

INTERSTATE 410, A HIGHWAY FOR FEW

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

The intent of this paper is to examine the planning process of a proposed Interstate highway loop around the southern metropolitan area of New Orleans in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It begins with a brief history of New Orleans, and details background information that led to the events of the proposed highway. After discussing the highway, the conclusion identifies why the highway was not built, and what is the current situation and future aspirations in regards to Westbank surface transportation.

DISCUSSION

New Orleans is a unique city. Its history, terrain, and culture are unmatched with anywhere else in the world. The city was settled under very challenging natural conditions. Before the earliest settlement of the city, the French Quarter, the natural levee immediately located on the banks of the Mississippi River was the only solid, developable land. Heavily forested wetlands of cypress and oak trees dominated the region east of the river. Jean Baptiste le Moyne, sieur de Bienville selected New Orleans at its present location because of its strategic military and economic potential. The location was prime for a city, which could be developed into an international port, as well as the first line of defense of the all-important Mississippi River, which was mid-America's transportation lifeline to the Gulf of Mexico and beyond. The city of New Orleans was selected to be a strategic location for the military and international trade, despite harsh natural obstacles, because of its excellent water transportation possibilities. Transportation technology has been revolutionized immensely since the eighteenth century.

While water transportation was the most practical mode to in long distance travel in the eighteenth century because of its efficiency, highway development was promoted for national defense and economic development, and became the kingpin focus in the twentieth century. During this century, the approximately 48-mile Interstate Highway 410 bypass of New Orleans was being planned.¹ This highway was planned to cross the Mississippi River twice, whereas much of it was also planned to traverse wetlands. The same natural challenges to growth, such as wetlands and flooding, remain today as they had been in Bienville's times. The settlers built into the wetlands because there was an existing demand for expansion; however, the fate of Interstate 410 was decided by speculation of future demand, which was deemed too costly to pursue.

Early settlers were knowledgeable about New Orleans' proximity to the Gulf of Mexico via the Mississippi River. However, it was native Indians who introduced them to Bayou St. John. The bayou was very important at the time because it presented New Orleans with a shortcut to the Gulf of Mexico by the use of Lake Pontchartrain and the Rigolets. Key initial transportation was the fundamental ingredient for New Orleans to grow into a major international port.

Some modern transportation routes in New Orleans occupy historic rights-of-way. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, major canals, such as the New Basin Canal, were constructed to enhance the city's transportation network. The major twentieth century transportation undertaking was the development and construction of the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.² In New Orleans, Interstate 10 and the

¹ Interstate 410, 20 December 2004, available from <http://www.kurumi.com/roads/3di/i410.html>; Internet; accessed 15 April 2005

² FHWA Route Log and Finder List, November 2002, available from <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/routefinder/>; Internet; accessed 20 April 2005

Pontchartrain Expressway follow approximately 5.5 miles of the right-of-way of the former New Basin Canal. During this Interstate Highway boom, plans called for a southern bypass around New Orleans, which was touted as Interstate 410.

In contrast to most other American cities, New Orleans is limited in the amount of developable land because of the presence of wetlands. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Eastbank of the Mississippi River was beginning to experience a shortage in developable land. This led to the increasing movement of development to spread to the Westbank, especially after the 1958 opening of the Greater New Orleans Bridge across the Mississippi River which gave birth to commuting across the river. The Riverfront Expressway (a proposed elevated Interstate dividing the river with the French Quarter) battle of the 1960s resulted in those funds and allocated Interstate mileage being transferred to the I-410 project.³ Elected officials felt that the Interstate 410 bypass was needed because of the feared thru traffic in New Orleans. Thomas Lee Osborne writes in the abstract of his master's thesis, "The case material reveals that Interstate-410 was the product of a "closed" planning process. Basic planning and key discussions were made by elected officials."⁴ The general perception in this era was that new highways were like gold and life would be better. National defense was strongly lobbied as a means for building the transcontinental network. Opponents of Interstate 410 in the beginning were few and far between. The route would begin and terminate at Interstate 10. A route through St. Charles Parish, along Paris Road in New Orleans East and generally south of Lapalco Blvd. on the Westbank would have been the general corridor. Today, Interstates 310 and 510 are the only

³ The Battles of New Orleans - Vieux Carre Riverfront Expressway (I-310) 15 December 2004, available from <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/neworleans.htm>; Internet; accessed 21 April 2005

⁴ Thomas Lee Osborne, "The Interstate-410 Planning Process: A case study" (master's thesis, Louisiana State University at New Orleans, 1972), vi.

built sections of what would have been Interstate 410; however, these highways were built as separate projects in the early 1990s.

