

# Fanning Controversy – The Nestucca River Crossing

## *Compiled from Interviews, Winter 2008*

*Some projects can generate unexpected publicity. Two retirees presented their perspectives on an Oregon project that became the center of controversy during a gubernatorial race.*

**Fred Rogers**, who began work at the Bureau of Public Roads in 1957, was involved in design for many years. “I started BLM work under Dave Judkins,” Fred recalled, “then I worked on the forest highways in Oregon.”

One of the projects that he remembered having Direct Federal office involvement was a segment of U.S. 101 on the Oregon Coast Highway. “At one time, we had a design for a bridge,” he said, “at Pacific City where the Nestucca River comes into the ocean....(It) came right over that entrance to the ocean and dropped down to the sand dunes.”



The project became a bone of contention during the race for governor. Tom McCall, the incumbent, had defeated Robert Straub in 1966, but was facing him again in 1974.

Another retiree remembered there being a march on the beach in protest of the project. “Straub was on the side of not building a road up the spit,” said **Lyle Renz**. Tom McCall, who had been the champion of Oregon’s famous “Beach Bill” early in his first term as governor, “was of the impression that that would be a good place to build a road. That was what the highway department was recommending and that’s what FHWA was recommending at the time.”

When Lyle first came to the Bureau of Public Roads in 1962, he did survey and construction inspection on projects in Idaho. After completing the training program, he worked direct federal projects in southern Oregon, then went to work in the Oregon Division in Salem at a time when direct federal construction was still being managed by the Division Offices.

Although he admitted that “after about 1973 I had very little to do with what was happening at direct federal,” he was nevertheless involved on this project because he was working on the environmental document. Then I went away to graduate school,” he said, and used the project and the “controversy associated with it” as a case study of the environmental process.

Environmentalists and farmers squared off on the issues surrounding the project. The former group wanted to avoid the impacts to the sand spit and the river. However, Lyle noted, if the road went up through the interior, “there were lots of little dairy farms” that would be cut up by this route. Not wanting their farms bisected by the highway, the “farming community was in favor of the route up the spit on the coast.”

As Fred noted, the strong opinions on each side made for a “project that was fairly political... It was very controversial.” Lyle made a similar observation, noting it was “probably the biggest item of controversy” in their campaigns. Once the environmental impact statement was issued, he said, “the interior route was (selected), so the road was not built up the coast through that area.”

This highway controversy unseated McCall, and an entry in the Oregon Blue Book documents that a state park commemorates Straub's successful defeat of the highway. Dedicated in 1987, the park was founded in recognition of Robert Straub “as a defender of Oregon's beaches....(and for his) successful opposition to a plan to reroute a section of U.S. Highway 101 across the scenic Nestucca Spit near Pacific City--an area that today is named Bob Straub State Park.”

*Fred Rogers spent his career in the Vancouver direct federal office after arriving from the training program in 1961. He retired in 1999. Lyle Renz joined the BPR training program in 1962 and worked in direct federal construction in Salem, Oregon, until 1971 when he moved into Federal-aid work. He retired in 1994 as Division Administrator in Illinois.*

*Stories in this series have been developed by Marili Green Reilly from interviews and correspondence. If you have memories to share about your experiences on direct federal projects, you may email them to [marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov](mailto:marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov).*