

Seattle I-5 History

The Everett-Seattle-Tacoma Superhighway — better known as I-5 — had been in the works since 1951. But it wasn't until 1956, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the National Interstate Defense and Highways Act, that the money became available to build it.

The construction of the 20-mile portion through Seattle displaced businesses, homes and even neighborhoods like Cascade — now South Lake Union — one of the city's oldest blue-collar areas. Opposition came mostly from people concerned about their property. The First Hill Improvement Club mounted an organized protest to delay the project, but it didn't work and the city went on as planned.

In 1957, more than seven blocks of residences and retail businesses on the east side of Eastlake were razed to make way for the Interstate. The freeway eliminated the bottom portion of the Republican Street Hillclimb, a stairway leading from Cascade to Capitol Hill built in 1910. Seattle's earlier pedestrian culture lost to modern cars and traffic. South of the Ship Canal Bridge Interstate 5 separates the Eastlake and Cascade neighborhoods from the Capitol Hill neighborhood, and separates Downtown Seattle from the Capitol Hill and First Hill neighborhoods. Its construction necessitated the demolition of significantly developed areas and cut off walking commutes to downtown for many First Hill residents, who "were by far the most vociferous critics of the proposed route," but far from the only ones. Architect Paul Thiry said in the early 1970s, "It was with the Freeway, cutting through the very heart of the city, that Seattle began taking one of its wrong turns and started to lose its identity as a city." He proposed a lid extending from Columbia Street north to Olive Way, roughly the entire length of downtown.



In this June 1961 photograph, residents of Seattle's First Hill neighborhood and other concerned parties protest the construction of the freeway, which they feared would isolate them from other parts of the city and expose them to pollution and noise. Their protests were unsuccessful, and the freeway construction proceeded.

Among the buildings torn down in the Downtown-First Hill area to build the freeway was the Hotel Kalmar at Sixth Avenue and James Street (built 1881 as the Western Hotel, demolished 1962), the last of Seattle's pioneer-era hotels, predating the Great Seattle Fire, and Seattle's then-oldest public building, the Seventh Avenue Fire Hall (built 1890, demolished c. 1962).



I-5 opened in 1967 and as Paul Thiry feared, left a big gash through Seattle that has yet to heal and now serves to separate the area with the region's greatest population density from the area with the greatest job density. As more travel happens on foot or by bicycle, this separation is more keenly felt. In the years since freeway's construction, Seattle has made several efforts to stitch back together pedestrian routes disrupted by the freeway, achieving part of Thiry's proposed "lid". The most visible of these efforts are Freeway Park (opened 1976), built as a lid over the freeway and connecting Downtown to First Hill, and the Washington State Convention and Trade Center (built 1982-1988) adjacent to Freeway Park, also bridging the freeway. The 7.5-acre I-5 Colonnade mountain bike park (opened 2007) uses the freeway as a roof and reconnects Eastlake to Capitol Hill.