 1965, the Nation's 224 urbanized areas had a 3C urban transportation process in compliance with Section 9. The Action Plan discussed in Chicago had proposed transportation planning on a voluntary basis. This law made it mandatory.

During the May 12 news conference, Whitton used a familiar metaphor to offer hope of relief from traffic jams. "If this nation has the will and technology to conquer space it can find a way to bring order to city redevelopment and the ways to get our cities out of traffic jams." Project Chicago, on May 10 and 11, 1962, was a moment in time when highway officials proposed transportation planning as a way to meet urban transportation needs — and stem the tide of criticism that threatened completion of the Interstate System by 1972. The 3C planning process was a breakthrough in urban transportation, allowing for a more balanced, multimodal review, but criticism of urban Interstate freeways would only increase in the years ahead. The myth-busting of the PR campaign and the new planning process that left the urban Interstates on the drawing board didn't, in the end, overcome the criticism.
