



Brian O'Neill: Building park over I-579 could cap rebirth of Hill

April 12, 2014 8:48 PM

By Brian O'Neill / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Crosstown Boulevard, one of the shortest highways in the history of man, opened in the late 1980s. Nobody said, "How pretty."

We tend to build ugly when we build urban highways, and this one is about as scenic as a prison yard. Traffic engineers sought only to move cars swiftly through a Downtown trough and succeeded for the most part with the road also known as Interstate 579.

There was just one prankish glitch: a sign for a Fort Duquesne Boulevard exit that didn't exist. PennDOT cut that exit from the original budget, but no one told the sign makers (heh, heh). Boy did Pittsburgh fool a lot of trusting tourists -- *bwah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah!* -- until the mistake was fixed in the early '90s.

Now another error might be fixed. Though this remedy would be considerably more costly, it would spruce up a prominently barren part of the cityscape. We're talking nothing less than a park that would be built over the highway trough and reconnect a redeveloping Hill District to Downtown.

The Pittsburgh-Allegheny County [Sports & Exhibition Authority](#) voted Thursday to accept a \$920,000 federal grant toward \$1.1 million in preliminary design work on a cap covering the highway. Neither the SEA, the city nor the county has the \$27 million it would cost to get it done, but the renaissance of what is now billed as the North Shore began in much the same way.

In 2000, the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources came up with \$1 million to develop a mile and a half of parkland on the north side of the Allegheny River, from the Fort Wayne Railroad Bridge to the West End Bridge.

Another \$46 million had to follow, but when it did it resulted in a decorative and inviting stretch that tens of thousands of Pittsburghers and visitors have enjoyed in the past decade-plus. That investment enlivened a part of the city that had been stuck in neutral for the three decades that Three Rivers Stadium loomed over an asphalt sea.

The new project would essentially cap 300 feet of the depressed roadway between Bigelow Boulevard and Centre Avenue. Motorists speeding along below would travel under an unusually wide overpass. The architectural renderings show a leafy trapezoidal park above them, criss-crossed with footpaths. A tree-lined promenade would take walkers past a restaurant with outdoor seating; a small parking lot is now there off Washington Place.

Architectural renderings always look good, but almost anything would beat the status quo of empty air punctuated by concrete. A number of cities have already shown the way. Not long after PennDOT completed this highway more than a quarter-century ago, the final section of Interstate 10 was built through downtown Phoenix. The difference is its depressed freeway was covered by 19 side-by-side bridges that became the foundation of a 29-acre park with picnic areas and sand volleyball.

Mary Conturo, executive director of the SEA, credited U.S. Sen. Bob Casey with getting the design grant, but the next phase of funding looks extraordinarily competitive. The U.S. Department of Transportation has TIGER grants (let's use the acronym because the full name is too boring to share) for projects that promote, among other things, "livability and environmental sustainability." The 2014 appropriation of \$600 million won't cover much of the country.

The federal highway program of previous decades blithely divided neighborhoods, and a lot of cities are trying to reknit them. Hill District residents are keen to see a neighborhood rebirth on the 28 acres that fan out just east of I-579 at the old Civic Arena site. The plan is to restore a street grid that would take Wylie Avenue clear down to Washington Place. New homes, retail and a couple of other small parks would be part of that package.

That future might not be easy to envision if you walk over there, particularly if you encounter the same dimwit who made a right turn on red through a crosswalk and almost creamed me on a recent afternoon. But it's easy to believe it can happen if you've ever visited the North Shore or the SouthSide Works.

The public will have to spend a fair amount of green to get a little green there, and building a support platform on the median of a crowded interstate should be interesting, but the nice thing

about parks is they're not like green bananas. They don't go bad in two weeks. Done right, they can show generations of Pittsburghers that it's OK to aspire toward a more beautiful city.