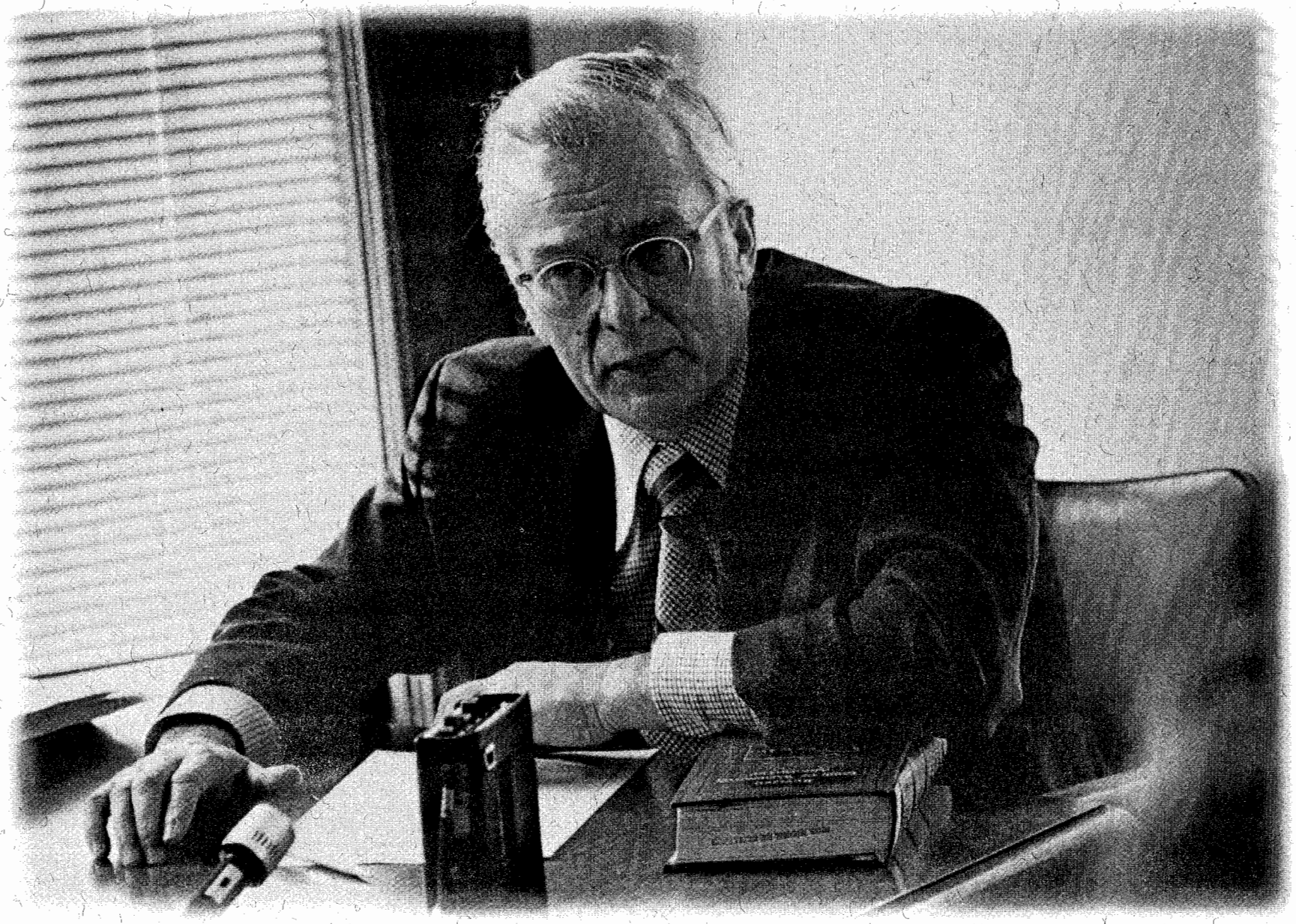
Chapter One

Building a legacy of clean water



Known as the father of Metro and a fierce advocate of community causes, James. R. Ellis served as Metro's legal counsel from 1958 to 1979.

The beginning of Metro

A dark-haired young man strode forcefully along downtown Seattle's Fourth Avenue on Nov. 20, 1953, the future of the region in his briefcase. To one side was the imposing and posh Rainier Club, its landscaping lush and green even in the dead of winter. His destination, however, was the Downtown YMCA, an architecturally interesting building somewhat worn by generations of young feet. He was to deliver a noontime speech he had been thinking about and working on for months.

Seattle and nearby suburban areas were beginning to stir with postwar growth and prosperity, but Seattle still was a city of the 1930s even as it celebrated its 100th birthday. The Smith Tower at First Avenue and Yesler Way was its tallest building. Stone and brick were traditional building materials, and cobblestone streets were not uncommon.

