

## Partnerships at Work: A Manager's Perspective

### *From an Interview with Jim Hall, March 2008*

*While employees of FHWA are building relationships with the public and our partners' front-line staff, managers dealing with their counterparts are seeing things from a different perspective. Two stories about our partnerships with the National Park Service and the Forest Service revealed how those special relationships that are forged.*



*A road in Mount Rainier National Park. WFLHD Construction Archives.*

Managers have to see the big picture. From selecting a suitable project to showing off an on-going project, they are involved with the top officials of our partner agencies and other FHWA offices. Jim Hall, who came to Western Direct Federal Division (WDFD) as Division Engineer in 1978, recalled two projects which revealed the complexities of dealing with other agencies and the degree of trust which must be built on even the simplest level.

Before WDFD, now Western Federal Lands Highway Division, can take on a new project, he explained, we have to have approval from other parts of Federal Highway Administration. Dave Phillips, who was chief of the Federal-aid Division in Washington at the time, came out to Vancouver one year to look for possible new public lands projects. Jim, Dave Phillips and Eldon Green, Region 10 Regional Administrator, took a road trip through the Region looking for that project. As Jim explained it, “Eldon had to recommend it, Dave had to approve it. If those two things happened, then you got money.” Driving along State Route 410 in Washington, they decided it would be a “great public lands highway project.”

Jim went to work trying to raise interest – and funding – from among the agencies involved for what would become Mather Memorial Parkway. “What I didn’t realize is how many agencies are involved in that short piece of road. There’s probably 25 miles of road, but Park Service had three organizations involved,” he said, “the Region Office... the Denver Service Center, (and) the park, and they all thought they knew what had to be

done.” In addition to the Park, the Region Office of the Forest Service in Portland and two national forests were involved; two districts of the State plus their Olympia office were involved, and FHWA had the Region and Division offices involved, in addition to WFLHD.

“To try to get any decision out of that was obviously going to be difficult, so we formed a Steering Committee. I was chairman, and each group got to have one representative,” Jim said. “We developed guidelines on everything, from what type of signs were going to be on the road, to what type of kiosks – the buildings for tourist information – to bathrooms, to road width, to whatever.”

It appeared that all the parties were in agreement until the State started the first project on the east side of the mountain. When they brought their design to the meeting, Jim said, “They weren’t following any of our guidelines. I got up and said ‘If this is the way we’re going to do it, then I’m out of here.’” He picked up his things and headed for the door, and “they said ‘No, no, no, no, we’ll work this out.’ ... We go back to work,” he said, but the District Engineer argued, “‘That’s not the way the state of Washington builds roads.’ ... We said, ‘If you’re going to build roads with the public lands funds, that’s the way you’re going to build (this) road.’”

By the next meeting they had completely revised their design, following exactly what the steering committee had laid out. “What was interesting about that,” Jim added, was that they submitted that project for national awards, and won first place. “They were so proud of themselves! But they had started in a completely different direction.”

The next piece was an FHWA project on the west side, which Jim described as “one of the prettiest pieces” on the parkway. Unfortunately, that project garnered the attention of some environmental people who adamantly claimed “we were raping the country.” FHWA set up a public meeting which was attended by the ski lodge operators in the area as well as the environmental groups. The latter also made sure that a Senator and her staff were present. “We went over the project, and I described what we were doing,” Jim said, and when they finished, “the head of the environmental group came over and said, ‘Would you mind showing us where these sites are?’” Jim was astonished: “They had never seen any of it, but had made a presentation about what a terrible job we were doing.”

He did receive validation for our efforts from the Senator. “She lived in that area,” he said, and after the review, she came over to talk to him. “She said, ‘I’ve been coming up here all my life, and I hear what the people are saying, (but) this has never looked this good.’ It made me feel good” to hear that from her.

It turned out they had the most difficulty completing the middle section of the Parkway, the segment which was the responsibility of the Park Service. “We would get agreement, and (then) Denver Service Center would get together with the Park, and then they weren’t agreeing any more.”

Sometime during the life of the project, Jim was sent an article from the *Seattle Times*. The article quoted the Regional Administrator for the Park Service as saying that he didn’t believe that what they were doing on the Mather Memorial Parkway was right. In essence, that official said “we wouldn’t let them do it through the park and they shouldn’t do it through the forest.”

Jim wrote him a letter, enclosing the article, and asking, “are these quotes accurate? I assume they are,” Jim wrote, but he asked specifically what data the official

had used to reach his conclusion: “what accident data... what traffic data?... I asked him a whole series of questions,” that could not be answered in a vague way. “I said, ‘I am the federal agent that has been assigned the responsibility to make this decision. Since you came public in this matter...I need (to know) how you already made this decision...I need every bit of information (about) how you reached this conclusion.’”

