To break out of traffic and maintain service levels, Metro needed more money for construction and operations, but as the 1980s began, the political infrastructure for such support was fast crumbling. There was little danger that Metro Transit would slide backward; the real question was, could it move forward?

Routes

Part IV: End of the Line

Tunnel Visions and a Shotgun Merger, 1980 -- 1993

Metro Transit's stunning success during its first seven years of operation was both a blessing and a curse. It demonstrated that Metro could do the job and that there was a vast potential market for modern public transportation. It also created enormous pressure to expand services at a time when the federal government was retreating from urban mass transit. Metro was caught in a political and fiscal squeeze to do more with less.

Metro Transit was further constrained by the lack of meaningful limits on urban sprawl and by the lack of capital to build high capacity systems which might vector growth in new, more transit-friendly ways. Either way, Metro could not count on the development of sufficient population and employment densities to assure the future cost-effectiveness in transit services.

Most frustrating of all, Metro analysts and planners were at a loss to explain the system's own popularity. This did not prevent the Metro Council from committing the transit system to an "aggressive all-bus strategy" in 1977 with a goal of serving 120 million annual riders by 1990.

Despite this ambitious target, the vagaries of finances, economic conditions, and urban growth compelled Metro Transit to narrow its capital vision to a small set of major improvements, notably the Downtown Seattle Transit Tunnel and a system of suburban transit centers, while broadening its service vision to embrace an active marketing philosophy to sell its transit "products."

While Metro achieved great success in realizing both its capital and its marketing visions, neither permitted it to achieve its service goals. Indeed, ridership all but stagnated during much of the 1980s and Metro Transit's share of regional travel shrank as suburban growth and auto use ballooned.

The resulting sprawl and congestion set off alarms that finally roused the Legislature from its Olympian slumber and led in the early 1990s to the passage of growth management legislation and new support for regional mass transit development, which will be discussed in the next

chapter. These were the key tools which reformers had sought since 1952 to bring order to Metropolitan Seattle and protect its quality of life, but the Municipality of Metropolitan Seattle would not get to use them. By 1992, Metro was already headed to the political scrap yard -- the victim of an inherent Constitutional flaw and, one could argue, its own contradictions.

Shifting Gears

The MetroTRANSITion planning process was launched in 1975 to help Metro Transit "discover what to do next," in the words of Don Munro, then head of transit planning. It was an empirical process intended to build on the momentum of previous success and community support, not an attempt to impose a preconceived grand plan on the region. As such, MetroTRANSITion was a refreshingly honest exercise, but it also highlighted the limits of technical knowledge and public consensus in building a truly "market-driven" transit system.

MetroTRANSITion analysts were perplexed by the causes of Metro's spectacular ridership gains. As the May 1979 Regional Overview Analysis discreetly put it, "The demographic, economic and travel factors producing Metro's current rapid ridership growth still remain elusive."

One factor was obvious, however: the dramatic increase in gas prices caused by unrest in the Middle East had made transit an economical alternative for thousands of new riders. The prospect of "an energy-scarce future" and antipathy towards rail transit led the Metro Council in 1977 to endorse an "aggressive all-bus strategy" as the core policy for guiding development of a 1990 plan. Given the rate of ridership growth since 1973, the Council also set a "planning target" of serving 120 million passengers annually by 1990.

A second "elusive" factor was regional consensus on future development and public transportation needs. MetroTRANSITion attempted to finesse this with a bottom-up approach through which a general plan might "evolve from an aggregation of subarea planning processes" for different parts of the county. This came full circle when citizen committees for the Seattle and Bellevue central business districts complained that they couldn't begin to identify local needs without understanding the regional whole.

The only real policy guidance available to Metro at the time was the concept of urbanized "activity centers" endorsed in the 1964 King County Comprehensive Plan and revived, with a few innovations, by the Puget Sound Council of Government's King County Subregional Plan.

Considering the political fragility of the COG, this was a weak foundation for a multi-million dollar plan.

To help re-focus the planning process, Metro commissioned Parsons Brinkerhoff to prepare a "transit sketch plan analysis [of] regional system issues and implications". The previously cited "Regional Overview Study" was the result, and it splashed cold water on some of transit's most fervent hopes.

Its fundamental finding was that Metro could influence but not control three of four key factors affecting its own success or failure, such as land use densities, energy prices and availability, and the rewards for using or not using automobiles. The only factor Metro COULD control was the quality and reliability of its own services. The study reduced this formula to a "DELI" of options: automobile **D**isincentives, **E**nergy and economics, **L**and use, and transit **I**ncentives.

The Study's analysis of current and projected traffic and ridership led it to conclude that rail was not a realistic prospect before 1990. "At the present time, it does not appear, at least from a demand perspective, that there is a warrant for anything other than bus technology in the major regional corridors." The Study did note, however, that a rail system's "sex appeal" might lead to development in the absence of objective demonstrations of need and effectiveness.

