

A Moment in Time: President John F. Kennedy Cuts a Ribbon

Series: FHWA Highway History Website Articles

April 10, 2019



U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration
1200 New Jersey Ave, SE
Washington, DC 20590

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A Moment in Time: President John F. Kennedy Cuts a Ribbon

By Richard F. Weingroff



On September 17, 1963, President John F. Kennedy met in the White House to discuss the routing of I-24 with the Governors from the four affected States. Left to right: Governor John Dalton (Missouri), Governor Frank Clement (Tennessee), Secretary of Commerce Luther Hodges, President Kennedy, Governor Otto Kerner (Illinois), Governor Bert Combs (Kentucky), and Federal Highway Administrator Rex M. Whitton. (Photo courtesy John F. Kennedy Library)

Presidents have rarely participated in ribbon-cutting ceremonies for highways, even including the Interstate System. Although President Dwight D. Eisenhower participated in at least two highway ribbon cutting ceremonies, he never participated in one for his favorite program: The National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, which Congress renamed in his honor in 1990.

Eisenhower's successor, President John F. Kennedy, is an exception.

Nixon vs Kennedy

In the presidential election of 1960, the United States had to choose between Senator John F. Kennedy (D-Ma.) and Vice President Richard M. Nixon. Vice President Nixon was the favorite according to pundits and pollsters, but his lead withered away during the campaign. It didn't help that when a reporter asked Eisenhower a question about useful advice or suggestions Nixon had provided, the President responded, "if you give me a week I might think of one."

In the final days of the campaign, with the Vice President trailing in the polls, President Eisenhower launched a 9-day "nonpolitical" tour that was partly in support of his own reputation but mainly in support of the Republican nominee. On October 18, the President participated in the dedication of Hiawatha Bridge carrying U.S. 63 across the Mississippi River between Red Wing, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. He called the new bridge "another example of Federal-State partnership in meeting both local and national needs." Speaking of the Interstate System, he pointed out that Vice President Nixon had presented the President's "Grand Plan" for highway development at the 1954 Governors'

conference. (A death in the family prevented the President from making the presentation. See <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/rw96m.cfm> for the text).

It was a close election - so close that Democrats and Republicans have ever since accused the other party of stealing it. (The only thing the parties agree on is that the theft took place in Illinois.) But Kennedy won 49.7 percent of the popular vote (34,220,984), while Nixon received 49.5 percent (34,108,157). With 269 electoral college votes needed to win, Senator Kennedy received 303 electoral college votes, and the Vice President earned 219. (Senator Harry Flood Byrd (D-VA), received the remaining popular votes (610,409) and 15 electoral college votes even though he was not a candidate.)

Vice President Nixon, as we know, would lose the 1962 California Governor's race and end his career in politics (telling reporters, "But as I leave you I want you to know - just think how much you're going to be missing. You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference"). He returned to the practice of law, only to win the Presidency in 1968, win reelection by a historic landslide in 1972, and resign on August 9, 1974, as a result of the scandals grouped under the general heading of Watergate.

Kennedy Takes Office

President Kennedy, the first President born in the 20th century, was seen as a refreshing change after 8 years of a beloved golf-playing leader from an older, fading generation. The President and his wife Jackie represented youth, vigor, style, and humor, with two little children, Caroline (3 years) and John (born on November 25, 1960) - a circumstance the Baby Boomers of the early 1960's could sympathize with while admiring the new glamour of Washington.

President Kennedy would have a positive influence on the Federal-aid highway program. First, he appointed Missouri's Rex M. Whitton as Federal Highway Administrator (1961-1966) to head the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR). With active support from the President, Whitton helped resolve the problems threatening to bring the Interstate program to a halt: allegations of waste, fraud and abuse; a financial problem stemming from congressional authorizations that exceeded Highway Trust Fund income; and the growing controversies, particularly over urban Interstates.

