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No Closure for Denver's Beltway Loop

By **KIRK JOHNSON**

GOLDEN, Colo. — Breathes there a soul who really, truly, loves a beltway? Maybe, but you are not likely to find one here in this little city in the Rocky Mountain foothills west of Denver.

For decades, this has been the community that said no, arguing through courts and politics and whatever other means available that a multilane ring road circling Denver — the kind built around cities all across America starting in the 1950s and '60s — would spell disaster. Most of Denver's belt-loop would cruise through open prairie land; here it would cleave the narrow Golden Valley and shatter the community, residents and their leaders said in what became a mantra.

The holdout appears now to have won, or at least fought the mighty belt to a draw, leaving a gap here in the nearly 102-mile circle that most planners have all but given up on completing.

Federal and state money for new highways faded with the recession. Political will at the state Capitol to push a beltway, or punish Golden for intransigence, has evaporated too under a governor, [John W. Hickenlooper](#), who preaches regional cooperation. Negotiations among Golden and its neighbors over a new public/private extension of the beltway north of the town broke off last month.

"CDOT has other priorities," said Stacey Stegman, a spokeswoman for the Colorado Department of Transportation, referring to the idea of completing the beltway.

But if [Golden](#), one of Colorado's oldest cities and briefly the territorial capital in the mid 1800s, did beat the belt — and some say its victory could come back to haunt it — should metro Denver and its drivers offer thanks, or curses? Is Golden a David with a sling, bringing down a giant, or a selfish obstructionist?

Transportation and planning experts say there is probably no clear answer as to whether beltways have been good or bad. If in some places they led to urban sprawl, they say, by

opening up undeveloped land and decentralizing downtowns, there are also examples where a belt, by diverting traffic to the edges, kept a thoroughfare from passing straight through a city's center and ripping it apart.

Memphis, for example, embraced the ring road as a way of avoiding an Interstate through downtown. Portland residents, by contrast, opposed a proposed Interstate extension in the 1970s, and the plan was scrapped in favor of public transit. Robert Moses' dream of a superhighway loop across Lower Manhattan went the way of fins and leaded gas. South Pasadena's opposition to the 710 Freeway in Southern California created a break in the highway that persists to this day.

Denver, by dragging out the beltway fight for decades — the vision was put down in regional plans in the late 1950s — created a kind of third way: a belt constructed in stages amid a slow-motion fight that never ended. Just this month, Golden filed a federal lawsuit accusing the Fish and Wildlife Service of improperly allowing federal land for a proposed new section of belt north of the city.

“Denver, as a result of doing it piecemeal, may not have had the curse of pushing people out into the exurbs,” said Representative Max Tyler, a Democrat who represents Golden in the state Legislature.

Some prominent urban planning experts are not so sure about that.

Because Denver's partial belt was built over time, with many assuming that the project would one day be finished, business owners and residents made decisions accordingly. Decentralization and sprawl, said one prominent planner, Patrick Phillips, have already happened. Golden's pushing the fight to the last man standing will not change what the region became along the way, he said.

“The cow has left the barn,” said Mr. Phillips, the chief executive officer at the [Urban Land Institute](#), a nonprofit research and education organization based in Washington. “It is an incorrect argument that if you can hold out against that last segment and not complete the ring it will be a bulwark against sprawl, because the sprawl already exists. From a regional planning and transportation perspective it makes more sense to have a full beltway than three-fourths of a beltway.”

Historians say the belt idea itself was essentially a kind of arranged marriage between urban America and the Interstate highway system, which began paving its way across the nation late in the Eisenhower administration.

The question, which had never before existed in a country of local and often unpaved roads, was what should happen when the Interstate encountered a city. Through the decades since, of richer and poorer and bumper-to-bumper, the answer — a circle — shaped what scores of cities became.

“It was like they took a magic marker and drew a circle on the map,” said Brian D. Taylor, a professor of urban planning at the University of California, Los Angeles, and co-author of a forthcoming book on metropolitan freeway systems. “What was designed to link cities, in fact, became the backbone of the transportation system in most U.S. cities.”

But Denver’s debate swerved again to its own idiosyncratic place beyond the logistics of engineering.

In the mid-1970s, when the environmental movement was gathering steam, Gov. Dick Lamm removed the one section of Denver’s beltway that had been identified as an Interstate from the federal system, which in effect took federal authorities out of the picture for the whole distance.

That changed everything — making the belt’s future more locally controlled, and more dependent on private financing and tolls, said Steven D. Rudy, the transportation director at the Denver Regional Council of Governments, a planning organization. And with many local governments in the region involved in deciding where the belt should go and how to pay for it, the result was probably more democratic, too, he said, however messy the process became.

“It was about the Denver region deciding it was something it wanted done and doing it itself,” Mr. Rudy said.

Even some people here in Golden fear the city’s victory could be Pyrrhic. If the extension north of town, called the Jefferson Parkway, is built and the belt thus closes in on both edges — a section already exists just to the south — then local streets, the critics say, could be overwhelmed by drivers creating a de facto belt by driving through Golden to get to the section of belt on the other side.

Golden city officials said that projected traffic numbers on the parkway extension have been inflated to make the project appear more financially viable.

“According to our studies, it would not make that much difference to traffic,” said Golden’s mayor, [Marjorie Sloan](#).

Bill Ray, a senior policy adviser to the [Jefferson Parkway Public Highway Authority](#), said the future would change with or without Golden's consent. A growing population, he said, would bring congestion to the little Golden Valley, and the only question was how the resulting traffic would be managed.

"There's a false dichotomy to say that (a) the parkway is built and bad things happen to Golden, or (b) it's never built and the future is good," he said.