Focusing on all-bus services, the Study found that Metro's "target" of 120 million annual riders could be met, but it cautioned that this would require dramatic increases in Metro's share of the "mode-split" between autos and transit in corridors serving such emerging "satellite centers" such as Tukwila and Bellevue. It urged Metro to augment the "radial" model centered on downtown Seattle with more aggressive service among suburban employment and residential destinations. This would require "a menagerie of services" such as small "paratransit" vans roving around rural areas and "subscription services" to carry workers to suburban employers. Recognizing the novelty of such a strategy, the Study commented, "It could well be that the future of transit may be different than the past," i.e., traditional fixed route service to central business districts. It also suggested, "A well run, non-CBD program could put more black ink on the ledger."

Noting that despite its success in the 1970s, Metro transported only 12 percent of the county's commuters and only 5 percent of all surface travel, the Study challenged lofty

expectations for transit to ameliorate air pollution or suburban sprawl. "In the long run, land use patterns will determine the limits of transit's influence in the urban scene," the authors warned, not vice versa.

The Regional Overview Study was one of dozens of reports which provided grist for the August 1980 MetroTRANSITion Phase IV report which outlined a "Transit 1990 Plan." While the Plan proposed capital and service investments designed to handle up to 138.5 million riders "Metro might have to serve" by 1990 [original emphasis], it deliberately disavowed any ridership goal because of uncertainties over "external factors such as fuel supply, auto operating costs, more concentrated employment, etc." Rather, the Transit 1990 Plan was presented as "more a statement of what Metro should be prepared to accommodate if ridership does, in fact, more than double over the next ten years..."

For all of these caveats and qualifiers, the Plan proposed "an ambitious and flexible approach to serving the transit needs of the 1980s." It included expansion of electric trolley routes from 55 miles to 124 miles in Seattle; nearly tripling park-and-ride facilities from 14 lots to 48 with 14,000 stalls; developing four "regional transit centers" and 19 "community transit centers;" expanding the bus fleet from 950 coaches and trolleys to 2,300; and more than doubling annual service from 1.9 million hours to 4.5 million. The total capital investment was $1.9 billion, including the State's share for completing 120 miles of High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes and new park-and-ride lots. Annual operating costs were projected to increase from $85.8 million in 1980 to $431.2 million by 1990.

With the promise that such investments "must and will be flexible to adapt to circumstances as they arise or can be more accurately predicted in the future," the Metro Council adopted the Transit 1990 Plan on March 19, 1981. The Plan's pliability was tested almost immediately as the Reagan Recession hit Seattle. Metro planners scrambled to adjust their assumptions and calculations. The capital budget was slashed to $766 million and the 1990 ridership target was lowered to 115 million passengers. At the urging of the Citizens Transit Advisory Committee and business interests, the Council focused its plans on serving peak-hour commuters first, and this meant dealing with the growing mess in downtown Seattle.

It was an inevitable but no less fateful decision which would drive the transit agenda for the next ten years, and ultimately, refuel the movement to merge Metro and King County.

The Metro Council adopted its revised "MidRange Program" in November 1981, and it was not a moment too soon as the year's ridership dipped below 66 million. Although a small drop, it was the first decline in passengers since Metro had taken the wheel of county transit services, and it would not be the last.

A Service Menagerie

Notwithstanding the contraction of its budget and plans, Metro remained committed to two fundamental strategies: developing a poly-centric system of services based on suburban transit complexes, and finding a way to cut through the traffic congestion in downtown Seattle. The saga of the "Downtown Seattle Transit Project" will wait a moment while we review the other important innovations introduced by Metro Transit during the 1980s.

Although the 1990 plan committed Metro Transit to substantial capital investments and service expansions, there was little likelihood of adequate federal or state aid. Metro had to look to its own revenues to finance much of these improvements. In this context, the Metro Council took a controversial step in February 1982 by instituting two-tiered fares for peak- and non-peak-hour travel. The new system added a peak-hour surcharge of a dime on a base fare of 50 and 75 cents for one and two zones.

The decision was made on the basis of a detailed ridership survey and market analysis which concluded that Metro's core commuters would swallow the increase. Veterans such as former transit director Chuck Collins believed that this undermined Metro's ability to attract marginal riders. "When they put on the peak-hour surcharge, I felt Metro lost its way," Collins says.

Neil Peterson, then Metro's Executive Director, disagrees strenuously. He dismisses the suggestion that Metro was milking its main market. "Isn't that what you're supposed to do?" he jokes. "It's called market pricing. It's what the airlines do all the time," when they charge regular business travelers the most and offer "supersaver" fares to attract infrequent, casual flyers. "We did studies up the kazoo," Peterson adds. "We knew what the elasticity curves were."

This knowledge was little consolation when 1982 ridership dropped to 63.5 million passengers, but Metro did not blame the new fares. It fingered a dramatic cut in gasoline prices and a losing race to capture the burgeoning inter-suburban commuter market.

