



What Were We Thinking? I'll Tell You.

Sixties Flashback: Urban Renewal, Go-Go Boots, and an Old Port that was nothing short of scary. When we're looking at all the new plans for the Franklin Arterial, we should review how we got here from there.

BY JOHN MENARIO

Portland's former city manager on the original vision for Franklin Arterial.

If I could rewind a video showing various scenes of the community in the early 1960s, people today would have difficulty recognizing them as Portland. There was no Franklin Street Arterial, no Spring Street Arterial, no public parking garages, no Cumberland County Civic Center, no new Portland Museum of Art, no pedestrian plaza in Monument Square, and no beautifully designed Portland Pub-

lic Library. The Old Port was mostly vacant and dilapidated buildings. No new major office building had been built in downtown Portland since the early 1900s. On the waterfront, there was no International Ferry Terminal (now the International Marine Terminal), no Gulf of Maine Research Institute, no Fish Pier or Fish Exchange, no DiMillo's Floating Restaurant, and no modern Casco Bay Lines Terminal. Most residential areas were blighted with junk cars plus an abundance of run-down buildings—some vacant, and some occupied. The

city dumped 15 million gallons of raw sewage into Back Cove and along Commercial Street every single day.

A giant step in arresting neighborhood blight came from the implementation of projects that would improve Portland's image by those who traveled in and out of the region by air.

But of all the positive changes going on throughout the city, none matched the massive economic development that took place on the peninsula, especially in the central business district, the Old Port, and the

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waterfront. It was made possible primarily from the construction of the Franklin Street Arterial, the Spring Street Arterial, and the policy decision to provide public parking. Those three decisions unleashed a positive economic chain reaction that continues to this day. For example, it was the existence of the Franklin Street Arterial, the Spring Street Arterial, and the Free Street Parking Garage that resulted in the city winning the voter-approved Cumberland County Civic Center, [bringing] approximately 500,000 annual event-goers to downtown Portland.

Franks Street Arterial also played a pivotal role when Lion Ferry Company of Halmstad, Sweden selected Portland as its U.S. terminal for a new ferry service to Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. Direct vehicle access from the Interstate to the proposed ferry terminal site helped win the day.

Perhaps the Franklin Street Arterial's greatest contribution to the city's economic health was its capacity to deliver volumes of traffic from the Interstate to Portland's central business district, making possi-

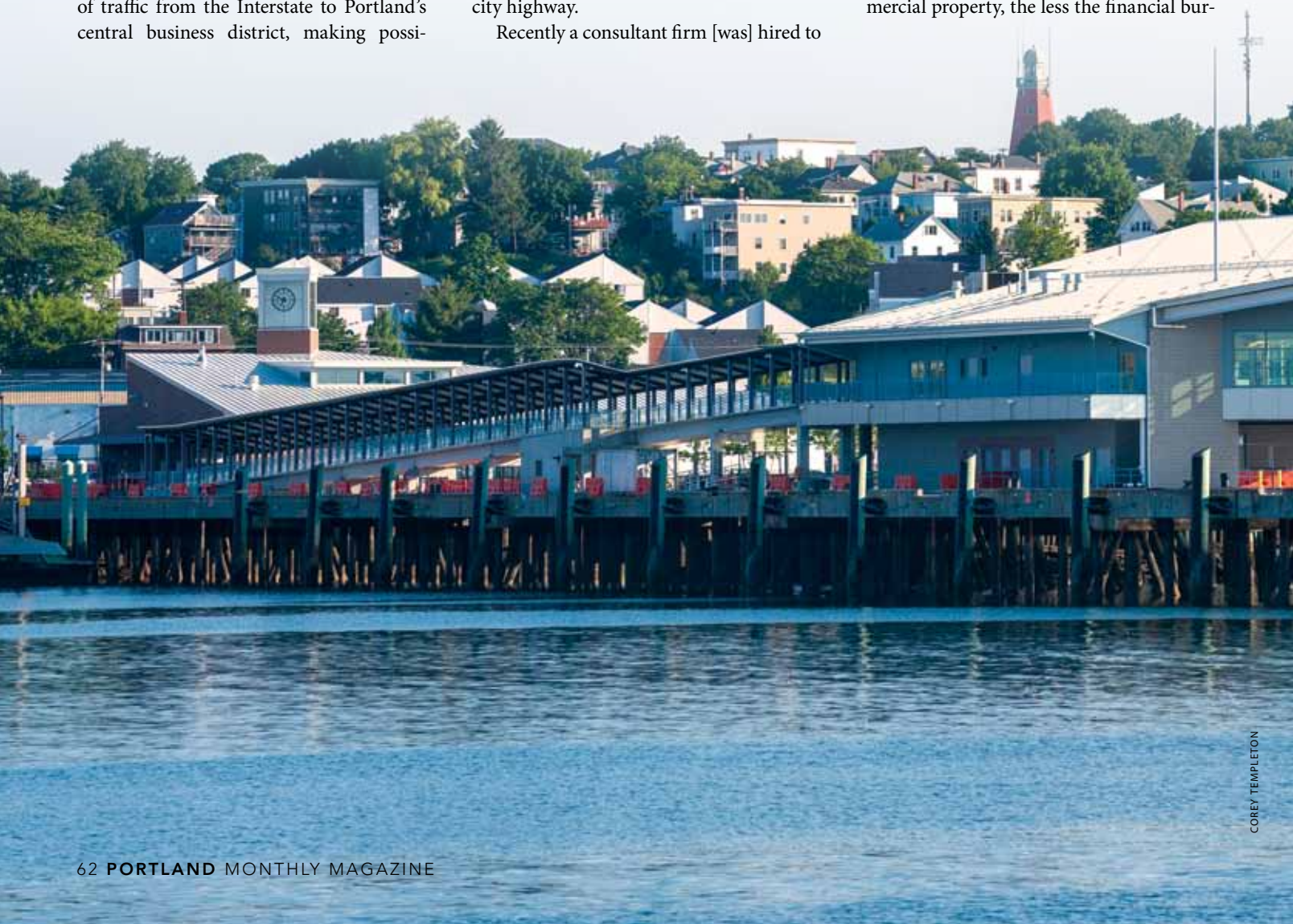
ble the largest construction of commercial buildings in the city's history. Casco Bank & Trust announced the building of a new high rise in Monument Square to house its branch bank, corporate offices, and commercial office space for rent. Canal Bank followed with three new commercial buildings at the intersection of the new Spring Street Arterial and Union Street. Maine Savings Bank built a new facility at 511 Congress Street. A few years later, a surface parking lot became the site for Two Monument Square; still later, a major mixed-use commercial development was built at One City Center. These new buildings added 832,000 square feet of commercial space downtown, housing thousands of employees, attracting customers and clients, and today producing \$1.8 million of annual property tax revenue for the city.

