

# CELEBRATING THE INTERSTATE'S ANNIVERSARY



SOURCE: PORTLAND CEMENT ASSOCIATION

The Interstate Highway System has always been there for many Americans—to them, celebrating its 50th anniversary is like celebrating the birthday of television. Believe it or not, there was a time before television, and those who can remember the time before the Interstate probably also can remember the time before television. The Interstate and television both developed and became indelible components of American life in the 1950s and 1960s.

But the Interstate, as a product of governmental actions, is more important than television, which is a commercial product. Television's role in society was the result of millions of individual decisions tapping into the massive capacities of the American communications system and the consuming public. The development of television followed the classic logistics curve—starting slowly, then reaching take-off with a period of rapid growth; as saturation of ownership approaches, the demand levels out. The computer, the Internet, the Walkman, and the cell phone, among recent phenomena, have followed the same pattern, which has repeated over and over in the past 50 years. Such consumer phenomena are inexorable.

There is nothing inexorable about public works. To make a massive program like the Interstate come to completion

is a much more laborious task, requiring time, money, skilled people, and—above all—perseverance by many public officials over long periods of time.

We can celebrate the anniversary of television's invention, which was followed by a hundred million decisions by consumers that made it a social phenomenon. Celebrating the Interstate, however, requires that we recognize the conceptualization, the engineering feats, the funding, and the realization of the dream by many people in our profession working together for their entire careers.

This issue of *TR News* takes the opportunity to acknowledge that tremendous body of work and to examine all aspects of its legacy. The articles in turn ask us to consider our own accomplishments and challenges in the light of this great work of our predecessors.

—Alan E. Pisarski

*Chair, Transportation History Committee*

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