

Old Highways, New Places

We’ve been working towards more walkable, transit-friendly cities for some time now. Despite good progress in getting sidewalks, bike lanes and transit throughout our neighborhoods and communities, though, it still doesn’t feel like our cities are very ... city-like. Businesses still depend on drive-by traffic and abundant parking to survive. Most of us still need to drive most of the time. Why is it so hard to be the kind of place where driving really is a choice, not a need?

To figure that out, we have to take a quick look at our region’s past. Thurston County came of age in the 20th century. We’ve grown up in the era of cars and trucks and highways with very little urban history predating that automobility. We’re trying to create the kind of places that have never really existed here before now. In the process, we’re discovering untapped assets and opportunities in unlikely places.

When Main Street was a Highway^{iv}

In planning, we usually focus on the present and the future but sometimes it’s valuable to turn around and take a look back from where we’ve come. This can give us useful insights as to where we really are right now and the direction we should take to get to where we want to be.

Almost 100 years ago, the principal roads into and out of the State Capitol were firmly established. These essential east-west and north-south routes became the primary state and federal highway corridors serving urban Thurston County and all of Washington State and the West Coast through the 1950s.

The streets we know today as Capitol Way and Capitol Boulevard, 4th and State Avenues, and Martin Way^v were components of the old Pacific Highway. Built as part of the first large-scale road-building program in Washington, they were part of the “national auto trail^{vi}” and were established as a state highway route by 1917. In 1926, Pacific Highway was re-designated from a state highway to a federal highway – U.S. Route 99. It connected Blaine, Washington to San Diego, California. Congress added U.S. 99 to the Interstate System in 1944.

U.S. 99 was not the only federal highway to bisect our urban area. The streets we know today as Harrison Avenue and Mud Bay Road were designated as part of the Olympic Highway in 1923. In fact, the terminus of Olympic Highway was at Capitol and 4th (then, Capitol and Main Street) in downtown Olympia where it intersected Pacific Highway, much like I-5 and U.S. 101 intersect today. Like Pacific Highway, it was designated a federal route in 1926 and given the federal route number of U.S. 101, which it retained until 1958.

These highways moved massive logs, finished lumber, and other freight along these busy commercial thoroughfares,



This excerpt from the 1939 State Highways map shows the alignment of US 99 and what became US 101.

When Main Street was a Highway



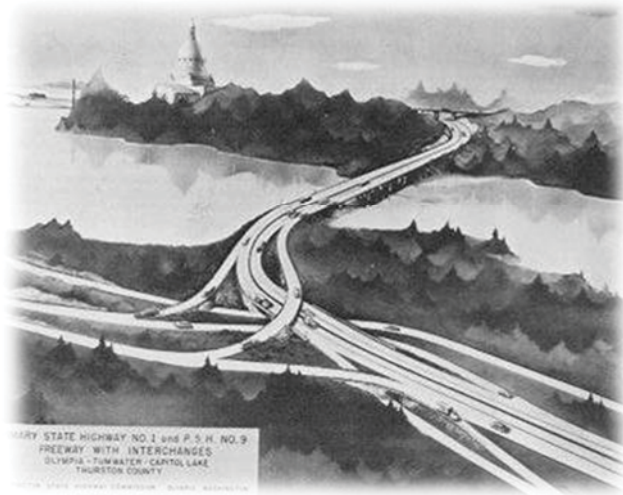
In 1956, U.S. Route 99 followed Capitol Way through downtown Olympia. This image looks north from the intersection of Capitol and Legion. The smoke stacks are north of State Avenue where lumber mills and factories supported the local economy. Photo courtesy of the Washington State Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation.



into and out of the bustling manufacturing districts on Olympia's waterfront, and in Tumwater throughout the Brewery's halcyon years. The highway carried growing interstate passenger travel between Seattle, Portland and the rest of the country, stimulating development of motor inns and hotels, auto service and dealership facilities, and other establishments catering to travelers using these highways.

Eventually congestion in the 1940s created gridlock in downtown Olympia, triggering conversion of 4th and State Avenues in 1949 to the one-way couplets we know today. Despite the couplets, and widening of U.S. 99 to four lanes through town, congestion in downtown Olympia remained untenable.

In 1954, the State Legislature approved construction of a 6½ mile limited access Olympia Freeway; this became the I-5 alignment we know today, from Exit 102 in Tumwater to Exit 109 in Lacey. At the same time, the Legislature authorized construction of the new U.S. 101 Expressway to intersect with the new Olympia Freeway. Four years later, on December 12, 1958, these new limited access highways opened for traffic. This began a long period of economic transition for the former highways as they reverted to local streets.



Location, Location, Location

Construction of new, limited access freeways – ultimately resulting in the interstate highway system we know today – had a profound influence on the character of economic development. By 1968, the pre-interstate federal routes were decommissioned and reverted to local “main street” purposes. By then, though, they had already begun their decline in economic relevance and regional significance.

Like communities all across the country, this region’s economy followed the modern highways. Our cities had grown out along the old highway corridors for a decade or more before the interstate era, beginning to diminish the economic importance of city centers. Advent of the interstate era hastened the pace of change. The economic lifeblood that had once pulsed along the old routes and enlivened city centers was drawn to the new interchanges. For the last half of the 20th century, economic growth and residential development occurred at the periphery of our cities, whose boundaries moved steadily outward from their historic centers.

The federal highways reverted to local streets but they languished for a long time – old, obsolete highways that had outlived their original purposes but had not yet found new ones.

Once-thriving commercial and manufacturing areas declined in value as the traffic – and the economy – moved



Undated photo of South Sound Center. Note the drive-in theater where Fred Meyer is located today.

Highway Access Spurs Modern Shopping Centers



On the former trail and present highway, joining the historic cities of Olympia and Tumwater, is located the above modern shopping center.

WILDWOOD CENTER

WILDWOOD PHARMACY
BALE ELECTRIC CO.
LEMAY'S WILDWOOD MARKET
WILDWOOD GROCERY

This 1950 advertisement for the Wildwood Center notes its location on the highway, when Capitol Way was also U.S. 99. Olympia's 1946 planning report laments the "urban sprawl" that had begun creeping out from downtown along the highway, citing this example as something detrimental to the City.

to the edges of our cities. Inexpensive property along the old highways generated inexpensive development, large parking lots, non-descript architecture, and high volume auto-oriented businesses. The focus on coordinated, modern growth starting in the 1980s was on new residential neighborhoods and regional retail centers; what infill or redevelopment occurred on the corridors was unplanned and uncoordinated. High-value, high-quality residential and commercial construction along the corridors and in city centers was no longer in high demand like it had been. Retrofit of old infrastructure was costly and hard to justify with unrelenting demand for new streets and facilities at the margins of the cities.

An Asset Whose Time has Come

While an appreciation of urban places took hold a while ago, it was a few more decades before we appreciated that these old corridors are assets, huge assets. In an ironic twist, it is here – along our old outdated highway corridors – that we have the best opportunity to create walkable, people-oriented places where driving is a choice, not a requirement. The 21st century is where the modern history of urban corridors begins.

Our urban corridors are the principal arteries connecting Lacey, Olympia, and Tumwater. They link those three seats of city government with the primary State Capitol campuses. They serve established neighborhoods as well as the region's largest employment and retail centers. They connect libraries, schools, colleges, and medical