Fixing Spaghetti Junction

BY JEFF LONG

Will the reconstruction of the tangled Spring-Sandusky interchange ever be completed? There's always a new delay, from Les Wexner's own road priorities to endangered water creatures to hostile neighborhood activists. And the bill keeps getting higher.

It's a matter of faith, that this generation of engineers and civil servants and civil engineers has finally gotten it right. That this solution to the insoluble traffic problems at the confluence of the Olentangy and Scioto rivers is the one that will make things better rather than worse.

The notorious Spring-Sandusky interchange, when—if—it ever is finished, well, let's just hope the freaking thing does what it's supposed to do. Let's hope that a road project...
that's been in various stages of design and construction for more than 50 years is finally worth it.

It's supposed to be the final piece of the puzzle, the last link in the Columbus freeway chain. Theoretically, you'll be able to roar in from Worthington or Upper Arlington to a Blue Jackets game with minimum fuss and delay, zoom from Miranova up to Grandview for dinner with little risk to life and limb. Get from Upper Arlington in a relative breeze to the airport. And it will, indeed, be easier to traverse the freeway tangle where the Olentangy meets the Scioto; it could hardly be any worse.

Columbus's first traffic jams—picture a snarl of horse-drawn wagons and cursing teamsters—probably took place where the Spring-Sandusky interchange sits today. Main thoroughfares from the west side, the first settled part of the city, and from downtown met at the road that followed the rivers.

Today the roads in question are 315, 33 and 670. The interchange in question—just south of Grandview and just west of Victorian Village, the Arena District and downtown—has been under construction for seven years now. Seven years of sitting, seething, in traffic jams, wondering: Why in the hell is it taking so long?

Which leads to the question: Who's to blame? Somebody's accountable for those countless hours lost from your life that you spent sitting in traffic in a downtown freeway snarl.

The list of suspects is long and includes the first planners and engineers who worked on it and the last planners and engineers who worked on it. It includes Columbus mayors, Ohio governors and U.S. presidents; you also can toss in Nationwide Arena, cranky Short Northers, birdwatchers, the city's Titans, AmeriFlora, historical preservationists, Les Wexner and several species of river mussel.

You have to go back five decades—shoot, you can go back to when human beings first began shopping along the rivers of Central Ohio—to start understanding this particular freeway interchange. Recent arrivals to Central Ohio just have no idea. Mostly what they know of it is construction; they should have seen that thing.

Of all the Columbus landmarks that have been lost, none will be missed less than the old Spring-Sandusky interchange, Spaghetti Junction, Columbus's own world-class thrill ride: the Great Roller Coaster of Death.

For the novice, even a veteran driver on Spring-Sandusky for the first time, an encounter with the old interchange was pure terror. Swoop down a high-banked curve under a crumbling old concrete railway bridge, through another bridge apparently built in the 19th century then up into an even sharper turn while trying to find the exit which is, unbelievably, there. Hard left!

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Before: The original configuration of Sandusky Street where it met Spring and Rt. 33. From a 1950 map of Franklin County.

After: The first Spring-Sandusky interchange, built in the mid '50s. From a 1959 map of Franklin County.
"Spring-Sandusky is nothing but a deathtrap," declared Mayor Buck Rinehart in 1985, lobbying Gov. Dick Celeste to take money for I-270 lights and fund Spring-Sandusky work."

Above: Shown is the first interchange, with the 1950s Columbus skyline in the background. "No one had ever seen a cloverleaf around here," says Paul Ward of the Franklin County engineer's office.

Right: The Columbus skyline from the Spring-Sandusky interchange today.

State-of-the-art highway project with few equals in the country. "No one had ever seen a cloverleaf around here," says Paul Ward, who was a kid living on the west side just a mile or two south of the interchange during the '50s. "It was a marvel. People back in that day thought it was the greatest thing they'd ever seen."

The novelty wore off fast as the danger became apparent.

