million to purchase Metropolitan Transit and begin building a new fleet. This was the first of many appeals for federal capital and operating aid, and the support of Senator Warren G. Magnuson, then-Chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, virtually assured approval of these funds. State voters proved fickle, however, and they turned down Referendum 30's transportation bonds on November 7, 1972.

Even the simplest tasks proved taxing, such as deciding what to call the new system. The Metro Council disposed of citizen suggestions such as SKI-Met (Seattle King County Metro) and SMART (Seattle Metropolitan Area Rapid Transit) and agreed on Metro Transit. Once this was settled, adhesive signs reading "Metro Transit" were quickly printed and slapped on a motley fleet of buses and trolleys.

Metro Director C.V. "Tom" Gibbs and his wife ventured out early on the morning of January 1, 1973, to wish the drivers well as they prepared to depart the Atlantic Street Base on their first routes in Metro Transit livery. He later recalled, "They wondered what we were doing there -- were we late New Year's revelers? And they did not quite believe that the Metro Transit labels were on the buses. But the buses pulled out on time. Indeed the system ran quite well. We had climbed the mountain."

Unfortunately, this was only the first peak Metro Transit had to scale. A whole mountain range stretched ahead, and the valleys were as deep as the summits were high.

A Wild Ride

After a national search, Metro found its new Transit Director in Pittsburgh: Carle H. Salley, Jr. At 45 years of age, Salley had worked his way up from the transit trenches as a streetcar motorman and bus driver, and risen to become assistant project manager for development of Allegheny County's $228 million rapid transit program. Metro director Tom Gibbs remembers Salley as "a transit nut. He was probably born in the back of bus somewhere."

Salley brought a visionary flair to Metro, a quality signified by his flamboyant handlebar mustache. He was determined to prove that an all-bus system need not take a back seat to rail. "Carle believed that if you built a better bus, they would come," recalls Chuck Collins. To this end, Salley proposed that rather than purchase new buses off the shelf, Metro should devise new specifications which would establish a model "world bus" for the industry. To fund Salley's dream, Metro prepared an application to UMTA for $86.3 million -- the largest sum ever requested for rubber-wheeled transit.

While Metro was fairly confident that Washington, DC would smile on its proposal, Olympia frowned on appropriating the promised MVET funds. The legislature had never believed that Metro and other localities could sell the sales tax to their voters, and now the State faced a substantial drain on the general fund. Facing his own budget crisis, Governor Evans submitted a budget which appropriated only $12 million of the $29 million in MVET revenues which Metro and other transit systems anticipated during the coming biennium. For its part, Metro needed assurance of MVET revenues in order to underwrite $14.9 million in general obligation bonds.

Metro argued that MVET was collected by the State "in trust" for transit, and not subject to appropriation. Slade Gorton, then Attorney General and now a U.S. Senator, supported this view, but Metro's enemies in the legislature were not persuaded. A move was mounted to repeal the transit MVET, but in the final days of the regular session, a compromise was reached which assured MVET funds through 1981 so Metro could market its bonds. Metro issued $14.9 million in general obligation bonds on September 1, 1973. It took advantage of a dramatic drop in interest rates three months later to issue "Refunding Bonds" in the same amount. These were placed in trust to purchase government securities sufficient to pay the interest on the first bonds.

With its financing apparently secure, Metro proceeded to plan and refine its system. Kent Mayor Isabel Hogan headed a special committee to pick Metro Transit's coach colors and interior appointments. Buses with alternative paint and interior schemes toured the County while Wally Toner and his staff collected "votes" from more than 8,000 citizens. Metro Transit's current brown and ochre "sunrise" livery carried the day over a blue, green and purple "Kwakiutl" scheme. Meanwhile, Larry Coffman negotiated an innovative contract with a new company, Washington Transit Advertising, to broker the sale of interior and exterior bus advertising. The same company is doing the job twenty years later, and its sales chip in $100,000-plus to Metro's budget every year.

During that same summer, a young City of Seattle aide named Keith Kirkpatrick had a bright idea: "How about making the buses free?" His boss, Don Munro, who then headed the Office of Executive Policy, thought that might be going too far but it occurred to him that allowing people to ride any bus within the Downtown Seattle retail core might help encourage patronage and relieve congestion. Mayor Uhlman liked the notion and sold the idea to Metro, which bought it with the condition that the City paid the cost.

Munro met with Salley to negotiate the financing, but no one was sure how to appraise the value of a free service. "That's the $64,000 question," Munro remembers saying, and it turned out to be the answer. He and Salley agreed on a one-year experiment priced at the annual cost of Seattle Transit's old Dime Shuttle: $64,000.

Metro's new "Magic Carpet" zone was inaugurated in September 1973 within the area bounded by Jackson and Stewart Streets, and the waterfront and Sixth Avenue. It was an enormous success with riders and made international headlines. Metro also found that by eliminating the need to collect fares from boarding passengers, the zone accelerated downtown bus traffic. The "Ride Free" zone was subsequently expanded north to Battery Street, thanks in part to financial support solicited by Mayor Uhlman from Martin Selig and other Denny Regrade property owners through contracts negotiated by City staffer Brian Kringbring.

