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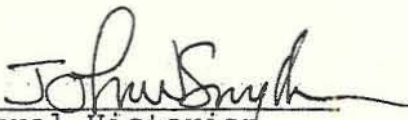
24.78/31.91 2

AN EVALUATION OF  
ARROYO SECO PARKWAY

PREPARED FOR:

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June 30, 1982

## History

On December 30, 1940, officials dedicated the Arroyo Seco Parkway, thus opening California's prototype freeway. Built at a cost of less than \$1,000,000 per mile, the six-mile roadway culminated years of planning and political battles involving the State Legislature, State Highway Department, and the Cities of Los Angeles, South Pasadena, Highland Park and Pasadena.<sup>1/</sup>

First surveyed for highway planning in 1895 by T. D. Allen, the Arroyo Seco provides a natural route from the San Gabriel Mountains to the Los Angeles basin. In 1897 Horace Dobbins began activities to build a bicycle route from Green Street in Pasadena to Raymond Hill, utilizing the Arroyo. The project was never completed.<sup>2/</sup> In the early 1920's, the Cities of Los Angeles and South Pasadena began to purchase land in the Arroyo for the establishment of a park which had been proposed in 1911 by the Los Angeles City Park Commission. Park plans included a winding road connecting Pasadena and Elysian Park. Preliminary surveys by City Engineer Lloyd Aldrich<sup>3/</sup> finally began in 1928 and funds were allocated that same year for property acquisition.<sup>4/</sup>

Actual grading operations began in 1931, and in the depression years this project, like many public works projects, provided substantial relief from unemployment. Early construction work was hampered by lack of funding, as well as by political and legal battles raised by local interest groups. In June 1932, the Los Angeles City Council ordered all work stopped on the project in response to objections. In the months that followed, proponents and opponents battled for political support at local levels. In 1934, members of the Pasadena Realty Board, the Pasadena Chamber of Commerce and the Pasadena City Planning Commission were able to elicit the support of the City Council of South Pasadena and the Board of Directors of Pasadena in favor of the project. In May 1935, Pasadena supporters took the plan to Sacramento, where Assemblywoman Eleanor Miller (from Pasadena) introduced AB 2435 to include the route in the State Highway System. After much lobbying, the Bill was passed and signed into law in July 1935.<sup>5/</sup>

Physical planning for the highway saw continued dispute in each of the communities involved, as various interest groups sought to mold the project. Finally, by April 1936 the Cities approved the parkway plan and the State Highway Commission gave its sanction. The design called for an 80-foot right of way, with two 34-foot roadway sections separated by a six-foot center divider. Yet political opposition continued in the Legislature, and a Highland Park woman brought an injunction to prevent construction of the project. The court,<sup>6/</sup> however, dismissed the case, and work resumed in mid-May 1937.

California engineers paid close attention to similar projects elsewhere, particularly to Germany's *Autobahn*, and Connecticut's Merritt Parkway and New York's West Side Express Highway and Henry Hudson Parkway. The use of "cloverleaf" interchanges in Massachusetts and New Jersey received no little scrutiny, and District Engineer Spencer V.

Cortelyou began work to eliminate all left turns from the parkway, designing 18 grade separation structures to cross the freeway. In January 1938, the two roadway sections were increased to 35 feet each.<sup>7/</sup>

Concurrent with the highway project, WPA forces were at work in the Arroyo to complete a massive flood control channel, without which construction of the parkway would not have been possible. This channel, whose cost exceeded that of the freeway, extends from Devil's Gate Dam in Pasadena to the Arroyo's junction with the Los Angeles River. It was under continuous construction from 1935 to 1940, and included sanitary and storm sewers, bridge abutments and piers, and the channel itself. Much of the material excavated for this project was utilized as highway fill for the parkway project.<sup>8/</sup>

The California Division of Highways awarded its first construction contract in January 1938. In March of that year, 1938 Tournament of Roses Queen Cheryl Walker inaugurated ground-breaking ceremonies at Arroyo Drive and Sterling Place. In January 1939 the first section of the project was opened to traffic between Fair Oaks and Glenarm. In May, the Legislature passed a law defining freeways, thus providing the basic principles for this new type of highway: "'Freeway' means a highway in respect to which the owners of abutting land have no right or easement of access to or from their abutting lands or in respect to which such owners have only limited or restricted right of easement of access."<sup>9/</sup>

As construction progressed, one of the last contracts let was for landscaping, to be jointly undertaken by the State, the WPA and the three cities involved. More than 10,000 plants were used, including ceanothus, fremontia, catalina cherry, holly-leaved cherry, matilija poppies, California holly, barberry, wild roses, purple and blue sages, bush snapdragons, fuchsias, manzanita and elderberry, in an attempt to create the effect of "hanging gardens".<sup>10/</sup> Shrubs in the divider strip were designed to reduce headlight glare.<sup>10/</sup>

Other parkway features included right-of-way fences to exclude pedestrians and animals, sodium vapor lighting at all entrances and exits, and red and amber flashers marking entrance and exit curbs.<sup>11/</sup>