These challenges prompted a redefinition of Metro Transit's mission, according to Peterson. "Our job really is not just to put people on buses, our job is to do something about congestion. Given the way the county was growing, given the way jobs were developing, given the way different traveling needs were being met, a 40-foot bus or a 70-foot bus was not always the best way to do it."

Peterson cites Metro's Ridesharing and Van Pool programs as examples of this new spirit of innovation. Metro took over responsibility for the Seattle-King County Commuter Pool in 1983. The program had been established in 1979 and its primary booster was Seattle City Councilmember Jeanette Williams, who served on President Carter's national ridesharing commission. She feared that the program would be "lost in the Metro bureaucracy," despite generous federal matching funds. Metro's rideshare programs expanded dramatically in 1987 when it took over Boeing's existing van-pool and ride-matching programs (shortly after the federal government made such programs and some employee parking a taxable fringe benefit). The program passed the milestone of 1 million trips in 1988 and was honored with National Association of Commuter Transportation's Leadership Award for that year.

Over time, Metro has augmented these operations with a potpourri of non-traditional services to reach rural riders, the disabled and other special markets. These include "dial-a-ride-transit," or DART, which shuttles riders between their homes and suburban park-and-ride lots, and even a "guaranteed ride home" program to assist transit and HOV lane users who are waylaid by breakdowns or other emergencies. These new strategies mark the emergence of a "transportation system management" or TSM philosophy which, when combined with modest capital improvements such as HOV lanes and freeway ramp metering, seeks to increase the person-carrying capacity of the existing network at the lowest cost.

As important as these "personal transit" services have become, Metro is still chiefly a *mass* transit agency. Its core strategy for attracting suburban bus riders was the development of park-and-ride lots and regional transit centers offering "timed transfer" connections among various collector routes. The logistics of serving widely dispersed communities also demanded the construction of outlying operating bases. Development of these facilities proceeded fairly smoothly, with the exception of the North Operating Base.

To serve the Eastside, Metro entered into a ground-breaking "Incentive Agreement" with

the City of Bellevue and the Downtown Bellevue Association. Signed in June 1981, this compact was a pioneering venture in the new field of "transportation demand management," or TDM, which sought to discourage auto use through transit and other alternatives. It obligated the City of Bellevue to adopt land use and parking regulations to discourage more traffic on the already clogged the streets between its giant 600-foot "superblocks." Bellevue's major employers also joined the agreement to promote car pools and transit patronage, which then served less than 3 percent of Bellevue commuters.

In exchange for these pledges, Metro promised to increase transit service, to build a regional transit center in the heart of the downtown, and to help organize and fund a Transit Management Association. In January 1982, Metro opened an interim transit center while it proceeded with design of the permanent facility at 6th Street and 108th Avenue. On March 3, 1982, Metro presented Bellevue with a facsimile "check" in the amount of $204,450, which represented the value of 4,350 additional hours of bus service.

Despite this, Bellevue transportation planner Tom Noguchi expressed a common suburban complaint in 1985 that "most Eastside buses are 'through-routed' via Downtown Seattle." Metro responded in 1986 with the adoption of the "Eastside Action Plan" which added new routes to link Kirkland, Redmond, Bellevue and other suburban cities without detours through Seattle.

Metro later negotiated special programs with major employers such as Boeing to "mitigate" factory expansions in Renton and elsewhere through special transit services and aggressive Ridesharing promotions. It also reached agreements with Snohomish County's Community Transit in 1986 and with Pierce Transit in 1991 to share park-and-ride lots and downtown bus stops for those systems' Seattle expresses.

For all of these innovations, Metro has repeatedly been faulted for not doing enough to serve the suburbs. Robert Neir, a long-time member of the Kirkland City Council and Metro Transit Committee chair during much of the 1980s, dismisses this criticism. "You can't make transit work when you have one house every five acres, and I'm not sure people want it to work. They want to have the bus go by their house, but they don't want to get on it."

"Transit has to go where the people are," Neir continues. For Metro, that meant going to, and through, downtown Seattle.

Not-So-Easy Streets

For all of its concern about new inter-suburban service, Metro was a captive of its own market, and this was centered in downtown Seattle. During a typical morning rush hour in 1979, 11,000 transit riders were headed downtown (and another 4,700 were passing through), which represented 40 percent of all inbound downtown travel and 36 percent of total morning peak-hour ridership. Handling this demand required 420 peak-hour bus trips, which created a paradox: the steady parade of Metro buses was now perceived to be part of the downtown congestion problem, not its solution.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the squeeze was not the fault of the downtown's notorious "hourglass figure" pinched between I-5 and Elliott Bay nor was it caused by a lack of "street capacity." For Metro, the real problem was a lack of available curb distance for buses to load and discharge passengers and the lack of sidewalk area for bus stops and pedestrian circulation.