The Seattle Rainiers played minor league baseball in a stadium south of downtown, and the only football was found in Husky Stadium at the University of Washington.

There were no freeways, although Dwight D. Eisenhower was president and his administration would build a national network of limited-access highways inspired by the German autobahns Ike had seen as commander of Allied forces in Europe during World War II.

There was only one floating bridge crossing Lake Washington. New homes were spreading haphazardly across blueberry fields and pastures on the east side of the lake. The bridge provided easy access to downtown Seattle where many jobs were located. Similar growth was occurring north of the city limits at 85th Street, again with little forethought, often on lots bordered by poor streets without sidewalks. Stormwater ran in open ditches and homes were served by septic tanks. Many of the buyers were young families, most of them WWII vets who had gone to college under the GI Bill and now had good jobs. They wanted homes at reasonable prices.

Families were buying cars built in Detroit (a '53 Chevy Bel Air sedan was priced at $1,874). Few of them rode the bus, and public transit ridership was in a long, slow decline following a heroic performance in carrying hundreds of millions of riders during the war years.

Metro Milestone

Sept. 9, 1958

Voters in the greater Seattle area approve the creation of Metro, giving it responsibility for sewage treatment. Its official name will be the Municipality of Metropolitan Seattle.

Metro Milestone

Oct. 1 and 6, 1958

First meetings of the Metro Council. C. Carey Donworth is elected chairman.

The area's beauty came from its waterways, lakes, bays and rivers. But many were polluted and beaches often were closed to swimming in the summer.

Boeing Co. engineers, having successfully built and flown the B-52 jet bomber, were working on the world's first successful passenger jet. The Dash 80, the prototype of the 707, would not fly until July 1954.

No one worried about cholesterol, exercised daily or ordered double-tall lattes in Seattle in 1953.

James R. Ellis pushed open the Y's doors, marched across its tiled lobby and up the stairs. He followed a side corridor to a meeting room and sat down and opened his briefcase. When members of the Municipal League had settled down, he began to speak from the heart, as he would for decades to come.

This was his city, his home. A graduate of Seattle's Franklin High School, he attended Yale, the University of Chicago and the University of Washington Law School. During the war years, he served as a meteorological officer in the Army Air Corps.

But home again, a law practice growing, he began to sense the region's problems. And, in what would become a lifelong practice, he wanted to do something about it.

His speech, when it was reprinted later, was nearly 10 single-spaced pages.

"Today's growing pains spring not only from a great population increase, but from a revolution in urban living," he told league members. "We are no longer satisfied with close-platted homes and walk-up tenements. We demand a view from our picture windows and consider the family car an absolute necessity.

"This urban revolution has spread our enlarged population over an area of nearly 150 square miles, including some two dozen cities, towns and unincorporated communities," he said.

State legislatures, dominated by rural areas, were reluctant to recognize the new problems of cities, and the cities themselves were slow to assume leadership. "Seattle is a young city with a chance to lick its metropolitan problems before being swallowed up by them," Ellis said. "It is axiomatic that if we are to do so, we must recognize the symptoms early and deal with them promptly and effectively."

Ellis ticked off the symptoms one by one: signs of obsolescence and decay creeping into areas of the city, the flight of young people and middle-income families to the suburbs, traffic congestion that threatened to strangle the community, and the creation of a dozen or more special

districts each year to provide services, such as water supply and sewage disposal, not available from general-purpose government.

There were several ways to solve the region's problems, including major annexations by Seattle or extending its services without annexation. But Ellis focused on one: the creation of a single metropolitan government given authority to do what the cities and the county could not or would not do individually.

To illustrate his point, Ellis said Seattle, seven small cities and 75 water districts were dealing with water supply piecemeal. Conditions were perhaps worse when it came to water pollution. "There has been no coordinated attempt to solve the metropolitan sewage-disposal problem," he told league members.

Acknowledging that what he was saying would be controversial, Ellis added: "A provocative suggestion for the solution of metropolitan-area problems is the concept of a metropolitan government made up either of directly chosen representatives from the entire area or of indirectly chosen representatives from the communities therein on a federation principle. This would be a government of limited powers to which would be delegated only those functions requiring areawide attention. These would include, as a minimum, water supply, sewage disposal, arterial roads, mass transportation and basic planning."

Continued drift by civic and government leaders would make the ultimate solution much more difficult, he said as he urged the league to seek formation of a metropolitan-problems advisory committee that would refine and advance the idea with the goal of taking a metropolitan-government proposal to the Legislature in 1955.

Ellis was not urging the creation of a single new government. He was recommending that existing governments be empowered to work together to solve problems they could not deal with individually. His focus was on the functions of government, not its form. He was rebuked the year before for attacking the form of government.

