

La Porte Freeway, SH 225

The La Porte Freeway has earned itself a unique distinction among Houston’s freeways. It is the only freeway in the region that has sustained a permanent cancellation within the city of Houston. The most notable feature of the La Porte Freeway is its abrupt end just inside Loop 610, where the freeway was truncated. The dramatic freeway end serves as a fitting monument to the cancelled freeway. It is also a monument to one man who relentlessly fought the freeway and ultimately succeeded in doing what no one else had done before in Houston—and no one else has done since.

The story of the La Porte Freeway has deep roots, with its origins going back to the 19th century. In 2000, more than 100 years after the La Porte Freeway corridor was first used for transportation, construction on the freeway was finally completed. Unlike other Houston freeways, the La Porte Freeway is largely devoid of strip shopping centers or any kind of commercial development. Instead, the freeway is lined with petrochemical plants and refineries, providing an impressive industrial landscape of catalytic crackers, distillation towers, and tank farms.

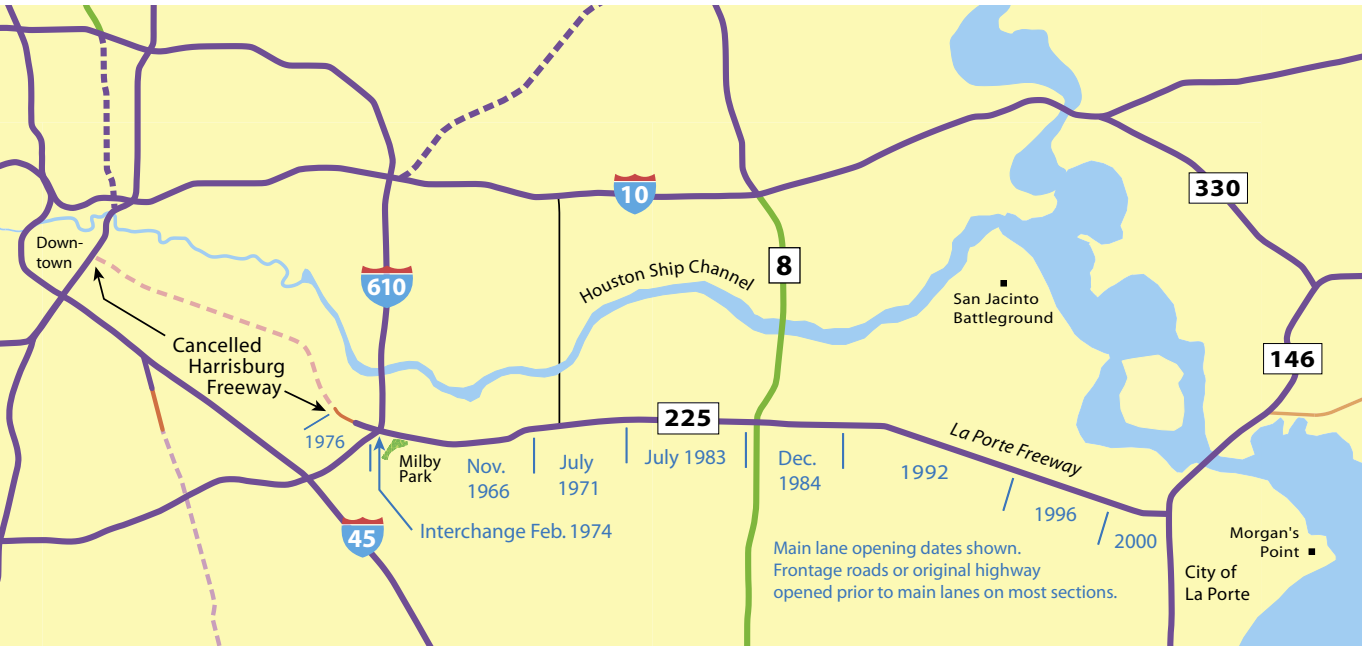
The La Porte Freeway

The development of the La Porte Freeway has been a slow evolution over a century. The route started out as a dirt road that generally followed the railroad corridor from La Porte to Houston, which opened in 1894. By 1907 the route was paved with crushed rock from Houston to approximately today’s Beltway 8. Sylvan Beach Park on Galveston Bay in La Porte was a popular destination for Houstonians, and there was increasing interest in extending the paved section all the way to La Porte to provide reliable automobile access to the park. In 1910 paving to

| La Porte Freeway | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Designated as freeway | 1953 |
| First freeway section open | 1966 |
| Freeway complete | 2000 |
| Reconstruction | none |
| Max traffic volume, 2001 | 141,000 vehicles per day |
| Future construction | None planned |