United States Representative Hale Boggs was a proponent of the project to construct the southern bypass. He considered it to be a great opportunity for land development in Jefferson Parish. Boggs stated, “Completion of this project will do more to develop Jefferson Parish than anything else in my lifetime.”⁵ Although this highway would have been excellent to make land prime for development, the traffic counts obviously were not there, because at the time, very people lived this far south in this new frontier of suburban New Orleans. Lapalco Blvd. was not the street it is today. However, with the anticipated development, leaders continued with their intent to build this Interstate. One *critical* facet of this project was the federal government’s commitment to fund 90% of the road’s total cost with the state of Louisiana funding 10%—practically a steal.

At the time of the planning for the Interstate (1960s and early 1970s) the Louisiana Department of Highways assumed control of the project from the elected officials who started it as the “Dixie Freeway.” Public hearings were conducted around the area. At one meeting there was agreement and disagreement. Osborne elaborates,

Testimony indicated general support for the concept of Interstate 410; however, there was disagreement over the corridor location... A group of persons from up-river St. John Parish were dismayed by the proposed location of the bridge. They believed that the bridge authority created in 1964 by the governor had not adequately evaluated placement of the bridge farther up-river at a site more accessible to residents of both St. John Parish and St. Charles Parish.⁶

⁵ Osborne, 25.

⁶ Osborne, 37-38.

In other places people were positive and upbeat about the proposed Interstate, but they asked all of the important questions ranging from need for the highway, traffic projections, and environmental impacts.⁷

Many alignments had to be studied for this Interstate, as is typical with all planned corridors. Planners must choose the “path of least resistance” for many reasons. Chiefly, highways are very expensive. Other important reasons in selecting a final path is to choose a route that has minimal negative environmental impacts, minimal displacements, and right-of-way that is inexpensive to obtain. In addition, social impacts on neighborhoods and existing development must also be accounted. One of the most critical aspects of the planning process must be public participation assessment. Lessons had to be learned after the Riverfront Expressway debacle and needed to be applied with Interstate 410. Several alignments for Mississippi River bridges were examined in St. Charles and St. Bernard Parishes of which none were constructed. Today’s Hale Boggs Bridge was created as a separate project (present day I-310). As for Interstate 410’s river bridge crossings, three alignments were studied for the crossing near Luling, and five were examined in the Chalmette-Meraux study area. The crossing of the Harvey Canal (Intracoastal Waterway) was studied with various alignments. Otherwise, the route would have maintained a parallel corridor roughly two to five miles south of US 90 and Lapalco Blvd. on the Westbank.⁸ In St. Charles Parish, the route would have been located approximately four miles west of Kenner; while in New Orleans East, the right-of-way of LA 47 (and today’s I-510) would have been absorbed by the proposed Interstate highway.

Although it was no surprise to anyone that the route would have been primarily for land development on the Westbank, the Eastbank faced different circumstances. A new river bridge

⁷ Osborne, 40.

⁸ Osborne, 21.

would have had to be constructed through the established suburb of Chalmette in St. Bernard Parish, or be located down-river, out-of-the-way of the general northerly direction of the planned alignment. The alignment down-river was selected with the St. Bernard Parish officials fully committed. It was problematic to build a river crossing at Louisiana State Highway 47, because it reflects the philosophy of finding a path of least resistance. Finding support to build a bridge at this location would have been extremely difficult, because not many people were willing to be displaced for the construction of a new highway. Right-of-way would most likely have been very costly as there is established industrial development located on the riverfront. Osborne discusses,

Louis Munster, a member of the St. Bernard Police Jury, remarked that his parish needs the bridge. This had led to their initial support of the New Orleans loop. In addition, I-410 would provide a hurricane evacuation route. It would also help stimulate residential and industrial growth. The area in St. Bernard Parish to be traversed by the loop is now largely marshland. When the levee system is completed around 1980, the parish will be in a position to begin planning for development. At that time the road will be most useful in bringing activity into the parish.⁹

St. Bernard Parish was optimistic about the project. New Orleans East was largely undeveloped marshland, and the highway was seen as a developmental tool there. The parishes in the region were all supportive of the project, but none were in need of it for transportation purposes. St. John Parish's major concern was the location of the river bridge, but it was not a threat to the project as a whole. The region acted in favor because they saw it as a future transportation need, and 90% of the cost was going to be federally subsidized. Money must be used responsibly, especially on highways because of their high costs, which typically leads to projects with definite and immediate urgency having priority financing. Projects based on speculation have a more difficult situation and position to sell.

