

The Salt Lake Tribune

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Legacy Parkway ready for commuters at last

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The Salt Lake Tribune
Salt Lake Tribune

Article Last Updated:09/07/2008 01:47:32 PM MDT

WEST BOUNTIFUL - The moment of choice is almost here for Davis County commuters.

Drive Interstate 15 south to Salt Lake City? Board a bus? Hop on a train? Or, starting Saturday, cruise Utah's first four-lane parkway as it snakes along the grassy horizon where shorebirds dance just east of the Great Salt Lake.

It's a menu that seemed unimaginable a decade ago, when the only way was the clogged freeway and environmentalists fought against paving Legacy Parkway through a world-acclaimed bird habitat, demanding a transit-first solution to a jammed I-15.

Opponents sued, dubbing Legacy a "sprawlway" that would spawn development and induce traffic, not curb it. Proponents told them to get real: Trains never could carry the load. The divided highway had become a divisive highway.

Ultimately, though, it became a defining highway when an amicable resolution - after years of courtroom dueling and backroom dealing - greenlighted the \$685 million parkway and signaled a new path in transportation planning, one in which environmentalists and transit backers no longer would stand as outsiders, but rather as partners with the state.

"There's no question they're a player," said Utah Transportation Commission Chairman Stuart Adams, a former Layton city councilman and state lawmaker who backed both rail and the road. "We can do a whole lot more together than we can apart."

Because of that, the same Sierra Club official who called the first blueprint for Legacy "incredibly destructive" now is optimistic about the next phase: the planned Mountain View freeway to stretch through the western Salt Lake Valley. The Utah Department of Transportation is involving the Utah Transit Authority and planning for light rail or bus rapid transit at the same time it plans the road.

Bud Price is glad the Legacy parties worked it all out. He lives a block south of the parkway's Parrish Lane interchange, and he cannot wait to ride on the road to work in South Salt Lake.

"I'm hoping it'll be a relief," he said from his driveway. He was waiting out rush hour because he has some scheduling flexibility and hates to "stand still in traffic for 45 minutes" on I-15. Even with FrontRunner trains lightening the load beginning in April, he noted, "it's still really, really busy."

His neighbor takes the train north and seems grateful for the relief, he said. Legacy makes more sense to Price, though, so he won't have to transfer to light rail in Salt Lake City.

Maybe best of all, he said, the parkway's 14 miles include a bike and walking path where he can extend outings with his daughter. Right now, their beige, stucco subdivision has only about a quarter-mile of pathways.

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Shifting gears: Twelve years after then-Gov. Mike Leavitt proposed Legacy's first leg - and three after a court settlement saved open space and tamed the parkway from what some feared would resemble a broad freeway - the political combatants, once so bitterly split, all say they're pleased. Commuter rail opened this spring at a cost of \$611 million and carries thousands daily through the corridor constricted between mountains and the lake. Legacy also provides an alternative for cars.

"Our goal was to get a balanced, multimodal transportation system, and now we have that," said Robert Adler, a University of Utah law professor who represented highway skeptics in their lawsuit against the state.

That shifting balance has become clear even before Legacy's debut. UDOT counts traffic on I-15 just south of the Lagoon amusement park in Farmington, near Legacy's northern terminus. Average daily traffic there for July was down 8 percent this year, to 136,326 from 148,218 a year ago. The decline coincides with FrontRunner's arrival and a spike in gasoline prices.

Some new transit riders say the diesel locomotives and padded recliners have broken forever their solo car-commuting habits.

"I hate to drive," Clinton resident Sandra Felkins said before boarding her train north from work in Salt Lake City. "I don't know if the train's any faster, but it's a lot less stressful."

The jump to FrontRunner doesn't surprise former Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson, one of Legacy's staunchest foes who, nonetheless, sees the compromise as a major improvement over the state's original plan. That deal saved land around West Bountiful's 500 South interchange - where opponents had feared a freeway-style compound of chain businesses - limited the road to four lanes, banned big rigs and slowed speeds to 55 mph to avoid disturbing nesting birds.

Anderson said cities around the world attract transit riders whenever they build options for commuters.

"With good mass transit and other transportation options," he said, "people will abandon their cars, and the need for the highway diminishes."

The former two-term mayor, who riled Davis County residents and officials by bashing the road and joining the lawsuit, still labels Legacy a bad idea.

"I don't think new roads are necessary," he said. "Every time we build a new road and expand the opportunity to drive more rather than less miles every day, it's a huge step backward in terms of our air quality, dependence on fossil fuels and dependence on foreign oil."

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Road to relief: Others who challenged Legacy in court concede that drivers needed more lanes through Davis County.

"We're always going to need roads," said Marc Heileson, southwest regional representative for the Sierra Club and a frequent critic of the initial Legacy plan. "It would be silly to think roads are not going to be necessary and people are not going to be driving their cars."

This road, it turned out, is one everyone can take pride in, Heileson said, because it's attractive and won't beget big-box stores and tract housing. The land west of it is preserved and, thanks to the settlement, light rail is planned to join heavy commuter rail in south Davis.

"We hope that it changes the transportation paradigm," Heileson added, "where instead of just looking at how many lanes, [we'll] make choices for the highest quality of life and the cleanest air."

If extra capacity was needed a decade ago, it's more in demand now. UDOT's I-15 traffic counts at Farmington grew from a year-round weekday average of 120,000 to more than 150,000 last year - though soaring gasoline prices could slow that rush of vehicles. Legacy is projected to siphon 20,000 daily car trips.

"It's important to have alternatives," said Roger Borgenicht, a mobility activist with the Future Moves coalition. "Just like it's an alternative to have a transit corridor and bike access, there are choices in having alternate roads to handle traffic and emergencies."

What the state originally proposed, at 330 feet, was too wide and designed to grow the region in the mold of Los

Angeles, Borgenicht said.

The settlement shrank Legacy, ensuring it will remain just four lanes for the foreseeable future, and gave the road a slower, curving alignment that removed the need for sound breaks near houses to the east. It also brought a softer, noise-absorbing pavement.

"They turned what was going to be their backyard into their front yard," Borgenicht said.

The parkway's different look - and its roadside nature park with an interpretive center and a boardwalk over a marsh - has city officials eager to show it off.

Kaysville Mayor Neka Roundy looks forward to gaining national scenic-byway status.

It all seems a "happy ending" for Leavitt, now the U.S. secretary of Health and Human Services, who acknowledged last week that the lawsuit and settlement improved the road. But he pointed out that the state paid contractors millions while they were idle and that the eventual price tag ballooned from \$451 million to \$685 million - a point Anderson countered by saying Leavitt had been warned by the Environmental Protection Agency of legal issues but pressed forward anyway.

"History will judge the cost-benefit relationship between the improvement and the delays," Leavitt said, "but the important thing is that the highway has been built and the citizens of Utah will have an alternative to I-15, and the environmental values represented by that area are protected."

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