



**The West Loop parking lot:** The West Loop is one of Houston's most congested freeways. This view looks north toward Memorial Park. (Photo: James Lyle, TTI, June 2001)

# The Loop, Interstate 610

Loop 610 is more than just a freeway. It has come to define a lifestyle and state of mind, not just a geographic section of the city. The “inner loop” is more of an urban person, someone who likes to be close to the arts, universities, events, parks, and entertainment. Many inner loopers seek out the variety, disorder, and nonconformity of Houston’s older neighborhoods. Others seek out some of Houston’s most affluent and exclusive neighborhoods. The inner loop often lives close-in as a means of avoiding freeways. More than any other geographic group in Houston, the inner loop is likely to be anti-freeway.

While it serves as an informal boundary between central Houston and the rest of the city, Loop 610 is also a vital transportation artery—the most important freeway in the functioning of Houston’s loop and radial system. As the focus point for much of the congestion on Houston’s freeway system, the West Loop is also the biggest source of dysfunction. The loop ties together many seemingly disparate sections of Houston: edge cities, neighborhoods from the exclusive to the decayed, parks, stadiums, and industry. Along its path, the loop offers an abundance of interchanges, the ship channel bridge, and some impressive freeway sections.

## Origins

The need for a bypass loop around Houston was first identified as early as 1931, when Harris County officials were proposing bypass routes to divert traffic from the city center. The early concept proposed using existing streets for the bypass. No progress was made during the 1930s, but efforts to build a loop came back to life in September 1940 when the Houston Chamber of Commerce Highway Committee formed a special subcommittee to study potential bypass alignments. Various benefits were cited, including reduction of traffic inside the city, reduction of accidents, and diversion of trucks, but the possible need for national defense deployments would quickly become the driving factor in moving plans for the loop forward.<sup>1</sup>

In March 1941 the first report recommending a bypass loop around Houston was issued. *Preliminary Study for a Primary Defense Need of Houston and Vicinity—A Bypass or Loop Thoroughfare*, published by the Houston City Planning Commission, explained how military officials had contemplated the logistics of large troop movements through Houston to protect the Houston Ship Channel and its associated industries. Initially authorities had planned to block off city streets to move military convoys through the heart of the city. However, it quickly became clear that this would be very disruptive, and by April 1941 the *Houston Chronicle* was reporting that “military authorities have all but demanded the construction of a belt highway.” The study also included a map that indicated the key “war industries” around Houston, such as Dow Chemical in Freeport, Houston Ship Building Corporation along the ship channel, and Consolidated Steel in Beaumont. The contemplated route followed existing and planned arterial streets around the city and was envisioned as a highway or large urban street rather than a freeway. The alignment of the northern half of the proposed loop ultimately became the Loop 610 freeway. The southern half of the proposed loop followed the arterial streets Bellaire Boulevard, Old

Loop 610	
Previous designation	Loop 137
Designated as freeway	1954 (north, west, south) 1960 (east)
First freeway section open	1952 (La Porte cutoff) 1960 (Loop 610)
Freeway complete	September 22, 1975
Reconstruction	Intermittent since 1975
Max traffic volume, 2001	290,000 vehicles per day
Future construction	Reconstruction of West Loop (underway in 2003)

Spanish Trail, and Wayside. On May 3, 1941, a \$5.4 million Harris County bond issue allocating \$1,028,354 for the Defense Loop was approved by Harris County voters with 71% of the vote.<sup>2</sup>

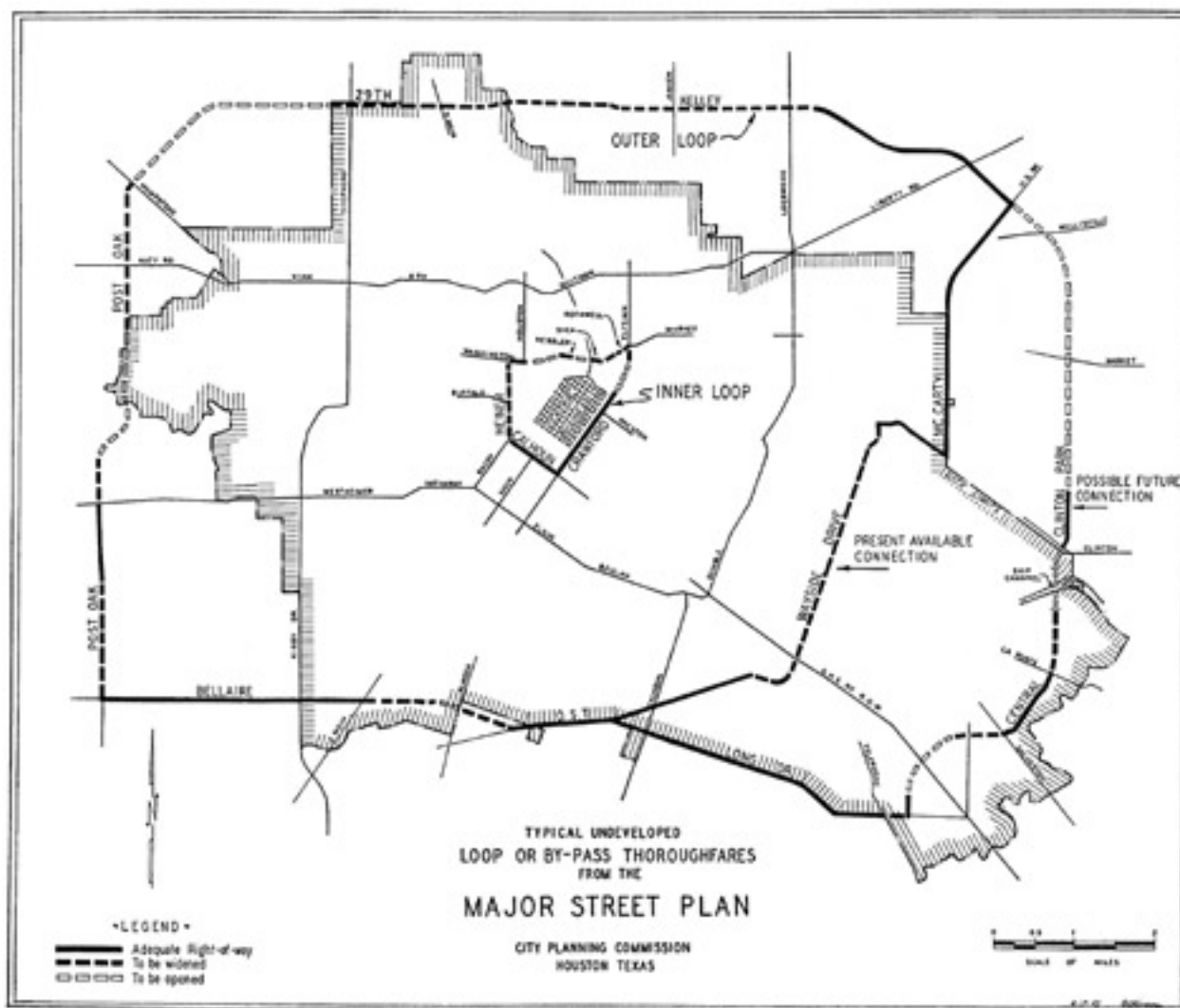
The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, increased the urgency of constructing the Defense Loop. On June 23, 1942, the Texas Transportation Commission formally adopted the north section of the Loop from IH 10 West (then US 90) on the west side of Houston to IH 10 East (then SH 73) on the east side Houston, calling it the “Loop on US 90.” An agreement approved on November 16, 1943, called for the city of Houston to provide a 150-foot (46 m) corridor for the highway. The loop was designated as Loop 137. However, real progress on a true freeway loop would have to wait until after the war.<sup>3</sup>

