

Freeway opening closes era in history

See related editorial.

By Jackie Klein
staff writer

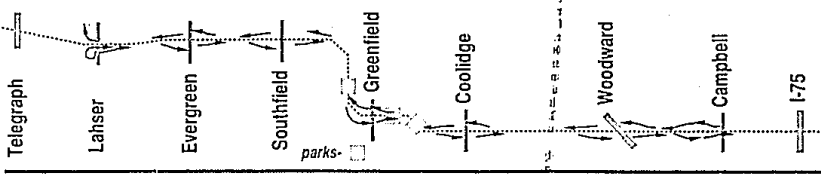
An ample ride will be carved in history for I-696. Never has east had so much trouble meeting west as the final eight-mile link of the expressway through south Oakland County. They built the Jeffries and Chrysler freeways in the nearly 30 years it took to argue about the route of I-696.

The dispute had been raging since Ike was in the White House, since the Russians launched Sputnik I and the U.S. sent man to the moon.

THE CONCEPT of I-696 took shape in 1955 when the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads (now the Federal Highway Administration) approved the Michigan State Highway Department's recommendation to include the east-west freeway to serve the rapidly growing areas of south Oakland and Macomb counties.

Studies between 1956 and 1963

The new expressway - where to get on and off



determined that the road should run along a corridor between 10 and 11 Mile.

In 1957, newly elected State Highway Commissioner John C. Mackle included construction of the first 8.8 mile-section of the freeway in his first five-year construction plan.

The western stretch of I-696 -- from the I-96 interchange in Novi to Telegraph in Southfield -- opened in 1963.

Officials met in Lansing for heat-

ed discussions and negotiations. Smoke rings formed big zeros as state officials and community leaders failed to agree on an alignment. Hoped-for construction was repeatedly delayed.

Gov. George Romney entered the fray in 1964. But a later 16-hour marathon session in Southfield with leaders from six cities ended in a stalemate.

was signed by the Legislature in 1968 authorizing binding arbitration of disputes over freeway routes that couldn't be settled by negotiations.

Trying to promote agreement, the State Highway Commission altered the proposed route location but left it on the 10 and 11 Mile corridor.

When some communities stood firm against the new route, the commission declared the situation deadlocked. Romney appointed a three-

member arbitration panel, all Detroiters.

Opponents sought a court injunction to prohibit the board from taking action. But the Oakland County Circuit Court upheld the arbitration law.

THE BOARD made its route decision in October 1968, setting off another round of legal battles to halt implementation of the board's decision.

The State Supreme Court finally settled the brouhaha, upholding the constitutionality of the arbitration law.

In 1969, Congress passed the National Environmental Protection Act setting up stiff requirements for highways that affect parks, wetlands and other environmental features.

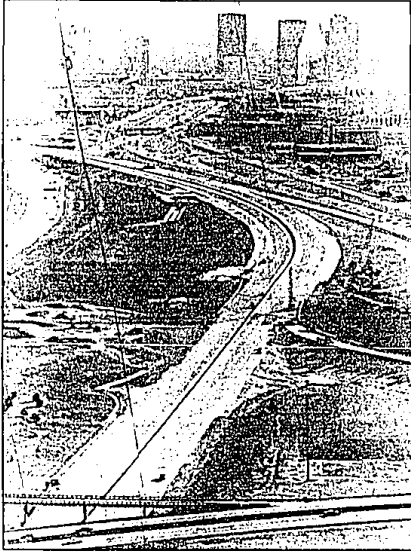
Opponents of I-696 seized the opportunity to proclaim that I-696 construction would imperil the Detroit Zoo and Rackham Golf Course which fell in the proposed path of the highway.

A 1974 headline in the Southfield Eccentric read "I-696, definitely coming -- and before 1980." But the eight-mile link remained a concrete phantom without a shovel.

OPPOSITION CONTINUED from Lathrup Village and Pleasant Ridge and from a group called COUPON, Community Organizations United to Preserve Our Neighborhoods.

Freeway fighters took their arguments to court. COUPON called for reconstruction of 10 Mile, 11 Mile and 13 Mile in Southfield.

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JERRY ZOLVINSKY/staff photographer

On the eve of its opening, I-696 curves east between Northwestern. In the background are the high-rises of Southfield's Prudential Town Center.

