

Southwest Freeway, US 59 South

The relationship between land developers and freeways has always been a cozy one. The freeway gets built, the land becomes prime for real estate development, and developers make millions. But what if the freeway doesn't come, or what if it is indefinitely delayed? If you are the real estate developer, you do whatever it takes to get the freeway built. That includes offering to donate the land for the freeway and aggressively lobbying political officials to build it.

In 1957, the Southwest Freeway became the recipient of Houston's first big freeway land giveaway when real estate developer Frank Sharp pulled together a large coalition of landowners to donate a 10.5-mile (17 km) right-of-way strip for the freeway. Sharp needed the freeway to get shoppers to his planned mall and suburbanites to their new houses in his huge Sharpstown community. Sharp probably never envisioned that the Southwest Freeway would someday become Houston's freeway-era main street and one of the busiest freeways in the United States.

Origins

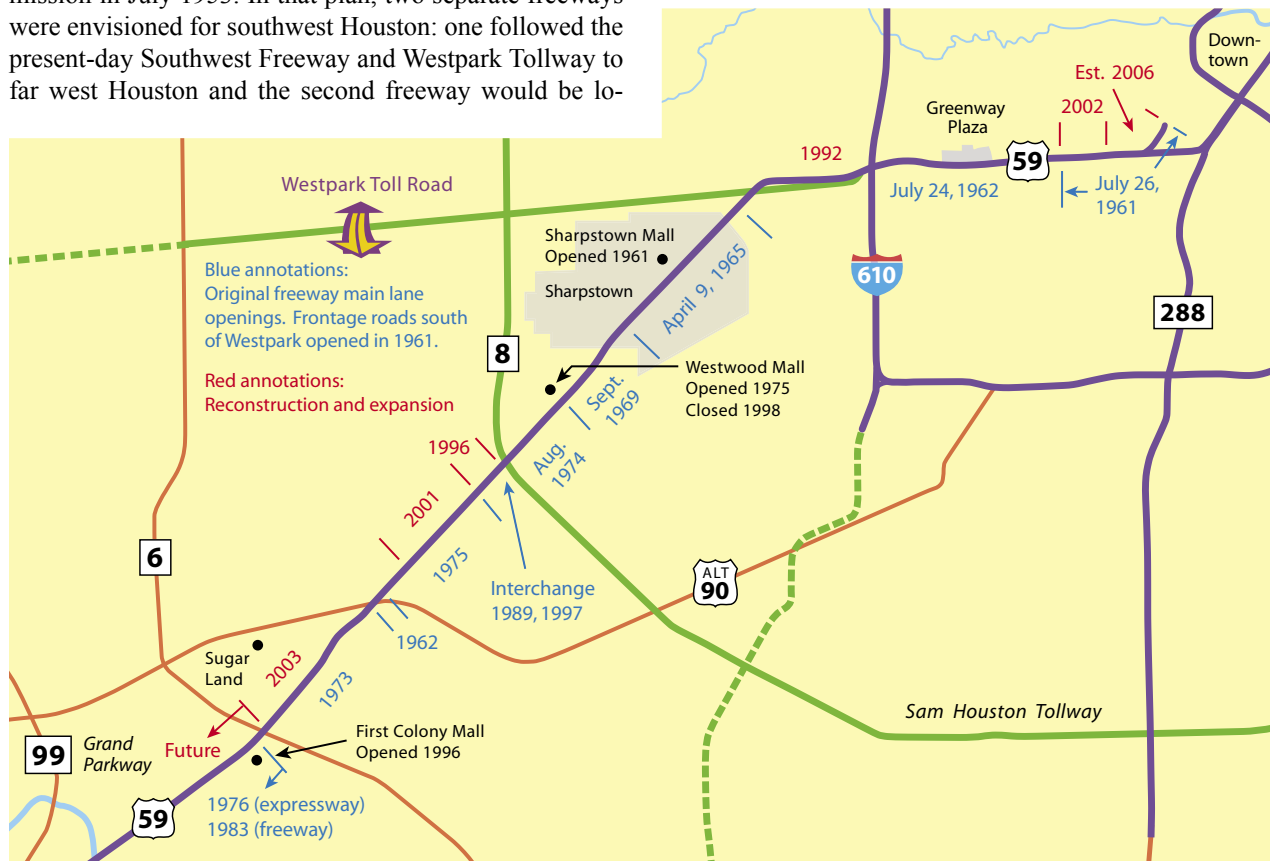
The need for a freeway serving the southwest part of Houston was first identified in a 1953 origin and destination study that served as the basis for the formulation of Houston's first freeway master plan. Local authorities presented the master plan to the Texas Transportation Commission in July 1953. In that plan, two separate freeways were envisioned for southwest Houston: one followed the present-day Southwest Freeway and Westpark Tollway to far west Houston and the second freeway would be lo-