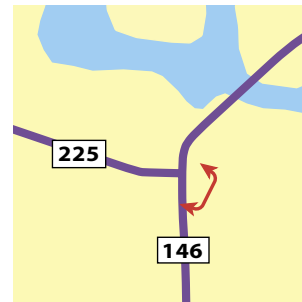
La Porte was completed with a shell surface. The road followed the alignment of the present-day freeway to about one mile (1.6 km) west of today’s SH 146, where it veered south.⁵²

On November 5, 1927, a concrete road on much of today’s freeway alignment was dedicated and designated as the La Porte-Houston Highway. The new concrete road was extended eastward where the previous shell road veered south, so the 1927 roadway defined today’s freeway alignment for the full length of the corridor all the way to SH 146. It was probably no coincidence that Ross Sterling’s mansion was completed the same year at Morgan’s Point, which is just east of the eastern terminus of the highway. Ross Sterling was one of Houston’s wealthiest and most politically influential citizens. In 1909 he founded Humble Oil, the predecessor to Exxon-Mobil, the world’s largest corporation in 2001 and second largest in 2002. He sold his interests in Humble Oil and purchased the *Houston Post* newspaper in 1925. In 1926 he purchased the *Houston Dispatch* newspaper and then merged it with the *Houston Post*. Sterling was appointed chairman of the Texas Transportation Commission in February 1927 and served in that position until he became





The first three-level interchange in Texas: The interchange at the eastern terminus of the La Porte Freeway at SH 146 was the first three-level traffic separation on the Texas state highway system when it was completed in 1953. TxDOT officials in Austin were initially hesitant to approve the three-level design because they felt that traffic volumes did not justify the “elaborate installation” and that it was being urged for its novelty. But it was approved, and within a few years three- and four-level interchanges would become common. Texas still had some catching up to do in 1953: that same year, California completed the four-level stack interchange at the intersection of the Harbor-Pasadena and Hollywood Freeways.⁵³ (Photo: TxDOT)



governor of Texas in 1930. For many years the highway was known as the Ross Sterling Highway.⁵⁴

The freeway era for the La Porte Highway began in May 1945 when the first section of freeway immediately east of the Gulf Freeway was authorized by the Texas Transportation Commission. The section of freeway was called the La Porte cutoff and connected the existing La Porte Highway to the Gulf Freeway. It opened in 1952 and would later be absorbed into the south Loop 610. Today’s La Porte Freeway from the east Loop 610 to SH 146 was authorized by the Texas Transportation Commission on September 18, 1953, as part of the proposed freeway system that Houston officials had presented to the commission in July 1953.⁵⁵

The first major construction on the present-day La Porte Freeway occurred in conjunction with the Baytown Tunnel on SH 146, which opened on September 22, 1953. SH 225 intersected SH 146 just south of the tunnel, and an interchange was completed in late 1953 to provide access to the tunnel. The interchange featured the first three-level traffic separation on the state highway system in Texas.

Texas still had some catching up to do in terms of multi-level interchange design, since Los Angeles completed its first four-level stack interchange at the intersection of the Harbor-Pasadena and Hollywood Freeways in the same year.⁵⁶

As authorities worked to define the exact alignment of the freeway in the late 1950s, they ran into a problem. At the time, the biggest risk to the alignment of freeways was parkland. In particular, many of Houston’s large parks, including Memorial, Hermann, and Macgregor, had been donated to the city of Houston, and the terms of donation often included “reverter clauses,” which stated that the land would revert to the original owner if it was not used as parkland. The La Porte Freeway would need to cut through the 74-acre Milby Park, which had been donated to the city of Houston by Charles W. Milby in 1937. Included in the terms of the parkland donation was a stipulation that no facilities for anything except specific park purposes could ever be constructed or used on the park site, or the park site itself would revert to the donor





