Residents have paid off mortgages and put their youngsters through college while waiting. Traffic engineers have turned gray. And motorists have worn out several generations of flivvers on the way.

Now, the beginning of the end of Interstate 15 is upon us.

It won't be quick -- the state Department of Transportation estimates the 2.2-mile segment along 40th Street from Adams Avenue to Wightman Street won't be completed until sometime in 1988.

And it won't be pleasant -- within the next few weeks alone, trucks will be hauling dirt through Kensington and traffic will be detoured in City Heights for an excavation that will eventually put the freeway 25 feet below street level.

But after more than two decades of waiting, the last link of a freeway that stretches all the way to Sweetgrass, Mont. will start pushing through eight blocks of surface streets to finally link up with Interstate 805.

The story of why the segment hasn't been completed long before now starts back in the administration of President Eisenhower when by oversight the freeway was only designated south to Interstate 8, according to Jim Larson, a Caltrans spokesman.

"Getting back in the federal plan took years and then there was the gasoline crisis of the 1970s," he explained. "There were interruptions in funding for years and then finally we got bailed out by the (state) Prop. 111 gas tax."

As it is now, freeway traffic coming off I-805 north and south up Ward Canyon on I-15 confront five stop-light intersections, vehicles scrambling across the roadway from stop-sign intersections, vehicles making left turns, and El Cajon Boulevard, one of the city's most heavily traveled thoroughfares.

"On the positive side, when it's done, it's going to be just so far much better than what it is now," is how Troy Bankston, the Caltrans resident engineer who will oversee the project's first phase for most of the next two years, puts it.

That first of three phases will officially begin this week when Caltrans holds a groundbreaking ceremony near what will become an expansion of Park De La Cruz.

The actual start of the 460 working days the first phase is expected to take will take place when the low bidder on the contract puts up orange-colored construction signs.
The Daley Corp. has put in the lowest bid and is expected to be named the winner of the contract this week.

There will be detours and distractions, but Caltrans said most traffic shouldn't hesitate much more than it does now.

"This is a tremendous opportunity for Caltrans to show that it can work in cooperation to restore a neighborhood," said Jay Powell, coordinator of the Visions Project for the City Heights Community Development Corporation.

The first phase of construction will set the stage for what Powell and others hope will be an imaginative but controversial town center located on a series of platforms covering the freeway.

The initial construction will not get in the way of the Visions Project. That will allow backers to come up with ways to fund the estimated $56 million extra it would take to put in three full blocks of cover and portions of two more blocks.

The Visions Project group is scheduled to come before the City Council with funding plans on April 6. Powell said recent studies show the covers can be built more economically than first thought and the environmental impact studies for the project can be completed during the first-phase construction.

Caltrans has agreed to put in one block of cover over the freeway between Central Elementary and Wilson Middle school at El Cajon Boulevard and is looking into the possibility of a cover between Landis and Wightman streets that could be developed into a park.

Many residents would just like to see the freeway finished quickly regardless of whether a town hall and green, community college annex, transit station, shopping mall and parks are put on top of it.

Of the total expected cost of $149 million, (not including the Visions Project), about $64 million will be spent on buying the right of way. Caltrans has been doing that over the last decade and has been razing homes and businesses in the process.

That has led to blocks of open space, abandoned apartments, rundown sections of City Heights and a general sense of uneasiness and apprehension among the residents living in and along the construction path.

Caltrans is feeling the pressure. More than 35,000 motorists daily use the congested corridor and an estimated 15,000 more clog other streets and freeways in order to avoid it. Caltrans estimates those numbers will quintuple by 2005.

Also, the traffic accident rate in the corridor is much higher than normal. The completed freeway is expected to make using the area four times safer than the present system,
Caltrans says.

Here's how the resident engineer says the first phase will proceed:

A detour will be made at 40th and Wightman streets to move a 60-inch water main and begin excavating for a bridge at the site. Meanwhile, grading for a detour north of Adams Avenue will begin and a project that will widen the I-15 bridges over I-8 will start.

Then dirt from the excavation at Wightman and Landis streets will be moved inside a loop ramp southwest of Adams Avenue and 40th Street. The dirt fill will help turn the area into a future park.

Caltrans will set up a construction headquarters and parking area northeast of the Adams Avenue bridge, but will leave some space for local parking.

Caption: 1 MAP 1 PIC
1. AREA OF ROADWORK 2. Bring on the bulldozers: The intersection of 40th Street and Orange Avenue shows the effects of years of waiting for the Interstate 15 construction that is finally about to begin. 1. UNION-TRIBUNE 2. Union-Tribune / SEAN M. HAFFEY
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Correction: CORRECTIONS A story yesterday about Interstate 15 incorrectly stated the year scheduled for the completion of a 2.2-mile segment along 40th Street from Adams Avenue to Wightman Street. the year is 1998. The San Diego Union-Tribune regrets the error. (San Diego Union-Tribune, 920320, B-2:5,6,7)
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