Southwest Freeway

Designated as freeway	1953
First freeway section open	1961
Freeway complete	1975 (to Sugar Land)
Reconstruction	1989–ongoing
Max traffic volume, 2001	337,000 vehicles per day
Future construction	Depress elevated freeway into trench (in progress in 2003); expand freeway in Fort Bend County.

cated on the US 90A ("Alt-90")-South Main corridor (see map on page 13). In September 1953, the Texas Transportation Commission authorized route determination studies for US 59 from the Fort Bend County line to US 75 (now IH 45) in downtown Houston.²⁶

In late 1953 the plans for southwest Houston were being reviewed. In a December 29, 1953, letter to the Houston office of TxDOT, City of Houston Planning Director Ralph Ellifrit reported that his department had devised a new alignment for the Southwest Freeway which curved southward from the Westpark corridor and connected with the present-day US 90A near Sugar Land. "We have made some very rough studies of such a location and would like





Pre-freeway US 59: Before the freeway era, major highways were routed through the city on ordinary city streets. This view, from around 1950, shows US 59 where it followed today's South Main. (Photo: HMRC MSS 227-519)

to show it to you after the first of the year to see what you think about it," Ellifrit wrote.²⁷

The new alignment of the Southwest Freeway as proposed by Ellifrit closely resembled the final alignment and would be adopted in the March 1954 revision of the master plan for Houston's freeways. The Westpark Freeway and US 90A Freeway were eliminated in the 1954 plan. The alignment appearing on the city of Houston's 1955 *Major Thoroughfare and Freeway Plan*, the first edition of the plan to include the full freeway system, was still not final, however. Plans for the freeway alignment in 1955 showed the freeway veering southward in the vicinity of Wesleyan and proceeding westward along Glenmont Street, which is approximately one-half mile (0.8 km) south of the actual constructed alignment. In January 1956 the final alignment was adopted. In August 1960, the Texas Transportation Commission formally approved

the closure of the downtown gap in US 59, connecting the Southwest Freeway to the Eastex Freeway.²⁸

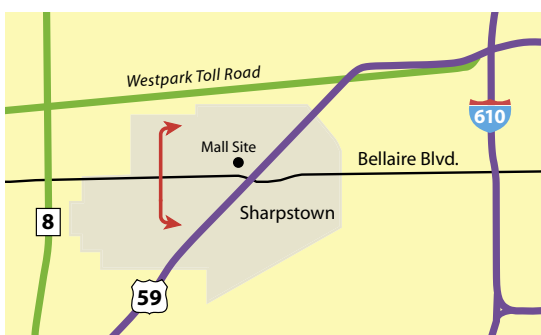
Freeway Suburbia

Just southwest of the urbanized area of Houston was a huge tract of land whose destiny would be shaped by the imminent age of the freeway and freeway-driven suburban development. The newly designated Southwest Freeway was aligned to cut a diagonal path right through the property. For land developer Frank Sharp, the owner of the tract, the freeway would be the backbone of his new vision of urban America—a vision he modestly named Sharpstown.

Sharp and his partners were reported to have performed the first studies for Sharpstown in early 1954, about the same time that Houston's original 1953 freeway master plan was modified to place the Southwest Freeway



Texas-sized suburbia: This is an excerpt from the full-page announcement for the grand opening of Sharpstown that appeared in the Houston newspapers on March 13, 1955. The advertisement touted Sharpstown as the world's largest residential development, a "city within a city" with 25,000 homes planned. The opening ceremony featured the sealing of a time capsule to be opened on March 13, 2000. When the time capsule, a metal enclosure, was opened, moisture infiltration had damaged or destroyed all the contents.