An impressive industrial landscape: The La Porte Freeway passes through one of the densest concentrations of refineries and petrochemical plants in the United States. Approximately 13.2% of the nation's refining capacity and nearly 50% of the nation's base petrochemical manufacturing capacity is located in the Houston area. This view shows the La Porte Freeway crossing through a tank farm just east of Loop 610. Completed in 1966, this was the first section of the freeway opened to traffic. (Photo: September 2002)

or his heirs.⁵⁷

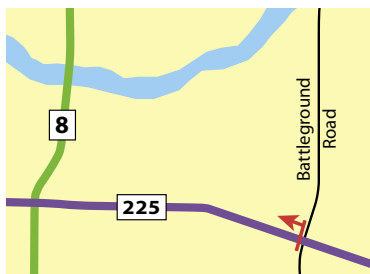
Original plans for the La Porte Freeway showed its alignment severing the park, using 6.5 acres for the freeway and isolating another 10 acres north of the freeway. In 1958, the city of Houston reviewed the legal implications of right-of-way acquisition through the park and determined that it could not sell or transfer the right-of-way. In order to minimize the impact on the park, the alignment of the La Porte Freeway was shifted northward along the edge of the park, reducing the impact to only 8 acres. Because the city would not sell the property, TxDOT obtained it through condemnation proceedings in 1960, clearing the way for the freeway. The daughter of the park donor then sued the city of Houston, arguing that the parkland should be returned to the estate of the donor since the terms of the original agreement had been violated. In August 1961, a court ruled that the Milby estate was not entitled to reclaim the remainder of the park.⁵⁸

Another difficulty in the construction of the La Porte Freeway through Pasadena was the relocation of the railroad that was situated along the western half of the corridor. Harris County and the Port of Houston entered into an agreement to relocate the tracks in October 1958, and the Texas Transportation Commission authorized TxDOT financial participation in the relocation in November 1959. From just east of Loop 610 to just east of Beltway 8, a 7.5-mile (12 km) section of railroad was relocated about 0.5 mile (0.8 km) north. The actual track relocation

(Opposite page) **Pre-freeway and modern SH 225:** The upper photograph from 1951 shows SH 225 at the Shell petrochemical plant, which is just east of Beltway 8. The freeway would later be built on the strip of land between the industrial plant and the two-lane highway, as shown in the lower photo. The freeway main lanes were completed in 1992. Work on the Shell refinery in Deer Park began in 1928 when the first team of engineers arrived from Illinois and set up offices in an abandoned schoolhouse on SH



225. In August 1929 the Shell refinery was operational. The above photo shows the Shell chemical plant, which produced its first product in September 1941, just in time to fill World War II demand for high-octane aviation fuel, toluene, and synthetic rubber. (Photos: upper, Shell Oil; lower, September 2002)



Finishing the freeway: The final push to complete the La Porte Freeway occurred in the 1990s. This view looks west from the Battleground Road overpass. This section was completed in 1992. The full La Porte Freeway was completed in 2000. (Photo: July 2002)

proceeded with no difficulty, but litigation ensued and was not cleared up until 1967.⁵⁹

By 1964 construction on the freeway could begin. In

November 1966 the first 2.5-mile (4 km) freeway section opened from Loop 610 eastward. Other sections subsequently opened, pushing the freeway eastward through the central part of Pasadena to east of Red Bluff Road by July 1971. Then the freeway went into hibernation due to the 1970s highway funding crisis. Work resumed in the early 1980s, pushing the freeway east of Beltway 8 by 1984. The freeway then went into hibernation once again. In the early 1990s the final push began to complete the freeway. Three sections opened during the 1990s, culminating with a new interchange at SH 146 in 2000 that completed the freeway. Forty-seven years after the official freeway designation in 1953, the La Porte Freeway was finished. The next phase of improvements for the La Porte Freeway will be defined in a corridor study scheduled to begin in 2003.

