Reflecting Back on the Interstate

The Public Works Historical Society is pleased to devote this special issue of our member newsletter to the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Interstate Highway System. The Society is particularly pleased and most appreciative that the American Public Works Association (APWA) has generously agreed to include a portion of this issue in the September 2006 issue of the APWA Reporter magazine.

The Interstate was not only the largest single public works project in American history. Its vast impact has yet to be fully analyzed. Where and how we live and work has been in many ways affected by the existence of the Interstate system. Understanding what the Interstate is, how it came about, how it was designed and built, and how it has had and continues to have an impact on transportation and society is a challenge for public works historians today and for generations to come.

The Public Works Historical Society is proud to make a small contribution to this understanding. Through our unique combination of professional public works practitioners and historians, we helped to conduct the most significant effort to document the history of the Interstate. Working under a contract with the American Association of State Highway & Transportation Officials (AASHTO), the Society conducted 100 oral history interviews, carried out numerous surveys, and analyzed publications and reports. The findings of this study were published by AASHTO in 1991 as Interstate: The States and the Interstates.

From the Editor

Howard Rosen has put together a very intriguing group of essays focusing on the commemoration of the Interstate Highway System. This issue of the newsletter is the second under my editorship that gives special attention to one important theme. In this case, few practitioners and historians of public works can ignore one of the great infrastructure projects in American history. The impact of the Interstate System, however, goes well beyond the miles of concrete put down, the plethora of onramps, offramps, access roads, and so forth, and speaks to the reordering of space in the American landscape, the commitment to almost a one-dimensional transportation system built around the car and truck, to lives changed by bringing highways to places that never had them, by changing the patterns by which goods and services were delivered and, in some cases, by long-standing cleaving neighborhoods. The essays that follow point to numerous impacts of the Interstate System, and it is best to let them help tell this important story. Thanks to Howard and to all the contributors.

Martin V. Melosi
Editor

Reflecting Back on the Interstate

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The reflections included here are from persons who have played a significant role in the Interstate or who have made valuable contributions to our understanding of its historical importance. In addition to noted public works and transportation professionals, Herbert A. Goetsch, Alan E. Pisarski and David Schulz, our contributors include Bruce E. Seely and Jonathan L. Gifford, who were important members of the team that produced that AASHTO report. Other members of that team included Ellis Armstrong, John T. Greenwood, David Jones, and Mark Rose. The Society is dedicated to promoting the understanding and appreciation of public works in history. Membership is voluntary. We encourage all APWA members to join PWHS. For membership information check our website at: www.pwhs.net.

Howard Rosen
University of Wisconsin-Madison
President, Public Works Historical Society
The Interstate System: A Golden Anniversary

Bruce E. Seely

The National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, the road system listed by APWA as one of the top ten public works projects of the 20th century, marks its 50th anniversary this year. Such an anniversary is a good occasion to reflect about the real significance of the Interstate network.

It is important to note that the golden anniversary marks not the origin of the system itself, but the legislation that funded large-scale construction of this limited system of high-standard roads. The concept and the planning to implement it have a much longer history. Congress considered several plans for toll roads as work relief measures during the Depression, but a report issued in 1939 by the Bureau of Roads (BPR)—“Toll Roads and Free Roads”—laid out the first vision of a network of roads to meet higher traffic demands. Franklin Roosevelt appointed a National Interstate Regional Highway Committee in 1941 to develop recommendations for implementation, and the committee’s report helped shape the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944 and its authorization of a new system of interregional highways. The postwar explosion of motor vehicle traffic added urgency to efforts to get such a road system under construction. Federal and state highway engineers approved the basic map of an interstate system in 1947, but members of Congress wrangled for nine years about how to fund this very expensive system. Some states started work on their own, most often adopting toll financing because of limited resources. Finally, in 1956, Congress agreed to allocate $25 billion to the construction of the Interstate system. In short, the Interstate program did not spring into existence full-blown in 1956.