The State inaugurated its first High Occupancy Vehicle lane that same September. It ran along most of SR-520 from Redmond to the former Toll Plaza on the east side of the Evergreen Floating Bridge (now named in honor of former Governor Albert E. Rosellini). Neighborhood opposition on the Seattle side thwarted plans to add a fifth lane to the bridge for HOVs, but State Highways Director George Andrews had ambitious plans for other highways. Thanks in large part to Andrews' leadership, highways and transit had finally made peace with each other.

Such innovations and Metro's successful integration of Seattle and suburban services into a unified transit system could not have been more propitious. The nations of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) declared economic war on the United States on October 19, 1973, in response to the Arab-Isreali War. Gasoline supplies dried up and tens of thousands of commuters turned to public transit for the first time. Although Metro had to scramble to secure fuel and paid a 40 percent premium at the pump, it kept the buses running.

Total ridership in 1973 leapt by 2.4 million passengers, or nearly 8 percent, over the previous year. As Metro Council Chair Donworth was later able to boast, "Metro was in the right place at the right time."

Bumps in the Road

OPEC's oil embargo continued through March of 1974, and Metro added 20 peak-hour trips on eight routes to accommodate the additional patronage. To accommodate the demand, Metro rounded up every bus it could beg, borrow or lease from all corners of the country. Some of these vehicles were pass their prime and earned less-than-affectionate sobriquets such as "Tijuana Trolleys" and "Jersey Junkers," but they kept the region moving.

That same spring, UMTA released the first $36.3 million increment of a total grant of $86.3 million, which permitted Metro to proceed with development of an East Operating Base and the first ten park-and-ride lots. An additional grant allowed it to start siting the first 200 passenger shelters. To help guide its planning, Metro empaneled a Citizens Transit Advisory Committee and tapped David Sprague to serve as its first chair.

The oil embargo spurred Congress to pass the National Mass Transportation Assistance Act which offered federal aid for transit operating costs for the first time. The 55-MPH speed limit was also imposed on interstate highways, further signifying the new commitment to transportation efficiency. One local beneficiary of this new energy consciousness was the trackless trolley. At Seattle's insistence, and with its financial support, Metro committed in 1974 not only to rehabilitate the existing trolley routes but to expand the system. Metro staff initiated a two-year cycle of community meetings to plan the details.

Metro staff also began to think about the more distant future of regional transit. Don Munro was hired away from the City of Seattle to head a small group of long-range transit planners. This set off alarm bells at the Puget Sound Governmental Conference, which regarded such planning as its bailiwick. PSGC director Mart Kask believed that transportation was the seed crystal for future growth management, and his emphasis on controlling development had already gotten PSGC sideways with its County members, who guarded their land use prerogatives jealously.

In February 1974, Pierce County Commissioner George Sheridan fired the first shot in a long simmering rebellion against the Conference. PSGC objected to County plans for industrial development in the Puyallup Valley, which regional plans designated for agriculture. When the County Commissioners refused to change, the Conference filed a negative A-95 review of a County application to HUD. Sheridan retaliated by leading Pierce County out of PSGC.

King County and Snohomish Counties joined the protest in May. Municipal and Conference staff tried to negotiate a solution through the summer and fall, but to no avail. In November, the King County Council unanimously passed a resolution demanding PSGC's reorganization to offset municipal dominance of the Conference's Executive Committee and rein in staff autonomy through the creation of "sub-regional councils" to guide policy for individual counties.

If PSGC feared Metro as a transportation planning competitor, Metro resented the authority of Conference staff as the "Metropolitan Planning Organization," which served as the clearing house for all federal transportation spending in the Puget Sound region. Since Metro was the only significant transit agency, it felt its wishes should prevail without second-guessing; Kask and his staff felt that the outlook of an "operating agency" was too limited to grasp the big picture. A memorandum of agreement was negotiated to sort out the two agencies' respective roles as the Conference undertook implementation of its 1990 Regional Transportation Plan. A special "Urban Systems Board" was also created at Metro's urging to involve elected officials in allocating these highway funds.

As these talks continued, Salley pressed ahead with the specifications for his model bus, which would feature lower floors, bigger windows, and more power. "He didn't want to put hand rails on his buses because nobody was going to have to stand on his system," Collins jokes. As part of this effort, Metro imported three European "bending buses" for demonstration runs in Seattle. Articulated buses were novelties on this side of the Atlantic, but the behemoths would allow Metro to carry more passengers at lower cost. Two hundred articulated trolleys and buses were incorporated into the plan to purchase a total of 605 new vehicles at a total cost of $40 million.

Articulated coaches were essential if Metro was to meet its service obligations without going bankrupt in the process. The other key financial ingredient in this strategy was to moderate labor costs. In this regard, Metro's drivers were not nearly so willing to bend as their experimental buses.

When management and labor sat down to negotiate a three year contract in 1974, two new entities faced each other across the bargaining table. Tom Gibbs stepped down in June to re-enter the private sector, and his place was taken by Richard Page, director of Metro's Public Service Department and formerly a Seattle deputy mayor and aide to Senator Jackson. Beyond the change in directors, Metro constituted a very different style of management than most transit workers were used to, and the union itself had been created through the shotgun marriage of two hostile locals. Current ATU Local 587 president Dan Linville recalls, "Each side wanted to test the other." Both sides were itching for a "battle royal."