In 1952, the League of Women Voters, the Municipal League and other good-government advocates (known as goo-goos) went after King County government. A board of freeholders (a group of citizens) was elected to design a new county government, and Ellis was appointed its special counsel. Their goal was to replace an 1880s form of county government that did not perform well in the 1950s.

The freeholders recommended a county-manager form of government and replacement of the three-member board of commissioners with a seven-member council. Many elected positions, including coroner, sheriff, auditor and treasurer, would be replaced by professionals appointed by the county manager. The remaining elective positions

would be nonpartisan. In effect, the courthouse would be shorn of cronyism and party politics.

Courthouse politicians flipped. Within a few days angry and fearful opponents had raised $30,000 and plastered the city with brochures asking: "Is this Moscow or is it Seattle?" Ellis campaigned for the proposition and attended countless community meetings to speak on its behalf. Generally, a couple of sheriff's deputies in civilian clothing would move into the audience and encourage heckling and laughter.

The goo-goos lost badly, the measure was soundly defeated on election day.

"I learned a lot about the county and its problems," Ellis would recall. "I learned the (existing) county charter would not address what bugged people—roads that ended abruptly, a lack of sewers, etc."

He came to believe structure was not the key, but that addressing the functions of government was.

Despite the bitter loss of 1952, Ellis was ready to try again. "The growing metropolitan area presents the most striking challenge in local government today. If we, as citizens, are not too spoiled to undertake hard work ... and if we apply imagination and perseverance to this challenging job of local citizenship, we can build a city beyond compare. There is a better way than the one we now follow."

Municipal League members were electrified and energized. "I was very much impressed with the thinking Jim had introduced," said C. Carey Donworth, a member of the citizens' group that planned and lobbied for the creation of Metro and who would become the Metro Council's first chairman. "There is no question that he was the spark plug, even at this early point."

It would take longer than expected, but the goo-goos would prevail. This was the beginning of Metro.

Metro's governing body, the Metro Council, meets to discuss agency business, circa 1969.

Water pollution woes

R. (Reginald) H. Thomson was the wizard of Seattle's infrastructure in the late 1890s and early 1900s. The city's chief engineer, his fingerprints were on the city's water, sewer, electrical and street systems.

He was a genius who built the first wood-staved Cedar River waterline to Seattle, designed and built huge sewer lines still in use in the late 1990s, constructed the city's first electrical powerhouse on the upper Cedar River and planned massive re-grading projects that swept away the hills that made getting around difficult in downtown Seattle.

A graduate of Hanover College in Indiana, Thomson was a self-taught surveyor and engineer. His hand on government 80 years ago determined how and where Metro would treat wastes decades later. Thomson's engineering was so good, and his politics so astute, that he served seven Seattle mayors.

In planning the city's sewage system, Thomson looked far into the future and designed a mammoth brick sewer 12 feet in diameter that far outstripped the needs of his time. It still carries much of Seattle's sewage across the North End for treatment at the West Point plant.

Thomson didn't build a treatment plant at the end of the North Trunk Sewer because in those days treatment was not an issue; one only needed to dump sewage in salt water where nature would take care of it.

"The theory in the old days was that if you got it to the water you were okay, " said C. J. (Chuck) Henry, who was director of Seattle's sewer utility until joining Metro in 1962.

Thomson's North Trunk Sewer came to daylight at the base of the bluff at West Point in 1913; he rejected an earlier plan that would have put the outfall at the foot of Denny Way. A dam blocked the lower half of the sewer line where it came through the bluff, but a smaller pipe exited the dam. In the mid-1950s, the pipe daily carried 40 million gallons of the city's sewage through an outfall line that ended a short distance offshore in about 25 feet of water.

At any tide, the sewage caused a fan-shaped stain in the water of Puget Sound that was easily seen from the air. At certain tides, the sewage washed back onto shore. When it rained hard sewage spilled over the dam in the North Trunk

Metro Milestone

Dec. 17, 1958

Harold E. Miller becomes Metro's first executive director.

Metro Milestone

June 1, 1959

Metro opens its first office at 152 Denny Way in Seattle.

Sewer and spread across the beach. The sandy spit was coated with a dark slime, and health officials closed nearby beaches because of bacterial contamination.

"The beach was black, it was ugly, terribly ugly," said Ted Mallory, a city engineer who also left Seattle's sewer utility staff for a job at Metro in 1962.

Above West Point was Fort Lawton, an Army base built decades before to protect Seattle and Puget Sound from foreign fleets. In the 1950s the fort was in the first line of defense in the Cold War.

When engineers drew plans for the Metro water quality system, they penciled in a 125-million-gallon-per-day primary treatment plant at the end of R. H. Thomson's brick sewer. They abandoned dilution as the solution because attitudes about treatment were changing and because the state Pollution Control Commission was demanding it.