Opening a path to suburbia: This 1959 view looks east over Sharpstown, with the Southwest Freeway frontage roads crossing diagonally across the photograph. As part of the deal in which landowners donated 10.5 miles (17 km) of right-of-way for the Southwest Freeway in 1957, TxDOT agreed to begin construction of the frontage roads within one year. In this view, the first section of Sharpstown is at right center, abutting the frontage roads. Within five years of this photograph, nearly all the vacant land in this view had been developed with housing, apartments, and shopping centers. (Photo: The Positive Image)

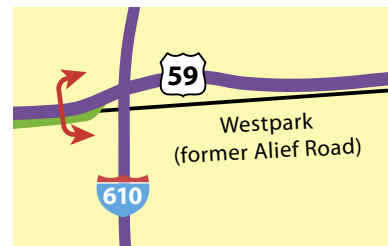
on its alignment through Sharpstown. Speculation that the Southwest Freeway was realigned for Sharp has been a freeway planning legend in Houston. Available documents suggest that the Sharpstown alignment was a technically superior alignment, and Sharp's cooperation in preserving the freeway corridor worked to the benefit of both Sharp and Houston's freeway program. For local authorities who faced the difficult and expensive job of right-of-way acquisition for freeways, it was logical to align the freeway where there was a single, cooperative landowner.²⁹

Sharp and his partners formally acquired a 4,000-acre tract known as Westmoreland Farms in June 1954 and added another 2,500 acres nine months later. Plans for

the new project were first announced on July 10, 1954. Whereas many freeways in the 1950s cut paths through established neighborhoods, the Southwest Freeway would be the lifeblood of Sharpstown, not a destructive force. The entire community would be designed around the freeway.

The sheer size of what was touted as the "world's largest residential development" was impressive, with 25,000 homes planned for the 6,500 acres.* The planned community would be substantially larger than the record holder

* Only about 6,800 single-family homes were ultimately constructed in Sharpstown. Land was converted to commercial or educational use, some of the original acreage was sold, and a planned development of high-rise housing north of Sharpstown Mall was not built. There probably was also some marketing hype in the original announcements.



The birth of Houston's busiest freeway: This December 1959 view looks east over the beginnings of the Southwest Freeway-West Loop interchange. This interchange would be the first four-level interchange in Texas with modern design characteristics. The four-level Fort Worth Mixmaster at IH 30 and IH 35W was completed in 1958, but it was built to first-generation freeway standards with left exits and poor geometrics. The section of the Southwest Freeway to be built in the immediate foreground would go on to become Houston's busiest freeway starting in 1993 and continuing in 2003, with 337,000 vehicles per day in 2001. (Photo: TxDOT)

"Sharpstown [is] completely planned and geared for the motor"

Houston Post, March 14, 1955

at the time, William Levitt's 16,000-home Levittown, Pennsylvania. But more significant was the integration of all urban amenities into Sharpstown, including a shopping mall, schools, churches, hospitals, a country club, and of course, the freeway. A representative from the Federal Housing Administration remarked, "The primary consideration is not size, but the satisfaction of developing the kind of city which will stand as a model in years to come." It was, he said, "a new experiment in our way of life." The large-scale development of virgin land also provided savings that impressed out-of-town reporters. The real estate writer for the *Cleveland Press* observed that "developed lots which cost \$2,000 here would start at \$3,500 to \$4,000 around Cleveland." Also noteworthy to reporters was Sharpstown's country club, which would bring country club living to all residents of Sharpstown for an affordable price.³⁰

But perhaps the most significant aspect of Sharpstown

was succinctly stated by the *Houston Post* on March 14, 1955: "Sharpstown [is] completely planned and geared for the motor" This was automobile suburbia taken to a new level of scale. The architect for the planned community shopping center stated, "We have designed it to maintain four or five square feet of parking space to every square foot of shopping space." Main Street was gone, and residents would soon be greeted by a small ocean of a parking lot at the neighborhood shopping mall.³¹

On March 13, 1955, Frank Sharp launched his Sharpstown community in a large, locally televised ceremony attended by thousands. Two-bedroom and three-bedroom homes were priced from \$12,500 to \$16,800. A month later 54 homes were complete and 420 homes were under construction. A year later about 1,000 homes were complete. Sharp celebrated the first anniversary of his community with a big birthday party featuring a 20-foot-wide by 15-foot-tall birthday cake and appearances by film star Walter Pidgeon and actress Jarna Lewis.³²

Getting the Machinery in Gear

With the formulation of Houston's freeway plan in 1954, there was a huge job ahead for the agencies responsible for getting the freeways built. Getting the freeway

construction machinery in motion and up to full speed proved to be problematic in the mid-1950s, slowing down many projects, including the Southwest Freeway. The alignment of the Southwest Freeway from Wesleyan to Hillcroft was in a state of flux until January 1956, preventing the protection and purchase of right-of-way. TxDOT officials were contemplating ideas for the freeway design, including a nine-lane facility with three reversible lanes inside Loop 610. Agencies responsible for acquiring right-of-way were understaffed and overwhelmed with the workload. In the meantime, development in southwest Houston continued at a furious pace. On September 19, 1955, Ralph Ellifrit, director of the city of Houston's Planning Department, sent a letter to TxDOT identifying the Southwest Freeway inside the loop as the "most critical point" in terms of potential loss of right-of-way to development, saying, "There has been too much uncertainty as to design and exact location."³³

