

## Finishing I-15 will end era; The Mid-City area is torn apart by the 40th St. link

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*Author: Roger M. Showley*

An intruder appeared in the neighborhood -- a big, orange bulldozer.

It came to demolish a house -- a little stucco Spanish bungalow that must have been there since 1925.

In other neighborhoods, the house being demolished would be a prized find. First-time home buyers, using their "sweat equity," would restore its hardwood floors, tile counter tops and plaster walls.

But the bulldozer showed no mercy. Within days, the house was a pile of splintered wood, then nothing.

Left behind was a red and white sign. It read in part, "No Trespassing. No Dumping. No Parking."

This house and 568 other residences along the east side of 40th Street in Mid-City are being torn down to make way for construction of a new freeway. It will be built 25 feet below street level from Adams Avenue south to Landis Street. Fifty structures already have been demolished to make way for it -- the rest of the houses, apartments and condominiums will be leveled in the next 13 months.

The good news is that this is probably the last freeway that will be allowed to wipe out a line of quaint homes and thriving businesses in an established pre-World War II section of San Diego.

For the completion of Interstate 15 between Interstate 8 and Interstate 5 along 40th Street, from Kensington to City Heights, represents the end of an era.

As the freeway system has been built over the last 40 years, it has blasted its way through countless older neighborhoods in America. The interstate system was first limited to connecting cities but later enlarged to speed transportation through cities, too.

This, the last segment of Interstate 15, is expected to be completed in 1994, 35 years after it was proposed.

Then commuters will be able to race to work on eight lanes of concrete -- north to Kearny Mesa or south to the 32nd Street Naval Station -- and encounter no signals, no flooding, no jaywalkers. They won't have 40th Street to kick around anymore.

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It will cost \$100 million to fill in this 2.2-mile "missing link" in Interstate 15, which begins in Sweetgrass, Mont., and ends at San Diego Bay.

Approximately 1,300 residents will be uprooted from their homes and forced to move. Property owners will receive the "fair market value" and moving expenses for their homes and businesses. Renters are entitled to as much as \$4,000 in relocation expenses.

Before 1970, the state offered virtually no compensation to tenants in an area being cleared. Property owners received little more. Federal law mandated more protection -- which is why the relocation program will consume 40 percent of the budget for the project.

The people who live in the path of the 40th Street project express mixed emotions.

Some of them have lived there since long before the freeway was first proposed in 1959. Others moved in later, but no one told them about the freeway; such a failure to disclose was only recently outlawed by the state Legislature.

But for years, they all have been living in a state of suspended animation, not able to sell, not able to move, not sure if they should paint the walls, fix the roof or mow the grass.

Along just one block of Terrace Street at the north end of the new right-of-way are a dozen or so homeowners who have been waiting.

People such as Gaspar and Alice Padilla. They bought their two-story home in 1965. It wasn't too many weeks before their neighbors came by and said, "Hey, why did you buy this place? A freeway's coming through."

But they stayed and raised a family, retired and now have grandchildren. After they moved in, they planted fan palms out front. They were 3 feet tall then, 28 feet today.

"All we can do now is hope that Caltrans will give us fair value for our property," said Gaspar Padilla.

Two doors away lives Larry Oviatt. He wonders where he can find a replacement comparable to the 3,000-square-foot house he bought in 1975. He rents out the two apartments in the back and the income covers his mortgage.

"I'd like to get this over as rapidly as possible," he said.

At the end of the block, DeWayne and Judy Bailey say a part of their lives has been on hold for 17 years, ever since the first public hearing to announce the "go-ahead" for 40th Street. At one point, an official advised them not to fix their roof because the project was imminent. That was more than 10 years ago.

"We're going to locate where this is not going to happen again," Judy Bailey vowed.

The Padillas, Baileys and Oviatt all have been notified to expect to receive a purchase offer from the state this month. They say they will not be happy if the offers are for anything less than \$250,000.

And if they refuse to accept the state's offer, they face eviction through condemnation proceedings and a lengthy battle in court that pits appraisers against appraisers. They would have to hire their own lawyers.

Meanwhile, Caltrans is planning to auction off some of the houses along the 40th Street corridor and is collecting names of interested would-be buyers. Buyers would be expected to make their own arrangements to relocate their houses to legal lots.

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Transportation officials said 40th Street has dragged on longer than any other freeway project in San Diego County.

Retired Caltrans district director Jacob Dekema even suspects that the project was derailed in the 1960s by a typographical error -- when someone typed the termination of Interstate 15 as being at Interstate 8 instead of Interstate 5.