Despite exclusive peak-hour lanes on Second and Fourth Avenue, congestion would only get worse, and Metro planners predicted that buses would reach the loading capacity of downtown streets by 1985. There was also the unanswered problem of how to handle buses from the Eastside once the I-90 transit lanes opened and began pouring coaches onto downtown streets. And, of course, there was the stink of diesel fumes in an area whose pollution already exceeded federal air quality standards.

The solution was apparent to all: transit needed a street and sidewalks of its own, but that was where agreement ended. Metro had floated the idea of a partial tunnel to route buses through downtown between I-90 and the I-5 Express lanes as early as 1975, but this "diesel ditch" horrified downtown merchants. Metro consultants and planners explored a variety of alternatives, including a "grade-separated transit spine;" converting a downtown avenue into a transit mall; construction of two terminals on the north and south ends of downtown linked by a "circulator system" of electric jitneys or other shuttles; a landscaped trench reserved for diesel buses; and an enclosed tunnel for trackless trolleys.

In April 1980, after much wrangling, the MetroTRANSITion's Downtown Citizen's Task Force, chaired by Seattle banker Robert Buck, opted for an "integrated" approach. This combined

initial construction of a Third Avenue transit mall bracketed by small terminals with later development of a tunnel serving electric trolleys or "dual-propulsion" buses and, eventually, light rail.

The "dual-propulsion" bus was a new ingredient in the debate. The vehicle is a hybrid of an electric trolley and a diesel bus. This allowed the bus to use its diesel engines in outlying areas and then hook up to overhead lines at the city limits. Dual-propulsions offered a theoretical solution to both the problem of diesel noise and pollution in downtown Seattle and the absence of electric lines along freeways and suburban routes. Although articulated dual-propulsions served several large European cities, no dual-propulsion vehicles were then employed in the United States, where there was much skepticism about the cost and reliability of the technology.

Such concerns were academic when Seattle's new mayor, Charles Royer, and its City Council endorsed a Third Avenue mall and "peripheral intercept" terminals at Third and Yesler and Ninth and Pine in November 1980. The Metro Council essentially did the same when it adopted the Transit 1990 Plan the following March, which estimated the project would cost $187 million. The "Downtown Seattle Transit Project" (DSTP) office was established in April 1981 under the guidance of L. Joe Miller. The COG and City of Seattle joined the effort soon after to advise the lead consultant, CH2M Hill, in preparing a detailed plan and environmental impact statement.

When Metro conducted a public "scoping" session for the EIS in December 1981, the ideas of a tunnel and dual-propulsion buses were treated as remote possibilities for a future date unknown. The plan focused on surface Third Avenue mall served by peripheral terminals, but cracks quickly began to develop in the early consensus. Experts expressed doubts over the capacity of the terminals to accommodate hundreds of buses each peak-hour, and suburban leaders grumbled about their citizens having to transfer.

They weren't alone. As Neil Peterson notes, "People from the University District and Rainier Valley would also have to transfer" to circulator buses at the northern and southern fringes of downtown. Boosters of rail transit saw no advantage in a mall because it didn't provide a separated grade for trains. Even downtown business interests were not sold on the idea, and retailers in particular feared the replacement of automobiles with moving walls of buses on Third Avenue.

On the other hand, City Councilmember Jeanette Williams saw the mall as key to

revitalizing Third, which was a poor cousin to Fourth and Fifth Avenues, and she believed that the terminals would stimulate business in the International District and upper Pine Street area. As chair of the Council's Transportation Committee, Williams wielded enormous influence. She had led the effort in 1980 to dissolve the mayor's Office of Policy and Evaluation while retaining a "Downtown Land Use and Transportation Office." This made her the dominant Seattle official in setting downtown and transit policy, but Metro had its own ideas.

Amid these discussions, Gerald Haugh took his leave to return to California, and Ron Tober arrived from Miami to become the fourth director of Metro Transit in April 1982. He stepped right into a hornets' nest on the issue of the North Operating Base.

In a rare display of independence, the Metro Council sided with irate citizens in October 1982 and rejected the original staff recommendation to locate the Base at about North 135th Street and Aurora Avenue. Metro Transit launched a "Place that Base" contest to seek new sites. It took another two years to settle on an alternative location adjacent to I-5 at NE 165th Street, and five more years hammer out a design acceptable to the neighborhood and the Council. The base did not open until 1991. At a total cost of $55 million (including its own freeway interchange), Ron Tober jokes that the North Base is "the world's most expensive bus garage." The controversy would prove good practice for the battle over the downtown tunnel.

Metro planners began to study alternatives such as using Fourth Avenue for the mall and reducing the distance between terminals. In January 1983, Metro floated trial balloons for "close-in" underground stations at Fourth and Columbia and Westlake Mall. The latter infuriated Mayor Royer, who had his own ideas for development of the long-stymied Westlake triangle, but it pleased suburban officials because closer terminals meant more of their constituents could reach their downtown destinations without changing buses.