## Putting the Freeway Loop on the Map

As progress on the loop highway crept along in the early 1950s, authorities were formulating a master plan for Houston’s freeway system which included a full freeway loop. In July 1953 a Houston delegation appeared before the Texas Transportation Commission in Austin





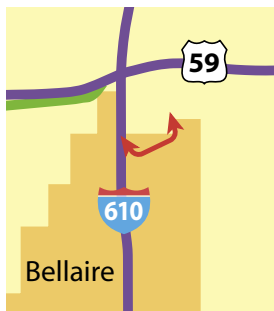


**Original loop plan:** Although the idea of a loop for Houston had been around since the early 1930s, the first real progress toward the actual designation of a loop occurred in 1941 when the Houston Planning Commission released a report titled *Preliminary Study for a Primary Defense Need of Houston and Vicinity—A Bypass or Loop Thoroughfare*. The above map from the city of Houston's 1942 *Major Street Plan* shows the proposed alignment of the bypass loop. The loop was envisioned as a highway or major arterial street, and for most of its alignment it followed existing routes. The first new construction for the loop would not be completed until 1950.

East Loop corridor, citing a “critical situation with respect to planning and protecting the right-of-way.” The alignment of the East Loop had already been shifted twice because of plant expansions in the proposed freeway path. When the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 authorized and funded the construction of the Interstate Highway System, the previously approved C-shaped Loop 137 bypass route was adopted into the interstate system, but the East Loop and ship channel bridge were once again passed over. On April 24, 1958, the Texas Transportation Commission agreed to continue to perform surveys and studies for the corridor and to continue to seek acceptance of the route into the interstate system. The commission did not, however, fully adopt the section into the state highway system.

Texas had a limited amount of mileage it could designate into the federal Interstate Highway System, and

there was not enough available mileage to meet all needs in Texas. Dewitt Greer left missing links in Houston and other Texas cities, thinking that the U.S. Bureau of Roads would automatically add the missing sections out of obvious necessity. However, Greer's plan backfired when the Bureau of Roads specified that IH 37 between San Antonio and Corpus Christi would receive the additional interstate mileage available in Texas. In 1960 the Houston City Planning Commission led a new effort to get the East Loop adopted into the state highway system, where its cost would be shared by TxDOT and Harris County. A delegation from Houston appeared before the Texas Transportation Commission August 22, 1960, to make the request. Two days later, the East Loop was finally adopted into the state highway system, allowing local officials to protect and acquire the needed right-of-way. Loop 610 would now truly be a loop.<sup>7</sup>



**From countryside to freeway-side:** This view shows the Pin Oak Stables with its annual charity horse show in progress in the late 1940s. Post Oak Road runs along the upper part of the photograph, and the future alignment of the West Loop freeway is indicated by the dashed lines. At the upper left corner, the alignment of the future Southwest Freeway is shown. The Pin Oak Charity Horse Show was held from 1945 through 1992. In its prime years, from the late 1940s to the 1960s, it was one of the leading horse shows in the United States and one of the most prestigious social events in Houston. Its parties were attended by Houston's elite as well as film stars and wealthy riding enthusiasts from around the country. The horse show was promoted by James Abercrombie, founder of Cameron Iron Works, and Leopold Meyer, whose family owned the now-defunct Meyer Brothers apparel retail chain in Houston. The land was developed for retail use starting in the late 1980s. The site of the horse show stadium became a parking lot for a large retail store which was later converted to educational use.<sup>8</sup> (Photo: HMRC MSS 67-1074)

Adoption into the Interstate Highway System was still pursued by local officials since interstate status would provide 90% federal funding for the freeway and costly bridge. Finally, during the week of September 10, 1962, the United States Bureau of Roads approved the East Loop as part of the Interstate Highway System.<sup>9</sup>

### Building the Freeway

The early work on the loop highway, called Loop 137 at the time, focused on the northeast section between the Eastex Freeway and the East Freeway. The first section, from the East Freeway to Lockwood, was completed in

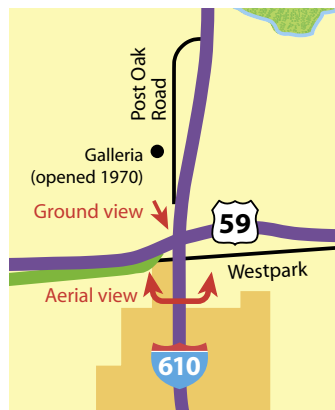
1950, and the rest of the section to the Eastex Freeway opened on February 26, 1954. The loop highway was generally constructed on a 150-foot-wide (46 m) right-of-way with four highway lanes.