"It was probably only 5 to 10 years old" before talk began about replacing it, says the Ohio Department of Transportation's Mike Ciutolo, formerly the project engineer for the new Spring-Sandusky.

This was even before the north section of 315 existed, back when 315 ran only from Mound Street up to Spring. As the Columbus boom picked up steam during the '60s, as 315 north unrolled during the '70s, as the east leg of I-670 stretched out in the '80s, the quaint little experiment in freeway design from the '50s became a daily hazard for Columbus motorists.

So you know now that as far back as the '60s the Spring-Sandusky renovation was on the table, and that by the mid '80s the interchange debacle had Buck Rinehart frothing at the mouth, and in the '90s we came to accept construction jams as a way of life.

The good news is that much of it is done. The stretch of 315 from Grandview south toward downtown is open, as are the eastern and westernmost legs of I-670. The center of the interchange near the Main Post Office is almost done, as are parts of 315 south of Broad Street.
The end is in sight, they tell us. The first shovel of dirt in the first piece of this $225 million puzzle was turned in 1993, already five years late and at a cost almost twice its original estimates. Fall 2003, we are told, will bring closure. This, too, is a matter of faith.

You look at old photos of interchange construction northwest of downtown in the 1950s, then try to navigate the interchange construction northwest of downtown almost 50 years later and you realize: The more things change, the more they stay the same.

What the freeway system has done to parts of this city is a crime.

Older residents in the predominantly black neighborhoods of the near east side can tell you about the devastation wrought by the 70-71 construction in the '60s. Then, when I-670 came along, it was the residents of the predominantly black neighborhoods to the near northeast of downtown who were in the way of progress. They cited lessons from the 70-71 experience, but couldn’t alter the plan for an airport expressway.

Older residents of the predominantly white neighborhoods of the west side have their own story about what can happen to a neighborhood when one of its main streets—in this case Sandusky—is gutted for a freeway.

There is but the sorriest little remnant of Sandusky Street left today. It’s on the map, but it’s nearly impossible to find: an extension of an on-ramp, really, cubbyholed in a grid of one-way streets and freeway bridges. A junkyard, a worn-out, semi-vacant row home, a shoddy duplex—that’s all that’s left of Sandusky Street except for the legacy that’s attached to a freeway interchange.

In the 19th century and for the first part of the 20th, Sandusky Street was a vital artery in this town. Stretching from Mound Street just west of the Scioto on the south toward its terminus at Olentangy River Road just north of the confluence of the rivers, it was a major thoroughfare.

Where Sandusky crossed Broad Street was a crucial west-side hub, a thriving commercial center in a solid working-class neighborhood. It also just happened to be the site of the original home of Lucas Sullivant, founder of Franklin, Columbus’s first big development tycoon.

Paul Ward, the kid from the west side, works today for the Franklin County engineer’s office, which built the original Spring-Sandusky interchange in the mid-50s. Ward’s school, Franklin, stood at the corner of Broad and Sandusky. “This was before 70 and 71 were built,” Ward says. “People from the south side would use Sandusky Street to get to the north side. It was the quickest way. We’d use it to get up to Olentangy River Road, and it was the quickest way to get around.”

Just north of the Sandusky Street bridge over the Olentangy lay the terminus of Spring Street, the main artery for traffic between downtown and the northwest suburbs.

Pictures of the era show a Columbus you would not recognize; the northern end of Sandusky Street was the kind of urban scene that belies the longstanding wisdom that Columbus has little industrial history. Think Pittsburgh or Cleveland. A hot nightclub on Sandusky south of Spring, the Riviera, disappeared utterly along with other businesses on the peninsula when city leaders decided in the post-World War II era that it was time for an upgrade.

The booming postwar economy meant a growing, more prosperous Columbus, which meant more cars than a 19th-century street system could ever handle. Traffic
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Jams at Spring and Sandusky streets became so hellacious that the city erected a shack on stilts at the intersection in which a cop would stand at rush hour, directing traffic.