There was no public access to the beach and, with a strong military presence in the fort above, it was unlikely the public would ever get near the point. To build a major primary plant elsewhere would require replumbing the city, at huge cost. It was easy to rationalize the decision to build a treatment plant on a sand spit Metro critics in the future would describe as one of the region's finest beaches.

West Point was not the only ugly place in a region where about 53 percent of all sewage received no treatment. In total, 60 outfalls discharged untreated waste into the Duwamish River, Elliott Bay and Puget Sound.

Around Lake Union, Green Lake and Lake Washington, combined sewers overflowed in rainy weather, contaminating those waters and often forcing closure of swimming beaches. Additionally, 10 secondary treatment plants (very high-tech for the time) discharged effluent into Lake Washington. By the early 1950s, scientists were beginning to suspect the lake was in failing health because of the phosphorous-rich effluent. Within a few years there would be no doubt the lake was ill, as the effluent stimulated the growth of algae that deprived the lake of light and consumed oxygen from the water. When the algae died it drifted ashore in stinking heaps.

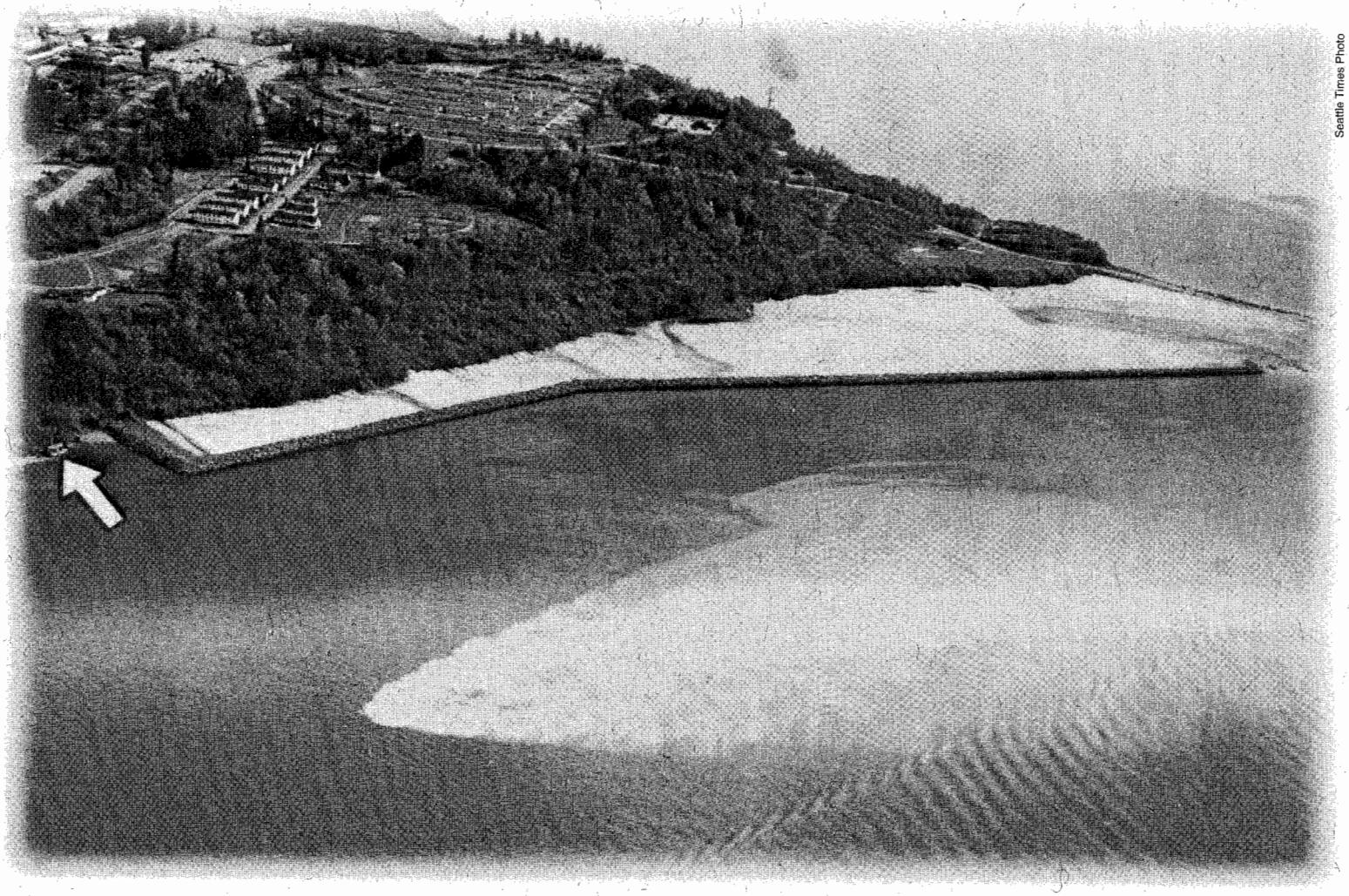
James R. Ellis, the young Seattle attorney who was pushing for a metropolitan form of government, recognized that the pollution problem was regional in nature. A growing body of citizens agreed that no one municipality could deal with it.