State policy during Gov. Jerry Brown's administration of the 1970s halted the project plus most others in an attempt to divert highway funds to buses and trolleys and other mass transit.

In the '80s, an aroused citizenry in the Mid-City area tried to mitigate the freeway's expected impacts by trying to narrow it, then cover it, then ban trucks from it. The state's only concession was to reduce the overall width a half-block and to span the freeway with a one-block wide park near Central Elementary School at an estimated cost of \$12 million.

In only one case have San Diego residents been able to halt a freeway project before it could start. That was the proposed widening in Balboa Park of State 163 -- San Diego's first freeway, opened in 1948. But even that "victory" 20 years ago may not stand.

Bill Dotson, the Caltrans district director who is retiring at the end of this month after 41 years with the department, said the widening plan may have to be resurrected because of the expected growth in convention and business traffic to downtown.

Dorothea Edmiston was a leader in that anti-widening drive in the late 1960s. And soon after, she discovered that right in her own back yard, Ward Road, an extension of 40th Street, was going to be raised, widened and "upgraded" to freeway status.

"We bought this little house in 1958 and thought we'd die here," she said. "I don't know if I want to stay that long."

She held the telephone to an open window. The roar of the freeway below came through loud and clear.

For the remaining residents in Mid-City, Interstate 15 will bring some benefits. Congestion on 40th will be reduced and a 75 percent decrease in the accident rate is projected. Two parks will open at each end of the street.

But projections indicate that the traffic will soar to five times above its current level in 20 years, as more and more motorists find Interstate 15 a convenient detour from other congested freeways. The passage of 150,000 cars a day through this corridor will surely increase noise and pollution.

There's the rub.

More and more motorists.

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"Freeway" was a term coined in 1928, when city planners saw the limited-access highway as a preferable alternative to street cars and trolley lines. These lines were largely in private hands and service was falling behind the need.

Ever since then, Americans have become addicted to automobile travel. In San Diego County, there are more cars than licensed drivers. The average number of daily trips is growing twice as fast as the population, according to the San Diego Association of Governments.

No wonder the public voted to raise sales taxes last year for expanded roads, freeways and mass transit. They are hooked on the fast lane.

Caltrans has never toted up the cost of building 300 miles of freeways in San Diego over the last 40 years. But the construction of 52 miles of I-15 illustrates how the price per mile has changed in just 10 years. The department built the 50 miles from Riverside County south to I-8 for about \$400 million, or \$8 million per mile. The cost of closing the 40th Street gap will be about \$50 million per mile.

In the minds of many Mid-City residents, the 40th Street story represents a lesson that should never be repeated:

It took too long to build;

Its design was changed but never fundamentally altered, despite society's new awareness of environmental problems and energy-related shortages;

It will wipe out homes and businesses.

Lee Hultgren, director of transportation for the San Diego Association of Governments, cites these and other lessons as reasons why the rest of the world is unlikely to see a freeway system on the same scale as America's.

"I would say that worldwide, we probably don't have the resources for everyone to have one car and drive where he wants to," Hultgren said, "not as long as we're doing our cars and roads the way we do them -- filling up with scarce fossil fuels and running carbon in the atmosphere."

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It is hard to imagine -- or remember -- San Diego and other large cities without freeways. But, perhaps we should look back and ask ourselves if the policy of building freeways through cities was worth the price.

Has the love affair with the automobile been worth the destruction of neighborhoods? The abandonment of central cities and their redevelopment at great cost? The loss of life from grisly freeway accidents? The suburban sprawl that gave everybody a "home in the country" surrounded by shopping centers and parking lots? The whole city engulfed in smog?

Before all the houses are gone, before the bulldozers are through, stroll along Terrace Street,

Central Avenue and 40th Street, starting at Adams Avenue and ending 12 blocks later at Landis Street.

Eat a pizza in the restaurant marked for demolition.

Touch Gaspar Padilla's palm trees, due to be uprooted and mulched.

The missing link in Interstate 15 has been found. But a community has been deep-sixed.

Smokestacks & Geraniums is a monthly column by staff writer Roger M. Showley, a third-generation San Diegan who has been reporting on development and growth issues for more than 10 years.

Caption: 1 MAP 1 PIC

1. The last link in Interstate 15, Homes and business are being cleared along 40th Street in Mid-City to make way for completion of a 2.2-mile "missing link" in Interstate 15. (F-2) 2. Judy Bailey says a part of her life has been on hold for 17 years, ever since the first public hearing to announce the 'go-ahead' for 40th Street. (F-2) 1. The San Diego Union 2. The San Diego Union/Jack Yon

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