"These roads—315 or Sandusky Street, 33, Olentangy River Road—these go back to the earliest days of the city," says Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission chief Bill Habig, who's been grappling with the Spring-Sandusky thing for 33 years. The city developed around them, he says, leaving mid-20th-century planners with a nightmare: Superimpose a new road system on a small peninsula at the confluence of two rivers crisscrossed by three rail lines. Easing traffic problems at this spot would be far more challenging than just adding a couple new turn lanes.

The Franklin County engineer's office took on the task. John Circle, longtime county engineer until his death last spring, worked on the project for a private firm in contract with the county.

"There's no question that the rivers and the railroads made it very difficult," Habig says.

"They were really in uncharted waters," Ward says of the first interchange designers.

"This was one of the first interchanges in the country," says former city of Columbus engineer Joseph Ridgeway. "It was filled with potential problems."

"This was prior to Eisenhower signing the interstate highway bill," says ODOT's Cioto. "There were no standards."

"The rules were a lot less stringent as far as safety and speed," says Habig. "They used less space and had more curves to where you'd say that's substandard. But back then it was state of the art."

"There was certainly no thought given to what the construction would do to the rich environment around the peninsula," says Jeff Skelding of the Ohio Environmental Council. Alternative plans that might have moved the focal point of traffic away from the peninsula weren't considered: "They had a mindset of cramming this thing right at the confluence of two rivers," he says.

Impressive as it was to the citizenry, the first Spring-Sandusky interchange was a failure. "By today's standards, it was inadequate almost from the moment it was built," Ridgeway says.
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had been studying the Spring-Sandusky tangle since the late '60s. In 1978, when the
old Penn-Central rail line was abandoned and its right of way acquired, simplifying a
new redesign, planning began in earnest. "I remember, the first redesign wasn't much
good," Ridgeway says. By the early '80s, the redesign had been refined and an
environmental impact study had been completed. Original price tag: about $150 milli-
on.

In 1983 the city was made the project manager, but there was little to manage.
The city and state were feuding over funding and federal dollars were drying up. As
of 1986, city officials were admitting that the original goal of finishing the job by
1992 was in jeopardy. It might take until 1995, they said. In December '87, Rinehart
and Celeste announced that the funding was in place and that work would start in
1989; the construction schedule pegged September '93 as the completion date.

But in '88, ODOT told the city it would have to redesign portions of its plan, pushing
construction back and raising ques-
tions about whether there would be


Finally, on Wednesday, Jan. 6, 1993, the
first orange barrels began to reroute traffi-
c, and construction equipment took up resi-
dence. Official projected completion date:
1998. "I thought it would take about six or
seven years once we got started," Ridg-
eway says.

A lot of the early work was just creating
detours to keep the cars moving around
the construction. "You're trying to build
the new right where the old is, and main-
tain traffic all along the way," Ridgeway
says.

By September '94—about 20 months af-
after it had started—construction was already a year behind schedule. Lead contami-
nation had been discovered in the old in-
dustrial area north of Goodale Street, which
meant huge truck loads of dirt had to be
excavated and carted away. The price,
meanwhile, had risen to $146 million, and
the plan had been broken up into 16 separ-
ate projects at the same time the state was
saying it didn't even have the money to pay for land purchases in the right of way.
Delays continued, leaving half-finished ramps that led to nowhere.

Columbusites frantic for progress on
Spring-Sandusky howled when, in 1995,
ODOT prioritized highway projects around the state and, lo and behold, the in-
terchange was ranked third in Central
Ohio behind the widening of I-270 in the
northern corridor and the Morse-Stelzer
interchange.

That would be, of course, Les Wexner's
interchange, the $223 million gateway to
his Easton project. Cynics presumed Wex-
ner's generous financial support of Gov.
George Voinovich's campaign ($130,000)
had something to do with it. Wexner also
kicked in $18 million of his own money to-
ward creation of the interchange.

