



The planning of a major new highway facility is a process embedded in the context of its time. After over 40 years of debate on the extension of Illinois Route 53 into Lake County, the Illinois Tollway established an Illinois Route 53/120 Blue Ribbon Advisory Council [www.illinoistollway.com/construction-and-planning/community-outreach/illinois-route-53-120-blue-ribbon-advisory-council] to decide its fate. On May 18, 2012, after nine months of work, the diverse membership of the council endorsed a value-priced, four-lane tolled parkway having a maximum speed of 45 mph and including extensive environmental mitigation and enhancements. It is interesting to contrast this modern process to that which led to the construction of US Route 41 in Lake County years ago.

Route 41: The Chicago–Milwaukee Superhighway

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Enthusiasm for the construction of long-distance highway routes surged during The Roaring Twenties with the introduction of exciting new automotive technologies. Discretionary income and car ownership surged among the middle class, democratizing the automobile and raising hope that these “superhighways” would be flung across the vast American terrain.

The spectacular rise in automobile travel, however, drew attention to the fact that metropolitan Chicago’s road building program was lagging behind that of other cities, something the Chicago Regional Planning Association (RPA) was eager to change. Having been created to foster the regional agenda in the spirit exemplified by the famous 1909 Plan of Chicago, the RPA seemed poised to succeed. Led by Daniel Burnham, Jr., son of the famous late architect who co-authored the Plan, it had close ties with the local and county governments that would need to carry out much of the work.

The RPA sent a delegation to Detroit, Michigan in 1925 to study the region’s emerging superhighway program. A push to build the so-called “Avondale Expressway”—proposed to extend northwest from downtown Chicago, much like today’s Kennedy Expressway—followed suit. But a referendum to issue the bonds to build the Avondale—

which was to be, in effect, a giant demonstration project to showcase the potential of modern superhighways—was rejected by voters in 1928, leaving the superhighway program in limbo.

Attention then turned to a proposed route north of the city that would allow Burnham, Jr., and his board of directors to leverage their deep Lake County and North Shore connections. Building this “Chicago–Milwaukee Superhighway” would require intergovernmental cooperation on a scale never before seen in a highway project within the region. But the project had one key advantage—most of the Illinois portion would be located within Lake County, which had staunch supporters of highway construction, in part due to the pioneering work of William G. Edens, sponsor of the state’s first highway bond.

The “Chicago–Milwaukee Superhighway,” by virtue of its gentle curves and wide shoulders, would be built for travel at high rates of speed. With four paved lanes (two in each direction), and a number of overpasses and underpasses that greatly reduced the number of stops, it would more than cut travel times in half. Engineers believed that it could be built quickly by retrofitting portions of existing roads and traversing the boggy Skokie Valley, which was

only lightly populated.

Responsibility for coordinating such a complex undertaking rested heavily on Robert Kingery, the RPA’s chief engineer, who had a background in concrete construction. As Kingery garnered the cooperation of local and state agencies, optimism ran high. Lake County had been a strong supporter of the RPA since its earliest days, and the State of Wisconsin agreed to build south from the periphery of Milwaukee to the Illinois state line, linking up with construction crews in Illinois.

The difficulties of building the superhighway, however, soon became apparent. Kingery’s gift for persuasion proved no match for the Great Depression, and progress slowed to a crawl as funding diminished. Although Cook and Lake Counties remained earnest supporters, completion dates were gradually pushed back. Ambiguity over the best route for the road was difficult to resolve. Significant portions would follow old Route 41, but other portions would require building a corridor across undeveloped land. Extensive funds would be needed to create an embankment through the area’s water-laden terrain.

Another problem was Lake Forest’s unfavorable opinion

of transforming Sheridan Road, which ran through the middle of their community, into a superhighway, fearing an onslaught of truck traffic. Ironically, Edward Bennett, co-author of the *Plan of Chicago*, is said to have been one of the key opponents. Bennett resided in the community and apparently considered trucks on this shoreline route anathema to good planning principle.