New road steers motorists safely

By Tim Smith
staff writer

A smooth, safe ride on a "state-of-the-art" freeway awaits motorists on the final leg of I-696, which opens today, said James Pitz, Michigan Department of Transportation director.

"They can expect a very smooth ride, a very efficient ride," Pitz said. "They will save a tremendous amount of time and travel a whole lot safer."

Among some of the notable features included along the \$436 million 9.1-mile segment are sign posts that break away on impact, numbered sections, to allow rescue teams easy access to accident victims; and light poles built into recessed areas of the freeway's attractive brick walls, Pitz said.

Another significant innovation, Pitz said, is the transformation of an overpass near Lincoln (10 1/4 Mile) and Greenfield into a community park.

A 500-foot-long deck, which eventually will become a playground, allows pedestrian access to nearby synagogues for 10,000 Orthodox Jews who live in the area and who cannot use motor vehicles on the Sabbath.

THROUGH THE inclusion of plaza decks, Pitz said the freeway is allowed to aesthetically blend into nearby communities.

But safety and convenience are the features that most of the public will benefit from the link, which is built below surface, Pitz said.

"The (median) are the new highway design, to re-direct vehicles and avoid potential for cross-over accidents," Pitz explained. "The lighting will be in recessed areas, so it will be almost impossible to hit a light pole. And there will be break-away posts for signs."

"These are all modern innovations. There is no safer type highway we know of than this kind of freeway. This will make a

To reduce glare for drivers as they pass through tunnels under the three plazas, the brightness of tunnel lights are controlled by sunlight, through a photo cell.

major contribution to (driver) safety," Pitz added.

Roadside telephones also could be a reality along the stretch, and Pitz said a water supply for fires will be available.

And, to reduce glare for drivers as they pass through tunnels under the three plazas, the brightness of tunnel lights are controlled by sunlight, through a photo cell, said MDOT's Paul Garreau.

THE FINAL piece of I-696, which was originally on the drawing board in 1957, also is expected to make life easier for those now able to directly commute from Novi east to St. Clair Shores.

And, according to MDOT traffic engineer Paul Riley, the new freeway should relieve congestion on east-west arteries such as the mile roads. A period of commuter experimentation is expected.

"The motorist is going to try this (freeway) route," Riley said. "And if its easier for him to use, he will probably stay on it."

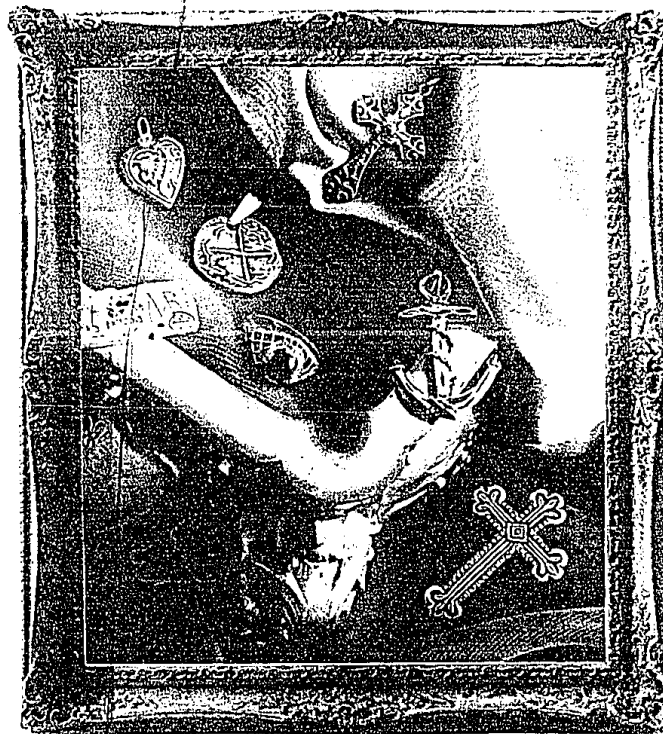
"They also may find, with other traffic coming to the freeway, their trips on 12 Mile, for example, will be less congested. So they may decide to stay on that roadway for a short trip."

When the segment opens, it will end years of frustration where people would randomly "pick a mile road to drive," Pitz said.

"As far as southern Oakland County is concerned, this will be of a tremendous assistance to (alleviating) east-west traffic," Riley said.

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