A couple of weeks later, Jim learned that that Regional Administrator was no longer in that position, and “I was told was that ‘Your letter didn’t help his case any.’”

However, as Jim observed, “I was up there recently, and (that segment) still hasn’t been built, even though money has been available for it (for) probably 20 years.”

Once a project is begun, it could become a showpiece for the responsible office. Jim recalled that a WASHTO meeting was held in Anchorage one year and he was asked to arrange a sight-seeing tour so FHWA officials could see one of the public lands projects underway in that area. The tours provide a break from the meetings and are a way for Division Engineers to “get ideas from each other,” he said.

Tom Edick was there, “the Federal Lands Administrator, and the top people in the Park Service, and lots of design people from here, and all three Division Engineers.... We had a project going at Exit Glacier down near Seward.”

The Park Service rented an airplane. “Some of their people from the Region Office down here were going to go with us on the trip. But there were too many of us for all of us to get in the plane, so just the higher mucky-mucks got to ride in the plane, and we sent a car down by the road.

“We got in the plane, flew down there, and I kept thinking, ‘That is a young pilot, looks like he might be 16-20 at the most.’ But I was pretty confident in those people.”

Their first landing was rough. The plane kept veering to the right and left as it approached the Seward Airport. “Probably had a cross wind,” Jim thought, but “it almost made me sick. I thought, ‘That was the scariest landing I’d ever had.’ I didn’t realize the adventure was just about to begin.

They went to Exit Glacier Park. It was early in the project and moose had been in the area, trampling over everything, and moose evidence was all around. Many of his FHWA guests were interested in getting closer, but Jim recalled an incident when people had gathered too close to a female moose and her baby.

“She got panicky....and she ran right over this kid and cut him up pretty good,” he recalled, so he stood back while the others looked. “Everyone else was interested to see them, but I was interested in not getting hurt.”

After the tour, they all got back in the plane. Jim had a commercial flight home scheduled, but calculated that he’d have plenty of time to make the flight. As the Park Service plane took off, he said he was “a little more reluctant this time, thinking about that pilot again. We took off, and the car took off.”



*Like this elk at Yellowstone Park, nature’s denizens take the easy route when public lands highways come through their habitat. WFLHD Construction Archives.*

“We started flying. We didn’t get very far until the fog closed in. We’d fly up this ravine between two mountains, and the only thing I can see is the reflection off the water. We keep flying, and I’m nervous as can be – I don’t trust the pilot. Finally we can’t make it, so he circles and comes back....”

Then the pilot said, “‘I know this other pass, maybe we can get through there.’ So we fly up the other pass where the railroad runs through, and we almost get through and across the mountain, and we’re socked in. Absolutely can’t see anything. So we turned, in between the mountains, not being able to see anything....(and) back up another one....”

“I think we did four or five like that,” he said, until they finally came through to “Turnagin Arm, across the mountain. It’s just as clear as can be...so we head to the airport, and we get about five miles from Anchorage, and there’s just a solid bank of fog. No chance to make it, so the pilot says ‘we’ll have to go all the way back to Seward.’”

“We started back to Seward, got about five miles back, and another bank! And it closed in behind us, and there was no way to go. We started circling, circling, circling, trying to see if it will open up, but it’s not opening up, it’s getting tighter. I look down: there’s a mountain, there’s a road, there’s mudflats, and there’s water.

“We decided to try the road,” Jim said, but it turned out to be main road out of Anchorage, and was quite busy. “We fly down and the pilot says, ‘Did anybody see a bridge parapet or a signpost or anything that we might hit?’ I didn’t see squat!...You don’t appreciate how fast you’re going until you get down right off the road.

“Alaskans are more savvy about this than most of us,” he said, because somebody on the road saw they were in trouble and stopped the traffic in one direction, “and that gave us a window. But they couldn’t stop the traffic both ways,” and the airplane needed the full width of the highway. “So we land on the road and just as we do, we see this big transfer truck coming the other way. We pulled off into a parking area that just happened to be in exactly the right place. This truck goes zooming by, and I’m really glad to be down.”

With the traffic all stopped and people out of their cars, waiting to see the outcome of the landing, Jim saw an opportunity to get a ride to the airport and his flight home. He jumped out of the airplane, and “somebody says, ‘Do you want a ride?’... (He) took me straight to the airport. I caught my plane – just barely – got back down here, (and) really felt lucky.”

“The next week I got a package in the mail from Edick and on the top of it he wrote: ‘Jim, in your hurry to leave the airplane, you left this on the seat.’ I thought I must’ve left my clothes.”

“I opened up the package and guess what was inside? Moose droppings. He’d collected them when we were out on the Exit Glacier project. I had to laugh.”

*If you have stories to share, please email me at [marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov](mailto:marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov).*