On this last point, Metro Transit chair Bob Neir was adamant. "Nobody in King County should have to transfer more than once to get where they're going on Metro Transit." He later made this principle official policy.

City Councilmember Paul Kraabel was keen enough to observe that moving the terminals closer together "would put us a leg up" on building a tunnel, to which he added, "Some people would see that as an advantage, and some people would see that as a disadvantage." Since the proposed terminals were only seven blocks apart, Bob Neir dropped the other shoe and proposed

that Metro simply dig a tunnel for diesel buses under Fourth. Jeanette Williams felt "betrayed" by transit staff.

At a February 1983 briefing of the Seattle City Council, Metro's Joe Miller confessed that his agency was leaning -- unofficially -- toward the tunnel. Before the month was out, the preference gained real sanction with Metro's approval of a study of close-in terminals with underground bus access. In March, Metro formally changed the scope of the DSTP to include the new terminal locations and possible use of dual-propulsion buses. Mayor Royer counter-punched in April by ramming a renewed endorsement of the mall and peripheral terminals through the DSTP's Advisory Committee, which he chaired.

Metro Transit staff replied in May by making an independent recommendation for the close-in terminals as the "preferred alternative" to the Metro Transit Committee. Its chair, Bob Neir, was openly hostile to the Seattle position, and he found support from County Councilmember Paul Barden, who scorned Seattle's plan "to turn Third Avenue into a greenbelt at great expense to people from outside the city." Neir wrote his fellow Metro Council members on May 27, 1983, to propose a diesel bus tunnel, no mall, scrapping the Monorail and substituting a downtown circulator system. Mayor Royer blasted back, "If you [the Metro Council] vote for a tunnel and we don't want one, there won't be one."

This was not simply a case of suburbs versus the big city, according to Neir. "It was a war of wills between the City of Seattle's goals for downtown beautification and revitalization, and a real transit plan. I told the downtown community, Metro's job isn't to build up your city, we're here to bring people to it -- and get them through it" to other destinations. On the other side, Neir had to convince suburban leaders to support sinking most of Transit's capital into a downtown facility. He told them, "We have to do the tough job first [of getting through Seattle], then we can expand the tentacles. Your turn is coming."

The battle lines were now clearly drawn, but the result was a stalemate. The DSTP Advisory Committee could not hold together an agreement on the terminals in June 1983, and Neir did not have the votes he needed on the Metro Transit Committee for his diesel tunnel, so the decision deadline was postponed until October. At the same time, significantly, the committee added a tunnel to the list of short-term options. Meanwhile, UMTA, which expected to fund initial planning, was becoming impatient.

As October 1983 approached, the warring sides dug in, but like World War I infantries, they couldn't gain ground against each other. At this point, Neil Peterson decided to break the deadlock, and dual-propulsion buses were his secret weapon. Metro studied the experience of European cities and imported a Renault-built articulated dual-propulsion for tests on Seattle streets. Despite its theoretical appeal in meeting both downtown and suburban service needs, dual-propulsion represented a risky technology. It was also Peterson's trump card, for dual-propulsion buses would allow him to assure the suburbs of service while permitting a clean, electric-powered transit tunnel through downtown. This was Peterson's last gamble, for he had already decided to resign effective the end of October.

After airing the idea of a dual-propulsion tunnel during September, Peterson wrote the Transit Committee on October 6, 1983, and formally recommended that Metro dig beneath Third Avenue from Union Station to Ninth and Pine for electric operation with dual-propulsion buses and that it shoulder responsibility for substantial street improvements and a surface circulation system. He estimated the total cost of construction at $320 million.

The Seattle City Council rejected the idea in early October (George Benson cast the lone pro-tunnel vote), but the mall temporarily lost its main champion when Mayor Royer entered the race to succeed U.S. Senator Henry Jackson, who had died the previous month. The loss of Jackson's clout made everyone nervous, and the City's Director of Intergovernmental Relations, Bill Stafford, pointedly warned the City Council that Congressional staff were "getting tired of our battles out here" over the downtown transit project.

Puget Sound Council of Government planners were also alarmed. As a result of high capacity transit studies in the early 1980s, COG staff had concluded that a rail tunnel through downtown would be needed sooner or later. COG director Mart Kask supported the transit mall as an interim solution because he feared that "a bus tunnel would pre-empt a tunnel for rail." Neil Peterson muscled past the COG's concerns, and helped prove that Metro was really the chief regional transportation planning agency, but Kask successfully argued, "If you're going to build a tunnel, at least make it compatible with rail."

The City Council reversed its position on the tunnel in a unanimous vote on October 31, 1983. As then-City Councilmember and future Seattle Mayor Norm Rice commented at the time, "I think we looked at our options and knew where the votes were going." Three days later, the Metro Council also voted unanimously to endorse the tunnel and proceed with a request to UMTA

to fund preliminary engineering. The great tunnel debate was over -- for the moment.