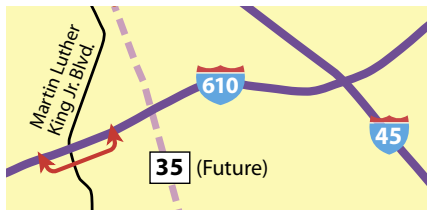
In 1954 the north, west, and south sections of the loop were officially designated as freeways. The 150-foot-wide highway corridor on the North Loop was expanded to a minimum of 300 feet (91 m), and in 1956 a new alignment was approved for a section of the North Loop at the Eastex Freeway interchange. The first full freeway section of Loop 610 had actually opened in December 1952 as the La Porte cutoff on the Gulf Freeway. That section of the





**Southwest Freeway interchange construction:** These views show the West Loop main lanes under construction at the Southwest Freeway interchange in May 1961. Post Oak Road snaked its way through the construction zone, as shown in the aerial view at right, which looks north. Soon after these photos were taken, this section of Post Oak Road was permanently closed and replaced by the West Loop. (Photo: upper, HMRC RGD6-952; right: TxDOT)





**South Loop corridor:** Aerial photographs from the 1950s and 1960s show an abundance of drive-in cinemas on the Houston landscape. The 1959 Houston telephone directory listed 18 drive-in cinemas, including the King Center Twin Drive-In shown in the 1960 photo above. No drive-in cinemas in Houston were displaced by freeways, but the South Loop just missed the King Center Twin Drive-In, skirting its edge. The South Loop at this location, indicated by the dashed lines, opened in January 1969. (Photo: The Positive Image)

La Porte Freeway was absorbed into the loop. The initial section to be constructed as part of the loop itself was a 1.3-mile (2.1 km) segment of the North Loop east of the North Freeway. That section opened in 1960. Over the next 15 years the loop would open section by section. The final ribbon for Loop 610 was cut on September 22, 1975, when a 3.3-mile (5.3 km) segment in northeast Houston was opened.<sup>10</sup>

### Building the Freeway through Bellaire

The history of Bellaire began in 1908 when a 9,449-acre tract known as the William Marsh Rice Ranch was purchased for development. The developer subdivided the eastern section of the property into small tracts and called it Westmoreland Farms. In a 1909 brochure, Westmoreland Farms was promoted as a “suburban agricultural opportunity” where the country life could be enjoyed within easy reach of the city. A streetcar line operated by the Houston Electric Company began service by the beginning of 1910 to connect the community to Houston. The community was incorporated as a city on June 24, 1918, and it grew slowly prior to World War II. Bellaire had about 330 homes and 1,124 residents in 1940.<sup>11</sup>

After World War II, Bellaire became a classic postwar suburban boom town. In 1950 Bellaire had 3,186 homes. The housing construction boom continued with 600 to 700 homes being constructed each year in 1950, 1951, and 1952. By 1955 Bellaire had been largely built out, and less than 100 homes were constructed. In August 1955 Bellaire had 5,897 homes. Since Houston had annexed all the land around the city, Bellaire became an island city and further growth was not possible. But construction in Bellaire was definitely not over. Transportation officials were working on plans for the West Loop freeway.

In 1941 Houston’s loop was designated to pass through Bellaire on South Post Oak Road. But it was planned as a major arterial street, not a freeway. In 1953 local officials revealed plans to turn the loop into a full freeway, and TxDOT officially adopted the loop into the Houston freeway system in October 1954. The freeway would follow Post Oak Road through Bellaire, splitting the city almost exactly in half. By December 1954 a group of Bellaire residents began an effort to stop the freeway.

### Trying to Stop a Freeway in the 1950s

Trying to stop a freeway in the 1950s was a daunting and perhaps impossible task. The legal tools for opposing freeways were not available at that time. As an added difficulty for those opposing the freeway, highway engineers sought the most direct, efficient, and least costly routes for freeways. The possibility of curving the freeway around Bellaire to minimize impacts was not considered an acceptable practice at the time since it would have caused an awkward, curving alignment.

The anti-freeway group first protested against the West Loop at a Bellaire City Council meeting on December 6, 1954. At the time, the freeway was informally called the Post Oak Freeway. The *Bellaire Texan* newspaper reported that “city council hid behind the ‘need for more facts and figures,’ giving nothing more than a ‘don’t worry about it’ brush off to 50 anti-Post Oak Freeway citizens who petitioned the council for a definite stand against any such construction through Bellaire.” The mayor tried to assure a skeptical audience that “the entire council is on the side of Bellaire, not Houston.” When the protest was reported in the local Houston news, the manager of Houston’s Public Works Department wrote a letter to the Harris County Judge, stating, “It looks to me like this is a



**Clearing the way:** Right-of-way clearance through Bellaire occurred from 1959 to 1961. Completed in March 1968, the freeway main lanes were built in the foreground of this photo. The blurred vehicle in the background is travelling on Post Oak Road, which was a two-lane road. (Photo: *Houston Chronicle*, January 11, 1960)

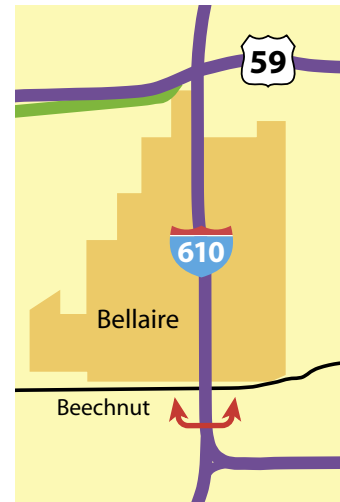
very dangerous situation.”<sup>12</sup>

The opposition then started a petition campaign to force the Bellaire City Council to enact an ordinance that would prevent the expenditure of any city of Bellaire funds for the purchase of right-of-way. Under the terms of TxDOT’s adoption of the West Loop freeway route, Bellaire was expected to pay for the freeway right-of-way through the city. The Bellaire City Council complied with the petitioners’ request without officially tabulating the petition results by formally notifying the Texas Transportation Commission on April 4, 1955, that the city of Bellaire “respectfully and officially” declined to provide right-of-way for the project. In its letter, Bellaire cited its island status within the city of Houston and its inability to increase its tax base via annexation. The council felt it had complied with the request of the petitioners. However, the petitioners then realized that the city council action would not preclude another entity from purchasing the right-of-way through Bellaire, and they asked city council to take a definite stand against any freeway construction. Harris County would step forward to take responsibility for acquiring the right-of-way, and Bellaire City Council would not actively oppose the freeway.<sup>13</sup>