The La Porte Freeway traverses through an impressive industrial landscape of petrochemical plants and refineries. Call it ugly or call it beautiful, it is certainly a distinctive stretch of freeway. The La Porte Freeway is generally free of traffic congestion, a rare distinction in Houston. But the freeway has a more dubious distinction—the part that wasn't built.

Key dates in the history of the La Porte Freeway

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|-------------|--|
| 1894 | Railroad tracks are constructed on the La Porte Freeway corridor. |
| 1927 | The La Porte-Houston highway, most of which became the La Porte Freeway, was paved with concrete. |
| 1952 | The La Porte cutoff on the Gulf Freeway is completed. It later becomes part of Loop 610. |
| 1953 | The La Porte Freeway is proposed as part of Houston's freeway master plan and officially designated as a freeway by TxDOT. |
| 1966 | The first section of freeway opens. |
| 2000 | The freeway is completed. |

Harrisburg Freeway

The Harrisburg Freeway had its origins in the 1960 traffic and transportation study for the Houston area. The study recommended the addition of two new freeways, the extension of the La Porte Freeway from Loop 610 to downtown and the southward extension of the West Loop. In August 1961, the Houston City Planning Commission officially delivered its recommendation for the new freeways in a report called *Freeway Phase*. The recommendation explained that the traffic study found “a demand on the Gulf Freeway far beyond its reasonable capacity



The planned alignment: This November 1971 map from the *Houston-Harris County Transportation Plan, Volume 3* (1971) shows the planned alignment of the Harrisburg Freeway. The unbuilt section is indicated with the pink highlight. This alignment is identical to the originally proposed 1964 alignment and the final alignment recommended in January 1973.

due to the large area it must serve and the tributary nature of the La Porte Freeway.” In a December 1963 letter to TxDOT, city of Houston department heads wrote, “It is our opinion that the most effective measure for the immediate relief of the traffic overload in the southeast corridor would require the extension of the La Porte Freeway westerly, in the vicinity of Harrisburg Boulevard, to the Central Business District Loop (US 59).” The La Porte Freeway extension would become known as the Harrisburg Freeway since it generally followed the alignment of Harrisburg Boulevard.⁶⁰

The local officials then needed to persuade TxDOT to add the new freeway section to the state highway system. In January 1962 TxDOT agreed to provide interchanges at the intersections of the Harrisburg Freeway with US 59 downtown and Loop 610. On March 31, 1964, Houston Mayor Louie Welch led a Houston delegation that made a presentation to the Texas Transportation Commission in Austin to request the inclusion of the freeway segment into the state highway system. The Texas Transportation Commission did not grant Houston’s request. In November 1964, A. C. Kyser, head of the TxDOT Houston Urban Project Office, reported that the Harrisburg Freeway was

“just a line on a map and a report” and said the Texas Transportation Commission had not yet reviewed the project. An effort had been made to include the route in the federal Interstate Highway System, but that request had been rejected by the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads. The project was at least six to eight years in the future because TxDOT was overcommitted for work on the state highway network.⁶¹

Saying No to the Freeway

Richard Holgin was born just north of downtown Houston in the area then known as the Fifth Ward. He moved to the Magnolia neighborhood east of downtown near Harrisburg Road as a child and attended the local public schools. Nearly all of his extended family, which included about 100 cousins, aunts, and uncles, lived in the east side neighborhoods along the proposed freeway path. He purchased his home in 1958 on Rusk Street, two blocks south of Harrisburg Boulevard, and started a family.

One day in the early 1960s, Holgin first heard rumors that a new freeway was planned for the Harrisburg corridor. Holgin immediately became concerned. Just around that time, the right-of-way clearance for IH 10 was cutting



Ramp to a dead end: This view along Loop 610 at the SH 225 interchange shows the exit and high-level connection ramp to SH 225 west, the planned Harrisburg Freeway. The freeway comes to a dead end just after the ramp returns back to ground level. (Photo: May 2002)

a path through the predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods just north of downtown, near the neighborhood where he was born. Would the east end neighborhoods, a developing Hispanic area, be destined for the same fate? Holgin set out to find some answers. He started by contacting the city of Houston, but soon found that the city was just one player in Houston's freeway construction machine, and the city couldn't or wouldn't answer his questions. So he tried contacting TxDOT, and then Harris County. Still, he couldn't get the information he wanted. The freeway was a "done deal," he was told, and it was best that he get out of the way. It seemed there was no place to focus a coordinated effort to stop the freeway. Holgin and the neighborhood were forced into an apprehensive wait-and-see situation for the rest of the 1960s.⁶²