An Excursion on the Waterfront Streetcar

As Metro wrestled with these issues, City Councilmember George Benson quietly promoted a simple idea -- restore a vintage streetcar and run it along Downtown Seattle's Central Waterfront. At least it *seemed* simple back in 1974, when fellow streetrail buff Robert Hively first broached the notion with the newly elected Benson.

Seattle Mayor Wes Uhlman and City Councilmember Bruce Chapman also suggested installing a streetcar on First Avenue to link Pioneer Square and the Pike Place Market, which were then undergoing substantial restoration. They quickly retreated from the technical and financial challenges posed by the line, but Benson was made of sterner stuff.

He entered into a complex series of negotiations to obtain permissions from the several railways which shared the right-of-way beneath the Alaskan Way Viaduct. Benson also needed waivers from the railway unions and federal agencies which determined work and safety rules for all vehicles operating on these tracks. As he navigated the tangled, 19th century maze of railroad regulation, Benson found himself stonewalled and undercut by hostile City planning staff who derided "Benson's Folly." Benson effectively went over their heads to win the endorsements of U.S. Senators Magnuson and Jackson, and he gained a key ally in Neil Peterson. "I knew it was going to be an asset," Peterson recalls, "so I said, let the guy run with it."

As Benson pursued a right-of-way, Hively offered the use of several Brill Master cars which he had salvaged from Yakima, but these proved unsuitable. An Oregon antiquarian named Paul Class offered to search the world for suitable rolling stock, and he ultimately found it halfway around the globe in Melbourne, Australia. Benson flew across the Pacific to inspect that city's Class W-2 cars, which dated from the 1920s but were still in use. When he explained to Melbourne officials that Seattle intended to actually operate the streetcars, not merely display one, "they graciously gave us the pick of their rolling stock" at the absurdly low price of $28,000 each -- including shipping. Benson took three on the spot (and Metro now owns five).

Despite this bargain, the cost of the streetcar line had ballooned from an initial estimate of a

few hundred thousand dollars to $3 million. Costs were driven by safety improvements to the roadbed and the need to construct five wheelchair-accessible stations along the 1.4-mile route. Just as construction was about to begin, Benson's colleagues on the City Council lost their nerve and demanded that waterfront businesses help finance the line.

Benson enlisted the aid of the late Chuck Peterson, owner of Trident Imports, and John Gilmore, president of the Downtown Seattle Association. They helped to rally support from local businesses and property owners who voted three to one to tax themselves $1.2 million through a local improvement district assessment. Benson also recruited hundreds of volunteers to help restore the streetcars. Even Bruce Nordstrom, a principal of the fashion retailer, pitched in to help paint the cars for their inaugural run.

"Benson's Folly" made its debut on May 29, 1982, and 3,000 citizens lined up along the route from Pier 70 to Pioneer Square. More than 277,000 passengers took the 20-minute shuttle during the line's first year of operation. Based on this success the line was extended east in 1990 to the International District and the southern portal of the downtown transit tunnel. No longer merely a tourist amenity, the Waterfront Streetcar is now an integral element of downtown Seattle's circulation system.

Breaking New Ground

The commitment to suburban transit centers, the Waterfront Streetcar, downtown Seattle tunnel, and car- and van-pooling represented the key elements of Neil Peterson's legacy to Metro. He departed in October for a an adventure in the private sector which ultimately led him back to public transit in 1989 as political architect of Los Angeles' new public transit system and, interestingly, that city's first transit tunnel.

For its new Executive Director, the Metro Council selected another veteran of the state Department of Human and Health Services, former director Alan Gibbs. That is where the similarities between Peterson and Gibbs ended, explains Dick Sandaas, who then managed Metro's Technical Services Department and would later succeed Gibbs. "Neil and Alan were the extreme ends of the spectrum," Sandaas recalls. If Peterson had proved to be an adept politician -- too much so, in the opinion of some -- Gibbs was the "consummate bureaucrat." This, too, would prove to have its drawbacks.

When Gibbs assumed his duties in October 1983, Ron Tober was busy trying to slow a precipitous drop in ridership. Thanks to the arrival of 202 new articulated coaches the previous year, Metro now had a fleet of 1,061 coaches. Tober redeployed these in October of 1983 to increase service by a dramatic 33,000 hours per month. The move blunted but did not reverse the decline, and Metro ended 1983 with its third ridership decline in a row, down to 62.5 million passengers.

As disappointing as this was at the local level, it did not diminish the national reputation for service innovation and technical leadership which Metro Transit had earned during its first decade. This was formally acknowledged in October 1983 when the American Public Transit Association named Metro the "Outstanding Major Public Transit System" in the United States.

