

Watts-Century Freeway

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The termini of the Century Freeway, Interstate Route 105, were set by the California State Legislature in 1956 to be between Route 405, near Los Angeles International Airport, and Route 605. Studies to fix a precise location began shortly thereafter and were split into two study segments. The first study resulted in selection of a route from the airport to Central Avenue in 1965. The second study, extending the route easterly from Central Avenue to Route 605, resulted in route adoption in the summer of 1968.

The second study, from Central Avenue of Route 605, received the most widespread scrutiny and interest. Central Avenue was, for many years, the most westerly boundary of Watts, and the Century Freeway studies looked at potential routes right through the heart of Watts.

In California our route studies take into consideration three major factors:

1. The effects that the alternate will have on the communities through or around which it may pass.
2. The degree to which the alternate will fulfill existing and future traffic demands.
3. The initial cost of the alternate, including both construction and right-of-way.

On the Century Freeway studies, cost factors seemed to favor the southerly alternates and traffic benefits appeared to favor the northerly alternates. Clearly, community impact would be decisive in determining the location of the route.

Introduction of a major transportation improvement into the urban environment disrupts the community—its patterns and established relationships. Means of minimizing the disruption and obtaining community support for our programs is one of the objectives of this conference.

In California the adopted route of the proposed Century Freeway has achieved not just community support, but advocacy from a community it severely affects—the community of Watts.

"Time" magazine claimed that one of the causes of the Newark riot was the "Negro removal" by three Interstate Freeways. Replacement housing was not available for the thousands displaced by freeways. In Watts, we face a similar problem—only we have already had a riot. Two freeways interchange in the heart of the community; 2,600 families will be displaced. The housing units affected are low-cost; half are owner-occupied; 20 percent of the occupants are retired and on fixed income. It is impossible to replace this housing. The average value of the houses to be acquired is \$13,000. The cost of comparable homes outside of Watts would run between \$18,000 and \$22,000.

Watts is not an average community. It is black; it has been wracked by a riot; today it is not much different than it was in August 1965—the root causes of the riot are still there.

There is one major difference that had tremendous import to and impact on our freeway proposals. Since the riots, federal, state, and local agencies and universities from all over the world have launched studies of Watts. Residents are besieged by door-to-door surveys. Even the U. S. Census Bureau did a special census.

Tours of Watts are constant and endless as dozens of remedial programs are proposed by innumerable government agencies. Millions of dollars have been spent in Watts in the last three years. The results: a great many promises for change; a significant increase in the daytime white population.

But even more foreboding for highways, the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency, for a number of years, had studied Watts and had submitted a plan for redevelopment to public hearings. Coming on the heels of a great many other proposed

programs, some seemingly exploiting the community, the redevelopment plans were completely rejected by the community and nearly all proposals for community improvement began to be suspiciously regarded as an attempt by the white power structure to break up Watts and scatter its residents all over Los Angeles. This issue and this idea was beginning to pervade Watts at the time our freeway proposals were introduced.

In the face of this, we obtained acceptance of the freeway and support and advocacy of a route right through the community. The results are dramatic, but they represent the routine practices of the California Division of Highways and good planning procedures.

We achieved these results by involving the community in the development of our plans and by taking into consideration the impact and effect of the freeway. It has always been the practice of the California Division of Highways to involve the local community, local groups, and service clubs at early stages in the planning process.

In California, termini are set by the State Legislature when they designate a highway as part of the state highway system. The California Highway Commission selects the specific location of the highway or freeway after public hearings. Although broad design features may be set by the location of the highway, detailed design follows location of the highway.

Throughout the highway route location process, prior to adoption by the Commission, the highways staff presents their studies to local city technical staffs, to concerned government agencies, to local interest groups, service clubs, garden clubs, in fact, to anyone who is interested in hearing our story. The net result, we hope, is a fully informed public at the time of the Division's hearings on the route location.

It is interesting to note that such procedures preceded hearings on the Panhandle Freeway in San Francisco. The "Technical Report" on the Panhandle Freeway was a joint city, county, and state study of freeway route locations and design. This report, also co-authored with Lawrence Halprin, presented publicly early concepts of joint development and multiple use of right-of-way.

However, despite local participation in planning and employment of well-qualified consultants, we lacked the legal means then of achieving some of the broad planning goals and that freeway (and ultimately others) was rejected by the community.

Public involvement in our planning activities continues after route adoption during the design stage. In addition, the California Division of Highways negotiates and executes with the local community a freeway agreement that sets some of the features of the proposed freeway.