⁹ Osborne, 57.

Accessibility to the Westbank was a key issue in the Interstate 410 project. At the time, two bridges served the Westbank across the river—Greater New Orleans Bridge and Huey P. Long Bridge. There are limitations to accessibility, as well as advantages with Interstate 410.

Limitations

Interstate 410 would have required an additional two bridges. The relatively rapid population growth of the suburbanized Westbank naturally leads to commuting into the New Orleans Central Business District, which explains morning and afternoon delays. However, on the Westbank, the Interstate would have had an east-west orientation with circumferential traffic, because the highway would not cross the Mississippi River near Downtown New Orleans. This Interstate route would contribute little to peak-hour delays, other than minor traffic using it to commute to a job near the highway, or to disperse evening traffic from arteries leading to the river crossing.

Advantages

The Westbank's geographical standpoint presents itself with difficult transportation challenges during a hurricane evacuation. Under normal circumstances, the Eastbank would have six major bridges preceding the Eastbank exit routes, which leads to dangerous situations if congestion is present on river bridges. Interstate 410 would have provided two more bridges to evacuate the Westbank, and also allow these citizens to not have to face Downtown New Orleans in the process, thereby improving traffic flow metro wide. Accessibility to and on the Westbank probably would have been improved horizontally with Interstate 410 because vertical development of the metro area is naturally limited with two river crossings and the river itself.

The Interstate 410 project could have been beneficial in creating jobs directly and indirectly. Directly, jobs related to the planning, design engineering, and the actual construction

would have been provided. In addition, this would have involved the draining of many wetlands. After the Interstate would have been completed indirect impacts may have been felt. This includes the stimulation of the economy, and all business-related impacts created by the highway. Perhaps industrial interests would have been explored, since many companies with to have the east access to the rest of the country via and interstate. Also, fast food restaurants, motels, gas stations and other retail developments tend to cluster near interchanges, because the high traffic density is prime for business. The citizens who felt commuting was possible with the high-speed highway would have influenced the economy. Jefferson and St. Bernard Parishes probably would have been the only parishes to experience significant development, because their parts of the corridor are nearest to existing arterials and development. Other parishes most likely would have had to drain significant wetlands near the corridor to experience growth around the planned highway.

At the time of the planning of Interstate 410, the Cold War publicity was past its peak, but still not dead. The official name for the Interstate system is Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and *Defense* Highways. As the Interstate system was being planned, the major selling point was national defense. Limited sources for this paper have not discussed the presence of the Belle Chasse Naval Air Station as a factor for the development of Interstate 410. However, the route map, as can be found following the bibliography, displays that the corridor was slated to pass within five miles of the Naval Air Station, which is not located near an Interstate highway.¹⁰ In Osborne's thesis the following is mentioned regarding national defense,

This project will provide for the fast movement of troops and equipment during periods of national emergency. It will also provide an improved route for evacuation of the general public in times of national crisis. It will also provide an excellent evacuation route for the hurricanes of which we are famous for down in the area. In conjunction with the proposed Larose-Lafitte Highway, it would allow these people a pretty quick

¹⁰ Osborne, 21.

access to this facility which would allow them to move to the east or to the west of New Orleans with the greatest possible speed under certain conditions.¹¹

Personal interpretation can be used to decide how much of a factor this NAS was involved in the project. In all likelihood it probably was involved, due to the nature of the Interstate Highway System's basic fundamentals.