Engineering studies also would recommend a regional solution, but in 1955 there was no government with the authority to develop an areawide sewage treatment system. Seattle could take care of its problems, but not those of neighboring cities and sewer districts. There was no

provision in the law under which the county could do the work or which would allow them all to band together in a common effort.

At the urging of the Municipal League, Seattle's Mayor Gordon Clinton and the King County Board of Commissioners appointed a 48-member citizens group—the Metropolitan Problems Advisory Committee. With Ellis as its chair, the committee went looking for the answer.

Raw sewage rising from an outfall pipe clouds the water at West Point in 1963. The pollution ended after Metro built a treatment plant at the site to replace the outfall.



Seattle Times Photo

Seattle Times Photo

In May 1958, members of a citizens' committee, led by chairman Dr. Clayton Wangeman, standing at left, strategize with Seattle Mayor Gordon Clinton, far left, on how to gain voter approval of a Metro ballot measure.

The Legislature responds

Nobody thought it had a snowball's chance. The Legislature in Olympia was rural, conservative, suspicious and didn't care a whole lot about Seattle's problems.

But there in the legislative hopper for the 1957 session was a bill allowing the creation of metropolitan districts and giving those districts authority to deal with six urban issues: public transportation, sewage disposal, water supply, regional parks, garbage disposal and comprehensive planning.

The Metropolitan Problems Advisory Committee had looked at metropolitan-type governments in the United States and Canada and had focused on one in operation in Toronto. Members of the committee, including Ellis, C. Carey Donworth (a Seattle business management consultant), Kirkland City Councilmember Al King and volunteer attorneys Bob Beach and Ray Ogden labored evenings and weekends around Ellis' kitchen table drafting legislation.

"It was an unusual response in the number of people attracted to support a cause," Donworth would recall. "They realized an important thing was at stake."

The draft legislation created a federation of existing governments to deal with urban problems. The metropolitan municipal corporation, as it was called, would be governed by a board including representatives of the board of county commissioners and the mayor of the central city. There also would be representatives from city councils of each of the other large cities and one chosen to represent a group of smaller cities. It would have 15 members who would elect a chair.

The law required a vote of the people to establish a metropolitan district. An odd condition also required favorable majorities within the central city and in the suburban area outside the city. It was a condition that would make it tough to create Metro in 1958 and to consolidate it with King County government in 1991.

But the bill was locked in a committee because its chairman was from Snohomish County, which for years would have an obsessive fear it would be overrun by a King County metropolitan district. Citizen proponents asked Seattle Democrat John O'Brien, the speaker of the House, to help. He did, by telling the committee chair that none of his other bills would reach the floor if the Metro bill were not

Metro Milestone

Dec. 22, 1960

State Supreme Court affirms the constitutionality of the Metro enabling act and the validity of its contracts with component agencies.

Metro Milestone

May 4, 1961

Metro publishes its first call for construction bids—for the Richmond Beach and Carkeek Park treatment plants.

released. O'Brien had the clout, and the bill moved out to a vote. In the Senate the legislation was sponsored by Senators R.R. (Bob) Greive and William Goodloe.

Despite resistance from Eastern Washington legislators, the Metro bill passed the last day of the 1957 session. The citizens had done a good job in rounding up help. Besides O'Brien, they had the support of newly elected state Rep. Dan Evans, who later would serve as governor and U.S. Senator; Greive, who would have a seat on the Metro Council through his future election to the County Council; Ed Munro, a powerhouse legislator who also would be elected to the Board of County Commissioners and sit on the Metro Council; Floyd Miller, a lobbyist for Seattle who would later serve the city as mayor and who would sit on the Metro Council; and then Seattle Mayor Gordon Clinton and the full City Council.

Gov. Albert Rosellini, a Seattle Democrat, supported the plan and signed the bill when it came to his desk.

Seattle City Councilmember David Levine was a strong friend of the metropolitan proposal. At an earlier closed meeting of the council, Levine asked, "Is Metro really us?" The answer was yes. "We're inviting others in to help us?" he asked. The answer was yes. "Do we have a majority on the council?" The answer was yes.

"If Metro is us, I don't know why we're asking questions," Levine said. "It's pretty simple. We need it and it is us. There's no reason to be against it."

Ellis, who recounted the Levine anecdote, later would say simply: "So we found ourselves with potent allies."

Voters back Metro plan

Election Day. Sept. 9, 1958.

Fearful, optimistic, worried, on edge, proponents of the creation of a metropolitan district in King County suffered through the long voting hours of election day. The Metro proposal had failed in a March special election because of the dual-majority requirement of the state enabling law, and there was worry about what would happen if it missed a second time. They gathered to await election results, hoping their campaign strategies had been correct.