But luck would be on Holgin's side. In spite of the efforts of the city of Houston and Harris County, the Harrisburg Freeway had not been adopted into the state highway system by TxDOT. The city of Houston, Harris County, and TxDOT were all overwhelmed by the huge task of acquiring right-of-way and building the approved freeways in the 1960s, so the Harrisburg Freeway was put on the back burner and remained just a line on the map.

By 1969, when the 1960s freeway construction binge was winding down, TxDOT was in a better position to add new freeways to the state highway system. The Texas Transportation Commission formally accepted the Harrisburg Freeway on April 2, 1969, just in time, it seemed, for the harsh new freeway climate that was developing. On January 1, 1970, President Nixon signed

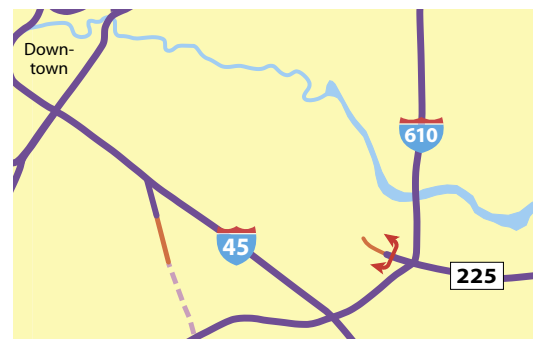
the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) into law. NEPA and provisions of the 1968 and 1970 Federal-Aid Highway Acts had dramatically changed the way freeways were planned. TxDOT would now have to prepare an environmental impact statement and provide a comprehensive public hearing process. The Harrisburg Freeway would be the first in Houston to go through the new planning process.⁶³

The freeway was coming back to life, and Richard Holgin was ready for it. He was determined to do everything he could to stop the freeway, and he was now empowered by NEPA and other new regulations that gave communities a large voice in the process. With his bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Houston, Holgin was one of the few college-educated Hispanics in the mostly blue-collar area. He was the ideal person to bridge the divide between the Spanish-speaking community and the freeway construction establishment. Leading the opposition effort provided Holgin with an opportunity to work at the grassroots level, improve his visibility, and build name recognition in the community. It was a perfect opportunity for a political launch pad. His opposition to the freeway and political aspirations turned out to be a perfect match. Whatever his greater motivation was, he brought dedication and passion to the anti-free-way effort.

Holgin knew very little about freeway construction and the newly adopted freeway planning processes required by NEPA. He found an ally and consultant in Alfred Davey, a private planning consultant who knew the ins



A monument to the cancelled freeway: This view shows the dramatic end of the La Porte Freeway just inside Loop 610. The main lanes come to an abrupt halt, and the frontage roads continue a little further until they dead-end at Lawndale Avenue. If the La Porte Freeway extension had been constructed, it would have continued to downtown Houston in the distance. The project was in serious trouble by 1973, and by 1976 the highway funding crisis effectively put the nails in the coffin of the freeway. (Photo: May 2002)



and out of the planning process. With advice and counsel from Davey, Holgin gained the knowledge to work in the system and deal with city and state officials. Holgin and the five or six community members who actively opposed the freeway designated themselves as the La Porte Freeway Extension Information Committee.