On February 28, 1961, just 5 weeks after taking office, President Kennedy sent a message to Congress on the Federal-aid highway program. It began, "Our Federal pay-as-you-go highway program is in peril" and must be put back on a sound financial footing because completing the Interstate System "at least as fast as originally scheduled is essential to our economy." He opposed "stretching out or cutting back" the program, two options that critics had suggested. Instead, he recommended making the temporary 1-cent gas tax increase (to 4 cents), approved in 1959, permanent. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1961, which he signed on June 29, made the 4-cent gas tax permanent and adjusted other excise taxes to provide the revenue needed to complete the Interstate System.

The President's message also addressed urban development issues. "A Federal Highway program of this scope cannot be isolated from other programs for social and civic improvement, particularly our progress in urban renewal and planning." He had, therefore, directed Secretary of Commerce Luther H. Hodges (where BPR was located) and Housing and Home Finance Administrator Robert C. Weaver "to increase their joint planning at every level, to improve coordination of urban renewal and freeway construction plans in the same area, and to invite the cooperative efforts of State and local highway and housing officials and private experts."

President Kennedy also recommended legislation to help families displaced by highway construction find "reasonable housing at reasonable costs, a problem that he said "has been largely overlooked."

On April 5, 1962, President Kennedy submitted a message to Congress titled "The Transportation System of our Nation." It began, "An efficient and dynamic transportation system is vital to our domestic economic growth, productivity, and progress." The message was a broad statement of national transportation policy:

The basic objective of our nation's transportation must be to assure the availability of the fast, safe and economic transportation services needed in a growing and changing economy to move people and goods, without waste or discrimination, in response to private and public demands at the lowest cost consistent with health, convenience, national security and other broad public objectives.

The users of transport facilities, he said, "should be provided with incentives to use whatever form of transportation . . . provides them with the service they desire at the lowest total cost, both public and private." He favored "continued reliance on unsubsidized privately-owned facilities, operating under the incentives of private profit and the checks of competition to the maximum extent practicable."

The section on urban transportation explained that changes in where people lived and worked had changed the patterns of urban travel:

In the past, transportation networks were organized to permit travel to and from downtown. Now, travel within urban areas was "increasingly diverse" and less geared to fixed mass transportation systems:

This drastic revision of travel patterns in many urban areas has seriously impaired the effectiveness and economic viability of public mass transportation, which is geared to the older patterns. A steady decline in patronage and a concomitant rise of unprofitability and financial problems have occurred. This has been particularly true of rail commuter and streetcar services limited to particular routes by fixed roadbeds.

Based on the Hodges/Weaver report, President Kennedy recommended that Congress establish a long-range program of Federal-aid to urban mass transportation (\$500 million over 3 years) in the form of direct grants to public agencies for rights-of-way, fixed facilities, including maintenance and terminal facilities, and rolling stock, as well as extension and rehabilitation of existing systems and creation of new systems. Only substantial, continuing Federal support "can induce our urban regions to organize appropriate administrative arrangements and to meet their share of the costs of fully balanced transportation systems."

Because highways would remain an "instrumental part" of urban transportation, the President asked Secretary Hodges "to make his approval of the use of highway planning funds in metropolitan planning studies contingent upon the establishment of a continuing and comprehensive planning process." He also recommended a change in Federal law to make Federal approval of a program for highway projects in any metropolitan area contingent on the Secretary's finding that the projects are "consistent with comprehensive development plans for the metropolitan area and that the Federal-aid system so developed will be an integral part of a soundly based, balanced transportation system for the area involved."

President Kennedy also reiterated his concern about "the problems of families displaced by new highway construction." He recommended that "assistance and requirements similar to those now applicable to the urban renewal program be authorized for the Federal-aid highway program and the urban mass transportation program."

In conclusion, the President recognized that transportation problems were deep and could not be quickly or easily solved. "But few areas of public concern are more basic to our progress as a nation." The issues were complex; solutions would not be easy. "Facing up to the realities of the situation, we must begin to make the painful decisions necessary to providing the transportation system required by the United States of today and tomorrow."

One result was the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962, which President Kennedy signed on October 23. Section 5 approved Federal-aid participation in relocation payments by the State to displaced individuals, families, business concerns, farms, and nonprofit organizations. The law limited payments to \$200 limit for individuals and families and \$3,000 for business or nonprofits.