"There was a fair amount of optimism," said C. Carey Donworth, because of changes made after the March defeat. Frankly, proponents had gerrymandered the proposed metropolitan district by trimming away huge areas of south King County that had voted against it in March (many later would petition to annex to Metro). They also proposed giving Metro only one function, sewage disposal, instead of the three (sewage, water supply, comprehensive planning) before voters in March. In addition, scientific and engineering evidence supporting the Seattle area's water-pollution problems and the need for a regional solution continued to grow.

Still, there was doubt as the goo-goos listened for election results. It had been a long campaign, stretching almost from legislative approval of enabling legislation the year before. Critics were hostile. The plan, some said, smacked of super government, would cost too much and was unnecessary.

Nicholas A. Maffeo, a Renton attorney, was one of the most vocal opponents. He said the Metro plan was "an unwarranted attack upon our historical form of local self government." Approval would impose an overwhelming financial burden on property, he said, suggesting the Metro proposal was communistic in nature.

Maffeo knew he needed more than words to make his point. Appearing in a television debate with proponents, he scooped a wet mess of algae from a jar

Members of the Robert Block family posed for a campaign photo at Matthews Beach on Lake Washington. The emotional photo helped galvanize voters to support the Metro ballot proposition.

Seattle Times Photo

University of Washington scientist, Dr. W. T. Edmondson, who played a critical role in the campaign to save Lake Washington, speaks to the crowd at the West Point Treatment Plant dedication on July 1966.

and gulped it down—proving, he said, that it wouldn't hurt you. Lake Washington itself offered vivid evidence in support of doing something dramatic that summer of 1958. It was a dry summer and the lake level dropped. Algae formed clots and mats and piled up on the lake shore, where it rotted and emitted putrid odors.

University of Washington scientists had been warning the lake was in trouble for several years. Dr. W.T. Edmondson, a zoologist and expert on lakes (a limnologist) said the awful algae was *Oscillatoria rubescens*, a life form that showed up in other lakes, particularly in Europe, as they began to die.

Edmondson became a point man in the campaign, talking and informing the public of the lake's problems, telling reporters and citizens that the phosphorous-rich effluent from 10 secondary treatment plants on the shore was causing the problem. Hundreds of thousands who turned out for the summer's Gold Cup hydroplane races at Seward Park didn't need a scientific explanation—they could see, and smell it, as they picnicked on the beach.

More weight was added to the proponents' case in the summer of 1958 with publication of the final draft of a regional sewerage study by the engineering firm of Brown & Caldwell. The study, which began in 1956, was directed by Harold E. Miller, formerly manager of a San Diego sewer agency. Miller later would become Metro's first executive director.

"All beaches within the area are subject to dangerous contamination," the report said. Overflowing sewers contaminated Lake Washington and Green Lake and the discharge of treatment-plant effluent into Lake Washington had pushed it to "the first stage of degradation due to nutrient enrichment."

Brown & Caldwell warned that unless changes were made, the "inestimable value" of Lake Washington as a recreational and scenic asset was likely "to be greatly reduced or perhaps lost completely."

The engineering firm and Edmondson provided greater detail to affirm a study by UW Prof. Robert O. Sylvester, who reported in 1952 that bathing beaches were often contaminated by bacteria from overflowing sewers and septic tanks and that the biochemical condition of the water was not satisfactory.

Health officials warned that children swimming at contaminated beaches could become ill from exposure to bacteria in the water. Parents worried their kids could get meningitis or infantile paralysis (polio).

The Lake City treatment plant in Seattle's North End began operating in 1952; its outflow doubled the amount of secondary effluent being discharged to Lake Washington. That immense flood of new nutrients obviously stimulated growth of *Oscillatoria rubescens*.

R.H. Bogan, an assistant professor of civil engineering at UW, added to the clamor for change: "The ideal solution will be to carry all wastes from the Lake Washington drainage area to Puget Sound," he wrote. The state Pollution Control Commission, long worried about the lake, in August 1958 ordered that treatment-plant effluent be sprayed on the land, not dumped in the water. Gov. Albert Rosellini, a Seattle Democrat, said the lake's condition represented "a disgraceful situation" that posed a public-health threat.

Pollution Control Commission reports in 1955 and 1956 also had fueled arguments over lake quality. The reports warned that continued discharge of effluent would lead to the uncontrolled growth of algae "which eventually will take over the lake."

Everyone was saying the right thing. But it wasn't heard by residents of south King County, particularly those who didn't see or smell the lake. Their no vote in the March 1958 election was so strong the measure failed to win the required favorable majority outside Seattle, although city voters approved.

Besides the obvious problems with the lake, several other actions helped sway voters in September 1958.