The consequences of this road network also became visible over a long period of time. A few outcomes were expected, such as the way that these roads would serve the needs of urban drivers, and the fact that Interstate highways would carry twenty percent or more of all traffic on only one percent of the nation’s roads. Moreover, the main lines of commercial and personal traffic were predicted rather well by the planners for the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

But many of the most significant impacts of these roads were unanticipated. Most urban supporters of the 1956 legislation, for example, assumed that Interstate routes would reinforce the economic primacy of central business districts. In fact, these roads hastened the decline of downtowns and encouraged the pre-existing movement of people to the suburbs. Lewis Mumford’s was a lonely voice decrying the consequences of urban Interstates and a policy of over-reliance on personal automobiles. Nor had planners realized how the roads would be routed disproportionately through the neighborhoods of the poor and disadvantaged, especially road construction linked to urban renewal. Indeed, few observers anticipated how radically American cities and the surrounding geography would be reshaped by the emergence of Interstate corridors and circumferential bypasses. Suburban malls, land-use problems and sprawl, and trucks as primary carriers of freight are among the many outcomes of these developments.

Not everyone approved these developments, however, and another unanticipated outcome of the Interstate program was the political response of highway opponents. The so-called freeway revolt that took shape in the early 1960s was the first large-scale opposition to roads in the 20th century, and it led to the diminishment of the role of engineers in the determination of American highway policy. The full impact of the politicization of highway decision making is apparent in the more than 6,000 earmarks found in the last highway bill. Another political consequence of the backlash against highways was the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), which altered substantially the place and voice of the public in highway routing decisions. While older engineers found the range of factors they now had to consider in locating roads (wetlands, endangered species and numerous environmental concerns as well as neighborhoods and noise), a younger generation believes the results are better highway designs.

In the end, the Interstate system must be recognized for meeting most of the goals of its designers and supporters—even if the impact on urban environment and the landscape has been high. Yet few of us can imagine this nation without such a road system and the movement of freight and people it allows. Indeed, the flexibility of the network is apparent in the emergence of business strategies such as just-in-time delivery for mass-production assembly plants, the overnight delivery promises of UPS and FedEx, and the near-instant gratification promised by internet retailers such as Amazon. Without the Interstate system, none of these would be possible. Indeed, emulation may be the most important indication of the significance of the Interstate highways, for Europe already has, and China is just starting to plan their own versions of an Interstate road network.

BRUCE E. SEELY is Professor of History and Chair of Social Sciences at Michigan Technological University in Houghton, MI. His book, Building the American Highway System: Engineers as Policy Makers, received the Abel Wolman Award from the Public Works Historical Society in 1994. Seely is a Past President of PWHS and is currently a member of the Historical Committee of the Transportation Research Board.
Celebrating 50 Years: The Eisenhower Interstate Highway System

Jonathan L. Gifford

The planning, design, construction, and ongoing renewal of the Interstate System are together an extraordinary accomplishment in the history of our nation. The system is the envy of the world and is being emulated today across the world from China to India to the expanded European Union. I would like to focus on the three main historical legacies the Interstate has bestowed, as well as on some of the key lessons it has taught us.

First, the safety impacts of the Interstate System are perhaps its most important legacy. The system in its early years exhibited a fatality rate just less than 3 per 100 million vehicle miles, roughly half the rate on non-Interstate roadways at the time. Since the opening of the Interstate, that rate has declined to under 1 death per 100 million vehicle miles.

Moreover, the Interstate demonstrated the benefits of its distinctive design features, such as medians between opposing traffic lanes, grade-separated interchanges, and high design speeds. That demonstration effect led to the wider adoption of such features on non-Interstate roads, leading to lives saved off the system as well. Together, these on- and off-system effects have saved tens of thousands of lives in the last half-century.

The second main historical legacy is the Interstate’s effect on American lifestyle. The Interstate’s development occurred during a time when the nation was engaged in a massive shift of housing, retail, and employment to the suburbs. Demand for suburbanization arose from many sources besides the Interstate. The GI Bill, VA housing loans, mortgage interest deductibility—all of these contributed to America’s suburbanization. But the Interstate was a powerful additional force shaping how, how fast, and how much suburbanization occurred.

Today, the majority of Americans reside in suburbs, and the Interstate system is an integral part of their everyday life. Almost every American household and business has a range of choices of where to work, live, play, shop, study, and worship that would not be possible without the Interstate system.

