A History of Highways & Transportation

Washington State Highway & Transportation Commission 1951 - 1993

Washington State Highway & Transportation Department 1905 - 1993

Years of Progress, Service, Achievement

Washington State Department of Transportation

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WASHINGTON STATE HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORTATION

A Brief Chronology

1852 - State Historical Road No. 1 established. "Byrd's Mill Road" between Puyallup, Tacoma and Steilacoom was the first road established by law in Washington by the Legislature of Oregon Territory.

1893 - Legislature approves plans to construct Cascade Wagon Road (now North Cascades Highway).

1905 - Highway Department formally organized. State had 1,082 miles of road, 125 miles in "improved" condition.

1909 - Highway Department achieves partial control over construction contracts, heretofore granted entirely to counties. Decision made to pave roads.

1911 - Permanent Highway Act: Still more contract control granted to state.

1912 - State's first concrete road built in Lewis County. (Other segments in eastern Washington in progress)

1916 - Federal Aid Road Act: First federal assistance with state highway construction costs.

1918 - Highway districts established in Seattle, Spokane, Vancouver, Walla Walla, and Olympia. Large-scale construction program started.

1920 - State citizens owned 186,827 autos and trucks.

1921 - District system enlarged from five administrative areas to seven. First gas tax: 1 cent on the gallon. Temple of Justice boiler room becomes first Highway Materials Laboratory. Motor Vehicle Act revised; state control over all highway maintenance.

1923 - Gas tax increased to 2 cents per gallon and part of the property tax levy for State Highway construction was eliminated.

1925 - Six-district system started; same as at present with exception of seventh. Seattle district established in 1957.

1927 - Speed limit raised from 30 to 40 miles per hour. Highway Department achieves regulatory control over toll bridges. The non-technical highway committee was abolished and the permanent post of Director of Highways was established.

1929 - Gas tax increased to 3 cents a gallon, with the 1 cent increase distributed to counties.

1931 - Gas tax increased to 5 cents per gallon.

1933 - To combat chronic depression-era unemployment, a $10 million emergency relief bond issue was placed on the department, and a large share of highway funds was diverted to the counties via the Secondary Highway Act to be used for road construction.

1934 - Aerial photography, a radio communications system and a network of truck-weighing stations was introduced to highway operations.

1936 - A planning survey was made to determine future highway needs.

1937 - Legislature approved a revised Highway Code, covering all aspects of highway administration. A Commission on Highway Transportation was formed to study the department's fiscal operations and related subjects.

1941 - Highway Advisory Commission formed to assist the department director with administrative matters. Gasoline tax legislation was broadened to diesel fuels. Highway Department started a comprehensive safety program for highway crews. Highway building practically ceased, due to World War II, and only work needed to keep roads passable was approved. State aid laws were revised to place more control of construction projects in the hands of counties and cities. The use fuel tax was imposed at the rate of 5 cents per gallon.

1949 - Motor fuel taxes were raised from 5 cents to 6 1/2 cents per gallon.

1950 - Second Tacoma Narrows Bridge opened on October 14, 1950. $14 million bond issue retired on March 1, 1965. (First Tacoma Narrows Bridge called "Galloping Gertie" had collapsed in severe wind storms on November 7, 1940.)

1951 - Five-member Highway Commission created to give the department continuity and a non-political outlook. The department assumed control of the Puget Sound ferry system, heretofore privately owned.

(The Washington State Ferries system is now the largest of its kind in the United States.)

1953 - Highway districts were given authority to advertise for and to open bids on contracts up to $15,000. Authority to award contracts remained with the department Director.

1955 - Department received authority of "blanket condemnation" wherein it could acquire several separately-owned tracts of land by filing one case against the owners.

1956 - Marked increase in federal allocations for highway construction came with Federal Aid Highway Act. Over 630 contracts totaling $143 million were awarded in next two years.

1958 - Department personnel numbered more than 3,200.

1959 - State's Interstate program took a slight setback when federal funding was reduced. Winter flood damage to highways brought federal relief funding.

1960 - Information on highway needs for next quarter-century and valuable data on county and city roads were supplied through Highway Commission Needs Study. Highway construction continued at reduced pace.

1961 - Gas tax was increased from 6 1/2 cents to 7 1/2 cents per gallon.

1963 - Priority Programming Act passed by State Legislature to set up guidelines for long-range planning of department. Part of the act called for the Highway Commission to develop a 14-year long-range plan for highway development.

1965 - Management survey brings sweeping changes to department's organizational structure. Seven major divisions created to streamline operations.

1967 - Legislature passes bills increasing gasoline tax to aid urban highway construction and authorizing a statewide survey of transportation needs. Legislature increased the gas tax from 7 1/2 cents to 9 cents per gallon. Maintenance Control System adopted to tighten and streamline scheduling and production of maintenance activities resulting in greater efficiency and control of expenditures.