The most important provision of the 1962 Act was Section 9, "Transportation Planning in Certain Urban Areas." The provision added Section 134 to Title 23, United States Code, requiring that after July 1, 1965, projects would be

eligible for Federal-aid highway funds only if they emerged from what became known as the "3C" planning process (for continuing, comprehensive, and cooperative). The 3C process remains the core of Section 134 today.

The breakthrough on mass transportation occurred on June 30, 1961, when President Kennedy signed the Housing Act of 1961. It authorized \$25 million for mass transportation demonstration projects, with local governments responsible for one-third of the cost; added mass transportation as part of comprehensive urban planning; and authorized \$50 million in loans for capital improvements at low interest rates. Further, his efforts resulted in the landmark Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964, which President Lyndon B. Johnson signed on July 9, 1964. It established the framework for a program of Federal-aid to transit.

The Kennedy Turnpike

In 1957-1958, a recession gripped the country. To stimulate the economy, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1958 increased Interstate authorizations from a total of \$6.4 billion to \$7.2 billion. However, it did not provide for increased highway user taxes and suspended the provision, known as the Byrd Amendment (after Virginia's Senator Harry Flood Byrd), that required reductions in apportionments if outstanding commitment exceeded foreseeable funding

Although the Byrd Amendment had been suspended, Congress could not suspend the reality that more money would be needed for the Interstate System. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1959 increased the gas tax by 1 cent (to 4 cents) through June 30, 1961; it was this temporary increase that President Kennedy would make permanent. The Act also reduced Interstate authorizations for FY 1961 to \$2 billion.

These events convinced highway officials in Delaware and Maryland that the expected reductions would delay construction of I-95 between Baltimore and the Delaware Memorial Bridge by nearly a decade. Therefore, they went to Congressman George H. Fallon in June 1960 seeking help. A long-time highway booster from Baltimore, Representative Fallon was chairman of the Subcommittee on Roads, a coauthor of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 and a roads booster during his entire tenure in the House (1945-1971).

During a meeting on June 14, 1960, with State highway officials and BPR Commissioner Ellis L. Armstrong and Deputy Commissioner and Chief Engineer Francis C. "Frank" Turner, Chairman Fallon agreed to introduce legislation that would allow the two States to repay the Federal-aid highway funds used on I-95 so they could build a turnpike instead. With BPR's approval, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1960 included a provision, Section 6, allowing Delaware to repay about \$500,000 in Federal-aid funds and Maryland to repay about \$900,000. The two States proceeded to build the I-95 segments using traditional toll financing - issuing bonds to be retired by toll revenue.

On November 14, 1963, President Kennedy helped open the 59-mile Maryland Northeastern Expressway and the 11-mile Delaware Turnpike. The White House helicopter landed on the Mason-Dixon line separating the two States; the speakers' platform straddled the two States. An aide handed the President a dark blue topcoat as he walked to the platform on a brisk and windy day.



The Maryland Northern Expressway-Delaware Turnpike opened on November 14, 1963, with President John F. Kennedy helping to cut the ribbon before a crowd of 10,000. The new road, the President said, "symbolizes the effort we have made to achieve the most modern Interstate highway system in the world." Left to right: Governor Elbert N. Carvel of Delaware, President Kennedy, Governor J. Millard Tawes of Maryland, and John B. Funk, Chairman, Maryland State Roads Commission. (Photo courtesy John F. Kennedy Library)

Speaking to a crowd of about 5,000 people, he said the toll roads "symbolized the effort we have made to achieve the most modern interstate highway system in the world." The combined turnpikes joined "a great interstate highway which represents a cooperative effort between the United States Government and the people of the various States, through which this long ribbon will pass." The coordinated effort on I-95 was important because "it may be only a few years when the whole area, stretching from Washington to Boston, will be one gigantic urban center." He concluded his remarks by saying:

Because people several years ago made the plans and took the initiative, this highway is now being dedicated. I hope in the year 1963 we will again take stock of the needs of the country over the next decade and we will begin today, this year, this decade, the things which will make this country a better place to live in for the rest of this century.

