

Stonewalling for Time

A History of the Garden Grove Sound Wall By Allison P. Jacobs

THE PROMISE

Unmatched in size, capacity, and convenience to commuters, the transportation system in Southern California is one of the state's greatest assets. Today, the increasing number of vehicles traveling Orange County, a metropolitan area crisscrossed by 17 state highway routes, has prompted the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) to work together to ensure that the communities in the area and motorists driving the freeways experience minimal disruption.

Among OC's freeway improvement projects include the widening of the SR-22 Garden Grove Freeway, a six lane, 13-mile highway that nearly runs through the backyards of homes on Anthony Avenue and other residential streets in West Garden Grove (Figure 1). The SR-22 is meant to carry some 115,000 vehicles a day, but crams in nearly 200,000 cars daily slowing speeds to an average of 34 mph at peak travel times. Homes are exposed to the increased daily bumper-to-bumper traffic, freeway debris, and noise and air pollution.

For years, residents were told, "a sound wall is coming." And for years, they waited with no confirmed construction plan in sight. After 38 years, residents are finally getting what they want. Breaking ground on the seven-segmented wall begins this month.

THE HISTORY

Homes that abut the SR-22 freeway between Valley View and Springdale were built in 1963, a time when Garden Grove was still very agricultural. Formerly Fred Bixby Ranch, the land was acquired by the state in 1960 and the subdivisions were laid out with a freeway in mind. Several years later, the construction of the SR-22 was completed, but without sound walls to separate the homes from the freeway.

Residents contacted Caltrans District 7, Los Angeles, and complained of the unyielding noise (screeching tires, sirens, horns, etc), and the threat to safety in their neighborhoods, and the erosion of their property value. They told the district about how they have had to endure their homes shaking each time large trucks would speed by, how they have had to cope with only using their front yards, and how they have had to deal with cars crashing through their retaining walls.

Caltrans repeatedly told residents that they qualified for a sound wall because decibel readings in their backyards exceeded maximum levels considered safe for humans living near freeway limits.

"The law requires that reconstructed freeways include sound walls for residential areas where the decibel reading exceeds a certain threshold," wrote OCTA Principal Government Relations Specialist Tom Fortune, in a letter drafted to Mark Reeder, Chief of Staff for Assemblyman Ken Maddox. Yet the lack of a sound wall in West Garden Grove was still an unresolved issue.

THE STUMBLING BLOCK

What hindered the construction of the sound wall was where residents' complaints were being heard. Although Garden Grove is part of OC, District 7 had jurisdictional responsibility over OC. It was

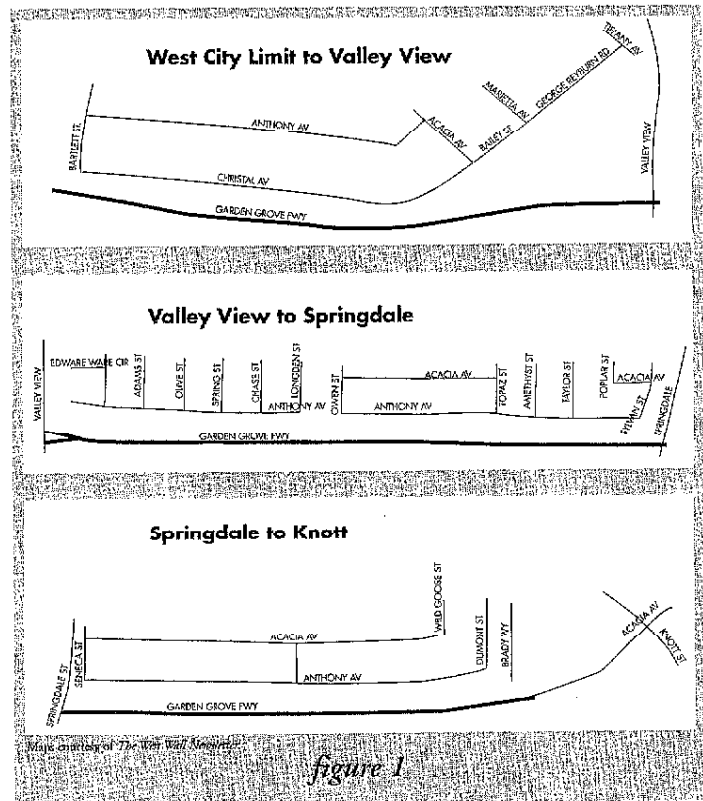


Figure 1

not until the creation of District 12, OC, in 1987 that eventually shortened the communication lines between the residents of Garden Grove and Caltrans employees—a step in the right direction for OC.

Residents were told over the years that a sound wall would be coming in three years. Three years later they were given the same estimate. With time moving on and Caltrans beginning work on other projects of higher priority, residents became frustrated, angry, and felt ignored by Caltrans officials.

"There always seemed to be a matter of higher priority [with Caltrans]," says Anthony Avenue resident Connie Naranjo. "[Garden Grove residents] would get close to having funds approved for the freeway widening but then we were told that another project would need it more than we did. It was a three-year plan that went on for thirty years."

