

Myth #114: Carson City's Freeway Bypass: A Long Time Coming by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist



Carson City and the surrounding region celebrated the completion of the first leg of the US 395 freeway bypass on February 16, 2006 and the second leg on September 24, 2009. The third and final leg around the east side of Carson City has been postponed until at least 2014 due to a shortage of highway construction funds.

With the completion of the I-580 segment from the Mt. Rose Highway to Washoe Valley in 2012, Carson City will be linked for the first time to the nation's interstate system. Only four other state capitals--Juneau, Alaska; Dover, Delaware; Jefferson City, Missouri; and Pierre, South Dakota--will remain without a freeway.

Many recent newspaper articles and editorials focusing on the long history of the proposed Carson City bypass noted twenty years of planning and a few stories referred to thirty years of planning.

Doing the math following some homework, the planning for a Carson City downtown bypass actually dates back some fifty years.

A visionary general planning study for Carson City, published in April 1958, proposed a parkway around the east end of the city and a ring road. "Carson City has never had a planning survey," according to the report. "Until recently it has not even had a planning board. The town's growth has been of the haphazard manner characteristic of most of the cities and towns throughout the country." While the city had about 5,000 residents, the report noted that "NO TOWN IS TOO SMALL TO PLAN."

A proposed Master Development Plan for the county in October 1964 included an "Eagle Valley freeway." Despite the fact that the Carson City area's population had doubled since the first planning survey, most Carson Street businesses (including the Nugget casino) and some residents vigorously protested.

"Maybe in the future some additional transportation problems may arise," said William Crowell, Sr., the attorney representing the Carson Street business interests. "I can't see how we can help this community by routing all traffic around town and giving business to Reno and Lake Tahoe." The *Nevada Appeal* reported that Crowell urged the planning commission to "strike" the freeway from the development plan and his statement was greeted by applause at the meeting.

Planning consultant Raymond Smith pointed out "the freeway could not be built until 1972, and probably not until at least 1982. But we should plan so that when 1982 comes we are not facing an insufferable situation in obtaining rights-of-way."

"One man said he has seen towns withered up by having a freeway go past them," wrote the *Appeal*. "Another man said Salem, Oregon, has grown tremendously since its freeway was built."

The plans for the freeway were dropped and a Carson City Beautification Plan in 1966 resulted in the elimination of parking on Carson Street and the addition of traffic lanes.

The Carson City Comprehensive Plan published in 1972 referred to previous master plans calling for a freeway bypass. While Carson City had consolidated with Ormsby County in 1969, and the city's population now exceeded 18,000 residents, the report noted "that traffic volumes needed to justify freeway construction are some years away."

By 1980, Carson City's population had reached over 32,000, and Washoe County to the north and Douglas County to the south were experiencing significant growth and development. Carson City officials and its city manager now called for a bypass.

Nevada Department of Transportation officials, on the other hand, argued that higher priority projects in Las Vegas and Reno would delay the construction of a freeway bypass in Carson City. City Supervisor John Hayes in a 1981 *Appeal* interview "said even 25 years might be too optimistic an estimate."

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While Hayes was right in his prediction, thanks to the efforts of Carson City Mayor Marv Teixeira and his championing of a local gas tax hike in 1997 to help build the freeway bypass, it appears what was first proposed in 1958 will become a reality more than fifty years later.

It didn't take that long to plan and build the Hoover Dam.

Graphic symbol of the 395/580 Freeway courtesy of the Nevada Department of Transportation. For more information about the freeway, visit the NDOT 395/580 website at: <http://www.ccfreeway.com/>.

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, January 2008.)