**Introduction to the Anita Zeidler Reflection**

**James J. Casey, Jr., J.D.**

Dr. Anita Zeidler provided the following reflection concerning the development of the Milwaukee freeway system and mass transit as part of a series of reflections in my copyrighted manuscript entitled, *The Milwaukee County Expressway and Transportation Commission: Democracy and Infrastructure Development* (Copyright, 2010). This reflection is based upon an interview with Dr. Zeidler at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee on October 24, 2007, and was fully reviewed, edited, and approved by her for the manuscript shortly after the interview. With her recent passing, it is appropriate that this reflection find its way into the public realm in advance of publication of the entire manuscript. As with all our conversations, this interview was highly enjoyable, and she had much to say about transportation issues in Milwaukee. Like her parents, she will be greatly missed.

**Dr. Anita L. Zeidler**

**Reflections on Expressways and Mass Transportation in Milwaukee**

The history of Milwaukee expressways and their relationship to local history and politics is critical to the understanding of Milwaukee today. These are my memories and musings about Milwaukee’s expressway program and its influence on Milwaukee’s culture, geography, ecology, and mass transit.

*History (as I remember it)*

After World War II, President Eisenhower wanted a national plan for roads and highways. His experience in the war demonstrated to him the necessity for a system of highways to move people and supplies. Factories in Detroit retooled from war production and began producing individual passenger vehicles again. Americans buying cars wanted roads to go places and get there faster. As a mayor of a large American city, my father, Frank P. Zeidler, thought that expressways running through town would relieve growing congestion on city streets, making neighborhood streets safer and healthier for city residents. Expressways were planned and built and have had intended and unintended consequences.

In the early years of the freeway program, the 1950’s, there was little argument over the location of the North-South Expressway (presently, I-43) because it was routed through the worst housing in the city of Milwaukee, neighborhoods of dilapidated buildings, many without indoor plumbing. My father worked his entire life, even after he left office, for decent affordable housing for everyone. It was therefore not surprising that as mayor he championed the causes of eliminating substandard housing and building public housing for the poor and veterans. When federal money became available for slum clearance, public housing and highway construction, it seemed logical to address the problems simultaneously. Thus, public housing was built, and present-day I-43 was routed through an area targeted for slum clearance.

The route ran through the Walnut Street/Bronzeville area north of downtown. Contrary to current assertions, the North-South Expressway did not kill Bronzeville. The viability of the Walnut Street area had already declined dramatically. My memory of the condition of the area was based on the fact that I rode the bus twice a week through the area to get to music lessons and catechism class, and I remember my father bringing home accounts of the terrible conditions in which many people there lived. It was only decades later when expressways became less popular that people started blaming the North - South Expressway for destroying Bronzeville. However, the demise of Bronzeville had started much earlier.

Clearing the slums of that area had the effect of moving African-Americans into better housing in other areas of the city. Where they had formerly been concentrated from the last century until the 1950’s in the Walnut Street area, now they were dispersing north and west into blue-collar white neighborhoods. White Milwaukeeans, worried about the unknown, were nervous about their new neighbors. Realtors took advantage of this by scaring whites into selling homes cheaply and then made huge profits selling over-priced homes to African-Americans. After my father left office in 1960, whites fled the city for life in the suburbs. Their flight was fueled by unfounded rumors and baseless fears, and those that stayed, closed their neighborhoods to African-Americans. Thus, began the struggle for open-housing in Milwaukee which due to lack of political leadership on the problem, eventually lead to the disturbance of 1967. That incident, in turn, lead to more white flight from the city. Indirectly the existence of the expressway influenced the ethnic make-up of the city today.

Unlike the North-South Expressway, there was a battle for placement of the East-West Expressway (I-94 West). The problem was resolved by routing the highway between two cemeteries located just west of County Stadium (now the home of Miller Park). Milwaukeeans did not want their homes and neighborhoods eaten up by highway right-of-way. Clearance of land for the Park West Expressway claimed some nice upper middle - class homes in the Sherman Park area and caused controversy. There was also controversy over clearing land south of Milwaukee County Stadium for another extension. In the end, neither of those extensions was built.

The Fond du Lac Expressway was another addition that failed to materialize. It would have made sense to connect Highway 45 with downtown Milwaukee since Fond du Lac Avenue has always been a major transportation route in Milwaukee. Fond du Lac Avenue was made more important when the city annexed a considerable amount of land on the northwest side during my father’s time in office.