In early 1957, Harris County took steps to expedite right-of-way acquisition by authorizing the hiring of 20 additional appraisers. A total of 547 parcels needed to be acquired for the freeway, and efforts to that point had acquired only a small fraction of the total needed. In July 1957, the right-of-way acquisition program was still struggling and Eugene Maier, director of the city of Houston's Traffic and Transportation Department, sent a letter to Mayor Oscar Holcombe recommending that every effort be made to develop a "crash" program to acquire necessary right-of-way for the freeway. At a freeway planning meeting in July 1957, local officials designated

the inner loop section of the freeway as the top priority for construction. The process began to pick up momentum soon afterward.³⁴

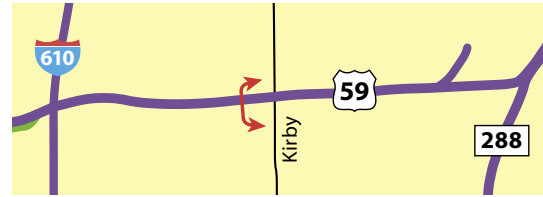
Let's Make a Deal

Sharpstown was a huge success and developed rapidly, but there was one big problem. Plans for the Southwest Freeway outside Loop 610 were stuck in neutral as all efforts focused on the section inside the loop. Frank Sharp had to put his plans for a new air-conditioned shopping center on hold since the freeway would be critical in providing customers to the mall. To make matters worse, Fort Bend County southwest of Houston announced in early August 1957 that it could not provide funds for right-of-way for the section of the Southwest Freeway within its boundaries.³⁵

By late summer 1957, real estate interests in southwest Houston realized that they would need to take matters into their own hands to get the freeway built. While Frank Sharp had offered to donate a 300-foot-wide (91 m) right-of-way strip through 3.2 miles (5.1 km) of his community, there was still a large section of the 11.1-mile (18 km) freeway segment for which no right-of-way was in hand. On September 6, 1957, a group of landowners on the originally planned freeway alignment submitted an offer to donate a total of 10.5 miles (17 km) of right-of-way for the freeway—Sharp's original 3.2 miles plus 7.4 miles of new donations. Only one-half mile (0.8 km) of right-of-way would need to be acquired by authorities. The offer hinged on the stipulation that construction of the freeway



Frank Sharp finally gets his freeway: On April 9, 1965, the Southwest Freeway main lanes through Sharpstown were dedicated. The freeway frontage roads, completed in 1961, had kept development in Sharpstown running at full speed. By the time the main lanes were dedicated, about two-thirds of the land in Sharpstown was already developed. Visible in the photo from left to right: Louie Welch, mayor of Houston; Gail Whitcomb, president of the Houston Chamber of Commerce; Herbert C. Petry, chairman of the State Highway Commission; Frank Sharp; J. H. Kultgen, member of the State Highway Commission. (Photo: TxDOT)



Moving into the major league of freeways:

This May 1961 photograph looking east shows construction in progress at the Kirby Road intersection. This section of freeway was the first in Houston to be constructed to modern design standards with high traffic-carrying capacity. The depressed section of freeway in the upper part of the photo, with 10 freeway lanes, is nearly complete and was opened to traffic in July 1961. The section of freeway under construction in the foreground was opened in July 1962. (Photo: TxDOT)

freeways dwindled starting in the 1970s.

Progress on the inner loop section of the Southwest Freeway also began to gain momentum in late 1957. By August 1958, 188 of the 547 right-of-way parcels had been acquired. In September 1959 the last parcel was acquired. The path was clear for construction. With the freeway right-of-way in hand and construction underway, the suburbanization of southwest Houston had the green light to proceed at full speed.³⁷

Building the Freeway

The freeway section inside Loop 610 would be the largest and most modern freeway segment in Houston at the time. The first full freeway segment from downtown to Kirby, a three-mile (4.8 km), 10-lane facility with both elevated and below-grade sections, was dedicated on July 26, 1961. On December 22, 1961, the freeway frontage roads from Sharpstown southward to US 90A in Sugar Land were dedicated, although sections had opened in advance of the official dedication. On July 24, 1962, a dedication ceremony underneath

frontage roads would begin within one year. On September 26, 1957, the landowners and local authorities presented their offer to the Texas Transportation Commission in Austin. The offer was accepted. In March 1958, TxDOT made the Southwest Freeway its top priority among non-interstate highways, allocating \$6.2 million of the \$15.6 million in available Houston-area funds to the freeway, the largest chunk going to any single freeway. Construction contracts for the frontage roads through Sharpstown were awarded in the next few months.³⁶