The third legacy is our freight and distribution system. The Interstate has facilitated a fundamental transformation of this system. Truck utilization has soared at a rate of increase of almost 12 percent per year since 1956. Today, virtually every item in our workplaces and households has reached us via the Interstate System. This shift to truck-based distribution allows the American economy to have the world’s most efficient supply chain management system. Efficiency arises in part from faster and cheaper transportation. But faster transportation also allows shippers to spend less on warehouses, and less on inventory in those warehouses. And products are less likely to spoil or become obsolete or go out of fashion while in a warehouse or in transit. Overall, our “total logistics costs,” as this bundle of services is called, have declined from 16 percent of GNP in 1980 to 10 percent in 2001 at the same time that freight volumes have exploded.

The Interstate has also taught us some important lessons. First, large-scale social and technological systems are complex and unpredictable. Many of the consequences of the Interstate System—positive and negative—were not anticipated. In 1937, the Bureau of Public Roads predicted that trucks would never carry a significant amount of freight because they would be inexorably squeezed between rail for bulk commodities and air for high value freight. Mayors clamored for urban interstates to help revitalize their downtowns. Transit owners believed their primary concern was being exempted from motor vehicle taxes. Reality turned out to be dramatically different.

The second lesson we learned from the Interstatebuilding is how much we value community preservation, social justice, and environmental stewardship. In the early years, the Interstate had serious adverse impacts on many older cities and especially on poor and disadvantaged communities. Our urban renewal policy of using Interstate highway investments to remove “blighted” areas displaced tens of thousands of poor African American citizens. We also sought to build Interstates through parks and environmentally sensitive open spaces.

Congress soon intervened and passed landmark environmental legislation such as the Clean Water Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1970, and the National Environmental Protection Act of 1969. These laws continue to guide highway and non-highway development today.

Finally, and most importantly, the Interstate shows that the development of a carefully engineered and planned system can bring extraordinary benefits. This achievement arose from strong federal leadership for planning and financing that is almost unprecedented in our 230-year history. The nation has spent $420 billion dollars on the construction of the Interstate, $370 billion from federal sources. System development has adhered generally to the 42,000-mile network that was defined between 1944 and 1956. For almost four decades between 1956 and 1990, Congress was satisfied to focus on building the interstate, and special projects were a rarity. No other system in our history—with the possible exception of the air traffic control system—has commanded such long-lasting federal leadership and support.

Moving forward we must be humble about our ability to predict consequences, and support careful monitoring and measurement of the impact of our programs in order to continue to benefit our economy.

The second lesson we learned from fifty years of Interstate building is how much we value community preservation, social justice, and environmental stewardship. In the early years, the Interstate had serious adverse impacts on many older cities and especially on poor and disadvantaged communities. Our urban renewal policy of using Interstate highway investments to remove “blighted” areas displaced tens of thousands of poor African American citizens. We also sought to build Interstates through parks and environmentally sensitive open spaces.

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Benefits of the Interstates Undeniable

David Schulz

Amid the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Interstate Highway System can be heard the cries of the revisionists: “Freeways promoted sprawl and suburban flight leaving minorities and the poor behind. They condemned public transit systems to decline, thereby transforming a society largely reliant on streetcars and its own two feet for getting around to one dependent on the automobile.” As with all conventional wisdom, there is some truth to these assertions. But...

Suburbanization began in America in the late 19th century before the invention of the automobile, facilitated by streetcars, steam-railroad “suburban” commuter service, and interurbans. This pattern is clearly seen in the so-called “railroad towns” in suburban Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and other large older regions. When given a choice and the means to take advantage of it, many (not all) people have demonstrated a preference for living in the suburbs, and have done so for more than a century.

As indicated in the figure, public transit ridership declined precipitously from its World War II heights long before President Eisenhower signed the Interstates into law, much less before their opening could influence travel behavior.

Pent-up yearning for autos coupled with exploding demand for housing by families engaged in “baby boom” fueled suburban growth in the late forties and fifties. While not originally planned to accommodate the resulting increase in suburb-to-city traffic, some Interstates did indeed carry this load. But did they “promote” sprawl? “Enabled” is a better word.