Metro was eager to impose new disciplinary standards. The former spit-and-polish demeanor of Seattle Transit had given away to what Linville, who had driven for both systems, concedes was "just anarchy." John Senear, then Business Agent (president) of 587, wanted to break through the federal price and wage controls then in place, and to win something bus drivers had never really enjoyed: an 8-hour day with two consecutive days off. Talks deadlocked and the drivers walked out for two weeks in November. A mediator was brought in and each side ultimately accepted the other's key demands. Metro got its new work rules, but it had to swallow a financial time bomb in the process.

Despite the strike, Metro had registered another record year with ridership increasing by 2.7 million passengers. The mood was upbeat in January 1975 as Metro Transit opened its first "Freeway Flyer" station in Montlake and its executive and planning staff moved into their first permanent offices in the refurbished Pioneer Building at First Avenue and Yesler. Seventy-five years earlier, Stone & Webster's Seattle Electric Company had controlled the city's street railways from this same building.

That same month, Metro's plans for its model buses jumped the track. Salley and his staff had been negotiating for months with General Motors, Volvo and other interested manufacturers, whom they encouraged to join forces in a single proposal; they may have pushed this idea too hard, it turned out. On January 20, 1975, Metro scheduled a press conference to formally open the bids and announce who would build the bus of Salley's dreams, but no bids were submitted. Eighteen years later, Richard Page still cringes at the memory of sitting red-faced under the hot TV lights before an empty table.

Metro scrambled to find a substitute and ended up ordering 145 AM General diesel coaches with special modifications (70 more were ordered in 1976). The dream of natural gas buses had also been dashed when the sole manufacturer folded (but the idea was revived in 1993 when the Metro Council mandated natural gas for Metro's next generation of buses).

Even though key elements of the 1980 plan had not yet been implemented, Metro knew it had to look beyond to the shape of transit needs and opportunities in the next decade. It launched two planning processes: first a review and modification of the 1980 plan, and secondly, development of a 1990 plan. The latter was christened "MetroTRANSITion" (credit Judy Souza for the name) with the express mission not to produce "a grand plan in the traditional sense, but a planning framework which will have the flexibility to respond to rapidly changing conditions."

Such conditions had been changing very rapidly. The pendulum had shifted from bust to boom in only five years. National magazines crowned Seattle as "America's most livable city," and King County was well on its way to adding 110,000 new citizens by birth or immigration by 1980. Most of these took up residence in the unincorporated areas on Seattle's flanks, and this low density development further complicated the problem of delivering economical mass transit services.

This growth also strained the highway system, which still lacked the key 1-90 link across Lake Washington from Bellevue to Seattle. The state's plan was stalled in the courts, and the 1973 Federal Assistance Highway Act had heated up the politics by giving localities a new option to "withdraw and substitute" federal funds from highways and spend them on mass transit. Governor Evans tried one last time to break the political and legal gridlock by appointing a 10-member committee on the problem. Simultaneously, PSGC convened an intergovernmental panel representing Seattle, King County, Bellevue and Mercer Island (whose mayor, Aubrey Davis, also chaired the Metro Transit Committee). In the course of these talks, Mayor Uhlman and Governor Evans together proposed a new lane arrangement and floated the idea of running buses from I-90 through a downtown tunnel.

After much wrangling, local jurisdictions and the State agreed on a the "4-2T-4" configuration which strengthened the transit component and added landscaped lids to mask the highway's visual impact on Central Seattle and Mercer Island. (Seattle, it should be noted, had pioneered the idea of such lids with its Freeway Park, developed at the behest of Jim Ellis.) This agreement began to unravel before the ink had dried. In 1975, an impatient State Legislature imposed a deadline of January 1977 for a decision on whether to finish the freeway or withdraw and spend a billion of federal money on something else.

Withdraw and substitute attracted much interest, but not from Metro. Although Boston and later Portland exercised their option to cancel freeways and build new rail transit, Metro was leery of the idea. "We already had our two "Ts" for buses or future rail transit," Don Munro explains, "and we didn't trust the politics of people who only wanted to stop I-90."

As these discussions continued, county resentments at PSGC boiled over anew and reached Olympia, where support grew for a bill to scrap the Conference and mandate a "Central Puget Sound Regional Planning Agency" to take its place. Facing this threat, PSGC's municipal and county members hammered out a new organization implementing the "sub-regional" committees and adopting a new name, Puget Sound Council of Governments (PSCOG). Tensions did not abate, however, and King and Snohomish County formally withdrew from "the COG." Since Pierce had already bolted, this left Kitsap as the organization's sole county member.

That summer, hostile legislative leaders slipped Metro a mickey in the 1975 special session. An amendment was quietly inserted into a school funding bill to require a state appropriation before MVET funds could be used for transit. Jim Ellis says no one noticed until the State Treasurer "combed the bills" produced by the special session and informed Metro that since no appropriation had been made, no MVET funds would be forthcoming. Metro and a coalition of other jurisdictions promptly filed suit and the case was tried directly before the State Supreme Court *de novo.*

The issue was not resolved until January 9, 1976, when the Court found unanimously that the State had broken its "contract" with Metro, and a majority of seven Justices to two ruled that MVET funds were essentially local tax revenue held by the State in trust and therefore not subject to express appropriation. With matching MVET funds now assured, other localities felt confident enough seek local sales for their own transit systems: Community Transit in Snohomish county levied its first transit sales tax in June 1976, and Pierce Transit followed suit three years later. Metro later accepted a legislative compromise prohibiting the use of MVET to secure bonds, but left sales tax revenues unencumbered for this purpose.