It was nothing new for real estate interests to be supportive of freeways. What was new was the donation of such a large amount of right-of-way to expedite the freeway construction. This arrangement would be prophetic of the future of freeway construction in Houston, as real estate interests would step forward with land donations to get freeways built when government resources for new

the West Loop overpass marked the completion of the freeway from downtown to just south of Westpark near Sharpstown, where traffic exited to the frontage roads. Motorists now had an uninterrupted roadway from downtown to far southwest Houston, and Frank Sharp had his coveted freeway access to Sharpstown. The interchange at Loop 610 was only the second four-level interchange in Texas and was far more modern in design than the Mixmaster in downtown Fort Worth, which had opened in 1958. On April 9, 1965, the freeway main lanes through Sharpstown, from south of Westpark to Beechnut, were opened. Frank Sharp finally had his freeway. By then, residential development in Sharpstown was about two-thirds complete. The main lanes pushed southward section by section in the following years and were complete to Sugar Land in 1975. The expressway south of Sugar Land opened in 1976.³⁸

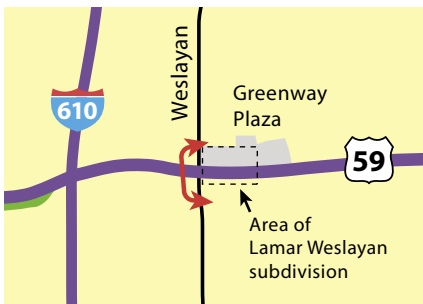


Big traffic jam, tiny car: Amidst all the hulking American cars in this 1962 photograph, the driver of the BMW 600 must have felt a little overwhelmed. The BMW 600 was an enlarged version of the Motocoupe, a popular minicar of the 1950s that originated with the Italian company Iso in 1953 and was licensed to numerous automobile manufacturers, including BMW in Germany. Approximately 8,500 Motocoupes were exported to the United States by BMW starting in 1957. What was believed to be the first Motocoupe in the United States arrived at the Port of Houston in late 1956 and was put on display in the lobby of the Houston Bank and Trust Company. The 772-pound (350 kg) Motocoupe had an air-cooled one-cylinder motorcycle engine capable of speeds up to 60 miles per hour (96 km/h). The BMW 600 was slightly larger than the Motocoupe, weighing about 1140 pounds (515 kg) and powered by a two-cylinder engine providing a top speed around 63 miles per hour (100 km/h). Notice that the Motocoupe and BMW 600 do not have driver-side doors. The front panel of the vehicles including the steering wheel hinged open to let the driver in. The BMW 600 has a passenger-side door for its rear seat (not visible in the photo), while the Motocoupe has only the front door. As for the traffic jam, it was probably due to an accident or the abrupt end of the freeway just ahead.³⁹ (Photo: upper, *Houston Chronicle*; below, Greater Houston Partnership)

A Neighborhood in the Wrong Place

In the 1960s, a story of a freeway, a neighborhood, and big-time real estate development began to unfold on the Southwest Freeway inside Loop 610. The neighborhood was Lamar Wesleyan, a community of modest post-World War II tract houses constructed around 1950. In 1962 the Southwest Freeway cut a path through the south end of the Lamar Wesleyan neighborhood, displacing 52 homes, but the neighborhood remained intact with houses on both sides of the freeway. In 1963 a 41-acre tract at the Southwest Freeway and Buffalo Speedway, just east of Lamar Wesleyan, was purchased for development. Real estate developer Kenneth Schnitzer and his Century Properties development firm began development of office towers





First the freeway, then the real estate developers: The Lamar Wesleyan subdivision had the unfortunate luck of being in the path of the Southwest Freeway and the westward expansion of the Greenway Plaza office complex. The above 1960 view looking east shows right-of-way clearance through the subdivision. Most of the subdivision remained intact, for the moment. The Greenway Plaza real estate development was launched in the late 1960s on the vacant tract of land in the upper left of the above photo. The developer, Kenneth Schnitzer, needed more land, so he bought all the homes in the Lamar Wesleyan subdivision to make way for expansion of the office complex. In the 1973 photo at the top of the opposite page, the first displacements had occurred for a new sports arena, which was just beginning construction. By the late 1970s all the homes in the neighborhood had been removed. The lower photo on the opposite page shows Greenway Plaza in September 2002. (Photos: above, HMRC RGD6-892; opposite upper, HMRC; opposite lower, September 2002)