The first public meeting for the Harrisburg Freeway was held in March 1970. There was considerable support for the freeway, especially among the local business establishment. Most residents were more interested in knowing if and when they needed to move, rather than opposing the freeway. But Holgin felt certain that there was opposition to the freeway, especially in the Hispanic community. He needed to inform the neighborhood that the world had

changed. It was now possible to stop a freeway.⁶⁴

After that first public meeting, Holgin and Davey met one day with their cameras in hand to take a tour of the neighborhood. They followed the proposed freeway corridor and took photographs of homes and businesses that would be displaced. Holgin then arranged a community meeting for May 1970, which was held at a neighborhood community center called the Ripley House. The TxDOT representatives used their allotted 15 minutes to give a brief overview of the project. Then, for the next hour



Anti-freeway crusader: Richard Holgin stands along Harrisburg Boulevard in May 2002. If the project had moved forward, the 400-foot-wide (122 m) freeway corridor would have been constructed in the area behind him. Today, the neighborhoods along the corridor are mostly low-income. The neighborhood has not been revitalized like many close-in urban areas in Houston, but retains its modest houses and scattering of businesses that serve a predominantly Hispanic and immigrant population.

and 45 minutes, Holgin's supporters presented the anti-freeway case. To start their program, Holgin and Davey presented the audience with a slide show of the properties along the freeway path. Barbara Streisand's "People" ("people who need people") was used as background music. As one slide after another was shown, the impact of the freeway registered with the audience. It became more poignantly clear that their homes, friends, and neighbors would be displaced. It was an emotional appeal, and it worked. Holgin was unlocking the latent opposition that he knew existed. Also at the meeting, Davey presented a plan he had developed for an alternative freeway alignment along the Houston Ship Channel which did not impact the neighborhood. If TxDOT wasn't yet aware that this freeway controversy would be different from ones in the past, then Holgin's first meeting—which became known as the "Ripley House meeting"—was certainly an eye-opener.⁶⁵

In July 1970 TxDOT launched its official study with a multidisciplinary team. This was something entirely new for TxDOT. Previously, plans and alignments for Houston's freeways had been determined by engineers and local political authorities who generally took the most direct or least expensive routes. But now, with the National Environmental Policy Act in force, selecting an alignment for the freeway would be a much more complex process. The multidisciplinary team was appointed in July 1970 to study the route and recommend an alignment, taking into consideration the social, economic, environmental, and physical implications of the project. The team included an urban sociologist, an economist, a landscape architect, an urban planner, a public information specialist, and the usual staff of designers and engineers. A team member

noted that they had "never been involved in anything like this" and the length of the study was uncertain because there was "no history of this type of undertaking."⁶⁶

Included in the multidisciplinary team was TxDOT project engineer Dexter Jones. Like Holgin, Jones had deep roots in the Harrisburg community, having been born there and having several immediate family members, including his grandmother, still living in the area. More than anyone else on the study team, Jones had a personal passion about getting the freeway built. Jones believed that the only way to reverse the decline that was afflicting the Harrisburg area was to build the freeway. The narrow streets and general inaccessibility of the area had choked off investment. The freeway, he believed, wasn't just about moving cars. It was about saving the community he knew so well by making it more attractive to businesses and homeowners. Jones and Holgin both shared a common goal of revitalizing the Harrisburg area, but were at opposite ends of the spectrum about how to achieve the goal. The stage was set for a battle that would play out over the next three years.⁶⁷

Six months later in January 1971, everything seemed to be going well for TxDOT. The study's progress report stated, "With the exception of the La Porte Freeway Extension Information Committee, all of the civic groups and virtually all of the private citizens who have contacted the team have expressed a pressing need for a freeway to serve the Harrisburg area." During this period Holgin contacted the Federal Highway Administration in Washington, D.C., and discovered that the person monitoring the Harrisburg Freeway study held the belief that there was no opposition to the freeway. Holgin still had work to do.⁶⁸

In early 1971 events began to work in Holgin's favor.

In February Houston Mayor Louie Welch proposed to make the freeway a tollway in order to get it constructed more quickly. The proposal was dismissed almost immediately by everyone involved in the process, and it invigorated opposition to the freeway. Many in the blue-collar neighborhoods along the freeway were already ambivalent about having a freeway in their backyards, but they became incensed about the possibility of being forced to pay to use it. At a February 1971 public information meeting, Holgin found that his organization was no longer alone in its battle against the freeway. An organization called Response in City Hall, or RICH, turned out a large contingent of people to oppose the alignment through the neighborhood and support an alignment along the Houston Ship Channel and Buffalo Bayou. RICH had collected thousands of signatures on a petition opposing the toll road proposal. The president of RICH, Jerry McGee, was skeptical of TxDOT's study and stated that TxDOT was "coming into my community not to consult, but to brainwash." Regarding TxDOT's statement that the bayou route was being considered, Holgin shared McGee's skepticism, stating, "I think they're saying that to pacify people." Another organization, the Urban Bunch, a group of architects and planners, was expressing concerns about bringing more traffic into the center of the city.⁶⁹