ODOT said that the Easton project
meant job creation. Either way, it was a
blow to Spring-Sandusky. "I think the
need was greater at Spring-Sandusky," says Habig. "It was a longstanding need.
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Work resumed on the parts of the pro-
ject that had funding in August '95. The
state and the city continued to spar over
how much the city would pay, a fight finally resolved when the General Assembly approved a law allowing Columbus to use revenue from the suburban Tuttle Mall tax-increment financing district.

The Spring-Sandusky price tag as of ’96: $187 million, with the city kicking in $40 million and most of the rest coming from the feds with some state participation.

Then, in late ’97, ODOT called a halt to a portion of the project, suddenly deciding it needed to investigate whether construction was destroying the environment around the confluence of the rivers.

ODOT insisted its withdrawal of an Environmental Protection Agency permit for the work had nothing to do with a letter Columbus environmentalists had sent to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers objecting to the permit.

The OEC’s Skelding says ODOT hadn’t kept up with stricter environmental laws and hadn’t considered how construction would affect the scenic wetlands and riverbeds in the Scioto-Olentangy area. At risk, environmentalists said: clubshell, northern riffleshell and rayed bean mussels, all on either the state or federal endangered species list, as well as the vitality of the rivers, whose very courses—environmentalists call this “channelization”—were being affected.

Skelding and other environmentalists say ODOT’s environmental assessment in the early ’80s was outdated, and ODOT should have realized it. “ODOT screwed up,” Skelding says. Lorello disagrees: “I don’t think anybody could have seen that coming. The federal laws had changed, and they don’t grandfather anything in.”

The environmental issue went away when ODOT boosted a wetlands project at OSU farther north on the Olentangy and also modified its plans for channelization of the Scioto, which preserved at least some of the wetlands in the area. But as for much of the habitat that supported many bird species (Indiana bats, too, it turns out), and the riverbeds that, if nothing else,
‘I think the need was greater at Spring-Sandusky,’ says Habig. ‘It was a longstanding need. The traffic was worse there and had been worse there for a long time. Morse, that was a new development, that wasn’t trying to fix something that had been a problem for 20 years.’”

Looking north from West Broad Street at ongoing construction under a railway bridge.

“How can you say the traffic won’t negatively impact it?”

In late ‘98, the Citizens group hired an attorney who wrote to the Federal Highway Administration asking it stop ODOT from spending any more money on the Short North section of I-670. ODOT and the FHA dismissed this out of hand. So the group proposed an alternative design, but ODOT said it would cost many millions more and mean an eight-to-10-year delay. “All we hear is, ‘We need to get this done,’” Armstrong says. “OK, it will take more money and more time. Isn’t it worth it to do it right?”

Lorello and others think Citizens for a Better Spring-Sandusky are looking out only for Victorian Village. “They wanted to move 670 south, but that just pushes it back into somebody else’s back yard,” Lorello says. “This has been a longstanding battle. Residents on Neil Avenue have always wanted to keep that a small, two-lane residential street,” he says. That battle was lost long ago, he adds. “Neil Avenue is a thoroughfare.”

Armstrong points out that he refused to sign the 1986 memorandum of agreement between the city and ODOT that finalized the initial interchange plan. A lawsuit is not outside the realm of possibility, he says; “We don’t want to, but we didn’t want to give up that option.”

As for the “obsolete” argument, Lorello says, “Look, I’m not saying it’s going to be perfect.”

“I think this should stand us in good stead for the downtown area for a long while,” Habig says.

City and state officials cross their fingers when they say it looks as though the end is near. Nothing else should crop up to stall this thing again, they say—acknowledging that they’ve thought that before.

Kim Shepherd, program coordinator for Paving the Way, the city group that dispenses info to the public about freeway work, thinks hard when asked what can possibly stop the momentum now.

“Hmmmm. Well, there’s still some digging to be done in Goodale Park,” Shepherd says. “We have to have an archaeologist on site or call, and I suppose if they find some artifacts there, some Indian things or some Civil War stuff, that would stop it.”

Shepherd laughs nervously. “I don’t think that will happen. But you never know….”

Jeff Long is a contributing writer for Columbus Monthly.