In addition to joining Governor Elbert N. Carvel of Delaware and Governor J. Millard Tawes of Maryland in cutting the blue-gray ribbon (symbolizing the Union and Confederate forces during the Civil War), he unveiled a reproduction of a stone marker used to mark the Mason-Dixon Line. A few minutes later, President Kennedy returned to the helicopter for a trip to New York City to address a labor federation convention.

As he spoke, civil rights protestors marched within a dozen feet of the platform, one holding a sign calling for "Freedom Now." Another sign read:

Mr. President, you-re opening highway No. 95.
Now, help us open public accommodations.

Eight days later, on November 22, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

After November 22, 1963

Soon after the assassination, State and local officials began thinking about naming roads, bridges, buildings, and other facilities after President Kennedy. For example, a campaign began, ultimately without success, to change the

name of New York's Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, not yet opened, to the John F. Kennedy Memorial Bridge. (The bridge opened on November 21, 1964, and is named after the Italian navigator who is credited with discovering the Narrows between Staten Island and Brooklyn.) One of the first successful namings, if not the first, involved the new I-65 bridge across the Ohio River between Louisville, Kentucky, and Jeffersonville, Indiana. On November 26, 1963, it was named the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Memorial Bridge before opening less than 2 weeks later on December 6.

Most of the facilities suggested for renaming did not have a direct connection to President Kennedy. One did: the turnpike he helped cut the ribbon for on November 14.

In 1964, Delaware and Maryland completed the plan to rename the turnpike section of I-95 after the late President. The dedication ceremony took place on January 15, 1965, in the lobby of a Hot Shoppes restaurant in the Delaware service plaza near Newark. A Kennedy bust, sculpted by Maurine Ligon of New Castle, Delaware, was unveiled in the lobby during a luncheon featuring Governor Elbert N. Carvel as master of ceremonies. Deputy Federal Highway Administrator Lawrence Jones represented FHWA, noting that the turnpike was one of the world's greatest highways. (The Kennedy bust is now in the administrative office of the I-95 toll plaza building.)

And so, following a moment in time when a President snipped a ribbon, two States changed the name of a highway to honor that President.

On September 17, 1963, President Kennedy convened a meeting at the White House to resolve a longstanding dispute about the location of I-24 from Nashville to St. Louis. Participants included Governors John Dalton (MO), Frank Clement (TN), Otto Kerner (IL), and Bert Combs (KY), along with Administrator Whitton and Secretary of Commerce Luther Hodges. In the original routing, I-24 ran from I-57 at Cairo, Illinois, via Nashville to I-59 in Georgia near Chattanooga, Tennessee.

The four Governors proposed that President Kennedy approve a routing for I-24 to enter Kentucky near Fort Campbell and leave the State at Paducah. They also recommended a new 64-mile Interstate highway from Jackson, Tennessee, to Hayti, Missouri. Governor Dalton told reporters that the four Governors were unanimous on the routing of I-24. "We will not agree to the route unless we get a bridge crossing the Mississippi." President Kennedy directed Whitton to study the proposal. The result was a compromise on the Mississippi River bridge and an Interstate connection to Dyersburg as I-155 in 1963.

He convened a meeting with delegates from Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri and Tennessee to discuss route alignments. These alignments started in Nashville and proceeded Northwestward to as far North as Pulleys Mill, Illinois to as far South as Cape Girardeau, Missouri. They deliberated and came to a compromise on the Interstate 24 of today from Nashville, Tennessee Northwestward via Paducah to Pulleys Mill, Illinois.

Once this route was established Tennessee and Missouri felt they were losing out a new Mississippi river Bridge and an Interstate Connection. They proposed Interstate 24W from I-55 near Hayti, Missouri via Dyersburg to Jackson, Tennessee at I-40. A compromise was made for the Mississippi River Bridge and Interstate connection to Dyersburg as I-155 in 1963.