Dexter Jones was still confident of the ultimate success of the freeway project. At the meeting he stated, "The freeway is necessary and it will be built." He then paused while the statement was translated into Spanish. "We don't know how, where, or when, but it will be built."⁷⁰

Holgin had renamed his organization the East End Preservation and Development Association, a name which better conveyed Holgin's broader goals for the area. In April 1971 he organized a meeting featuring United States Congress Representative Bob Eckhardt, a Democrat who favored environmental and neighborhood causes. Holgin and his group vented their frustrations to Eckhardt, stating their belief that they were not being heard by the TxDOT study team. Following the meeting, Eckhardt stated, "I feel the freeway should go [along the ship channel], and not through a residential area."⁷¹

In 1972 Holgin made a run for political office. His effort to seek the office of state representative fell short, as he lost to Ben Reyes, who would go on to larger prominence in Houston politics. Reyes was convicted of bribery, conspiracy and mail fraud in 1998 and was sentenced to nine years in prison. Holgin's political run was unsuccessful, but the freeway fight would go on.

By the summer of 1972 the list of potential alignments had been reduced to two options: the Harrisburg Boulevard route and the ship channel route. In January 1973 the recommended alignment was announced. The freeway would take the Harrisburg route. And in the end, the study team recommended what it knew best—a state-of-the-art freeway facility with a 400-foot-wide (122 m) right-of-way and main lanes depressed below grade to minimize impacts to the surrounding area.⁷²

The environmental impact statement (EIS) reported

Key dates in the history of the Harrisburg Freeway

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| 1961 | The Harrisburg Freeway is recommended by a regional transportation study. |
| 1962-1968 | Local officials attempt to gain TxDOT approval of the freeway. |
| 1969 | TxDOT accepts the route into the state highway system and official designates it as a freeway. |
| 1970 | The Harrisburg Freeway becomes the first Houston freeway planned under new federal regulations and the National Environmental Policy Act. Opposition to the freeway develops. |
| 1973 | The Harrisburg Boulevard alignment is recommended for the freeway after three years of study. The EPA rejects the draft environmental impact statement for the freeway. |
| 1974 | A full interchange is completed at Loop 610. |
| 1974-1976 | The highway funding crisis forces many freeway cancellations and postponements. By 1976 the Harrisburg Freeway is dead due to public opposition and lack of funding. |
| 1992 | The Harrisburg Freeway is deleted from Houston's <i>Major Thoroughfare and Freeway Plan</i> . |

that 1,244 residential units, including 617 single family residences, would be displaced, affecting approximately 4,000 people. In addition, 47 industrial buildings, 40 commercial buildings, 2 churches, 2 Masonic lodges and 2 fire stations were in the path of the freeway. The EIS reported, "The project as recommended will avoid any disruption or division of established communities." The team's rationale for making that statement was that the freeway followed a corridor that "constituted a long-established boundary between two communities that have distinctly different characteristics." This boundary had been recognized by other agencies, including the city of Houston and its Model Cities Department. To Holgin, that statement was nonsense. He felt the freeway would destroy the neighborhood, and he continued his efforts to stop or delay the freeway. He appeared at the meeting of the Houston-Galveston Area Council, the regional planning organization that approved all transportation plans, and appealed to the council to delay approval, saying that the freeway would "destroy a developing Mexican-American community." Looking back on that meeting, Holgin knew that the outcome of the council vote was never in doubt. "It was a matter of rubber stamping the process. It was a good old buddy system." The council approved the freeway alignment.⁷³

