

FEATURE ARTICLES



NEVADA'S OWN "WEST SIDE STORY" ENDS WELL AFTER RIOTOUS START

Citizen participation and community involvement provided what sociologists might call a "textbook" solution to one of the most critical problems to face the Nevada Highway Department. What sprang from the smoke, destruction, and bitterness of a major civil disturbance in the state's largest city culminated in a project of lasting benefit to the city and its inhabitants.

What focused nationwide attention on and threatened southern Nevada with its first racial riots in October 1969 started very uneventfully in July 1957 as the plan to construct Interstate 15 through Las Vegas Valley. The Highway Department's proposal in that early stage of the freeway program was met with only minor opposition and considerable support of community leaders and businessmen. It called for swinging the alignment through the west side of Las Vegas on an extended fill with access beneath and to the Interstate limited to the two most important thoroughfares in the area, Bonanza Road and Washington Avenue.

The proposal was approved by local and state governmental entities and federal BPR officials in September 1957, and in October of that year the consulting engineering firm of De Leuw, Cather and Company was hired to plan and design the urban portions of I-15 through the valley. Final plans for the project were completed in 1967.

Construction of I-15 through Las Vegas began in 1964, but the section involving West Las Vegas and its predominantly black population was not started until 1968. That same year, the Federal Highway Act focused specific attention on the consideration of social, environmental, and economic factors in highway planning and set the stage for joint or multiple use of rights-of-way for community betterment. Prior to that time, primary consideration in highway location and design had been engineering efficiency and cost-benefit justification.

Although during planning and design of the freeway the department had frequent contact with local officials and community leaders, there had been no indication of resentment or opposition to the project as it progressed. Unfortunately, as later events revealed, spokesmen for the area were not reflecting the attitudes and feelings of residents of the black community.

In early October of 1969, a confrontation between Las Vegas police and a black family on the west side sparked a five-day racial disturbance that crystallized the dissatisfaction and unrest, particularly of the young people of that community. When civil control was re-established and city officials had met

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with various minority group representatives, it was evident that residents of West Las Vegas wanted some major changes and considerably greater involvement in their community and transportation planning. Strong pleas from area spokesmen pinpointed the need for alterations in the freeway, for improvement of recreation facilities, and for more consideration during the planning phase of any public works project affecting the community. Within a week following the riots, petitions containing 1,500 signatures of west-side residents were sent to city officials outlining demands for improvements.

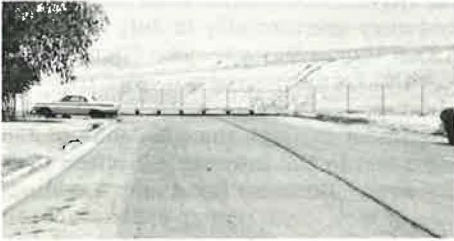
Between mid-October and mid-December, state and local officials discussed possible changes to the freeway and conducted a public meeting on the proposals. On December 11, the mayor of Las Vegas appointed a special committee to study the I-15 problem and develop recommendations for solving it.

Objections were raised by the minority representatives to the proposed mid-1970 date for adding an additional freeway penetration at D Street. It was indicated the city had promised a January 1970 date. The Highway Department assured the group that every effort would be made to achieve this goal. On December 15, the BPR was requested to approve reopening D Street, and on the 17th the proposal was approved. Excavation work started on January 9 and was finished within a week.

At that same time, consideration was given to additional changes to I-15. The following week, the mayor's special committee met, and on January 13-16 a series of public hearings were conducted to receive comments from West

Las Vegas residents, businessmen, and community leaders. Immediately following the hearings, the committee appointed a subcommittee of state and local representatives to make a complete study of local desires and needs relating to landscaping and mini-parks. The subcommittee completed its study and recommendations on January 28.

The mayor's committee directed the Highway Department to analyze all the information received and prepare a report for the mayor. Members



Interstate 15 cuts through West Las Vegas on the embankment at the end of a dead-end street, resembling the situation at D and F Streets before the grade separations were built.



Typical of the new open span structures that provided additional penetrations and kept neighborhoods intact in West Las Vegas is this bridge at F Street.



The leveled land seen in the foreground will be the site for one of the large mini-parks slated for construction within the next two years as part of the improvements to I-15 requested by the community. In the background is the new grade separation for D Street, which permits passage under the Interstate route.

of the committee included Assistant Deputy Highway Engineer Donald Crosby (now Deputy Highway Engineer); Assistant BPR Nevada Division Engineer Ed Wood (now FHWA Region 9 Director for Environment and Design); Las Vegas City Public Works Director Dick Sauer; Allan Sanders, from the West Las Vegas Neighborhood Council and Clark County Beautification Committee; and Mrs. Ethel Pearson, from the West Las Vegas Neighborhood Council. The landscaping-park subcommittee consisted of Sanders, James Gay, from West Las Vegas, Las Vegas City Recreation Director Fred Martin, and State Highway Landscape Engineer Jack King.