Identical procedures were followed in Watts during the route location stage. We contacted local groups in Watts, including the militant organizations that receive so much publicity in the national press. We contacted home improvement associations, street improvement associations, garden clubs, churches, every conceivable group that seemed to have an interest in the effect of the highway upon this community, and Watts has a plethora of groups. We presented our story to them, what we proposed, the nature of the highway investment, and the anticipated impact upon residential property within the community.

It became evident that the huge right-of-way investment to be made in Watts—around \$100,000,000—provided a rare opportunity for Watts. Unless a program was developed, it could be dissipated throughout Los Angeles. That is, the recipients, the homeowners, the individuals directly affected by the freeway, most likely would take their payment and leave Watts. Yet this community, which had suffered so much during the riots and after the riots, could use the investment in right-of-way to improve and upgrade the community.

Since the riots, normal economic activity has dwindled in Watts. The publicity of the riots has made investment institutions, banks, and speculators—conservative in most cases—reluctant to invest any money in Watts. As a result, there has been almost no money for housing since 1965. Loans for new housing have been nearly nonexistent. The right-of-way acquisition program of the Division of Highways could be an opportunity to stimulate real estate development within the community again, an opportunity to use the right-of-way investment to renew or rehabilitate the community, to give it a new start on building its own identity in a more satisfactory environment.

With this in mind, we developed a different strategy for land acquisition in the Watts community. The key item in this strategy involved replacement housing.

Of the properties to be acquired in Watts, 95 percent are residential and, as previously stated, half are owner-occupied. Our survey indicated only one-third of the affected residents really wanted to relocate outside of Watts. Most of them had lived there many years—their roots were there, their friends were there. Community activities and organizations remained in the community—they had no desire to leave. The people affected by the Century Freeway are part of the most stable elements in Watts. Displacing them would leave a vacuum in Watts that would be hard to fill.

Learning from our experience in San Francisco, we formalized our replacement housing strategy before the freeway route was adopted by seeking legislative sanction for the idea. Governor Ronald Reagan included in his 1968 legislative program a bill, proposed by Assemblyman Leon Ralph from Watts, to provide for the development of a replacement housing program in California. This legislation provides that the Division of Highways may acquire and condemn vacant unoccupied property outside freeway right-of-way and that it may contract with public and private entities for the financing, planning, development, construction, management, sale, and exchange or lease of replacement housing, in order to provide replacement housing for low-income individuals and families who reside in economically depressed areas of the state and who are displaced by freeways. It further provides that we may acquire other property for such purposes by means other than condemnation.

Our first approach to the problem in Watts was very similar to our proposals in San Francisco for the Panhandle Freeway, with high-rise apartments alongside and straddling the freeway. We envisioned the freeway as upgrading the living conditions and environment of Watts through modern buildings. We even embellished the corridor with industrial sites to provide jobs for the 40 percent unemployed in Watts. But these visions do not fit Watts. They do not represent the aspirations, goals, and desires of its residents—most especially those affected by the freeway.

The vast majority live in single-family dwellings—small units but with fenced yards, privacy, and a garden. Their house is a status symbol—especially to the retired Negro who worked and saved all his life to acquire his own home. An apartment may easily replace the functional utility of the home, but it would never have the same dignity, meaning, and comfort. The replacement housing program must primarily involve single-family dwellings.

At the present time, it is proposed that the Division of Highways acquire scattered lots throughout an area roughly six blocks from the core of the freeway. These lots will be developed individually with single-family residences and a few multiple units. It is expected that our activity will generate additional activity by other nonprofit organizations that are attempting to develop programs in the community. We expect that the improvement of housing in the neighborhoods we affect will stimulate additional development adjacent to and in the vicinity of our housing. We expect that the total development of all of this housing will encourage owners to apply for loans to upgrade their own housing. We expect that the investment involved in both our program and the other programs will persuade banks and lending institutions to make additional loans in this community for upgrading the community.

In Watts, we intend to implement the replacement housing program through continued community involvement. The replacement housing program will offer the community an opportunity to change the shape of their environment in the manner of their own choosing. In this connection, California proposes to involve a unique organization in Watts—the WLCAC, or the Watts Labor Community Action Committee.

The WLCAC is a community union. It is headed by Ted Watkins, an international representative of the UAW, and it is supported by the AFL-CIO. Its purpose is to put union skills and organizational experience to work in the community to attempt to improve and revitalize the community by promoting and providing much-needed services to its neglected citizens and to develop the economic base necessary for the area to become a healthy, self-sustaining segment of Los Angeles.