When the expressways first opened in the 1960s, driving on them was a strange experience. They were new, people did not know how to drive on them, and there was no place to learn how. Many drivers would avoid the expressways. Others would only drive in the middle lane, feeling that at such high speeds they needed the space for error. Some drivers would stop at the end of on-ramps, hesitating before entering expressway traffic, waiting for an absolutely clear road. The eccentric behavior of those early users was mitigated by the relative emptiness of the expressways.

Signage in the early years was confusing especially before system continuity was achieved. It was not unusual for people to try to enter on exit ramps, or to get lost because I-94 turns west at downtown and I-43 continues north. Drag racing was not uncommon since travel on the expressways was light, and late at night the roads were wide and empty. Teenagers would drive three cars abreast to block lanes and build parades behind themselves. Children would stand on overpasses and drop things onto the expressway or passing cars. Eventually more sophisticated drivers and improvements such as fencing on overpasses, more useful signs, and concrete barriers made the expressways more user-friendly.

*The Effect of Expressways*

Expressways facilitated migration of all kinds. Mainly they helped people move out of the city into the surrounding countryside where they could live a rural life and still easily get to their jobs in the city. Milwaukee’s population dropped from its high point when my father was in office. The result was rapid and unplanned urbanization of the areas around Milwaukee which has resulted in extensive loss of farm land, high levels of pollution and now water shortages in adjoining counties.

Expressways moved cars and trucks off city streets, but also contributed to the changed character of the city. Small businesses and business districts suffered as Milwaukeeans bundled in their cars for trips to new shopping centers often located in suburban areas. Many small neighborhood stores and services disappeared. Neighborhood groceries, bakeries and drugstores are distant memories. Milwaukee is no longer a city of neighborhoods. Few of us know our neighbors or others in our community. The automobile isolates us from one another. When people traveled by bus, they got to know others in their community who stood at the same bus stops and traveled the same routes. In the car we are each in a cocoon in which we are mostly unaware of others. Stopped at a light or traveling on the expressway it is not unusual to see people singing or talking to themselves or combing their hair as if they are entirely alone and unobserved. Expressways aid in this isolation because people spend long periods of time traveling alone to and from suburban areas. The extensive use of cell phones and i-Pods are one way we relieve this isolation now.

*The Future of Expressways and Mass Transit*

Cars made people more mobile and more independent. But cars gobble up government resources and are significant polluters. Drivers of passenger cars oppose support for mass transit. At a time when we are worried about the future well-being of the entire planet it seems clear that what we do in Milwaukee impacts the rest of the world. We have a continuing and pressing need for expanded and improved modes of mass transit which we seem unable to acknowledge or address. In the past, at county and state levels, government officials and agencies have not sufficiently appreciated the importance of mass transit to the economic and social viability of the area. They have not acted with understanding or urgency. It is now obvious that mass transit is also integral to environmental viability.

Mini buses and zero/low emission buses would improve mass transit in Milwaukee. Trolleys and street cars have drawbacks related to our climate, but high - speed trains would make sense as part of an overall plan. Planning should be in place now for mass transit systems that connect all the major cities in our area of Wisconsin, Minneapolis/St Paul and Chicago. Perhaps in the future expressway routes could be shared giving dedicated space to mass transit systems as some of the original expressway planning intended. If we do not plan and invest in mass transit options now, something will have to be done later at considerably greater expense. This cheats future Milwaukeeans. We should learn from past failures.

Drivers of individual passenger vehicles will have to be convinced of the ecological and economic benefits of mass transit by government officials. As mayor, my father considered one of the most important aspects of his job to be that of *teacher*. He felt it was his duty to explain the issues, promote public discussion, and to help bring about consensus to do what was best. Milwaukee again needs leaders like my father willing to educate the public on the critical importance of mass transit.

On balance expressways have made travel easier and safer. They have changed the landscape of southeastern Wisconsin, but they also bring awareness to the people of the various communities in this region of how close we are to each other now. Local governments in southeastern Wisconsin, used to thinking of each other as enemies, seem more willing now to seek mutual solutions. We are all growing to realize that our problems and destinies are interconnected. This awareness in turn, may in the future change the face and function of expressways, eventually morphing them into right – of - ways for mass transit.

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