Research shows that in locating a home (or a business) decision-makers first decide on a city or suburban locale, then search for a specific site. While transportation availability is an important part of the second decision, the first appears driven primarily by quality-of-life and affordability concerns (or in the case of business, labor and land availability and price). In fact an argument can be made that the Interstates actually slowed the inevitable suburbanization of employment by allowing managers to live in the suburbs and commute to plants remaining in the cities, rather than moving both their homes and businesses out immediately.

Interstates undeniably, some would say gloriously, increased the mobility and lifestyle choices of the American people. Not only could families choose homes in developing suburbs with open space, clean air, good schools, and low crime, taxes and housing prices, but they could connect more freely with a wider variety of activities than any people before. Those who chose (or were forced) to remain in cities also saw great benefits from the Interstates.

Celebrating 50 Years...

(continued from page 3)

These legacies and these lessons make a strong case for resolute and continued attention to the stewardship and renewal of the Interstate system we have built, as well as careful consideration of options for expanding and adapting it to the challenges and realities of the 21st century.

JONATHAN GIFFORD is Professor of Transportation and Planning and Director of the Master’s Program in Transportation Policy, Operations and Logistics in the School of Public Policy at George Mason University in Arlington, VA. His most recent book is Flexible Urban Transportation. Gifford currently serves as the Secretary of the Historical Committee of the Transportation Research Board.

American urban and suburban life today without limited-access highways would be very different. More traffic congestion? For sure. Fewer options in terms of accessible jobs and other activities? Absolutely. A weaker economy? Undoubtedly. While those nostalgic for trolley rides might think they prefer such a world, even they must admit that the Interstates serve an essential function. What the Interstates are about is choices and mobility. While traffic congestion, sprawl, and pollution may at times obscure these benefits, there is simply no denying that the Interstates are an essential component of life in twenty-first century America.

DAVID SCHULZ is the Director of the Infrastructure Technology Institute at Northwestern University, Evanston, IL. Schulz has served as the Deputy Public Works Commissioner for the City of Chicago as well as being elected County Executive for Milwaukee County.
Vision, Planning and Financing: The Interstate System

Alan E. Pisarski

It is easy to believe that the Interstate System was always there; it is such an embedded element in our lives. Maybe for those a bit younger, recollecting the time before cell phones or i-pods helps with the concept. Garrison Keillor said recently that Columbus made it across the Atlantic without any communication, and we cannot get through the produce section of the supermarket without our cell phones. So it is with the Interstate.

When we think about the genesis of a great public work such as the Interstate, maybe specifically the Interstate, we need to appreciate that such an undertaking takes vision, planning, and financing—and then a lot of very dedicated professionals working over many years to make it happen.

With respect to vision—many use the President Dwight D. Eisenhower stories as the basis for the Interstate vision but it began far earlier. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt laid out an idea for three East-West and three North-South routes for the nation on a map in 1934 and asked for a technical feasibility study. His vision derived from a dozen or more ideas that had been floated in the Congress in that period. The result of Roosevelt’s request was a document, “Toll Roads and Free Roads,” one of the central documents of national highway planning of the last century. It elucidated, supported, and refined the vision.

With respect to planning—World War II interrupted the course of events, but as the war ended Roosevelt and the Congress took the next step in requesting an evaluation study and plan. That document, “Interregional Highways,” perhaps the most important transportation document of the past century, evaluated ideas for national systems from 16,000 to almost 80,000 miles. The result, in 1944, was a recommended plan for a national system.

With respect to financing—it was the genius of President Eisenhower for knowing how to organize human and physical resources in the pursuit of a major goal that began the system in earnest. He used the work of three commissions and maintained pressure on Congress in 1954, 1955, and 1956 until a financing plan that would work was in place. Even then the effort was anything but automatic—it failed in 1955 and only by relentless effort—selling, and selling again—did he succeed.

Today we have a commission that has been formed to address our current needs. We will wish them well but recognize that the task last time took twenty years to come to fruition. It is a bit too optimistic to suggest that they can subsume vision, planning, and finance in one year’s time, but they can start us on the long journey to the next interstate.

ALAN J. PISASKI is an independent transportation consultant in Falls Church, Virginia. He has published major studies on the topic of Commuting in America. He currently serves as the chair of the TRB Section responsible for all the statistical committees of TRB, and is also the Founder and Chair of TRB’s Committee on Transportation History.