Compared the I-5 Santa Ana, the Orange Crush (where the I-5, SR-22 and the SR-57 meet), and the SR-91 Riverside freeways, the SR-22 had the lowest traffic count. Priority was given to where the "pressure" was the greatest says Larry Stevens, senior Right of Way agent for District 12.

"Most people don't understand the magnitude of these projects," Stevens says. "This is a process that is constantly evolving—a constantly moving target."

Communication lines between residents and Caltrans officials may have been shortened when District 12 was created, but a major

delay in the sound wall construction was the lack of funding. Construction funds for these walls were made part of the budget to widen the SR-22 freeway. In April 2000, Governor Gray Davis unveiled a \$5.2-billion statewide transportation plan. Of the \$400-million requested, OC transportation officials received only a fraction (\$242 million) for the numerous unfunded projects on the county's wish list. OC received only \$50 million of the \$250 million needed to widen the SR-22 freeway.

West Garden Grove residents felt shorted. In order to gain the attention of candidates running in the 2000 election, residents campaigned to make the sound wall a priority for Garden Grove and OC. Freeway widening could wait; the sound wall could not.

SOUND WALL NOW

In May 2000, under the direction of the West Garden Grove Residents Association (WGGRA), a volunteer organization for the improvement of West Garden Grove, residents decided to use the only advantage they really had—the SR-22 freeway. Thirty-eight banners made out of blue water-resistant tarps, measuring 6 feet by 8 feet, and painted slogans that read "Sound Wall Now," "Waiting 30 Years for Sound Wall," and "When Will the Sound Wall Be Built?" lined the backyard walls of residents along Anthony Avenue (Figure 2). The banners not only attracted the attention of the freeway commuters, but also the media and elected officials. Caltrans chief Jeff Morales toured Orange County by helicopter and viewed the messages written on the banners. Caltrans spokeswoman Rose Melgoza says that those signs were hard to miss.

They were indeed hard to miss and were successful in what WGGRA sought to accomplish. By July, residents were promised a sound wall with an estimated completion date of December 2003. Some residents were still skeptical as they felt they had just been told what they had heard for years. In August, president of WGGRA Tony Flores took the resident's fight to Sacramento to confirm with Caltrans officials when the sound walls would be built.

In the same month in order to alleviate the frustration and confusion of the residents, Caltrans and the City of Garden Grove established The West Wall Newsletter to provide residents with accurate and up-to-date information about the project. A series of informational meetings were also scheduled for residents to address questions or concerns and to input their ideas on the design of the wall. Russ Lightcap, a Caltrans veteran of 44 years, was appointed the facilitator for all neighborhood meetings and responds to all phone inquiries made to the West Wall hotline.

By September, the newsletter confirmed that no property would be taken or affected by the sound wall project, and that state funds were allocated and secured by Caltrans to complete all work planned for the sound walls.

In November, residents learned that not only were they going to get their sound walls, but they were also coming sooner than promised. As a result of collaborative efforts between Senator Joe Dunn (D-Garden Grove), Caltrans, and the City of Garden Grove, Caltrans was able to accelerate the construction of at least two of the seven sound walls.

"We need to put past feelings aside," says Stevens. "The Caltrans staff responded rather admirably to meet the needs of the community. This project will take one-third of the time it would have taken—that

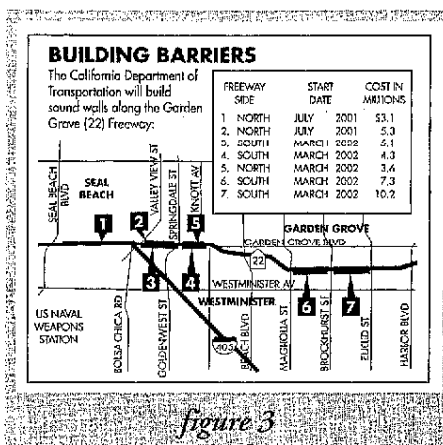


Figure 3

Map courtesy of The Orange County Register

says how much of a priority it was for us. It may be 30 years late, but we did what was humanly possible to get the job done."

With no significant environmental, foundation, wall location, Right of Way, or utility problems, construction begins first on wall six and seven and ends with walls one and two in the Spring of 2002, a year and six months ahead of a previously proposed schedule (Figure 3).

"The acceleration of the sound walls' construction is a success story of community leaders, families and state governments working together to provide residents with the high-quality of life they deserve," says Senator Joe Dunn (D-Garden Grove), vice chair of the Senate Transportation Committee.

CONCLUSION

It may have taken 38 years, but residents of West Garden Grove are finally getting the sound wall. Though residents and Caltrans officials were frustrated over the struggle to obtain the wall, its construction is ahead of schedule. Both sides did what they could to make certain that the sound wall was a priority: residents hung their banners and campaigned; and Caltrans conducted weekly meetings to ensure that every individual involved on the project met the required deadlines. With six different construction companies building the seven sound walls, the project may be an indication of what is to come in expediting the delivery of sound walls to communities in need of them.

"It's exciting that [the sound walls construction] is happening," says Flores. "What once seemed an impossible task is now an accomplished goal."



Figure 2

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