Metro supporters persuaded the Robert Block family to allow their five children to appear in a campaign photo. The memorable photo—which was used in campaign literature, on posters and on billboards—featured the kids at Matthews Beach, next to a sign warning not to swim there. A second political event won the support of several suburban mayors whose opposition had been strong in March.

Seattle Mayor Gordon Clinton told Ellis that suburban cities and sewer districts were left "holding the bag" in the March election because they would have wound up owning useless treatment plants. He suggested Metro buy them out. Further, the mayors of Bellevue, Kirkland, Beaux Arts and Hunts Point called a press conference to recommend the size of the district be trimmed, that its authority be limited to sewage-disposal and that Metro be required to pay for city or sewer district systems it would acquire.

Metro Milestone

July 20, 1961

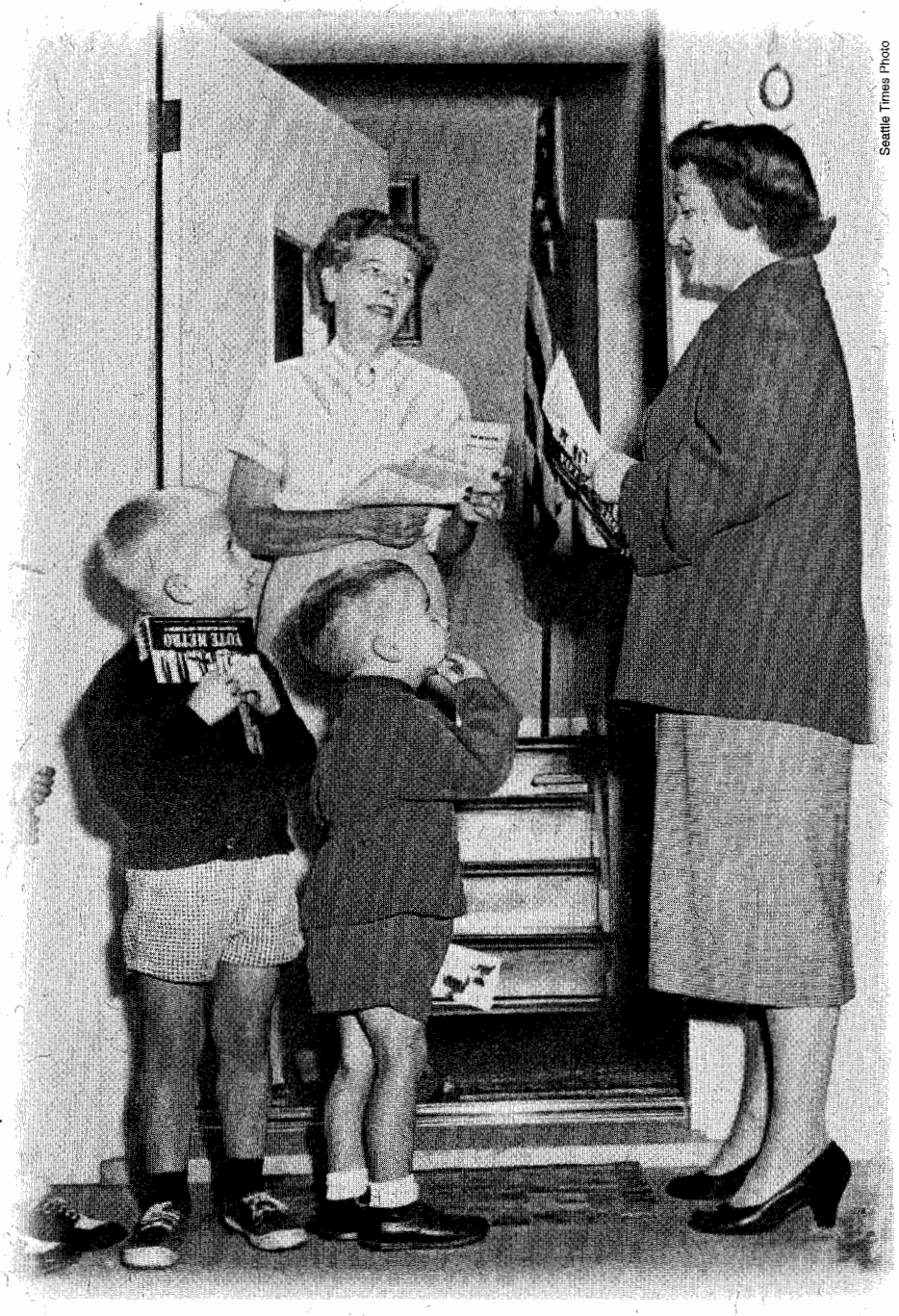
Ground-breaking for the Renton Treatment Plant.

Metro Milestone

July 1, 1962

Metro levies its first sewer service charge—$2 a month.