Throughout 1940, sections of the project were opened as they were completed, culminating in formal dedication of the entire project on December 30, 1940. Final cost was \$5,048,487.46, not including parklands expenditures of Los Angeles and Pasadena, nor Los Angeles' grading costs prior to the route becoming a State highway. From first survey to completed freeway had taken 45 years.<sup>12/</sup>

### Significance

The original six-mile segment of the Arroyo Seco Parkway (now the Pasadena Freeway) was the prototype freeway in California, and served as a test bed for later freeway projects. From this project

lessons were learned and applied to subsequent designs. These included lessons of median width adequacy and landscaping therein, acceleration and deceleration lane provision, superelevation and minimum curve radius, shoulder width, lane width, and curb configuration.<sup>13/</sup>

The facility retains a high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. Only minor changes have been made over the years. These include new median barrier, replacement of original light standards with "break-away" type standards, construction of shoulder "safety bays" for disabled vehicles, pavement grooving to prevent hydroplaning and use of raised pavement markers in place of painted lane stripes.<sup>14/</sup>

Bridges along the route which are clearly contributive elements include:

Figueroa Street Off-Ramp Undercrossing, Bridge No. 53-533L, 1940, Lloyd Aldrich;  
Avenue 26 Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-372, 1938-9, Lloyd Aldrich (built 1925, modified 1939).  
Avenue 35 Underpass, Bridge No. 53-425, 1939-40.  
Pasadena Avenue Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-426, 1940, Lloyd Aldrich.  
Arroyo Seco (Avenue 43 Ramp), Bridge No. 53-985Y, 1940, Lloyd Aldrich.  
Avenue 43 Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-427, 1939, Lloyd Aldrich.  
Sycamore Grove Pedestrian Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-344, 1940.  
Avenue 52 Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-428, 1939.  
Hermon Avenue Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-429, 1939.  
Avenue 60 Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-430, 1938-9, Lloyd Aldrich.  
Arroyo Seco (Avenue 60 Ramp), Bridge No. 53-986Y, 1940.  
Pedestrian Undercrossing (Avenue 60 Ramp), Bridge No. 53-988Y, 1940.  
Avenue 64 Underpass, Bridge No. 53-431, Ca. 1895 (strengthened 1923).  
Arroyo Seco (Marion Way Off-Ramp), Bridge No. 53-886Y, 1940.  
Marmion Way Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-445, 1939-40, Lloyd Aldrich.  
York Boulevard Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-121, 1912.  
Arroyo Seco, Bridge No. 53-276, 1939.  
Pedestrian Equestrian Undercrossing, Bridge No. 53-432, 1938.  
Arroyo Drive Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-433, 1938.  
Grand Avenue Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-434, 1938.  
Orange Grove Avenue Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-435, 1938-9.  
Prospect Avenue Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-436, 1938-9.  
Meridian Avenue Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-437, 1940.  
Fremont Avenue Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-438, 1939-40.  
Fremont Avenue Underpass, Bridge No. 53-439, 1940.  
Fair Oaks Avenue Overcrossing, Bridge No. 53-440, 1940.

Other contributive elements would include (but are not limited to) period light standards, masonry walls and cribbing, the Arroyo Seco Flood Control Channel, and landscaping.

The Arroyo Seco Parkway (that portion of Route 11 from approximately P.M. 25.78 to approximately P.M. 31.91), the first controlled-access freeway in the west, appears to meet National Register Criteria A and C, at the State level, with exceptional importance in the areas of architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, politics/government, and transportation.

## FOOTNOTES

1/ *The Arroyo Seco Parkway: The West's First Freeway*", California Department of Public Works, Division of Highways, December 1940; H. Goodwin, Jr., "The Arroyo Seco: From Dry Gulch to Freeway", *Southern California Quarterly*, 47, 1, March 1965; "The Arroyo Seco Parkway", *Motorland*, March 1941.

2/ Goodwin, "Arroyo Seco"; A. Griffin, "Arroyo Seco," *California Highways and Public Works*, 40, 1-2, January-February 1961; "Press Release", California Division of Highways, Sacramento, December 28, 1970; *The Arroyo Seco Parkway*.

3/ Lloyd Aldrich served as Highway Engineer of Stanislaus County, Deputy County Surveyor of Fresno County and County Surveyor of Sonoma County. He was involved with John B. Leonard on the State's Test Highway at Pittsburg in 1921-2. He succeeded J. J. Jessup as Los Angeles City Engineer on September 1, 1933. He also counted extensive irrigation and water system work among his experience prior to turning to highway and bridge engineering.

4/ Goodwin, "Arroyo Seco".

5/ Goodwin, "Arroyo Seco"; "Press Release"; *The Arroyo Seco Parkway*.

6/ Goodwin, "Arroyo Seco".

7/ Goodwin, "Arroyo Seco"; W. Myers, *Historic Civil Engineering Landmarks of Southern California*, Los Angeles, 1974.

8/ Griffin, "Arroyo Seco"; *The Arroyo Seco Parkway*.

9/ Goodwin, "Arroyo Seco".

10/ Goodwin, "Arroyo Seco".

11/ Goodwin, "Arroyo Seco"; "The Arroyo Seco Parkway".

12/ Goodwin, "Arroyo Seco"; Griffin, "Arroyo Seco"; *The Arroyo Seco Parkway*.

13/ Griffin, "Arroyo Seco".

14/ "Press Release".