

NWDA's role in stopping freeway questioned

Your article on George "Bing" Sheldon ("Designs on the Avenues," July 1987) contains serious errors concerning the role of Mr. Sheldon and the Northwest District Association in stopping the I-505 freeway that had been planned for the Thurman-Vaughn corridor. You give sole credit to the NWDA for opposing the freeway plan and for filing the lawsuit that blocked that planned development.

Although the NWDA and Mr. Sheldon might prefer in hindsight that the facts were otherwise, the historical truth of the freeway also deserves to be honestly understood. The Highway Department's plan to build a freeway in the Thurman-Vaughn corridor as a connection between the Fremont Bridge and St. Helens Road had a depressing effect on upkeep and values of residential property in that corridor and to the north. Only slowly has that important low-income residential area of Northwest Portland begun to recover.

Sadly, the NWDA initially decided to support the plan to build the I-505 freeway in the Thurman-Vaughn corridor. The argument was that the freeway would serve as a barrier to further industrial encroachment in the Northwest residential area. Furthermore, presumably because of the NWDA's support for the plan, the Highway Department was willing to consider NWDA design recommendations that might reduce noise and improve freeway aesthetics and the flow of street traffic.

The now-defunct Willamette Heights Neighborhood Association was formed at that time to fight against the freeway. Mr. Morton Paglin, acting as chairman of the WHNA, and other members of that group tried unsuccessfully to convince the NWDA to reverse its position.

In March 1971, the Portland City Council met to consider the freeway proposal. The NWDA supported the Highway Department plan and argued convincingly and with graphic diagrams that the freeway proposal had the solid backing of the community. Mr. Paglin, for the WHNA, and a few other Northwest residents argued against the plan. The City Council approved the plan at that meeting.

At that time the WHNA was a lonely ad hoc group of a few individuals with a few petitions and no coherent plan. Mr. Nick Chaiwoe, a lawyer living in Willamette Heights, suggested to Mr. Paglin that a federal lawsuit against the freeway plan might be successful. The basis for the suit was that the Highway Department had not filed a proper environmental impact statement; they had not given due notice of public hearings; and they had not examined alternative routes in an unbiased and objective fashion as required by existing federal law.

Although the NWDA eventually withdrew its support for the Thurman-Vaughn corridor freeway plan, it did so belatedly and only after the WHNA and Mr. Chaiwoe conceived and planned the federal lawsuit. As a result of that lawsuit, the Thurman-Vaughn freeway plan was blocked and the court mandated that alternative freeway routes had to be given serious and honest consideration before any plan could be approved.

We believe that there are several compelling reasons to set the historical record straight. First, the NWDA has in recent years begun claiming credit for stopping the Thurman-Vaughn Freeway plan. Second, the record establishes that the major organizations entrusted with regulating development in our community (i.e. the Highway Department, the Portland Planning

Commission, the Portland City Council and the NWDA) cannot always be trusted to act in the public interest. Mavericks and affected individuals should therefore continue to be involved in the struggles and debates that affect our neighborhoods.

Third, historical truth is important for its own sake because it can help us to learn from our errors. Unfortunately, our ability to learn from history is also very fragile and it can only be accomplished if our "collective conscience" and memory remain vigilant and stronger than our collective will to forget. Your article illustrates that our will to forget is extremely strong, even on a local and relatively recent issue.

Finally, we wish to emphasize that our goal is not to criticize Mr. Sheldon or anyone else. On the contrary, the Thurman-Vaughn freeway plan placed the entire Northwest district in a difficult spot, and different groups did their best to limit the potential damage. We should all be able to live comfortably with the truth. We should also all be able to support each other as we continue to engage in the ongoing struggle.

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