Their accomplishments to date have gone far to attain their goals. It includes the development and maintenance of over 20 vest-pocket neighborhood parks, two gas

stations, a nursery for the beautification of Watts, a chicken ranch, a credit union and last summer a youth camp for several thousands Watts youths—a camp that will be used in winter for training programs for Operating Engineers and Marine Cooks and Stewards. Most recently, they shared with the City of Los Angeles the job of preparing the Model Cities Application, and it is expected that if a planning grant is received from HUD, then the WLCAC will play an important role in planning the future of Watts.

At the public hearings on the Century Freeway, Ted Watkins discussed the importance of community involvement in any project in Watts and I would like to quote him:

In our working with the kids, we see that the most important things to them are not necessarily the most obvious to a person living outside the community. We see the kids closely identifying with the parks they have built, buildings they have built, trees they have planted...and most of the projects they have helped to construct.

The long-term success of any community program lies in the planning participation and use of these facilities by its citizens. If you impose a program, you run the risk of a reaction [which could include] vandalism. The use or quality of the buildings on the routes [of the Century Freeway] may not look like much to you, but destroy the identity with that building, and you destroy the kids.

This people thing, which grows around certain functions and facilities, is the beginning of what holds a community together.

Before you relocate people, you must relocate their identity to new images, and before you think about a route, you must look at the opportunities in an area for redirecting the community's attention.

In the state's replacement housing program, the role of the WLCAC looms large in directing the community's attention. Not only do they have planning capabilities, but their job-training program provides a source of labor and community participation in the job of providing housing.

For example, one of the replacement plans that our program will make possible involves moved housing. The Division of Highways and other public agencies acquire hundreds of houses every year for public projects in Los Angeles. These are sold at auction, moved, and rehabilitated for resale. This housing could be diverted to Watts. Utilization of this housing in a replacement housing program provides an opportunity to use the unique services of the WLCAC. They can use the site preparation, house moving, and rehabilitation to provide training and building skills for Watts residents.

The Century Freeway displaces thousands of residents in an area where a depressed real estate market makes replacement impossible through normal means. But, at the same time, it offers the community and the people of Watts an opportunity to improve and revitalize their community through total community involvement in a replacement housing program.

The Century Freeway through Watts could have been like any other freeway in the country. It could have approached the community without regard to the impact and the effect upon the people living within that community. It could have been just another case of "Negro removal" in the urban communities, but in California our experience with the Panhandle Freeway in San Francisco has taught us something. Beautiful pictures and sketches of joint development do not buy public acceptance. The changes wrought by the freeway must be channeled to match the needs and desires of the people in that community. The freeway must reinforce the change desired in the community, and most important, the program proposed in the pictures and brochures must be capable of attainment, not merely an embellishment to sell the product. To sell their product in today's urban environment, freeway planners must become social advocates—they must assure that the program, the joint development or multiple use of airspace they advocate for public acceptance of their product, can be achieved and take the steps to achieve it. Otherwise, their proposals will always just be pictures and brochures—and their freeways will just be lines on the map.

In California, we are just beginning to develop our program. It is a long way from achievement—but highway engineers and planners are now in the housing and community development business to assure the success of our program and the acceptance of our product.

DISCUSSION

Lowell Bridwell

I think it might be useful if Mr. Hill would add just a little bit of information and describe, first, the community reaction to the house that was rehabilitated on the corner and occupied as part of the program, and second, the community reaction to the pre-fab house that was brought into Watts.

Stuart Hill

This is a very interesting point that Mr. Bridwell brings out. There is a lot of vandalism in Watts, like any other community, and broken windows. A house becomes deserted and the windows are broken, walls kicked out, and so forth. But after you become familiar with the community you begin to realize that the vandalism is directed toward things that are not respected in the community, contribute nothing to the community, or more or less emphasize the condition of the people that live there.

Litton Savings and Loan moved a house into Watts just about the same time we were talking about our proposal. It was a house acquired from a freeway, and they had repossessed a lot and set the house down, rehabilitated it, painted it, and offered it for sale. It had plate glass windows in it, a sliding glass door in the back and was exposed on the corner to everyone on what is really kind of a rough corner because children from several schools converge on it. Everybody expected that if it remained vacant for very long the windows would be broken and the walls torn down. The house is still standing, the windows are not broken; it is a positive contribution to the community and is recognized as such.

If the county or the city were to go in and put up vest-pocket parks, all the iron for the swings, slides, and so forth would disappear overnight and be sold. But the parks that the kids put up, and help maintain themselves—that are part of their community—the swing sets, slides, and everything else stays there. Interestingly enough, just recently somebody put up a pre-fab house in Watts. It was put up in about four hours or so, some record. About two weeks later, the house was gone. Somebody took it away overnight.