

MANSFIELD'S BIG DIG: Underpass project met initial resistance but broke ground in 1954

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MANSFIELD - *This is the third of a four-part series on the Underpass Project of the 1950s, which eliminated grade-level train crossings.*

The plan to eliminate dangerous grade crossings on the streets of Mansfield called for new underpasses at North Main and Chauncy streets, and a third underpass on a new road that came to be known as Copeland Drive. The advisory committee that planned the project offered a slogan to tout its benefits: “For safety—lives saved; For convenience — time saved; For prosperity — money saved.”

While this plan was ultimately adopted, it was not without opposition. Local toolmaker Walter Knowles proposed burying the rail lines 26 feet below ground. The Commonwealth rejected the plan, arguing that the price tag of \$12 million was exorbitant.



Chauncy Street during construction of the 1950s Underpass project to reduce grade level railroad crossings.

The advisory committee assured residents they had considered all options, including the relocation, elevation, and burying of the rails, and the possibility of overpasses, but none were feasible. Despite the plan's shortcomings, which included several dead-end streets, a somewhat confusing traffic pattern, and concrete canyons cutting through the center of town, the plan was accepted by most as a realistic solution to a dangerous problem.



A view of the North Common during the Underpass construction project.

The plan was deemed acceptable to the state Department of Public Works, which was then headed by future governor and US Secretary of Transportation John Volpe. The project was approved by House Bill 2246, which was signed by Governor Christian Herter on June 8, 1953. The New Haven Railroad also approved of the project and contributed \$500,000 towards its completion. Bids were opened for the project in Boston on October 16, 1954, and the contract was awarded to Westcott Construction of North Attleboro at \$3,294,675.

Groundbreaking was held on December 19, 1954. About 500 citizens gathered to watch as Commissioner Volpe, Lt. Governor Sumner Whittier, United States Speaker of the House of Representatives Joseph Martin of North Attleboro, and Chairman of the Board of Selectmen George Dustin turned the first spades of dirt.

“Sunday, December 19th will be a golden memory for all Mansfield in the years to come,” Chairman Dustin proclaimed. “We gather this afternoon to break ground for the \$3,200,000 elimination of railroad grade crossings that have menaced the safety of the community for a hundred years or more.”



North Main Street during construction of the Underpass project to reduce grade level railroad crossings.

Speaker Martin declared “It is the beginning of a new era for Mansfield. Yours is one of the finest growing towns in the Commonwealth.” Commissioner Volpe said, “It is a typical demonstration of our way of life to undertake a project regardless of its political aspects.”

He later added, “Grade crossings are not eliminated for Republicans or Democrats.”

A dinner followed at the Rose Garden restaurant on Pratt Street.

The only cautionary note was sounded by contractor Frank Westcott, who told the citizens of Mansfield “I plea for your understanding during the next two years because we will be obliged to cause you ... inconvenience. Remember, you have been planning this job for 40 years; please don’t expect miracles.”