The Historical Significance Of The Interstate Highway System In Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Herbert A. Goetsch

Public works projects by their very nature are fixed improvements in a changing environment. The Interstate and Defense Highway System (I-System) serve as a classic example. Planning and construction of that portion of the I-System in the Milwaukee Metropolitan Area was influenced by a variety of factors. The local political environment, with the central city undertaking massive annexation programs and the adjacent rural townships countering with incorporations as cities, made inter-governmental cooperation difficult.

Although expressway planning started in the late 1940s, it was not until 1960 that state legislation established the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission. This assisted local, state, and federal units of government in planning future development.

The City of Milwaukee adopted an expressway plan in late 1947 and completed its first construction project in 1952. However, the City could not proceed beyond the city limits. In 1953, the Wisconsin State Legislature established the Milwaukee County Expressway Commission, which assumed the work started by the City. In 1955, Milwaukee County adopted a general plan for expressways. Valuable time had been lost due to the jurisdictional change.

The federal government adopted the I-System in 1956 including 47 miles of Milwaukee County’s planned freeways. Because the federal government financed 90% of the cost of the I-System, local officials gave those routes priority over the rest of the system. The first eight miles of expressways to be opened to traffic were on the I-System. Many of the non-I-System segments were delayed, and some were not completed but were left as connectors to local arterials. Most expressway construction in Milwaukee stopped in 1970. Objections to the taking of properties off the tax rolls and actions by some state legislators from the Milwaukee area caused delays. Although referenda in 1974 favored completion of the remaining planned freeways,

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The Gulf Freeway: From Urban Freeway to Interstate Highway

Tom Watson McKinney

The overwhelming majority of Houston was constructed after 1945, and much of it was the result of highway-based development projects. Houston’s first freeway, the Gulf Freeway, was opened within the city limits on the evening of September 30, 1948, and the mercury vapor lights illuminated not only the freeway’s first 4.1 miles, but also the primary axis for the city’s growth. The entire 50.75-mile length of the Gulf Freeway, which stretched from downtown Houston to Galveston, Texas, was officially opened on August 2, 1952. What began as a simple six-lane urban highway was upgraded, modified, and expanded into what was designated by the Federal Highway Administration as Interstate 45 South in 1959.

William James Van London, the Canadian-born designer of the Gulf Freeway, envisioned a four-lane highway divided by a curb in his 1942 sketches of the roadway. Dewitt C. Greer, head of the Texas Highway Department, insisted that Van London include one-way frontage roads on either side of the freeway. Greer felt that the freeway should serve Houstonians’ transportation and economic needs, and this was ensured by the inclusion of frontage roads.

The design of the Gulf Freeway makes liberal use of overpasses within the city limits. Federal highway officials criticized this aspect of Van London’s design, but the engineer had little choice. Houston was one of the largest railroad hubs in the Southern United States. Despite this, the roadway still had its many overpasses, ensuring that it would no longer expand the city’s growth prompted the mass adoption of a commuting lifestyle, which reinforced the desire for bigger and better highways as more and more cars filled the lanes of the existing ones. The economic impact of the Gulf Freeway was tremendous, and the public demand for similar facilities led to its continued replication throughout the region.

When the Federal Highway Administration designated the Gulf Freeway as Interstate 45 South in 1959, it did not meet the minimum standards for such a facility and would not until the early 1970s. The seemingly continual construction on the freeway has led many to believe that the roadway has never been finished, but the fact remains that the freeway’s high volume of daily traffic creates perpetual maintenance work. The Texas Highway Department concluded that it would no longer expand the Gulf Freeway because of the costs associated with doing so in 1973, and would instead concentrate on improving the flow of traffic on the roadway by the use of traffic metering and other flow improvement techniques. The modern Gulf Freeway is a very different facility from the freeway William James Van London began designing in 1942. Heavy traffic volumes and its designation as an interstate has changed the original function of the roadway from one of urban highway that connected Houston to Galveston, to an interstate highway connecting the Gulf of Mexico with the rest of the United States. Despite this, the roadway still has its many overpasses, ensuring that “Van London’s roller coaster” remains in spirit.