Holgin had, however, received some encouraging news in this period. His sources at TxDOT were telling him about TxDOT's developing financial crisis, which became substantially worse with the loss of revenue resulting from the 1973 Arab oil embargo. Even if the freeway's EIS received approval, there was a good chance there would be no money to build it. Then on September 1, 1973, word came of a huge victory for Holgin. The Environmental Protection Agency had rejected the Envi-

ronmental Impact Statement for the Harrisburg Freeway and labeled it inadequate. The EPA said the EIS did not contain sufficient information to adequately assess two aspects of the impact of the freeway. The first item was the impact of the displacement of persons and buildings, not on the Harrisburg corridor itself, but on the areas where displaced residents would move to. The second item was the impact on current and future air, noise, and water pollution in the corridor. Finally a governmental agency had put itself on Holgin's side. The *Houston Chronicle* quoted Holgin, "The EPA ruling on the draft report is a victory for the people in the Harrisburg community. It shows that somebody is looking out for us." The head of Houston's urban highway program, Bill Ward, was confident the problem could be overcome, saying, "We will do everything we can to answer the EPA's objections."⁷⁴

The EPA ruling turned the tide in favor of the opposition, but it was not a final decision and both Holgin and TxDOT continued their efforts. Holgin appeared before Houston City Council on May 22, 1974, to ask the council what action it planned to take on the freeway. The city of Houston reiterated its support for the freeway.⁷⁵

The Death of a Freeway

But the freeway was doomed. TxDOT's budget shortfall was developing into a full-blown crisis, and TxDOT was forced to put the Harrisburg Freeway and other projects on hold. In September 1976 Bill Ward stated in a project status letter, "It is assumed that further development of the Harrisburg Freeway is suspended until the funding situation is cleared up." Looking back on the period, Ward remembered, "There was no point to pursue a project that had opposition since there were no funds to build the freeway." With political support for the highway program at an all-time low, it didn't make sense to continue to generate negative publicity.⁷⁶

The freeway still had widespread public support in April 1975, however. A study by the Texas Transportation Institute found that 70% of a sample of residents in the freeway corridor supported the freeway. Sixty-six percent of Hispanic residents, who comprised 61% of the survey participants, favored the freeway. The Harrisburg Freeway Study Team issued a final route report in August 1976, stating its final case for the freeway.⁷⁷

Holgin closely monitored any new developments regarding the freeway, but there would be none. The free-

way was dead. The freeway didn't burn out, but it faded away, a victim of declining financial support for the highway system and public opposition. TxDOT moved on. Dexter Jones moved on, focusing on highway safety research. Holgin moved out of the area in 1986.

In the final analysis, it can be concluded that insufficient highway construction funding was the principal cause of the demise of the Harrisburg Freeway. But when the freeway's future became tenuous due to the funding situation, Richard Holgin's opposition probably was the decisive factor in the ultimate decision to abandon the freeway. Had there been no opposition or if there had been visible community support, the Harrisburg Freeway probably would have moved forward, slowly but surely.

The Harrisburg Freeway remained on official planning maps until 1992, when it was finally deleted from the city of Houston's *Major Thoroughfare and Freeway Plan*. Left behind at the eastern end of the proposed Harrisburg Freeway is a dramatic reminder of the cancelled freeway. Just to the west of a four-level interchange completed in 1974, the freeway grinds to an abrupt halt and traffic exits to the frontage roads. The frontage roads proceed for another half-mile (0.8 km), with the land once designated for the freeway main lanes now vacant.

Is Houston a better place without the Harrisburg Freeway? Is the Harrisburg community a better place because the freeway was not built? To Richard Holgin, the answer is yes.

To others, the answer is no. Frank Mancuso, Houston City Council member during the period, looked back in 1999 and stated about the freeway, "I still think there's a need, more than ever." While other neighborhoods close to downtown experienced a renaissance during the 1990s, particularly the Heights area near the Katy Freeway, the Harrisburg corridor was largely left behind. Perhaps the area remained just as Richard Holgin wanted it, serving its low-income and immigrant residents with modest homes and a scattering of small businesses. The decline and stagnation of the Harrisburg area was a particularly bitter pill for Dexter Jones to swallow. In a career that included many successful safety improvements to the highway system, including Houston's leading highway lighting program, the demise of the Harrisburg Freeway stood out as the greatest single disappointment. For him, it was an opportunity lost—an opportunity to revitalize a neighborhood to which he had a personal connection.⁷⁸