In November 1955 the proposed right-of-way map for the freeway corridor was released. In the initial plan, right-of-way was to be acquired almost entirely on the east side of Post Oak Road. An article in the November 16, 1955, *Bellaire Texan* presented numerous citizen comments on the freeway, including those of supporters and others who accepted the new freeway as inevitable. Former mayor and prominent resident Abe Zindler, whose estate was immediately adjacent to the freeway route, stated, “If they need it, and that’s the best route, then we can’t stop progress.” In early February 1956, Harris County Commissioners Court adjusted the freeway corridor to lie to the west of Post Oak Road in the northern part of Bellaire, mainly to avoid a Catholic high school. Commissioners Court then proceeded to approve the alignment. The new alignment would displace 190 homes in Bellaire, a clearance corridor that was generally four houses wide along South Post Oak Road.<sup>14</sup>

Only one formality remained: a public hearing on March 29, 1956. About 75 citizens of Bellaire attended the hearing at Harris County Commissioners Court. However, the opponents realized that the hearing was largely a formality. “The freeway is a foregone conclusion. We’re

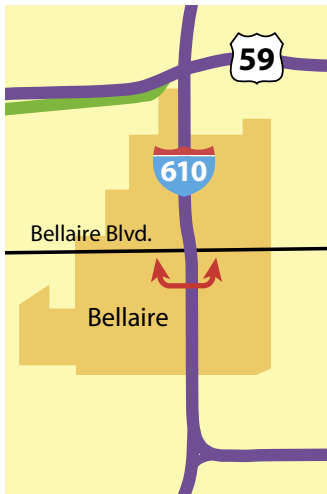




**Pre-freeway Bellaire:**

This view looks north over Bellaire in 1960, just after right-of-way clearance for the West Loop had begun. The West Loop is aligned along Post Oak Road, the two-lane road running through the center of the photograph. The freeway alignment is indicated by the dashed lines. The clearance corridor was approximately four houses wide along Post Oak Road. (Photo: The Positive Image )





This view, also from 1960, looks north over the north section of Bellaire. At the top of the photo, construction is just beginning on the Southwest Freeway interchange. (Photo: The Positive Image)





**Why is this man smiling?** In 1957 he was included in *Fortune Magazine's* list of the 76 wealthiest persons in the United States. Freeways also made him smile. He owned a lot of land along Houston's freeways, including about 90% of the land along the West Loop between Westheimer and Memorial Park. Land along Houston's freeways is particularly valuable because the freeway frontage roads enable commercial development. Who is he? R. E. "Bob" Smith (1894-1973), oilman, rancher, and land speculator.<sup>15</sup> (Photo: HMRC RG-D5-4983)

here only to get the gripes off our chest," remarked one protester. The commissioners unanimously approved the freeway alignment. The West Loop through Bellaire was now a done deal, and the opposition dispersed. When the highway department held a public hearing for the freeway design in September 1957, Houston Urban Project Office head A. C. Kyser reported, "No opposition to the route was voiced and we spent about an hour briefing the people and answering questions that applied to their specific property." At the meeting the freeway corridor was widened to 350 feet (106 m). Right-of-way clearance began in 1959 and was complete by 1961.<sup>16</sup>

Although the freeway opponents may not have realized it, there was a very powerful person who had a strong interest in the Post Oak alignment, probably making it a near certainty: oilman, rancher, and millionaire R. E. "Bob" Smith. Not only was Smith wealthy and well connected, but he was also a strong political backer of Houston Mayor Roy Hofheinz. Smith owned a large amount of land along the Post Oak Road corridor north of Bellaire. In fact, he and his associates owned about 90% of the land along the freeway corridor between Westheimer and Me-

morial Park, so he stood to reap a huge financial gain from the construction of the West Loop. This did not go unnoticed by Houston City Council. In December 1954, Houston City Council was informed of a new plan to move the alignment of the West Loop slightly east of Post Oak Road for a section between the Southwest and Katy Freeways. The realignment shifted the freeway to vacant land, saving approximately \$400,000 in right-of-way costs, approximately 2.28 million in 2003 dollars. The realignment would cause the West Loop to bisect Smith's property, so his land holdings would have freeway frontage on both sides of the freeway. *The Houston Chronicle* reported that "a majority [of council members] indicated opposition on the argument that the routing would increase vacant land owned by Robert E. Smith, political backer of the mayor." The alignment through Smith's property would be adopted, and Smith would reap a financial windfall when the West Loop commercial boom subsequently took place.<sup>17</sup>

The West Loop story has a happy ending for the residents of Bellaire. If ever there is a need for evidence that freeways do not destroy neighborhoods, one needs to look no further than Bellaire. In spite of the West Loop, or perhaps because of it, Bellaire has become one of the most desirable residential areas of Houston. Starting in the 1980s, Bellaire became known as a "tear-down" area, where older homes were torn down and replaced with large and expensive custom homes. Many of the new homes were constructed immediately alongside the West Loop. In 2001, the median home price in Bellaire was \$143 per square foot (\$1,539 per square meter), far above the Houston average of \$66 per square foot (\$710 per square meter) and the Harris County average of \$60 per square foot (\$646 per square meter). New homes in Bellaire typically sell for \$500,000 to more than \$1 million. Some Bellaire residents may feel that their city would be even better without the freeway, but the convenience and transportation access provided by the West Loop is certainly something that should not be discounted.<sup>18</sup>

In 1997, 43 years after the original controversy over the routing of Loop 610 through Bellaire, TxDOT called for a new series of public hearings to discuss improvements to the West Loop, including the section through Bellaire. The project was a "no capacity added" project, and proposed improvements were very modest, consisting mostly of improvements at entrance and exit ramps. Nevertheless, substantial opposition developed, especially over a plan to extend the West Loop frontage roads underneath the Southwest Freeway just north of Bellaire. It was almost as if the clock had been turned back, and TxDOT officials once again felt the fury that had been released in 1954 when the freeway was originally planned. Some in Bellaire were demanding that the freeway be depressed below grade, but flooding concerns quickly scuttled that idea. The reconstruction of Loop 610 in Bellaire was underway by 1999 with only a few modifications from the original plan. The lack of added capacity, however, would ensure that the freeway would not be able to meet future demand.