David Kalberer took over management of the Downtown Seattle Transit Project in April 1984 and began preparing the final environmental impact study. An early design issue focused on the adaptability of the tunnel to future rail use. There was no controversy that the dimensions and alignment of the tunnel should accommodate conventional light rail cars, but this left major outstanding design issues such as the height of the loading platforms. High platforms like one encounters in subways would have dictated a radical new design for buses, and the aesthetics of a ditch in a ditch offended Bob Neir. "I wanted a street experience" below ground, and he told the staff, "Treat these people [future tunnel users] as human beings." Low platforms on the sides of the right-of-way were the result.

The project's cost rose to $416 million, which included $394 million for the tunnel itself, plus $15.3 million for surface improvements and $5.7 million for the downtown "circulator," but did not count the cost of dual-propulsion buses, whose use had not yet received final blessing. Metro's consultants reported one piece of good news. Detailed engineering demonstrated that the Third Avenue route was $4 million cheaper than Fourth Avenue, which settled the route issue once and for all. This left the small issue of how to pay for it.

Metro had hoped that the federal government would cover three-fourths of the cost of digging the tunnel. This was an audacious goal given that the state had lost its two most powerful advocates, Senators Magnuson and Jackson, and the Reagan Administration was openly hostile to urban development aid in general and mass transit in particular. "Seattle just doesn't have clout anymore," Bob Neir admitted, so Metro proposed that UMTA pony up $197 million, or half of the

main tunnel budget, "just to get into the game." Even this proved to be a daring gamble as the tunnel became a hostage in a power struggle between Congress and the Reagan Administration over transit funding. Despite his initial enthusiasm for Metro's all-bus philosophy, UMTA administrator Ralph Stanley flatly declared in February 1985, "The tunnel is dead."

UMTA retracted this obituary a few weeks later under bipartisan pressure from the state's Congressional delegation. Republican U.S. Senators, Dan Evans and Slade Gorton worked on the Reagan Administration and their Senate colleagues, while Congressmen Mike Lowry and Norm Dicks won the support of key Democratic leaders in the House. Metro was still in the game.

As wary of public transit as the federal government was in the 1980s, it did confer one curious benefit through the reform of the tax code. The new code permitted public transit systems to market the depreciation of their own bus fleets to private corporations via "safe harbor leases." Because public agencies did not pay corporate income tax, such depreciation was useless to them, but it had great value for corporations seeking ways to cut their tax liabilities. Several national companies paid Metro millions of dollars to "own" its new buses and write off the depreciation, while Metro took actual possession of the vehicles. It was a win-win for everybody, with the notable exception, of the federal treasury, but, of course, the booming economy was supposed to make the national debt "grow away."

As Metro wrestled with federal bureaucrats over money, it also faced a final decision on dual-propulsion technology. While the initial commitment to the new buses had allowed Neil Peterson to finesse the tunnel vs. mall issue, no one was yet sure that the things would actually work. Only 70 of the vehicles were then in use and no vehicle had operated longer than 18 months. A Metro delegation traveled to France and Germany in January 1985 to see dual-propulsions in action, and Metro consultants scrutinized their capabilities and performance histories. On February 21, 1985, the Metro Council officially climbed aboard and authorized preparation of bid specifications for the purchase of 236 articulated dual-propulsion coaches. The cost was then estimated at $130 million.

In April 1985, the Metro Council took another significant step by approving $1.5 million expressly for commissioning and installing works of art in the five tunnel stations. The following month, Metro retained Seattle sculptor Jack Mackie to coordinate the project. Mackie had created one of Seattle's most popular pieces of public art, the brass dance steps inlaid in the sidewalks along Broadway. He recruited four additional artists, Alice Adams, Sonya Ishii, Vicki Scuri and

Kate Erickson, to work with architects from the TRA firm, under overall direction from Mark Spitzer, to integrate original art directly into final station designs. Metro Council member Dorrit Pealy chaired the Metro Council's arts committee, which included Seattle City Councilmember Jim Street. "The objective," Street explained, "is to transform a functional transit facility into a place of human interest."

The final piece fell into place on July 16, 1985, when UMTA issued a "Record of Decision" declaring the tunnel to be the "most cost-effective transit project" in the nation and approved $20 million to begin land acquisition for the tunnel. Two days later, the Metro Council unanimously approved the final EIS.

David Kalberer and his staff, along with a legion of engineers and architects from Parsons Brinkerhoff and TRA, got down to the nitty gritty. The tunnel was the most expensive construction project yet undertaken by Metro (it has since been dwarfed by Metro's $2 billion secondary treatment system) and one of the most complex. The final design envisioned two parallel, 18-foot diameter tubes bored at an average depth of 60 feet beneath Third Avenue from Union Station to Westlake. This required the services of two 140-ton "shield excavators," giant mechanical moles which literally chewed through the earth while "tunnel rats," as the subterranean workers styled themselves, toiled behind them to shore up the tubes.