No relief in sight: This section of the Southwest Freeway opened in 1962, and by 1968 severe traffic congestion had already developed around Loop 610 at rush hour. A 1968 study recommended an aggressive program of improvements to avoid “complete paralysis of traffic on the Southwest Freeway.” This photograph, looking east towards the Loop 610 interchange, was taken in 1972 when TxDOT was discussing plans for widening the freeway to 10 main lanes from Hillcroft all the way into downtown. Then came the 1970s highway funding crisis and population boom in Houston. The Southwest Freeway became a commuter’s nightmare. In 1992, 20 years after TxDOT first started planning improvements, the expansion of this section was finally completed.⁴⁰ (Photo: National Archives NWDNS-412-DA-10534).

on the tract in the late 1960s. By 1968 Schnitzer had big plans for his development known as Greenway Plaza, proclaiming, “There is no office development in the country that compares in size, scope, and accessibility, with the exception of Century City in Los Angeles.” But there was one problem. Forty-one acres would not be enough for his big plans.⁴¹

So Schnitzer looked west—to the Lamar Wesleyan neighborhood. During the 1960s he began to buy up the 350 houses in Lamar Wesleyan, often personally closing deals with homeowners. By the early 1970s houses were being cleared for development, including the land for the Summit sports arena, which opened in 1975 and was renamed Compaq Center in 1997. However, Kenneth Schnitzer was unable to use his charm to close the deal on one house. The homeowners, Jim and Dorothy Lee, were demanding \$500,000 for their home, which would otherwise have been worth about \$26,000. The asking price translates to about 1.51 million in 2003 dollars. Finally in 1974, Schnitzer gave in to the homeowner’s demand so development could move forward.⁴²

By the late 1970s the Lamar Wesleyan neighborhood had been wiped off the map. While the Southwest Freeway was directly responsible for only a small number of displacements, its presence provided the impetus for real estate development that displaced the entire neighborhood. It was perhaps one of the most interesting twists in neighborhood displacement resulting from freeway construction.

Too Successful for Its Own Good

The Southwest Freeway quickly became Houston’s most important freeway corridor in terms of commercial real estate development, activity centers, and population. But with success comes traffic, and lots of it. In 1968, just six years after the opening of the freeway, a study by a consulting firm reported that peak-hour speeds averaged less than 10 miles per hour and an aggressive program of improvements was necessary to “avoid complete paralysis of traffic on the Southwest Freeway between Buffalo Speedway and the West Loop.” In 1972, just 10 years after its opening, TxDOT officials were discussing plans to

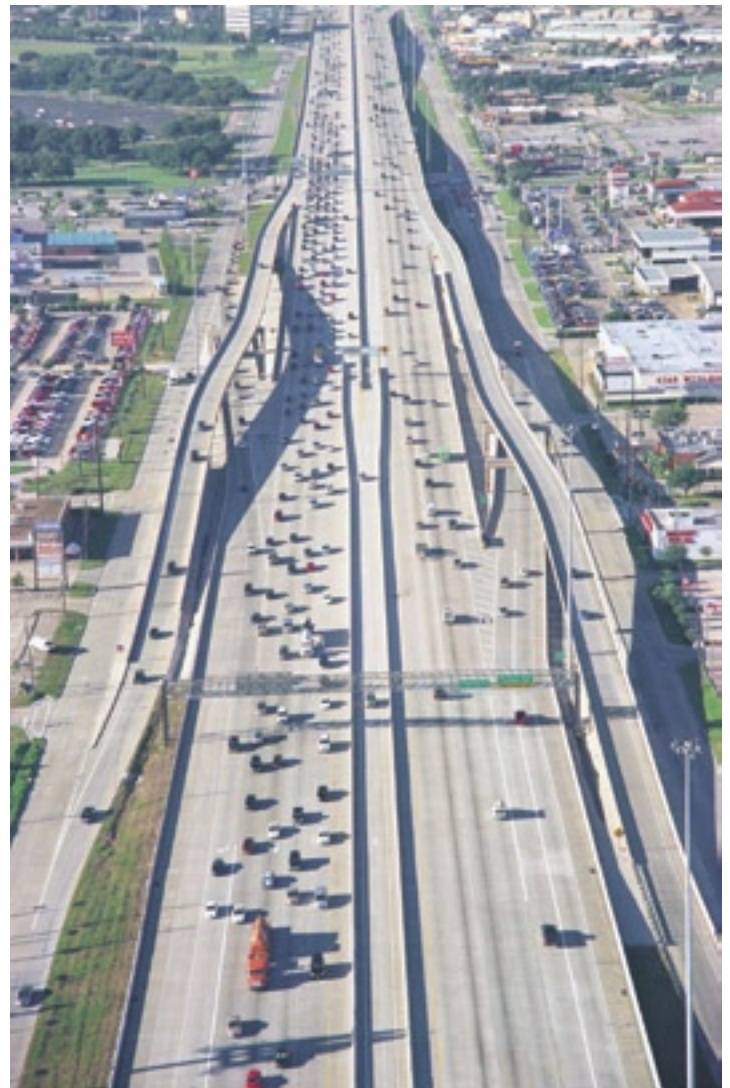
Key dates in the history of the Southwest Freeway