**Freeway disaster:** A cloud of ammonia gas engulfs the West Loop-Southwest Freeway interchange on May 11, 1976, moments after a speeding tanker truck fully loaded with ammonia crashed through the guardrail on a connector ramp and fell to the Southwest Freeway below. Five people were killed, about 50 were hospitalized, and about 150 received treatment. This photo was taken by photographer Carroll Grevemberg about one minute after the accident from the thirteenth floor of an office tower in the Galleria complex. Grevemberg, an audio-video designer at the Transco Company, heard the explosion and then heard someone say, “I wish I had a camera.” Grevemberg grabbed his camera, loaded some film, and was able to capture the gas cloud as it expanded over the interchange and then dissipated during the next five minutes. (Photo: Carroll Grevemberg, Grevy Photography, New Orleans)



## Disaster

May 11, 1976, 11:18 A.M.: A tanker truck loaded with ammonia speeds northward through Bellaire on the West Loop toward the Southwest Freeway interchange and exits to make the connection to the southbound Southwest Freeway. As the truck rounds the curve, its speed is too great and it cannot stay on the roadway. The truck crashes through the guardrail and falls to the Southwest Freeway main lanes one level below. The resulting explosion unleashes a cloud of ammonia gas, engulfing the interchange. Four people are killed immediately, three by asphyxiation. Others attempting to flee the scene by foot collapse before they can escape the gas cloud. Fifty people are hospitalized, and another 150 are treated and released. The death toll reaches five in the following days.

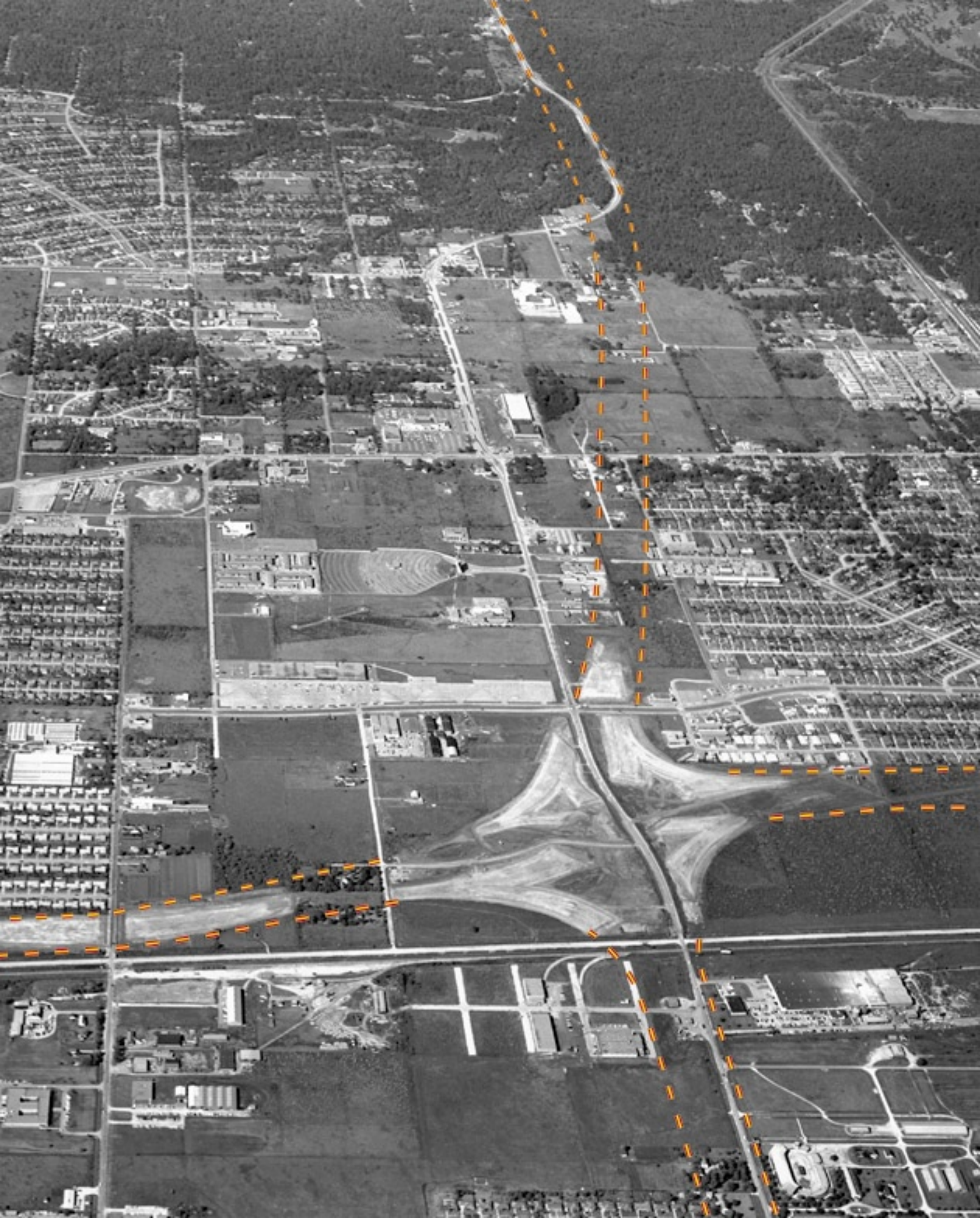
In terms of loss of life, it ranks as a tragic accident, although certainly not as deadly as other highway accidents over the years, particularly those involving buses.