1968 - More than 102 miles of Interstate 90 completed from 1966 to 1968 between Seattle and Spokane.

1969 - Last traffic light between Canada and Oregon border removed on Interstate 5 near Everett.

1971 - 6,451 miles of non-Interstate on state's highway system. 763.7 miles of Interstate on state system, 563.5 miles open to traffic. Interstate Program 74% complete.

1972 - North Cascades Highway (SR 20) open to public September 2, 1972 between Newhalem and Winthrop at cost of $20 million.

1973 - 440-foot ferries Walla Walla and Spokane added to Ferry System fleet, each with a 2,000 passenger and 206 car capacity.

1974 - Fuel shortage curtails Department of Highways and Ferry System operations.

1975 - As part of a re-organizational review, Districts 1 and 7 were combined and the District 7 headquarters in Bellevue was eliminated. The Ferry System carried over 7.8 million passengers during Fiscal Year '75. Total vehicles carried was 5.3 million, while 1.6 million vehicles utilized the Hood Canal Bridge (SR 104).

1976 - Federal Highway Act extends completion date of Interstate Highway system from 1979 to 1990.

1977 - Gas tax increased from 9 cents to 11 cents per gallon. Department of Transportation created by State Legislature, effective September 21, 1977.

1978 - Seven-member Transportation Commission and WSDOT identify integrated transportation modes; purchase six new 100-car ferry vessels at $135 million.

1979 - Hood Canal Floating Bridge sinks February 13, 1979 from 120 mph winds, high tides and swirling canal waters. Western half sinks to bottom of 300 foot canal. Eastern half remains intact.

1980 - Mount St. Helens volcano erupts May 18, 1980, destroying St. Helens highway and 12 bridges. Monumental ash removal begins across state.

1981 - Duane Berentson becomes second Secretary of Transportation May 21,

1981; five of six new 100-car ferry vessels in service.

1982 - New, stronger Hood Canal floating bridge is reopened October 25, 1982.

1984 - Increased productivity and cost savings realized; work on $1.4 billion I-90 Project progresses between Seattle, Mercer Island and Bellevue.

1986 - Streamlining department's structure provides multimodal systems that meet social and economic needs of travelers.

1988 - Passenger-only ferry vessels introduced. Assistant Secretary for Marine Division moved to Seattle waterfront headquarters.

1989 - WSDOT efficiency improved without sacrificing effectiveness as it fosters economic development role.

1990 - 50-year-old Lacey V. Murrow concrete floating bridge (I-90) sinks November 25, 1990, during severe storm; New, wider I-90 floating bridge paralleling the L.V. Murrow bridge (named in 1993 for Homer Hadley who designed the L.V. Murrow pontoon bridge) was opened between Seattle and Mercer Island in June 1989.

1991 - Passed largest gas tax increases in state's history -- from 12 cents to 18 cents per gallon in 1984, and to 23 cents a gallon in 1991. Revenue solved critical highway street and road funding shortfalls at all levels of government.

1992 - Joint Regional Policy Committee charged by Legislature to bring a commuter rail system to ballot in 1993.

- New Spirit Lake Memorial Highway (SR 504) opens October 16, 1992 to Castle Lake viewpoint, near Coldwater Lake.

1993 - New Lacey V. Murrow replacement bridge opened across Lake Washington September 12, 1993; anticipate completion of I-90 Projects in 1995.

- Sid Morrison named new Secretary of Transportation by State Transportation Commission following retirement of Duane Berentson. Morrison's duties begin June 1, 1993.

- Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act described; distribution of ISTEA enhancement funds ($150 million federal funds) to be spent over six years.

- Partnering concept accepted fostering public/private construction work bringing long-term cost savings and more efficient resource management.

- Rail passenger service plans start. Designed to improve passenger service through Oregon and Washington to Vancouver, B.C. Canada. Congress designates N.W. Rail Corridor.

- WSDOT/STC conduct public meetings to discuss implementing 20-year State Transportation Systems Plan targeting state-owned highways, ferries and airports. STC to adopt final plan in January, 1994.

- WSDOT oversees maintenance and operations of 7,000 miles of state highways and 3,500 bridges on which the state's citizens (estimated at close to five million) travel over 47 billion vehicle miles every year.

- WSDOT employees total 6,700 -- include environmental specialists, engineers and technicians, aeronautics experts, transportation planners, marine operations specialists and support staff. Department operates with $2 billion biennial budget, administering over 100 construction projects worth more than $650 million per year. Oversee largest ferry fleet in the United States, transporting 22 million passengers and nine million vehicles each year, and general aviation activities at 500 airports used by 20,000 pilots of private aircraft.