It's almost impossible to overstate the economic value of being able to siphon traffic from a major Interstate by way of a direct, convenient, and attractive inner-city highway.

Recently a consultant firm [was] hired to

bring forward recommendations on how the highway can be redesigned to accommodate pedestrian traffic, walking trails, bicycle lanes, and side space for development. Pedestrian safety should always be a concern, walking trails and bicycle lanes have been a great addition to the quality of life, and I applaud those who continue to support their expansion. If there is a need for a walking trail, hopefully it can be placed along the side of Franklin Street as it is along Baxter Boulevard. I would resist the narrowing of the street for a bicycle lane. At times there's a limit to a good thing, and not allowing a bicycle lane on Franklin Street may be one of them.

As popular as trails and bicycle lanes are, the city should resist allowing them to hinder or reduce the flow of vehicular traffic heading to activities that support the city's economic base. Every community leader knows that the more property tax revenue that can be produced from commercial property, the less the financial bur-



den on homeowners.

If I owned the City of Portland, I wouldn't let anyone touch the Franklin Street Arterial—not because of its past contributions but because of its capacity to support new economic development that could match or exceed the positive developments that occurred over the last many years. Some development is already underway, some is on the drawing boards, and some requires the ability to imagine the future. You don't need to be a traffic engineer to understand the added traffic impact on Franklin Street from current developments in the Old Port. Add to that the similar developments taking place in the India Street neighborhood and Munjoy Hill, plus an increasing number of events at Ocean Gateway, along with the added trailer-truck traffic that soon will be coming to the expanded Marine Terminal.

A proposal to renovate and redevelop the Portland Company property on the waterfront could nearly double the size of the Old Port; the current vehicle capacity on Franklin Street could well be tested. At some point, the city may want to consider tunnel-



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ing under Cumberland, Congress, and Middle streets so that waterfront traffic could travel directly there without interrupting local traffic.

If Apple introduces an iPhone app capable of looking ahead a few years, focus in on the waterfront to see Portland's new world-class aquarium, which was finally built thanks to some great leadership and the coming together of several private, public, and non-profit organizations. Focus your iPhone on the largest underdeveloped piece of real estate in Portland. It's the [Top of the Old Port] parking lot bounded by Franklin Street, Cumberland Avenue, and Congress Street. Can you see Portland's new Convention Center attached to a major convention hotel? It is an element of a development plan once envisioned by Joe Boulos several years ago. Unfortunately, [it] never happened, but that's another story. Franklin Street Arterial's contribution to the economic health of Portland in the past, present, and foreseeable future is equivalent to a successful quadruple bypass on a patient dying of blocked arteries. Study it all you want, but don't clog it up! ■

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