Shift Change:

By the time the cloud lifted from Metro Transit's financing, Carle Salley had departed. Metro officials had become increasingly dismayed by Salley's eccentric management style (Tom Gibbs once had to scold him for following buses on a motorcycle so he could see how the drivers were performing) and he did not mesh well with professional planners and marketing experts. A clumsy attempt to fire Larry Coffman, who was then Transit Marketing manager, over

Thanksgiving of 1975, prompted Dick Page to ask for Salley's resignation. For all of these shortcomings, Salley had guided Metro Transit through three eventful and productive years during which ridership increased by more than 7 million passengers and nearly 23 percent. He also left behind a profound legacy in the form of articulated coaches, whose use he successfully championed despite the disappointment of his model bus.

To succeed Salley, Metro settled on an old friend, Chuck Collins, who had kept suburban buses running in the final months before Metro Transit took charge. Although not a transportation professional per se, Collins brought a new financial and managerial discipline to the agency when he took charge in April 1976.

The interval before Collins' appointment had been an active one. In February, Metro survived a major legal test. Citizens sued the agency, claiming that its decision to abandon natural gas propulsion violated the EIS for the 1980 plan, but Superior Court ruled that Metro satisfied the State Environmental Protection Act because it had promised only to purchase vehicles "employing the best available propulsion source at the time of purchase." Metro passed a different kind of test when the Kingdome opened in March and its transit strategy helped to avoid gridlock in downtown Seattle. Thanks to another dramatic surge in ridership during 1975 -- up by 2.9 million fares, or 8.5 percent over 1974 -- the system ordered an additional 70 AM General coaches.

Chuck Collins took charge in April 1976. The following month, the "Magic Carpet" service earned national recognition as part of the American Bicentennial celebration. An even greater cause for celebration followed in May as Metro's first new coaches entered service. The success of the new buses allowed Metro to begin retiring its venerable 1947-vintage 100-Series buses that fall.

In June, Metro took one of its biggest technological gambles and ordered a fleet of articulated motor buses from AM General and MAN industries. Collins recalls that "10 systems bought at the same time, but only a few coaches each. We bought 145. We regarded it as an experimental buy but we had to take the plunge. We'd gotten ourselves in a hole on services versus ridership," with the latter rising faster than the former. To catch up and meet its 1980 goal of 54 million riders, Metro needed buses with 72 seats rather than 45. At the same time, the Metro Council was willing to gamble only so much on the new vehicles, and blocked a proposal to purchase articulated trolleys as well (it changed its mind later on).

One of Collins' early acts was to reorganize transit planning after an earlier experiment in housing water quality and transit planners under one roof had failed. Collins felt that there should be a continuum of transit planning from the regional level right down to individual routes, so he consolidated "Service Development" and Long-Range Planning in a single unit for "Transit Development" under Don Munro. Thanks to the introduction of the RUCUS system for computerized route planning, this unit shrank from 80 staff members to 54, before being reorganized in the early 1980s.

The first significant fruit of putting regional planners in the same room with the people who had to plot routes and schedules was a dramatic simplification of the transfer system, followed by a complete overhaul of Metro's zone structure. In place of 30 zones, Metro planners proposed two: one inside the Seattle city limits and one for the rest of the county. Transfers were liberalized to allow passengers to hop any bus in any direction for an hour, and monthly passes were introduced. After much debate, the Metro Council adopted the new system in October and set fares set at 30 cents for the first zone and 20 cents for the second. Fares for seniors and disabled riders were discounted to a dime. The system simplified life for passengers and drivers, while promising to raise $2 million in additional fare box revenue without loss of ridership.

Metro's planners also negotiated a new arrangement with PSCOG, which was still in political turmoil. In January 1976, King, Pierce and Snohomish Counties agreed on new scheme for a Central Puget Sound Regional Planning Council to replace PSGC. Unanimity on the King County Council crumbled soon after one newly elected member, Bob Greive, warned his colleagues, "All you're doing is playing games and you may have disastrous results." The federal government backed Greive up the following month by setting a June 30 deadline for agreement on an acceptable regional planning agency, or it would decertify PSCOG and begin closing off federal funds requiring regional review -- which included all aid for transit and highways. This ultimatum induced a new agreement on a restructured Executive Board with equal representation for counties and cities and a reduction of staff from 52 to 37.

The new organization was not formally ratified by every jurisdiction until the signing of an Interlocal Agreement in May 1977, but what was created was a shell of its former self. Gone were dreams of a nascent regional government or even a federated system which could discipline its members when they strayed from common goals and plans. As COG president and Snohomish County Commissioner Charles Hill wrote in the agency's 1977 annual report, the COG's new role was "not to impose regional solutions, but rather to facilitate coordinated local solutions to address areawide problems." Even this greatly relaxed mission would prove too constricting for some members, and the era of federal largesse for regional planning was nearing an end. The COG's troubles were far from over.

