

History of the Paul B. Henry Freeway (M-6)

The Paul B. Henry Freeway project can be traced as far back as the Defense Highway Act of 1941, when the need for an east/west highway in Grand Rapids was outlined in federal legislation. In the late 1950s, it was part of a plan to replace US-16 connecting Detroit, Lansing, Grand Rapids and Muskegon. The route to Muskegon was planned for the south and west sides of Grand Rapids, however, when I-96 was constructed in the early 1960s, local and state officials decided it should be located on the east and north sides of the metro area. Later, I-196 (the Gerald R. Ford Freeway) was constructed from I-96 on the east side of Grand Rapids, through downtown and west to Holland.

In the 1960s and '70s when the Kent County/Gerald R. Ford International Airport was relocated to its current site, and development accelerated in southern Kent County, interest in a new east/west route was revived. During this period, Rep. Martin D. Buth of Comstock Park was among the first legislators to take a lead in supporting the new alignment by vigorously advocating each year for the design and construction of the highway.

Public Act 327 of 1972, sponsored by Rep. David M. Serotkin, sought to identify new state funding for 13 critical highway projects, one of which was the South Beltline. Legislators recognized a growing need to reduce congestion on existing state highways such as M-11 (28th Street), and local roads such as 44th Street. In the 1980s, the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) and area officials, through the local metropolitan planning organization, began conducting major studies of routing options and the potential impact of the proposed South Beltline.

The formal Environmental Impact Statement, with the South Beltline in its current location, was endorsed locally, and approved by state and federal officials in 1993. MDOT initiated design and property acquisitions for the new highway, designated as M-6, shortly thereafter. Construction of Phase I of the new freeway between I-96 and M-37, began in 1997 and the freeway opened in 2001 - more than six months early. The M-6/US-131 interchange alone cost approximately \$145 million - the single largest contract in MDOT history. There were 22 contracts awarded to 91 different contractors and subcontractors, from the fall of 1997 to the spring of 2004.

The Michigan Legislature designated M-6 as the Paul B. Henry Freeway in 1998. Congressman Henry was a longtime supporter of the freeway, both in the U.S. Congress and the Michigan Legislature.

What does it take to build a 20-mile-long freeway?

- 17,350,000 pounds of structural steel - equal to the steel in 30 Empire State Buildings.
- 682,400 feet of piling laid end to end - enough to stretch from Grand Rapids to Traverse City.
- 124,300 cubic yards of concrete for bridges - enough to build a three-foot column 90 miles high.
- 10,220,000 cubic yards of earth excavation - enough to fill the University of Michigan football stadium 40 times.
- 225 acres of wetlands were created - equal in area to the size of two 18-hole golf courses.
- 8,000 tons of steel reinforcement for bridges - equal to 266 freight cars loaded with steel.



Paul B. Henry

Congressman Paul B. Henry had a long and distinguished record in public service, starting with his election to the Michigan House of Representatives, 91st District, in 1979. He held numerous leadership positions with the state house that ultimately led to his election to the U.S. Congress in 1985, where he served until his death in 1993.

The late Mr. Henry was instrumental in securing funding for the South Beltline Freeway.

In 1998, the Michigan Legislature adopted House Bill 5851 (now PA 399 of 1998) that honored the Michigan congressman by designating the M-6/South Beltline Highway as the Paul B. Henry Freeway.



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A COMMEMORATIVE HISTORY OF M-6



THE PAUL B. HENRY FREEWAY



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