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Transportation

City leaders, who've procrastinated on a solution for decades, tunnel in on a plan this week

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On Thursday, the Portland City Council will debate a resolution that funds a master plan for the I-5/I-405 loop, including burying a major portion of it in a tunnel.

Hooray.

A patient in need of quadruple bypass finally made its first doctor appointment.

The loop's arterial sclerosis has been hardening for more than two decades, and the latest what-me-worry procrastination occurred more than a year ago. Then, a blue-ribbon task force urgently recommended getting on with a master plan and study. But the proposal fell between the cracks: Mayor Tom Potter was busy master planning city government.

No big deal, you might think. Large-scale transportation projects take 20 years to realize. But federal funding comes in five-year cycles. Deadline for the 2010 round is 2008. Master-planning projects take at least two years.

So make that about 25 years. **The big oops**

For the city whose mythologists so love to sing, "We planned; it worked," the loop's long tangled history is worth recounting.

It begins in 1943 when an ambitious city commissioner, William Bowes, hired famed New York City planner Robert Moses for \$100,000 -- more than \$1 million today -- to create a "Portland Improvement Plan." A staff of a dozen toiled for two months and Moses himself for a week to hatch \$60 million worth of proposed changes -- from a new civic center to neighborhood schools.

Basically what Moses did was take freeways already planned by the Oregon Department of Transportation and package them as a more coherent whole -- a loop -- within a larger central city plan. Voters said "yes" to his proposed sewer system, but tossed out the big downtown improvements by a 2-1 margin. State and local officials, backed by the 1956 Federal Highway Act, proceeded with the freeways.

On the good side, Portland ignored Moses' plans for clearing 20 blocks of downtown along with historic Union Station. But the city also missed one very smart recommendation. Moses wanted to trench I-5, align it on Southeast Eighth Avenue and save the eastern riverfront for a park.

But the right-of-way cost \$7 million, so the City Council never considered it. The new freeway could be built far more cheaply atop riverbank fill.

The result: one of the most dangerous sets of turns and the biggest clog in the entire West Coast I-5 corridor, and the riverfront blight of the Eastbank Freeway.

East side, west side

Beam ahead to the late-1980s. Downtown Portland is savoring the successes of the citizen-driven 1972 Downtown Plan and the reign of the political (if personally flawed) genius, Mayor Neil Goldschmidt. Having rallied to remove Harbor Drive from what became Tom McCall Waterfront Park, the activist group, Riverfront for People turned its sights on I-5.

But what was citizen revolution on the west bank turned into a class war on the east bank.

To Riverfront for People, I-5 was a seismically challenged tangle of concrete destined for rebirth as a glorious expansion of a picturesque riverfront city. For the owners of warehouses and light manufacturing facilities in the inner east side, the freeway was a road to the market. But almost more importantly, it was a gritty psychological barrier to joining the east side to downtown.

It came to a head over a proposed Water Avenue on-ramp. Eastsiders wanted it for direct southbound access to I-5. Westsiders saw it as \$60 million of good money chasing bad. Combine it with more than \$100 million in planned seismic upgrades and other improvements to the loop and, they figured, you'd have a big down payment on moving the freeway off the river.

Despite pretty pictures of bold new development between the then-newly rising Oregon Convention Center and OMSI, the City Council voted to build the ramp, 3-2. The deciding vote: then-city commissioner, now-Congressman Earl Blumenauer. Joining the loop's historic harmony of vision and pragmatism, Blumenauer saw the ramp as a short-term political win on the longer road to a rail and transit system that would render the east bank freeway obsolete, someday.

But two years later, a new city commission led by Vera Katz -- and a different mix of near- and far-sightedness -- sank the Water Avenue ramp and spent \$36 million for a slice of the picturesque: the Eastbank Esplanade.

Whether because or in spite of the freeway and the various visions to move it, the central east side has changed. OMSI, the Oregon Convention Center and the Rose Quarter now sit like islands connected by the Esplanade. Manufacturing mostly has moved out; creative services, artists and clubs have moved in. A streetcar loop will join east and west sides. Developers are already drawing up housing towers for its path down along Southeast Grand Avenue.

Meantime, the loop has continued to clog. Two-thirds of its users drive it as a local street. Crash rates run 50 percent higher than the rest of the state over much of its 6.5 miles. According to the city's 2005 study, by 2030, traffic will be slow or stopped up to 14 hours a day with backups extending up to five miles.

Moses may have designed it to move traffic through the city, but it is now slowly strangling it.

With the City Council's approval, the new master planning process will become the 18th attempt since 1980 to address the loop's myriad problems. From better connections to I-84 to the proposed capping of I-405, all the plans ended up going nowhere.

This newest effort grows out of the 2005 Freeway Loop Advisory Group chaired by Nohad Toulan, emeritus dean of Portland State University's College of Urban Affairs. Packed with heavyweights from every interest group, the committee studied a series of options ranging from modest improvements to radical ideas like turning the loop into a giant, one-way roundabout. The best way the loop's problems truly can be solved, they concluded, is with a tunnel. Cost: \$3.5 billion-\$5.8 billion.

To those for whom a tunnel conjures images of the Boston's wildly over-cost Big Dig, Toulan counters that the city of Cairo, Egypt, built a four-lane, two-mile tunnel 90 feet underground beneath the ancient pyramids -- on time and on budget.

"Tunneling is one of the fastest-improving technologies in the world," he says. In an urgent tone, Toulan argues, "We must deal with the totality."

Indeed, we should. But as Blumenauer -- now a member of the House Transportation Committee -- cautions, any big vision must compete with the region's other big visions, such as the proposed Sunrise

Corridor to Damascus. Given a city that is now being planned piecemeal from the proposed Burnside/Couch couplet to the expansion of light rail downtown, Blumenauer asks, "What is the vision?"

City Council willing, the loop's master-planning process will join a wider central city plan, according to longtime city planner Steve Dotterer.

"Obviously it can't happen all at once," Dotterer says of the tunnel. "What we want to do is identify improvements and put them in order. It's really a 25-year vision."

And so it may be. Maybe the loop's cycle of idealism and pragmatism can be broken -- or maybe the City Council will decide a fix in 30 years is soon enough.

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