But in terms of extraordinary events and sheer drama, it is the most horrific and memorable accident in the history of Houston’s freeway system. Survivors told stories of fleeing the gas cloud and barely making it out alive. Others who had collapsed in the gas cloud were dragged out by good samaritans. In an adjacent neighborhood, foliage looked like it had been hit with a hard freeze—even though it was May. The freeway interchange structure was badly damaged, necessitating the closure of freeway lanes for the rest of May to rebuild a pier structure for the West Loop overpass.<sup>19</sup>

## Edge City Extraordinaire

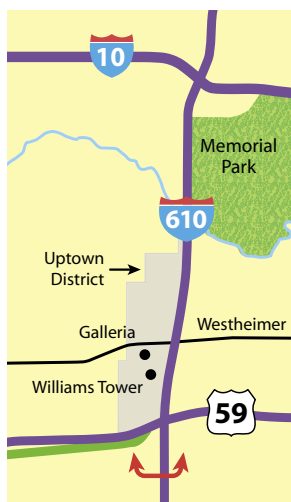
Large business centers generally come in two varieties: those that existed before the freeway era, and those that arose as a result of freeways. The Uptown Houston district along the West Loop provides one of the most dramatic transformations of suburban, freeway-side acreage







(Opposite page) **Transformation:** This view shows the West Loop/Uptown Houston corridor in 1960 just as the first freeway construction is beginning. In the lower part of the photo, land preparation is underway for the West Loop-Southwest Freeway interchange. The dashed lines from top to bottom indicate the route of the West Loop.



The dashed lines from left to right indicate the route of the Southwest Freeway. The West Loop main lanes between the Southwest Freeway (US 59) and the Katy Freeway (IH 10) were complete in November 1966, and the opening of the Galleria shopping mall in November 1970 launched the West Loop commercial construction boom. For a modern view from the same perspective, see the chapter introductory photo on page 272. (Photo: The Positive Image)

into a major business center. In 1960, the area that would become Uptown Houston was mostly vacant land with a scattering of strip shopping centers, some residential development, a drive-in cinema and a television station. But change was coming. Work was just beginning on the interchange at the West Loop and Southwest Freeway, and by 1961 work was underway on the West Loop frontage roads and main lanes. The first section of freeway main lanes in the Uptown Houston district opened in June 1964, and the entire West Loop was complete in 1968.

The seeds for the West Loop commercial boom were sown by developer Gerald Hines, who began work on the Galleria shopping center in the late 1960s at the corner of Post Oak and Westheimer, just west of the West Loop. The Galleria was a new concept for Houston, featuring a three-level shopping mall with a central ice rink and a glass canopy roof. Office buildings and hotels were integrated into the Galleria complex. The mall opened on November 16, 1970, and became influential in the development of high-end, mixed-use malls across

**A calm, quiet intersection:** This view, looking northeast at the Westheimer intersection, shows the first section of the West Loop main lanes to open in the present-day Uptown Houston district. At the time of the photo in December 1964, the freeway main lanes stopped north of Westheimer and the land along the frontage roads was vacant. Within a few years, large-scale commercial development of the land along the West Loop would begin and the Westheimer-West Loop intersection would go on to become one of the most chronically congested in Houston. (Photo: TxDOT)

the United States.<sup>20</sup>

The Uptown Houston district boomed along with Houston during the 1970s and early 1980s. An impressive collection of mid-rise office buildings rose along the West Loop. It became one of the most impressive instances of the edge city, a term popularized by author Joel Garreau in his 1992 book, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*. The crowning achievement of Uptown Houston was the construction of the landmark 899-foot-tall (274 m) Williams Tower (known as the Transco Tower until 1999) by Gerald Hines Interests in 1983. At the time, it was believed to be the world's tallest skyscraper outside of a central business district. The Williams Tower has a dominating presence on the landscape and dwarfs the nearby structures which are generally in the 20- to 40-floor range. The Williams Tower was the product of a unique era in Houston, a period when energy companies were flush with cash and sought impressive, monumental structures to project their power. Large-scale office construction in Uptown Houston came to an end with the collapse of energy prices and the meltdown of Houston's economy in the mid-to-late 1980s. In 2001 the West Loop commercial district had 23.8 million square feet of office space. Downtown Houston, in comparison, had 39.3 million square feet. In the late 1990s a mini-boom of mid-rise residential tower construction, typically 30 floors tall, got underway. Uptown Houston has accumulated a surprisingly large concentration of high-rise residential structures for a low-density city such as Houston. Many of those high-rise residents are looking to avoid the traffic congestion on the West Loop, no doubt.<sup>21</sup>







**Uptown Houston:** The mid-rise office towers of the Uptown Houston district are dwarfed by the 64-floor, 899-foot (274 m) Williams Tower. Reconstruction of this section of the West Loop began in 2003. Although it is a “no capacity added” project, the reconstruction will substantially improve merging operations and interchange performance. (Photo: May 2002)

### The Traffic Boom and the Planning Bust

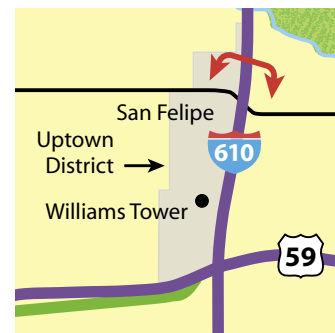
The commercial boom along the West Loop brought dramatic increases in traffic. In 1968, the year the main lanes of the West Loop were completed, the peak traffic volume was 90,600 vehicles per day. In 1971, just one year after the opening of the Galleria shopping center, peak traffic volume had grown to 146,200 vehicles per day, making the West Loop Houston’s busiest freeway. Traffic would continue to grow dramatically through the 1970s and the West Loop would hold the title of Houston’s busiest freeway until 1991, when it was eclipsed by the North Freeway. More than any other freeway in Houston, the West Loop sustains severe traffic congestion in both directions during rush hour.

Houston’s freeway expansion program became very active in the 1980s. In 1989 work was underway to widen

the section of the West Loop between the Katy and Northwest Freeways to 12 and 14 main lanes. The project was complete by the end of 1992.

In 1991 the time had finally arrived to formulate a plan to relieve the chronically congested section of the West Loop between the Southwest and Katy Freeways. Big problems required big solutions. The plans for the West Loop proposed a major expansion of the freeway to meet the transportation needs of the area. TxDOT called a public meeting in November 1991 to present the developing plans to the public.

Several options were presented, but attention focused on the leading proposal, the “collector-distributor” option.