The controversy ended in 1933 when a portion of old Route 41 was upgraded with a forty-foot-wide pavement suitable for heavy vehicles. Plans were made to further improve this stretch for the superhighway, thus creating a less disruptive route through the wetlands west of Lake Forest. Charles Hayes, president of the Chicago Motor Club, declared this would “drive the final nail in the coffin” of the idea of opening Sheridan to trucks, which indeed proved to be the case.

By early 1934, construction had again garnered momentum. By winter of that year, much of the pavement had been poured between Skokie and the southern periphery of Lake Forest. Lake County, meanwhile, acquired a 180-foot-wide corridor north of Lake Forest, which required at least five condemnation lawsuits to settle “friendly” differences on the value of land.

By late 1936, Lake County and the state had awarded contracts to build between Lake Forest and the Illinois-Wisconsin boundary. Crews were installing “safety signals,” still relatively uncommon at the time, at the most dangerous crossings. The crossing at Golf Road in Skokie, reported to have claimed six lives in just 30 days the previous summer, was an especially high-priority location. The sodium vapor street lights installed along a one-mile portion near Dundee Road affirmed that this would be one of the country’s most modern highways.

Engineering firms also designed complex grade separations (underpasses and overpasses) to avoid conflicts with less important roads and railroads. By the end of 1936, seven such separations involving railroads were complete, leaving only a pair of crossings with two little-used sets of tracks. Finishing the job, however, dragged on, and it was not until November 1937—almost 10 years after the RPA’s had resolved to build the superhighway—when the last Illinois portions were complete. It took until early 1938 until the last Wisconsin portions were finalized.

But it was worth the wait: Extending 61 miles from the northern edge of Chicago to Milwaukee, the new road was heralded as the longest four-lane superhighway in the country and for having the longest continuous section of divided pavement. Planners came from afar to study the innovative design, including the 20-foot median that separated the northbound and southbound lanes in Illinois and the 50-foot “parkway” that separated them in Wisconsin. The *Chicago Tribune* heralded the fact that fast-driving motorists could likely make the Chicago to Milwaukee trip in 90 minutes without “record breaking” speed. Motorists, municipal leaders, and the media extolled its wonders, although many motorists simply called it “The Skokie Highway” or, simply, Route 41.

But there were also losers. A hotelier in Wisconsin complained in the *Tribune* that “the fast highway had brought Milwaukee so close to Chicago that business drivers, and even excursion travelers, drove to Milwaukee, spent the day in visits or on business, and usually returned before night.” Traffic on the Chicago, North Shore & Milwaukee Electric Railway’s line through the Skokie Valley—just eleven years old—fell sharply.

The Superhighway remained a vital artery through the World War II years and into the postwar era, fueling the growth of northern Cook and Lake Counties as well as southern Wisconsin. Burnham, Jr. and Kingery envisioned linking the road with another superhighway circling around Chicago, thus creating a direct motor route from Milwaukee to Indiana.

Not only was this not to be, but future road projects gradually diminished the highway’s importance to long-distance travel. The Edens Expressway opened between Chicago and Lake-Cook Road in 1951, diverting some of the traffic. By the early 1960s, motorists could travel all the way to Milwaukee on the Tri-State Tollway and Interstate 94. The Superhighway surrendered some of its most graceful qualities as portions of the landscaped median strip gave way to an unattractive concrete wall.

Travelers using the road, however, will still find ample evidence of its former superhighway glory. The segment near Lake Forest—where the road slips below the graceful North Shore Line railway bridge, now a recreation trail—seems almost frozen in time. More than any other road, “The Chicago–Milwaukee Superhighway” gave those living in Cook and Lake counties their first taste of the



Twin railroad structures over US Hwy 41, circa 1935...



...one of which has now been converted as part of the Skokie Valley Bike Path.

pleasantries of long-distance travel on a modern divided highway. 🌿

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