Although not actively participating in the January 12-16 meetings, two representatives from the Washington, D.C., office of the BPR's Environmental Development Division did attend. Participants included 60 people from West Las Vegas, some personally invited to appear because they represented a cross section of the area's residents, businessmen, and civic leaders.

In mid-February when the report was completed it contained the following recommendations:

1. Penetrations of the freeway through use of grade separations be provided at D and F Streets and an interchange be constructed in the vicinity of Washington Avenue to provide access to the freeway.
2. Structures planned for the grade separations and interchange be designed to present a more wide-open appearance.
3. Comments received by the subcommittee relating to the number, size, and layout of the mini-parks be used as a basis for planning the facilities and determining the scope of planting and equipment needed.
4. Existing remnants of right-of-way obtained for the freeway be used to construct mini-parks on the west side of I-15 as a means of improving recreational facilities in West Las Vegas, and where necessary additional rights-of-way be acquired to implement this proposal.
5. Urban renewal be considered by the city to be accomplished in connection with the remaining freeway construction and plans for such a project be based on needs made known by the residents of the area.

Of particular interest regarding community involvement in modifying the freeway were the responses received during the mini-park study. During the week of January 19, 1970, the subcommittee interviewed numerous adults and young people in West Las Vegas to determine their desires.

From the interviews, there appeared a definite need for two separate areas with facilities for grammar-school-age children. These areas would include sandboxes, playground equipment, turf areas, and landscaping. It also was determined that the teenage group needed a larger area that would provide turf for team games and one or more paved areas for basketball or volleyball. The teenagers expressed the desire to have a multipurpose area with an electric outlet for playing radio or phonograph music and dancing.

A completely different approach was taken by the adults, who asked that areas be set aside for just sitting and relaxing in the shade and for picnicking. A major concern of the adults was that all the areas provided be well-lighted because during the summer months the facilities would be used most in the evenings when the heat would be less intense. They further asked that facilities for the grammar-school youngsters be separated physically from those for the teenagers and that both those groups be separated from parks for the adults.

These desires tied in with plans previously considered by the city parks and recreation department. It had been determined that parks were needed in West Las Vegas, particularly areas for adult group activities.

Additional landscaping was requested to obtain the effect of a "greenbelt" between the residential area and the freeway. It was felt that the parks and

landscaping would do a great deal toward creating a feeling of community pride among residents and aid in upgrading the entire area.

Preliminary design for the mini-parks was completed on January 28, 1970, and reviewed by residents of the area and representatives from the city parks and recreation department. The proposals were enthusiastically accepted.

To construct the proposed interchange at Washington Avenue and the mini-parks required the acquisition of 34 additional parcels of land. On 19 of them, dwellings existed with 42 families that would require relocation. There would be some utility adjustments also needed.

Cost estimates for completing the total project were originally set at \$2.5 million but have risen to \$4 million for additional excavation, structures, signals and lighting systems, signing, mini-parks, utilities, and right-of-way. The mini-park development is being done jointly with the City of Las Vegas; The state will be grading, installing irrigation systems, paving, and fencing; the city will be planting the grass and shrubs, installing the playground and lighting equipment, and constructing the basketball courts.

The structures for D and F Streets and Washington Avenue have been completed. Almost all of the additional right-of-way has been acquired for the mini-parks, the city urban renewal, and landscaping. Plans for building the mini-parks are in the final stage, and the Highway Department expects to provide for their construction as part of the freeway landscaping project now scheduled for contract in 1974 or early 1975. What has delayed progress on the parks and landscaping and what may delay it in the future is the lack of sufficient federal highway funding. However, the department is proceeding with the design and will initiate a contract as soon as funds are available.

Community reaction to the work already done has been outstanding. The new grade separations that open up West Las Vegas have created an entirely new attitude among the residents. There has been a great increase in community pride and residential interest in the area. The structures are among the most attractive on the freeway system in Nevada and certainly give the area a more wide-open appearance.

Although it is costing a significant amount of money to accomplish the changes asked for by West Las Vegas, the investment in that community has more than paid for itself in the reawakening of resident pride, in the re-establishing of rapport and understanding with the valley's minority population, and in the feeling of accomplishment by highway employees who worked so enthusiastically to solve the problem and write a happy ending to the Las Vegas "West Side Story".

CONFERENCE ON TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH RAISES PERTINENT QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE

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An International Conference on Transportation Research with the overall theme of "Reaching for the Eighties—Changing Transportation Priorities" was held at the College of Europe, Brugge, Belgium, June 18-22. The Highway Research Board, through its Committee on New Systems and Technology, par-

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