It retained the 8-lane freeway in the center, adding 4-lane collector facilities on each side of the freeway to provide 8 more freeway lanes. Frontage roads were generally increased to 4 lanes in each direction. Overall, the proposal generally had 16 freeway and 24 traffic lanes, with exact lane counts varying from point to point. Right-of-way acquisition was minimal since high-rise structures lined both sides of the corridor. The proposal did not include elevated structures and kept all lanes at ground level.

As soon as the meeting started, however, it became clear that this would not be a typical freeway hearing. It became more like an anti-freeway rally. Before public comment even began, one public official after another stepped up to the podium to bash the proposed collector-distributor plan. Most vocal were Houston council members Jim Greenwood, an architect and mass transit advocate, and Sheila Jackson-Lee, who promoted inner-city and minority interests. Greenwood, Jackson-Lee, and others called for a greater emphasis on mass transit. The large crowd at the hearing was unusually receptive to the anti-freeway speakers.

Possibly the most lethal opposition came from the Park People, an organization which worked to improve park resources in Houston. The West Loop cuts through the western edge of Memorial Park, a wooded area with approximately 1,500 acres of parkland. Three and a half acres of Memorial Park were needed to accommodate the widened freeway. The Park People were not willing to accept the loss of a single square foot of parkland for the freeway, and Jackson-Lee summed up the Park People's sentiment when she stated, "In this city, any loss of park space cannot be tolerated." Realistically, users of the 1,500-acre Memorial Park would never notice the loss of 3.5 acres along the western edge of the park, and many park users would have benefited from the improved access to the park. But in situations such as highway project development, reason often does not prevail and emotions can take over.<sup>22</sup>

Also in November 1991, Houston elected Bob Lanier to become mayor of Houston. If anyone could save plans to expand the West Loop, it was Bob Lanier. As chairman of the Texas Transportation Commission during the 1980s, Lanier was a strong advocate for highway construction and had been instrumental in dramatically increasing TxDOT funding. But Lanier was no longer just a highway advocate. He was now a politician. He had to balance the various issues facing him as he entered office, and highway construction was just one issue among many. Lanier gave lip service to the expansion plan, but he was not willing to use up valuable political capital to save it. And it would have taken a lot of capital to keep the expansion plans alive.<sup>23</sup>

How could this happen in Houston? Several factors had converged to cause the anti-freeway outburst. Vocal anti-freeway activists were on Houston City Council. The Houston business community, so often a key supporter of freeways, was remarkably silent. The West Loop business community seemed to be missing in action. Bob Lanier

stood by, unable or unwilling keep the plans on track. The press depicted the expansion as a "24-lane" freeway when in fact the freeway section was much smaller, and the potential benefits of the project were not adequately reported.

Was Houston going to succumb to the forces that have devastated transportation planning in other cities? Was this the end of Houston as a forward-looking freeway metropolis? Fortunately for Houston's freeways, the answer was no. It was, in effect, more like a certain alignment of planets had occurred at that particular moment in time in Houston freeway planning. Everything that could have gone wrong in the process did go wrong, so the West Loop expansion died.

By the late 1990s the pavement on the West Loop was crumbling and action was needed. In 1997 and 1998 meetings were held to reach a compromise plan to rebuild the freeway as a "no-capacity-added" project. The final plan included the addition of new merging lanes at entrance and exit points, better lane balance, major modifications to the interchange with the Southwest Freeway, and total reconstruction of the interchange at the Katy Freeway in conjunction with the Katy Freeway expansion. Work began on the southernmost section of the West Loop in 1999, and the final contract valued at \$262 million for the work near the Katy Freeway was awarded in July 2003.

The failure of plans to expand the West Loop will have a long-term negative impact on the performance of Houston's freeway system. The importance of the West Loop as a critical link in Houston's freeway system will increase in the future as other freeway projects move forward. In the near future, the Katy Freeway expansion, the Fort Bend Parkway, and the Westpark Tollway will all feed more traffic onto the West Loop. Longer term, a planned expansion of the Northwest Freeway and a potential future tollway along Hempstead Road will bring even more traffic. A long-term planning map published by the Harris County Toll Road Authority in 2001 shows a potential toll road corridor along the Union Pacific railroad which parallels the West Loop about half a mile (0.8 km) to the east. However, the railroad passes through Memorial Park and near high-income neighborhoods, and any effort to construct the route is certain to be highly controversial. The proposal appeared to be dead on arrival when it first received wide publicity in June 2003. But it doesn't take a prophet to conclude that transportation demand will overwhelm the West Loop. At some point, the toll road proposal or an alternative plan—perhaps elevated lanes—will need to be given consideration. Houston motorists can only hope for a more favorable alignment of the planets the next time traffic relief plans are put on the table.<sup>24</sup>

### Home for the Dome

The alignment of the South Loop was officially approved by the Texas Transportation Commission in October 1954. At the time, the prairies south of Houston were a quiet area. There was little residential or commercial development in progress, and the area was semirural.









(Above) **The replacement:** This view looks northwest over the Astrodome and its replacement, the \$449 million, retractable-roof Reliant Stadium. The Houston Texans football team played its first game in the stadium on August 24, 2002. (Photo: The Positive Image)

(Opposite page) **Building the Dome:** The Astrodome was the world's first fully enclosed and air-conditioned stadium when it opened on April 9, 1965. The upper photo, looking north, shows the beginnings of the Astrodome in 1962. Excavation for the Dome was nearing completion and construction of the South Loop frontage roads had just begun in the lower part of the photo. The frontage roads opened in June 1963. The lower photo, looking southeast, shows the structural shell of the Dome substantially complete in 1964. The Astrodome was renovated and its seating capacity increased in 1989, but the stadium could not meet modern standards. The Houston Oilers football team played its last game in the Astrodome on December 15, 1996, before moving to Nashville, Tennessee. The Houston Astros baseball team played its last game in the Astrodome on October 9, 1999, before moving to the new downtown baseball stadium. When the NFL awarded Houston a new football franchise on October 6, 1999, plans moved forward to build a state-of-the-art, retractable-roof football stadium that would also be used by the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, the Astrodome's only remaining major tenant. (Photos: upper, The Positive Image; lower, Houston Photographic and Architectural Foundation Trust)

However, Harris County Judge Roy Hofheinz would soon start contemplating about the future of professional sports in Houston, and his vision would find a home on the South Loop.