Plans for Interstate 90 also took a turn for the worse in early 1976. Public review for the revised 4-2T-4 plan revealed little enthusiasm and less consensus. Governor Evans took one last stab at reaching an agreement by appointing mediators to negotiate among Seattle, Mercer Island, Bellevue, King County and the State Highway Commission. In December, they signed a new memorandum of understanding which shrank the highway to eight lanes in a 3-2T-3 configuration and enhanced the lidding and landscaping. As Aubrey Davis, who was one of the signatories, puts it: "We didn't want to see I-90, we didn't want to hear it, and we didn't want to smell it." This final compromise did the trick. A new EIS was quickly prepared and accepted by President Carter's new Secretary of Transportation, Brock Adams, a former Seattle Congressman and future U.S. Senator. The new plan passed legal muster in August 1979. By then the "I-90 Majority" of freeway opponents were collecting signatures for a Seattle initiative to prevent the work on the project in the city, but the State courts voided the effort. This was the last obstacle, and construction resumed in early 1980.

Metro planners were having their own problems in 1976. After an auspicious beginning, the MetroTRANSITion process bogged down in confusion over the relationship of local and regional transit "futures" and uncertainty over rail. The first phase of planning had focused on "test projects" to address a wide range of specific situations such as the Seattle and Bellevue central business districts, service to rural areas, provision of transit on I-90, and "special projects" such as a cross-lake ferry and additional ride-free zones. Phase I also culminated in broad policy goals to provide "transit as a primary alternative to automobiles," focus services on "mobility" for employment and transit-dependent populations, and explore options beyond "fixed route, fixed schedule service."

The second phase of MetroTRANSITion explored six options for public transportation beyond 1980. These ranged from "doing nothing" to development of a "major fixed guideway" system to supplement bus service. While MetroTRANSITion was intentionally wary of committing to any particular technology, it sought federal funds to explore options for rail transit.

Metro officials had every expectation of securing the needed planning grant when they hosted UMTA Administrator Robert Patricelli in Seattle in October 1976. He was extremely impressed by Metro's accomplishments and repeatedly asked Aubrey Davis, "How come you have such a good bus system?" This only magnified everyone's shock when Petricelli announced that UMTA was awarding rail planning funds to Portland, Oregon -- but not Seattle! When Davis pressed for an explanation, UMTA officials replied that they did not want to "lose the example" of what a city could do with rubber wheels alone. Metro had done its job too well in serving a major metropolitan area with buses alone; it would have no other choice for the foreseeable future. No good deed goes unpunished.

There were some rewards, however. UMTA maintained its commitments to Metro's capital program and the year ended with several important milestones. Metro completed its East Operating Base, installed 205 new shelters, for whose design it won top AIA honors, instituted a new computerized maintenance system, and put a total of 184 new buses into service. The public obviously liked the results as 3.6 million new passengers climbed aboard Metro and boosted ridership by 9.6 percent over the previous year.

The new year began with its usual bad news from Olympia, where the legislature passed a new law allowing King County to take over Metro subject to a vote of the people. The news from Washington, DC was better when President Carter nominated Dick Page as UMTA's new administrator. Penny Peabody took charge of the agency until a permanent replacement could be found.

During the course of 1977, Metro made solid progress on several fronts. Thanks to Don Munro's visit to Paris, where he was enchanted by the lucidity of the transit signage, Metro began implementing a new system of bus stop markings in February. In May, Metro took a giant step in the new direction of "transportation demand management" by signing up Safeco insurance as the first employer to help subsidize transit passes for its workers. This was part of a larger marketing strategy developed by Larry Coffman. As Collins explains, "Larry concluded that we were tapped out on the transit-dependent. We needed to concentrate on the occasional rider to get workers to take the bus more often." This translated into marketing discounted passes and soliciting employer subsidies. Collins credits this strategy for "causing ridership to explode."

Metro also launched its first experiment with "paratransit" to test the efficiency of using smaller vans to serve rural areas. The program began with service to Woodridge, a community near Bellevue, in July and was later extended to Northshore and South King County.

That summer Metro took its first tentative steps toward wheelchair accessibility. It had inherited a special "Flxette" coach equipped with a wheelchair lift from Seattle Transit in 1973. The vehicle was assigned to serve Center Park, a Seattle Housing Authority apartment complex for the physically disabled. During the 1970s, however, advocates for the disabled began to argue that "special" accommodations were demeaning and could never be adequate. The City of Seattle was a pioneer in adopting policies mandating accessibility to all public facilities and those private facilities such as restaurants which served the public. Seattle joined with Metro and other agencies to apply this philosophy to mobility through the Elderly and Handicapped Transportation Study. This later led to policies for a 100 percent accessible transit fleet and supplementary services such as subsidized "Taxi Scrip" for low-income senior and disabled citizens nearly 20 years before the Americans With Disabilities Act made full accessibility a national goal.

Actually achieving transit accessibility proved to be a far more daunting technical challenge than anyone expected. In the summer of 1977, Metro ordered 10 AM General diesel coaches with the best wheelchair lifts then available, and later incorporated the same design in its order for 109 new trolleybuses. When the new diesels went into service, however, the lifts proved to be both balky and dangerous. Metro cancelled their installation in its new trolleys after 30 had been built, and went back to the drawing board.