The environmental impact was a critical component to the Interstate 410 project. As aforementioned, most of this corridor would have been built through undeveloped wetlands, which would have had to be mitigated to some extent. An environmental report dated January 8, 1973 suggests the following,

From the standpoint of natural setting, New Orleans has already exceeded its optimum size. All alternatives to continued unbridled expansion should be sought. Restrictions should be placed on wetland "reclamation" and development. Future development should be directed towards more suitable areas such as the well drained terracelands on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Another solution would be more sensible use of areas already urbanized thereby promoting greater density of people on less land area.¹²

Wetlands are an important part of our environment because they are homes to fragile ecosystems. A highway could be disruptive, but steps to mitigate impacts can be taken. Coastal Environments, Inc. listed some of the impacts for one planned segment in Jefferson Parish near Bayou Aux Carpes,

Physical: On-grade roadbed will disrupt sheet water flow within the unit. It will entail removal of organic surface and near surface subsoils. *Biological:* Will destroy fresh swamp vegetation in much of right of way; wildlife will probably be able to reestablish itself in remainder of unit. *Cultural:* No cultural elements affected but one pipeline must be crossed. *Indirect:* If interchange is constructed it will have major adverse affect [sic] upon unit through encouragement of drainage and development of an area not suited to urbanized uses.¹³

Their recommendation for future use and development states "should be managed as an open space and wildlife area. The land is not suitable for development because of soil and flooding

¹¹ Osborne, 131.

¹² Coastal Environments, Inc., "Environmental Considerations, Interstate I-410", 5.

¹³ Coastal Environments, Inc., 34.

conditions”.¹⁴ However, after further analysis, most parties agreed the route, as a whole, would not be practical from an environmental perspective.

John Hammond, the Assistant Director of the Executive Committee of Louisiana of the America Institute of Planners, represented the committee’s views of the Interstate 410 project.

The following excerpt includes the five major reasons of the committee’s decision,

Basically we believe that, as presented the Interstate 410 alignment is not defensible from a transportation, land development, or environmental standpoint. Our position is that serious modification in (1) the planning & design process, which led to the development of this proposal, and (2) the alignment itself, must take place before we foresee it having a substantive and beneficial, rather than detrimental, effect on the metropolitan area. Five reasons include sprawl of the New Orleans metropolitan area, route design leaves much to be desired, detrimental effects to the environment, practically no traffic demand, and the route is chiefly a land development corridor.¹⁵

Their five critiques are their justifications for not building the highway. In Jefferson Parish—most likely the parish that stands the most to gain—according to the DEIS traffic counts were estimated around 25,000 vpd and expected to be 55,000 by 1994.¹⁶ The low traffic counts for a six-lane facility simply were not appreciable during this time. Also, the committee felt that “Interstate 12 and Interstate 610 are legitimate by-pass routes.”¹⁷ Interstate 10 travels south and east of Baton Rouge to serve New Orleans, while I-12 remains an east-west route to assist transcontinental traffic, and relieve them of the metro area. Interstate 610 serves as an intracity bypass route of Downtown New Orleans. Interstate 410’s route would have added significant mileage, relative to the I-12 route, for transcontinental travelers.

CONCLUSION

With the bust of the oil industry’s exodus to Houston, the metro New Orleans area’s growth slowed considerably. In fact, the population has drastically declined. The Westbank

¹⁴ Coastal Environments, Inc., 34.

¹⁵ Osborne, 143-144.

¹⁶ Osborne, 108.

¹⁷ Osborne, 148.

growth began to slow as a result. Undoubtedly in 2005, the need for Interstate 410 most likely is not there if it was not needed in 1973 (when the population was much greater). What is being examined today is the Interstate 49 extension from Lafayette to New Orleans. This route is considerably different in planned location and design. The I-49 alignments generally follow the existing US 90 right-of-way.¹⁸ I-49 is being advertised as a safety and economic transportation corridor that aids all of South Louisiana not served by an Interstate presently.¹⁹ Elected officials started the Interstate 410 corridor and the planners inherited it. Planning a highway should have open communication between all parties and stakeholders, including the citizens who were generally left out of the Interstate 410 planning process. The Riverfront Expressway battle laid the foundation, and I-410 was cancelled before any further problems escalated. While history and aesthetics brought down I-310 in the French Quarter, it was a lack of coordination and planning that led to Interstate 410's demise.

¹⁸ I49 South Project, available from <http://www.i49south.org>; Internet; accessed 28 April 2005

¹⁹ I49 South: It's TIME to Begin....Lafayette, Louisiana...Interstate...Highway, available from <http://www.i49south.com>; Internet; accessed 28 April 2005

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