At Westlake, the bores joined a more traditional "cut and cover" excavation which extended east to the Convention Center station at Ninth and Pine. The tunnel's five stations would also be excavated by cut and cover techniques. During 1986, Metro signed contracts with Constructors-Pamco for utility relocations, and Atkinson Construction/Dillingham Construction for boring the tunnels and digging Pioneer Square station.

The final TRA station design specified a distinctive architectural approach for each stop along the route. The understated pavilions of the International District station suggest a cultural crossroads in keeping with the neighborhood. The Pioneer Square station's rich brick, distinctive clocks and ornamental iron gates echo the history of Seattle's birthplace while the University Street station's spare, modernistic barrel ceiling portends a brave new world of global commerce and electronic technology.

Westlake Station is the centerpiece of the design. It features a broad mezzanine with direct portals to downtown's leading stores and its post-modern fixtures and lustrous stone and tile

surfaces would make the Moscow Subway blush. Finally, the functional Convention Center displays flashes of neon reflecting the marquees of nearby theaters and hotels. A squadron of artists was commissioned to create textures, images and artifacts to express the theme of each station.

All of this would be complicated enough, but the project entailed much more: the relocation of a subterranean maze of power and telephone lines, water mains, sewers, and even steam pipes; rerouting of hundreds of buses and trolleys and tens of thousands of automobiles and trucks; and the removal of some 800,000 cubic yards of soil from beneath the central business district. The Third Avenue tubes would also have to cross under and then over the Burlington Northern's 1907-vintage rail tunnel.

There was also the challenge of designing and building 236 articulated dual-propulsion coaches -- three times the number of such vehicles then extant -- by 1990. Coordinating this effort fell to Bob White, then head of Metro Transit capital planning. Metro selected Italy's Breda Construzione Ferroviarie to fabricate the buses, which would incorporate Westinghouse electric systems and Detroit Diesel Allison engines. The plan called for final assembly of the vehicles at a factory in Issaquah.

Tremors

Just to make things more interesting, Metro's construction schedule coincided with the most active period of downtown development in Seattle's history. The City of Seattle planned to construct the new Westlake Center and Park simultaneously with the tunnel, and developers raced to secure permits for an unprecedented eruption of new highrise office buildings before Seattle's new downtown plan took effect in 1985. In all, 28 major public and private projects were slated for construction in downtown before the end of the decade.

The prospect of so much construction at one time sent shivers through City Hall and the Downtown Seattle Association. They joined with Metro to organize special marketing, including DSA's "Easy Streets" program of subsidized shopper parking and transit tokens, and signage to help retailers survive the onslaught. Metro promised to halt its work at Westlake, in the heart of the retail district, in time for the 1988 holiday season and to finish it by 1989. City Councilmember Benson volunteered to act as downtown's unofficial ombudsman during the building boom.

The scale and cost of the tunnel and the approach of a "dig or die" deadline in September 1987 mobilized a last ditch campaign to block the project. Social advocates, urban design skeptics, and government reformers organized an "Ad Hoc Coalition for Alternatives to a Bus Tunnel" and *Seattle Weekly* publisher David Brewster appointed himself as a one-man truth squad in challenging Metro's budget estimates and ridership projections. There was ample grist for the mill: annual ridership had dipped again in 1985 and slipped to 63.2 million in 1986, far below both the optimism of the original 1990 plan and even the new "realism" of Metro's adjusted forecast of 75 million riders by the end of the decade. Metro blamed the effects of downtown office construction (which it would soon exacerbate) and low gasoline prices.

New doubts arose over the reliability of federal funding. UMTA's Ralph Stanley denounced the tunnel as an example of the "ton of fat" in Congress' budget priorities. Under renewed pressure, Stanley recanted once again, and UMTA signed a "full-funding" pledge for $197 million in May 1986 *if* Congress made the required appropriations. The project's cost rose to $426 million and Metro had to ask downtown property owners to approve a $40 million assessment for street and circulation improvements in order to keep the project within available revenue.

As the detailed design emerged, critics began focusing on specific uncertainties such as how Metro would keep the stations safe and how would it treat the downtown's growing homeless population. The "regional equity" of the project was questioned by suburbanites. Newly elected County Councilmembers Cynthia Sullivan and Ron Sims proposed that an advisory ballot be submitted to voters in advance of construction, and some suggested that the project be postponed while a temporary mall was tested on Third Avenue.

Behind much of this agitation was a growing anxiety about the accountability of Metro's staff and Council. This was fueled by the collapse of the Washington Public Power Supply System, aptly nicknamed WPPSS, whose dream of building 20 nuclear plants had just blown up in the largest public bond default in history. Resentment of Metro was further reinforced by the agency's decision to site its $600 million secondary treatment plant at West Point despite the opposition of Mayor Royer and most environmental groups.

The Municipal League gave voice to these concerns in a special *Issue Brief* published in August 1986. Although the League supported the tunnel *per se*, it expressed uneasiness with the