Fortunately, Metro employed a creative engineer named Ed Hall in its Transit Technology unit. He came up with better wheelchair lift design, and tinkered together working models in his spare time. The prototypes were "retro-fitted" into two older diesel coaches assigned to Center Park, and they worked beautifully. Hall's design set a new industry standard, and it is now manufactured by the Lift-U Corporation. Metro specified Hall's lifts in all of its subsequent orders for coaches and trolleys and it has been retro-fitted into most older vehicles.

Also during the summer of 1977, Metro accepted the City of Seattle's decision to introduce new trolley service on Rainier Avenue, although Chuck Collins expressed his own skepticism about the cost effectiveness of electric transit. "I got run over," he says with a shrug.

A national search for Dick Page's successor resulted in the selection of Neil Peterson, then director of Community Services for the State of Washington's Department of Social and Health Services. Peterson had an excellent reputation as a public administrator but no background in water quality or transit. When his interviewers made note of this, Peterson replied, "Most of the people who ride your buses are my clients." Peterson is the first to admit that his selection was an audacious move. "I was also the first 'non-Ellis' guy," to run the agency created by Jim Ellis, he adds.

When Peterson assumed his duties in September, he found his Transit Department on a virtual war footing as it prepared for the expiration of the ATU contract on October 31, 1977. With labor costs constituting more than three-fourths of the total transit budget, and most riders concentrated in weekday peak hours, Collins argued that Metro had to take an entirely new approach to its payroll economics. "We could pay people $8 an hour but we couldn't pay for an 8-hour day when we really only needed three hours of service. The arithmetic of reaching our ridership goal wouldn't let us do it."

Collins credits two bus drivers, Dan Graczyk and Ron Neal who had been "detailed" to administrative duties, for suggesting the solution of part-time drivers. "Amazing people driving buses," Collins comments, explaining that both men were MBAs. They developed a computer model of the current, 120-page contract, and showed that 40 percent of drivers should be part-time for Metro to reach its goal of 54 million riders within available resources.

This idea was anathema to the union, and even other transit managers from around the nation were cool to such a radical reform, but Metro saw no alternative and prepared for a strike. It braced downtown merchants for a holiday walk-out, organized a car pool program and charter bus services, and equipped a "war room" for the emergency. Managers also made sure the union knew they were ready.

But local union leaders were not in the mood for a fight. Dan Linville reports that ATU knew that the 8-hour guarantee had "hurt Metro far worse than it expected." Local 587 president John Senear was due to retire the following year, and he had built a good relationship with Ed Rafter, Metro's manager for transit operations. The membership was also not inclined to strike since the part-time proposal would only apply to new hires, not current drivers.

The international union leadership was probably the most concerned because they knew that Seattle was a "beachhead" for the use of part-time employees across the nation. They suspected a conspiracy to "bust the union" between Metro Council chair C. Carey Donworth, whose profession was to advise corporations in labor negotiations, and UMTA Administrator Dick Page, who was urging transit systems to rein in labor costs.

Negotiations dragged on through the winter, and ATU members began succumbing to "contract flu" to express their displeasure, which focused more on Metro's proposals for new disciplinary procedures and work rules than on the part-time issue. This was followed by a series of "strategic sickouts" which cut bus service by 20 percent. Metro railed at the union for "unfair labor practices," but ATU's leadership had lost control of events to a rump group of the membership which called itself the "Ralph Cramden Caucus," after Jackie Gleason's character in "The Honeymooners."

At least one employee resorted to sabotage, but of a very creative variety. During the middle of one night, he or she parked Metro's trolleys bumper to bumper and then removed their control handles, so they could not be operated. The next morning, Chuck Collins awoke at his Mercer Island home to find a mysterious blue gym bag on the hood of his car. Taking no chances, he called the Mercer Police who in turn summoned the Seattle Bomb Squad. The bag was removed to a safe distance and gingerly opened -- to reveal the missing trolley control handles.

ATU members rejected contract offers on December 5 and 16. Facing Metro's refusal to arbitrate and hostile press, Senear summoned his members to a special "work-stop" meeting on December 20, but they demanded that he intensify negotiations. Feelings were inflamed by a bitter mechanics' strike against auto dealers (who were being advised by Donworth's company), but it was becoming clear to drivers that Metro would not budge. The sick-outs ended a week later, and on January 9, 1978, the membership grudgingly approved a new contract which included a 6 percent raise for drivers and improved sick leave and vacation benefits.

The "defeat" did not prove as mortal as the ATU had feared, and the use of part-time drivers remains the exception, not the rule in the United States. Metro, however, had won an important victory by gaining authority to staff up to 50 percent of its driver ranks with part-time workers (who can achieve full-time status after about 3.5 years of service). Metro could now realize its dream, in Larry Coffman's phrase, of "a third way for transit" connecting work places and park-and-ride lots with service on articulated buses driven by a part-time operator in a dedicated HOV freeway lane.

Despite the rolling work stoppages, Metro attracted 3.3 million new riders during 1977, a 9.3 percent gain. Significantly, Metro Transit now carried 43 percent of the peak hour person trips into and out of downtown Seattle. The growth of its executive staff in all divisions, not just Transit, led Metro to lease new offices in the Exchange Building in December.