1953	A freeway for southwest Houston is proposed as part of the freeway master plan. The freeway is approved by TxDOT in September 1953.
1954	The general alignment of the freeway is defined. The alignment is finalized in 1956.
1957	A group of landowners led by Frank Sharp donates right-of-way for 10.5 miles (17 km) of freeway.
1961	The first freeway section opens.
1962	The West Loop interchange, the first four-level stack in Houston, is completed.
1975	The freeway main lanes are completed to Sugar Land.
1989	Reconstruction and expansion begins. A long segment from Shepherd to Beltway 8 is completed in 1992.
1993	The Southwest Freeway becomes Houston's busiest.
1997	The interchange at Beltway 8 is completed.
2002	Work begins to place the elevated section of freeway at Montrose into a trench.
Future	Expansion in Fort Bend County.

expand the 8-lane sections of the freeway to 10 lanes and revise ramp configurations. Officials stated that the expansion might begin in four to six years. The highway funding crisis of the 1970s caused an indefinite postponement of plans for improvements. In the meantime, Houston's 1970s energy boom unleashed a massive amount of development along the Southwest Freeway corridor and in the nearby Galleria area, feeding more and more traffic onto the already overloaded freeway. The 6-lane freeway outside Loop 610 became a critical choke point in Houston's freeway system.⁴³

In 1981 the Southwest Freeway broke the 200,000-vehicle-per-day barrier at a point just outside Loop 610. Traffic continued to build during the 1980s with no funding available to make any improvements to the freeway. In 1989 work finally began on a major expansion project to make the full length of the freeway inside Loop 610 ten lanes wide, the section outside the loop to the Westpark curve twelve lanes wide, and the remaining section to Beltway 8 eight lanes wide. A barrier-separated transitway in the center of the freeway was also added. With the completion of the project in 1992, the Southwest Freeway was positioned to become Houston's traffic volume leader, overtaking the West Loop in 1993 and breaking the 300,000-vehicle-per-day barrier in 1996. Traffic volume was 337,000 vehicles per day in 2001 just outside Loop 610.

Expansion continued south from Beltway 8 in the mid-1990s. Plans were also being formulated to reconstruct the freeway near the downtown exit and add a transitway. Original plans called for the construction of



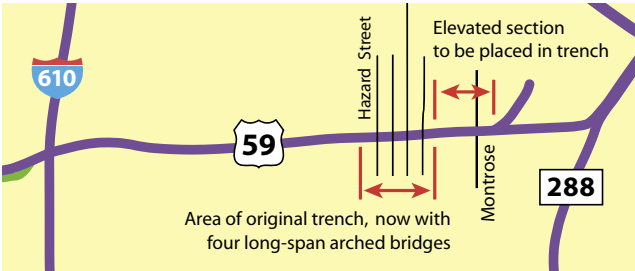
Braided ramps: This photograph just outside Beltway 8 of a section of freeway reconstructed in 2001 shows a frequently used design in Houston's current generation of freeways: the braided ramp. Braided ramps allow both entrance and exit ramps to be built at the same location and are particularly suited where there is limited distance between intersections. (Photo: November 2002)



an elevated structure above the existing elevated freeway lanes at Montrose Boulevard, prompting substantial protest from the surrounding neighborhoods. The final adopted plan called for the demolition of the 10-lane elevated freeway, with the expanded freeway including transitway lanes depressed into a new trench. Elevated freeways have been demolished in several places in the United States, including Fort Worth (Texas), San Francisco, and Boston. However, this appears to be the first case where an existing elevated freeway is removed and replaced with a trench at the same location. The new trench will feature the distinctive long-span arched bridges that were added during the