In the late 1950s local authorities began discussions for a new sports center for the Houston area. In 1958 a stadium location study was completed. Various locations throughout Houston were considered, and a site on the South Loop was rated as number one by both the city of Houston and TxDOT. The accessibility provided by the planned South Loop Freeway and nearby South Freeway was the principal strength of the site, and the land was readily available for sale by millionaire oilman R. E. "Bob" Smith and others.<sup>25</sup>

The construction of a stadium along a freeway was nothing unusual. But this stadium would be different. Judge Hofheinz wanted a futuristic facility to gain worldwide recognition for Houston. His new stadium would be the world's first fully air-conditioned domed stadium. The otherwise nondescript segment of the South Loop would be distinguished by this first-of-its-kind structure.

Harris County voters approved \$20 million in revenue bonds on July 26, 1958, for the domed stadium. However, the revenue bonds depended on future revenue to be generated by the facility, and the lack of history of revenue from stadiums made it difficult for Harris County to sell the bonds. The domed stadium moved beyond the talking stage on January 31, 1961, when voters agreed to replace the revenue bonds with \$22 million in general obligation bonds, which were backed by general tax revenue. When the lowest bid for the construction of the dome came in at \$19,440,000 (excluding excavation, which had previously been completed for \$738,000), it became necessary

Key dates in the history of Loop 610	
<b>Early 1930s</b>	Loop or bypass routes are first proposed.
<b>1941</b>	The first formal study for a bypass loop is completed.
<b>1942</b>	The North Loop is adopted into the state highway system as a highway.
<b>1954</b>	The West and South Loops are officially adopted into the state highway system as freeways. The North Loop is upgraded to freeway status.
<b>1960</b>	The first freeway section of the Loop opens. The East Loop is adopted into the state highway system.
<b>1962</b>	Houston's first four-level interchange is completed at the West Loop-Southwest Freeway intersection.
<b>1965</b>	The Astrodome is opened on the South Loop on April 9.
<b>1970</b>	The Galleria shopping center opens near the West Loop on November 16, launching the construction boom along the West Loop.
<b>1973</b>	The ship channel bridge opens on March 2.
<b>1975</b>	The loop is completed on September 22.
<b>1983</b>	The 899-foot-tall (274 m) Williams Tower is completed near the West Loop.
<b>1992</b>	Plans to expand the West Loop are cancelled due to opposition.
<b>2007</b>	Scheduled completion of reconstruction of the West Loop, including a full rebuild of the Katy Freeway interchange.

to raise more funds with a supplementary bond issue of \$9.6 million to pay for all project costs and site work. The bonds were approved by Harris County voters on December 22, 1962, bringing the total bond funds to \$31.6 million. For comparison, the \$31.6 million translates to approximately 154 million in 2003 dollars. Still, that seems like a bargain by modern standards. The replacement for the Astrodome, the retractable-roof Reliant Stadium completed in 2002, cost \$449 million.<sup>26</sup>

Ground was broken for the domed stadium on January 3, 1962. The new stadium was officially dedicated on April 9, 1965, when the Houston Astros baseball team played an exhibition game against the New York Yankees.

Even before the first game, a problem had arisen. The first time the Houston Astros ventured onto the new field for practice on April 7, they discovered that the glare from the roof, with its clear plastic panels, made it extremely difficult to catch fly balls. Sunglasses didn't help since the area of glare coming from the roof was so large. A quick solution was needed to make daytime baseball possible in the Astrodome. The week of April 19, crews began painting the clear roof panels with off-white paint to make the panels opaque rather than transparent. The grass in the stadium was already struggling before the roof was painted, and paint further reduced available sunlight by 25-40%. Artificial turf had recently been developed and success-

fully installed at a private school in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1964. The solution was obvious: the Astrodome would become the first major sports venue in the United States to use artificial turf. The first major league baseball game played on Astroturf took place on April 8, 1966. Astroturf would soon become widely used in sports stadiums across the United States.<sup>27</sup>

The South Loop was still a work in progress when the Astrodome was completed in 1965. Frontage roads for the freeway were in place near the Astrodome, but to the east and west, the South Loop didn't exist at all. On May 16, 1969, a 2.5-mile (4.0 km) section of the South Loop main lanes at the Astrodome was opened, completing all of the South Loop except for a short segment west of the Gulf Freeway interchange. Aside from the Astrodome, the South Loop didn't get any glamorous or distinctive development. During the 1970s the South Loop became a favorite location for the large, boxy warehouses of furniture retailers. The furniture retailers would frequently go out of business or change names, leaving vacant warehouses along the freeway. By the end of the 1970s the furniture warehouse era had largely come and gone.

On March 2, 2002, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo ended its 37-year run in the Astrodome with a farewell concert attended by former President George H. W. Bush and featuring a star-studded list of country music performers. A record-setting crowd estimated at 70,200 packed the Dome for what was expected to be its final major event. It was a bittersweet night for Houston. The Dome, once touted as the "Eighth Wonder of the World," had propelled Houston to international prominence and had been a source of civic pride. Now, it was just another passé relic of the 1960s. The Dome faced an uncertain future in 2003 as Harris County officials searched for an economic use for the facility. Local preservationists expressed hope that the Dome could be spared from demolition.<sup>28</sup>

The South Loop has a more certain future than the Astrodome. The section of the South Loop serving the Astrodome and its replacement, Reliant Stadium, was expanded to 10 main lanes in 1994, providing ample traffic-carrying capacity. In the long term, there is the possibility of a large new stack interchange at the intersection with the proposed Alvin Freeway. The future of the Alvin Freeway will be determined by a study expected to be underway by 2004.

**The Future of the Loop**

The reconstruction of the West Loop will continue until approximately 2007. As of 2003, there are no major studies planned for the north, east, and south sections of Loop 610. For the intermediate future Loop 610 will likely not see major changes. Increasing traffic congestion on the North Loop may eventually prompt some work on that segment, however.





**South Freeway interchange:** This wide-angle view looks east along the South Loop at the sprawling South Freeway interchange. This interchange was completed in 1978 and opened to traffic in 1981. (Photo: September 2002)



**East Freeway interchange:** This view looks north along the East Loop at the East Freeway interchange. This interchange was completed in 1976. (Photo: November 2002)