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« NEWS SECTION »

Highway to Hillyard

by DANIEL WALTERS

The railroad lines were the arteries that pumped Hillyard full of life. Jobs, money, an influx of new residents — they all stemmed from railroad tycoon James J. Hill's material yard.

Then in 1970, the Great Northern Railroad began to withdraw. Hillyard was hit hard, plunging into poverty and disrepair.

"We've been in an economic slide for 25 years," community activist Paul Hamilton says. "We've been depressed in such an economic state: I'm tired — I'm tired of telling people we're the poorest economic region [per capita] in the state."

Today, many Hillyard residents are counting on another form of transportation to pull the region from its economic slump: the much anticipated North Spokane Corridor, better known as the North-South Freeway.

Hamilton does a lot of traveling in his work with Allstate. During one trip, he noticed a freeway off-ramp being built in Arizona. He returned to the same spot three years later. "It went from desert to fully-developed retail and service," Hamilton says. "Go anywhere in America ... find an off-ramp and study the development that happens with it." Hotels, restaurants and gas stations spring up, followed by houses — or, in the case of Liberty Lake — entire communities.

That's what Hamilton and others hope will happen in Hillyard.

In the years since 1946, the North-South Freeway has gone from an idea to a goal to a myth to a punchline to a serious proposal and, finally, to an under-construction reality.

The first major section of the freeway — lanes stretching from Freya and Francis to Farwell — is due to open next spring. In 2011, the highway will extend to Wandermere. The Department of Transportation hopes to eventually extend the corridor all the way to Interstate 90, but currently doesn't have the funding.

With the sounds of construction clomping and whirring in the distance, there's been a change of attitude in the community,

Hamilton says. People who scoffed at the idea the highway would ever be completed in their lifetimes are now starting to believe.

In recent years, Hamilton says, Hillyard has taken some major steps in the right direction, including building a skatepark, a new pool and a revitalized historic business district. But the need for the freeway remains.

"The biggest thing we've learned is that transportation is one of the big things holding us back," Hamilton says. "All the feasibility studies say the big thing that's been stopping us is now on the table. We'd have that transportation."

For Hillyard, the notion of a completed corridor comes with a bouquet of promises: The freeway, some residents say, will bring out-of-towners to the Hillyard region, create jobs, add more retail businesses and provide major distributors like URM and Food Services of America with a vital route to I-90.

"Obviously, we would be more than excited to have the freeway done," CEO of URM Dean Sonnenberg says. "We have over 700 tractor-trailer rigs inbound and outbound ... We drive over 75,000 miles a week. That's a huge expense."

Currently, those rigs rumble down Market Street, rattling store windows as they roar by. A freeway, Sonnenberg says, would not only take the trucks off Market — a relief to the stores and the pavement — it would mean less time idling, less time burning diesel and ultimately more profits for URM.

Hamilton says that even the prospect of the highway being built has created a ripple of change. "In the last 24 months there's been some serious investment going on," he says.

Jeff Johnson, president of the commercial sales division for NAI Black real estate, says commercial real estate values have been increasing in the Hillyard area. "There's been some land sales in Hillyard over \$4 a square foot," Johnson says. "A few years ago it was only \$1.50 to \$3 a square foot."

Part of that is supply-and-demand; Hillyard's one of the few places left in the city that is zoned for light industrial buildings. But the promise of a new highway bringing in new people and relieving truck traffic helps as well.

"Hillyard's a little bit of a sleeper," Johnson says. "Hillyard has some affordable space. It also benefits from Mead traffic that drives to and from work. Add to that the North-South Freeway construction — long term it bodes very well."

The president of the Greater Hillyard Business Association, John Bogensburger, says some residents are already taking advantage of Hillyard's rosier future — and not always in the best way, he says.

"There's some people that are land-banking up, that are buying buildings and sitting on them." Bogensburger says. "Which is frustrating."

Hamilton says he has a word for some of the people who employ such a tactic: Slumlords. They let their buildings sag, their paint peel and their lawns wither into weeds.



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While some are looking for a financial windfall from a new corridor, others have serious doubts that the highway will save Hillyard. William Grimes, head of the planning firm Studio Cascade, is less sanguine about the highway's impact. He's written a paper titled, "Learning from I-90: The North-South Freeway's Implications for the Urban Form."

"The highway will hurt Hillyard, and devastate East Central," Grimes says. "You'll see a slough of disinvestment [along the highway's routes]."

Grimes predicts that as truck traffic leaves Market, so too will regular consumers. "The community-oriented, lower-rent, family-operated commercial corridor of Market Street will probably transform, similar to the way East Sprague has transformed [economically] over the past 40 years," Grimes writes.

Bogensburger empathizes with that concern. "Everybody wants to retain the consumer traffic, but nobody's going to miss the truck traffic," Bogensburger says. "If [the highway] also takes away people seeking services and products, that's a little bit of a concern."

To retain that vital consumer traffic, Hamilton wants Hillyard to change into a destination, instead of simply drive-by-scenery out the car window. But he has some concerns as well. He wants Hillyard to grow and improve, but still retain its historical core.

Meanwhile, it may be tempting to zone the whole highway perimeter as a commercial district, hoping for more business and tax revenue for the region. That would be a mistake, city planner Leroy Eadie says.

First, Eadie says, the local customer base may not be large enough to support too many businesses. Secondly, the influx of big businesses — Best Buy, Wal-Mart and Office Depot — could easily push out the small family businesses, turning Historic Hillyard into Generic Strip-Mall, USA.

"We don't want to displace [Ziggy's] with Lowe's," Hamilton says. While big-box stores provide jobs, they're often low paying jobs, he says. Nevertheless, Hamilton's confident that the plans have been honed well enough to garner great results.

"There's been decades of work getting ready for it," he says. "If they get that thing open... it's going to happen."

totheeditor@inlander.com

Publication Date: 8/28/08

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