Excavation: This view dating from around 1960 shows the excavation for the depressed section of freeway near downtown. At the time, this excavation for the 10-lane freeway was the largest and most impressive construction project to occur on Houston's freeway system. (Photo: HMRC MSS 334-1153)



Houston's most appropriately named street: For 40 years Hazard Street was, in fact, one of Houston's most hazardous streets. The Hazard Street bridge over the Southwest Freeway had a clearance of only 13 feet, 11 inches (4.24 m) and was frequently the scene of collisions with oversize vehicles. The damage to the bridge structure (underneath the height signs) visible in the photo was not part of the demolition process—it was the result of collisions during the previous 40 years. The replacement span is an arched structure with improved vertical clearance. On August 12, 2000, the original bridge was demolished. (Photo: Chuck Fuhs)

Tropical Storm Allison:

When the storm hit in June 2001, it unleashed a major freeway flood event in Houston and filled the Southwest Freeway trench nearly to ground level. At that time, construction was in progress to widen the trench. Most motorists were able keep their vehicles out of the water, but the construction contractor, Williams Brothers Construction, wasn't so lucky. It lost 42 pieces of equipment, including 22 pieces of machinery (including large cranes, such as the one shown in the lower photo), 17 trucks, and 3 message boards. (Photos: Robert Cowart)

June 2005 Update: The northbound US 59 elevated structure was demolished in March 2004. Demolition of the southbound elevated structure, shown in the photo, was complete in May 2005. The entire project to replace the elevated freeway with a trenched freeway will be complete by the end of 2006

The Montrose elevated, 1961-2004:

The elevated structure in the photo will be demolished and replaced with a trenched freeway. The project, which began in late 2002, is perhaps the first instance in the United States of an elevated freeway being removed and replaced with a trenched facility at the same location. Elevated freeways in other cities have been relocated to new locations or placed in tunnels. The reconstructed freeway will have the same design as the adjacent section of freeway and will feature two more long-span arched bridges. (Photo: July 2002)





Houston's busiest freeway: The Southwest Freeway just outside Loop 610 is Houston's busiest freeway, with 337,000 vehicles per day in 2001. The reconstruction to its present configuration with 12 main freeway lanes was completed in 1992. At the right side of this photo, construction on the Westpark Tollway, an elevated structure at this location, is in progress. (Photo: September 2002)

reconstruction of the adjacent depressed section, completed in December 2002.

Efforts to designate a new Interstate 69 corridor from Indianapolis, Indiana, to the Texas-Mexico border also gained momentum in the 1990s and a study completed in 2000 identified options for the routing of Interstate 69 through Houston. Most of US 59 in Texas will ultimately be absorbed into Interstate 69, but it remains to be seen how US 59 in Houston will be affected.

Sharpstowns of the Future

Freeway history has a way of repeating itself. People still want suburban housing, and developers still want to make money. Further south along the Southwest Freeway

in Sugar Land, the next big real estate development, First Colony, began to take shape in the late 1970s. Houston's second loop, Beltway 8, connected to the Southwest Freeway in 1988. Intensive development in and around Sugar Land in the 1980s and 1990s overwhelmed the freeway, and by the late 1990s the city of Sugar Land was doing everything possible to get the freeway widened. Whereas Frank Sharp brought land to the table, Sugar Land brought money. Major expansion in Sugar Land began in 2000 and was completed in May 2003. Further south along the freeway is the intersection with Houston's third loop, the Grand Parkway. The Sharpstowns of the future are a glimmer in the eye of land developers.

Sugar Land: The photos on the opposite page show the Southwest Freeway in Sugar Land, the suburban city named after the sugar mill that operated there from 1843 to 2002. The upper photo shows construction of the Southwest Freeway in 1970. The view shows the first major real estate development in Sugar Land, Venetian Estates, which included the finger lakes visible in the photo. The freeway opened in 1973. With the opening of the freeway, other large real estate developments followed. The lower photo, taken in 2000, shows the development which has occurred, including the Sugar Creek golf course community, which was developed shortly after the freeway opening. The large First Colony real estate development was launched in 1977 and other developments followed in the 1980s and 1990s. The extensive development necessitated the freeway expansion, which began in 2000 and was completed in May 2003. (Photos: The Positive Image)







Beltway interchange: This view looks southwest along the Southwest Freeway at the Beltway 8 interchange. This interchange was built in two phases, with the first completed in 1989 and the second completed in 1997. (Photo: May 2003)



Overarching style: This view looks west along the freeway with the Mandell overpass at the bottom. (Photo: May 2003)