Although modern Interstate 45 crosses downtown Houston by way of an elevated freeway, the original roadway terminated in what Van London dubbed a feeder street system. Beginning in the heart of Downtown Houston at Louisiana Street, he created a system of four one-way streets designated to carry incoming and outgoing traffic. The four streets then merged into the freeway outside the downtown area. Van London later designed the North Freeway which connects downtown Houston with Dallas, Texas. The two freeways were connected in 1967 by an elevated freeway, known as the Pierce Elevated, and the feeder street system was eliminated.

The construction of the Gulf Freeway provided immediate access to predominately rural land on the fringe of the city, and this made the automobile the primary form of personal transportation in the Houston region. Suburban growth prompted the mass adoption of a commuting lifestyle, which reinforced the desire for bigger and better highways as more and more cars filled the lanes of the existing ones. The economic impact of the Gulf Freeway was tremendous, and the public demand for similar facilities led to its continued replication throughout the region.
**Interstate Facts**

Official Name: Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways

Total Miles: 46,837 (as of 2004)

Number of Interchanges: 14,750 (approximate)

Number of Bridges: 55,512 (as of December 2004)

Number of Tunnels: 82

Highest Elevation: Eisenhower Memorial Tunnel, Clear Creek/Summit Counties in Colorado (11,012 feet east and 11,158 feet west)

Longest Routes:
- I-90 . . . From Seattle, WA to Boston, MA (3,020 miles)
- I-80 . . . From San Francisco, CA to Teaneck, NJ (2,899 miles)
- I-40 . . . From Barstow, CA to Wilmington, NC (2,555 miles)
- I-10 . . . From Los Angeles, CA to Jacksonville, FL (2,460 miles)

Shortest Two-Digit Route:
- I-73 . . . From Emery to Greensboro, NC (12.27 miles)

Shortest Three-Digit Route:
- I-878 . . New York (0.70 miles)

States with the Most Interstate Miles:
- Texas . . . . . .3,233 miles
- California . . . .2,455 miles
- Illinois . . . . . .2,169 miles
- Pennsylvania . .1,759 miles
- Ohio . . . . . . .1,572 miles

Interstate Route Going through the Most States:
- I-95 . . . Goes through 16 states

State Capitals Not on an Interstate:
All but five state capitals are on an Interstate. Those that are not include: Juneau, Alaska; Dover, Delaware; Jefferson City, Missouri; Carson City, Nevada; and Pierre, South Dakota.

**The Historical Significance…**

(continued from page 5) elected officials did not authorize construction. Currently, extensive reconstruction of the system is underway without the detours, which the original plan had envisioned.

The I-System in Milwaukee County has served the public well, although traffic is exceeding the design capacity during rush hours. It has stimulated economic development and provided increased traffic safety.

HERBERT A. GOETSCH is a Past President and Honorary Member of both APWA and the Public Works Historical Society. He served as Milwaukee County’s Assistant Expressway Engineer from 1958–1962, from 1962–1963 as City Engineer for the City of Milwaukee as the City’s Expressway Coordinator, and from 1963–1983 as Commissioner of Public Works.

For more information on the history of the Milwaukee freeway construction and revolt, refer to two essays in the PWHS Historical Essay series:

- **The Politics of Congestion: the Continuing Legacy of the Milwaukee Freeway Revolt (Essay 20)**
- **Mayor Frank P. Zeidler: Transportation Development in Post-war Milwaukee (Essay 25)**

Both essays were written by James J. Casey, Jr., J.D., and are available through the APWA Bookstore, www.apwa.net. PWHS members will receive a complimentary copy of Essay 25 in September.

**The Historical Significance…**


**Programming includes:**

- **PWHS Town Hall Meeting & Special Presentation:** The History and Consequences of the Interstate Highway System, Featured Speaker Bruce E. Seely, Michigan Technological University (Sunday, September 10, 2 – 3:50 p.m.).

- **Chapter Historian’s Meeting:** Featured Speaker David Boutros, Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City (Monday, September 11, 11 a.m. – Noon – new time).

- **Repeated Lessons Learned in History of Natural Disasters—Panel Discussion** (Monday, September 11, 3 – 4:30 p.m —new date and time).

**Congratulations…**

http://www.apwa.net/Meetings/Congress/2006/Preview.
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