Compared to the previous year's high drama, 1978 seemed almost anticlimactic, but Metro made some important progress. Beginning in January, it shut down Seattle's overhead lines and retired 59 venerable trackless trolleys with the goal of reactivating the rehabilitated system with 109 new trolleys -- the first built in America in a generation -- one year later. Metro hired its first part-time drivers in March, and employed 152 by the end of the year. It also installed new signage on its buses to show the destination and type of service as well as the route name.

In April, the Metro Council made its transit system the nation's first to commit itself to a fully wheelchair-accessible fleet, and ordered new buses from Flyer Industries of Canada equipped with Ed Hall's wheelchair lifts. Metro also funded a "taxi scrip" program to subsidize fares for the elderly and handicapped passengers.

Transit planners resolved a long and bitter wrangle over downtown transit in August when they settled for exclusive peak-hour transit lanes on Second and Fourth Avenues. Merchants had steadfastly resisted the idea of "contraflow" lanes, fearing the loss of loading zones and a "wall of buses" during rush hours. Everyone thought that the new with-flow lanes were only a temporary measure until something could be figured out to expedite transit through the downtown bottleneck. To this end, MetroTRANSITion staff and citizen advisors continued testing different ideas.

Metro Transit lost one of its pioneers that same August, but he didn't go far away. After a disappointing bid for the County Executive's seat the previous November (John Spellman won a three-way general election that also included "independent" Harley Hoppe), Metro Transit Committee chair Aubrey Davis was tapped to serve new Secretary of Transportation Brock Adams as his regional representative, and Davis was later named head of UMTA's northwest regional office. Although appointed by President Carter, Davis survived the Reagan Administration until his voluntary retirement in January 1988, and continued to play a pivotal role in many transit decisions.

Metro ended 1978 by bringing its new computerized "Schedule Information Data Base" (SIDB) on line and opened its new South Operating base. Planners and citizens launched Phase IV of MetroTRANSITion which would map the future of transit through 1990. Thanks to a new marketing plan and recruitment of 10 new employers to subsidize their workers' monthly passes, ridership scored a record gain of 4.6 million new passengers, up 10.2 percent. This growth was getting habit-forming, so there was not too much trepidation when the Metro Council raised fares to 40/60 cents effective January 1, 1979.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it

The new year began with mixed messages from Olympia. The legislature blocked further use of MVET for bonds by making the revenues subject to appropriation, but it removed the 1981 "sunset" on excise tax authority for transit systems.

Metro enjoyed a glorious summer of "firsts." The first of Metro's new Flyer Industry coaches began to arrive from Canada, and orders were placed for 116 more. (Metro also opened a new Flyer Stop at the SR-520 Toll Plaza, so you could theoretically take a flyer on a Flyer.) That August, the first wheelchair accessible coaches entered service, the first 150 AM General/MAN articulated coaches were delivered, the first rehabilitated trolley routes were powered up, and the first of 109 new trolleys began arriving. Metro implemented a new computerized "Route Cutting and Scheduling System" (RUCUS) to improve maintenance efficiency, opened three suburban park-and-ride lots, and initiated a "Bel-Hop" circulator service in downtown Bellevue.

The weather turned nasty in October, and lightning knocked out much of the new trolley system. A different kind of storm also broke that fall as the King County Council (led by Mike Lowry, who would later be elected to Congress and the governorship) placed a proposition to "merge" Metro and King County Government on the November 6, 1979, ballot. The "Committee for United County Government" melded old grievances against Metro "elitism" with new ideas for greater accountability and efficiency, and assembled an uneasy coalition that included organized labor and both the King County Republican and Democratic Parties. County Executive John Spellman supported the effort, but at a safe distance.

Most Metro Council members, particularly municipal officials, and their "good government" allies smelled an old-fashioned "power grab." They formed the "Committee Against the County Takeover of Metro" under the leadership of Kirkland City Council Member Doris Cooper, Mercer Island Mayor Beth Bland, and Seattle City Council Member Jeanette Williams -- who, as head of the King County Democrats, had torn into Metro's hide a decade earlier but now rallied to its defense.

The opposition neutralized the merger proposition with a simple bromide: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." More than two-thirds of the electorate apparently agreed, and the merger was rejected by 207,000 votes to 69,000. (The author should note that he directed the anti-merger media program; his former colleague Roxie Grant came up with the idea of applying a bit of old folk wisdom to the campaign.) The same voters approved the King County Farmlands Program to purchase development rights for preservation of agricultural lands in danger of development -- another idea of Jim Ellis.

Metro Transit ended the year by opening its new Federal Way Park & Ride lot, which immediately filled with 800 cars the next day, and it completed work on its new maintenance center/unit repair facility. Seafirst Bank became the first company to fully subsidize Metro passes for its employees, and its participation brought the count of companies underwriting transit to 69, with nearly 100,000 employees. Metro also initiated "subscription service" offering scheduled commuter buses to 21 employment centers outside of downtown Seattle.

As Metro ended the penultimate year of the "1980 Plan," it had completed work on eight park-and-ride lots and 900 bus shelters, exceeded its goals for minority business participation by awarding 22 percent of its construction contracts to minority-owned contractors, and deployed 1,578 drivers. Although many were part-time, patron complaints per driver fell from 4.38 in 1978 to 3.1., and the incidence of preventable accidents dropped by 11 percent thanks to an innovative "Safe Driver" incentive program.

Thanks to such improvements and services -- and a little help from the Ayatollah Khomeini, whose overthrow of the Shah of Iran sent fuel prices through the roof -- Metro ridership bolted upward by nearly 9 million passengers, an extraordinary 17.8 percent gain over the previous year. With a total ridership of 58,259,000, Metro had achieved and surpassed the ridership goal established back in 1972 one year ahead of schedule. C. Carey Donworth later wrote, "Indications are that ridership would have been even higher if Metro had been able to put more buses on the street."

Despite these spectacular successes, the growth of transit revenues were not pacing the system's ridership. Metro traveled to Olympia for relief, and experienced unwonted ease in winning legislative authority to ask voters to raise their sales tax another three-tenths of a percent.

The electorate proved to be a bigger problem, and the decision to raise fares to 50/75 cents in May 1980 probably did not help make Metro's case the following fall. By primary election day on September 16, the local economy was mired in the same "stagflation" that gripped the nation, and 53 percent of voters rejected Metro's sales tax hike. With half a billion dollars in essential new revenue at stake, Metro could not afford to take "no" for an answer. With the leadership of Renton mayor Charles Delaurenti and Penny Peabody, who had recently left the agency to consult, Metro launched a major campaign for reconsideration on November 4. The new sales tax squeaked through by 172,000 votes to 166,000, a scant 50.9 percent majority.

Warren G. Magnuson wasn't so lucky. Despite the best efforts of Aubrey Davis, who resigned his federal post to manage Maggie's bid for a sixth term, the President Pro Tem of the United States Senate was washed over board by the Reagan tidal wave and a vigorous campaign by Slade Gorton. The author of the original UMTA legislation did not leave office, however, before securing an additional $38 million grant to enable Metro to purchase 202 more articulated coaches. Davis was rehired as UMTA regional representative before the inauguration of Ronald Reagan.

Change was clearly in the wind for Metro as well as the nation. Founding father James Ellis had stepped down as corporate counsel in September 1979, although he remains a trusted advisor. Chuck Collins resigned two months later to pursue a private sector career. To succeed him, Metro tapped Gerald Haugh, son of a transit pioneer, former priest and then director of the transit system in Long Beach, California. C. Carey Donworth, the only chairman the Metro Council had ever known, also decided to lay down his gavel after 22 years of unpaid service. To fill the void Donworth left behind, the Metro Council turned in July to a chemical engineer and univerity administrator, Dr. Gary Zimmerman, was then Seattle University's executive vice president and now heads Antioch College's Seattle campus.

When Metro Transit closed the books on 1980, it counted 66.1 million passengers for the year -- more than twice the ridership it had inherited in 1973 and almost 12 million more riders that it had set its sights on in its first plan. There seemed to be nowhere to go but higher and higher, but in politics as in nature, what goes up must ultimately come down.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

The turn-around between the defeat of the second Forward Thrust plan and the authorization of Metro Transit in just two years is nothing short of a political miracle. Metro can take credit for its new realism in planning services, arranging financing, and plotting and executing campaign strategy, but it also benefited from a dramatic change in public attitudes toward freeways and the environment, and, perhaps most important of all, a consensus that a real emergency existed and there was no practical alternative to Metro's plan.

The voters' approval of two sales tax hikes also carries a lesson, as Aubrey Davis puts it, "that people don't always vote their economic interest." Beyond the obvious advantage of avoiding the 60 percent super-majority requirement, the sales tax proved to be a more "bite-size" source of revenue than the property tax and easier for the electorate to swallow, even though a consumption tax affected far more people.

The decade of the 1970s also highlighted new dangers for Metro and future transit planning. Foremost, the chaos at the COG demonstrated that the federated approach to regional decision-making was unraveling. County officials were no longer content to play the role of country bumpkins to their big city cousins, and they resented their exclusion from regional policy decisions affecting people they had been elected to represent. Although the counties and their legislative allies were not able to mount much more than harassing guerilla operations during the 1970s, they steadily gained confidence and strength.

Foremost, Metro had evolved from being a largely invisible utility into a political force -- and a political target. It was now accountable to the public for a sensitive function which, unlike sewage treatment, hundreds of thousands of people saw and experienced every day. Similarly, Metro's decisions on technology, routes, capital improvements, and service levels had far-reaching impacts on the quality of urban life and the course of suburban development. Metro could no longer claim the political immunity of a mere technical "problem-solver;" it had become a de facto government.

At the operating level, Metro also discovered an ugly truth. Despite the ebullience of its steady ridership growth, it became clear that delivering a high quality, efficient service was not enough. Achieving even the modest goal of deriving one-third of its revenue from the fare box would prove impossible. Metro was also trapped in the same congestion which clogged the region's highways. Without dedicated rights-of-way and HOV lanes, its buses shared the misery of traffic jams with cars and trucks and afforded commuters no additional speed or convenience. At the same, the spread of low-density development in the suburbs scattered future transit customers in locations which would be difficult and expensive to serve with traditional buses.