Metro supporters distribute campaign information on Sept. 8, 1958. An estimated 5,000 volunteers, including children and adults, participated in the "Metro March." The supporters had plenty to cheer about the following day when voters in both the city of Seattle and county approved a proposition to establish a metropolitan municipal corporation.



Seattle Times Photo

Kirkland Mayor Byron Baggaley, originally an opponent, then campaigned strongly for the September 1958 proposal. Kirkland, which had voted no in March, voted 2 to 1 for creation of Metro in September.

When Edward Logan, the county's superintendent of elections, finished counting the Sept. 9 vote it was a clear and substantial victory for the citizens' movement: Seattle Yes—58,617, No—15,693; suburbs Yes—41,703, No—7,860.

Less than a year later, Metro would receive Look magazine's All-America City Award, long before it had poured a yard of concrete or treated a gallon of sewage. The honor was not for improving water quality, although those honors would come. It was for "progress achieved through intelligent citizen action."

Conduit, concrete and commitment

The Metro Council's first meeting was Oct. 1, 1958, about three weeks after voters said yes.

On Oct. 6, 1958, C. Carey Donworth was elected chairman. He would hold the post until 1980. James R. Ellis was appointed legal counsel on Oct. 22, a job he would hold until 1979. In December, Harold Miller was lured from the directorship of the Pollution Control Commission (PCC), where he had gone after completing the Brown & Caldwell engineering study, to become Metro's first executive director. Maralyn Sullivan soon was hired as clerk of the council and administrative assistant to Miller.

Metro rented office space on the second floor of a building at 152 Denny Way, above a tailor shop. (The building is still there, on the corner of Warren Avenue North.) Soon the small Metro staff was joined by employees of Metropolitan Engineers, the joint venture hired to design the system voters had approved. The firms were Brown & Caldwell, R.W. Beck and Associates, Hill & Ingman and Carey and Kramer. They all crowded into small work areas, where the engineers set up drafting tables and unpacked their slide rules and pencils.

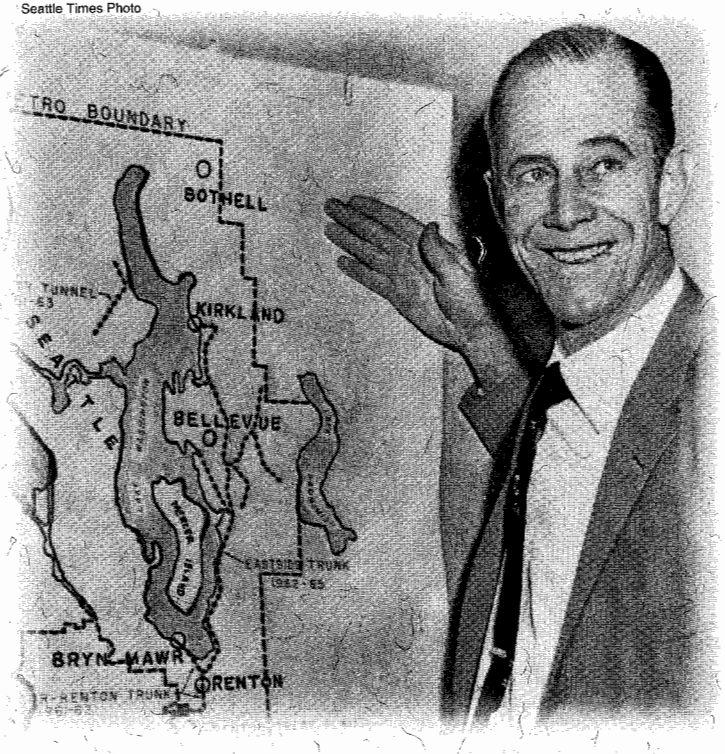
In July 1959, Miller brought a PCC engineer, Charles V. (Tom) Gibbs, to Seattle. Destined eventually for the Metro staff, he at first worked four days a week at Metropolitan Engineers and one day at Metro. Within a few months he would be working full time at Metro developing a water-quality-monitoring program; in 1967 he would become executive director.

Metropolitan Engineers would design four treatment plants, more than 100 miles of large tunnels and interceptor sewers and dozens of pumping stations. It would take nine years and cost about $140 million to build it all, of which Metro borrowed $125 million. (If it were to be done in the 1990s, the cost would exceed $1 billion.) At the same time, Metro began planning the 1962 takeover of the treatment systems it would acquire from suburban cities, Seattle and sewer districts.

Forde Photographers

Meeting to discuss a pending agency issue are, from left, James Ellis, legal counsel; Maralyn Sullivan, administrative assistant and clerk of the council; C. Carey Donworth, Metro Council chairman; and Harold E. Miller, Metro executive director.

Seattle Times Photo



Harold E. Miller, Metro's first executive director, displays a map showing the beginning steps planned in the agency's water pollution control construction program in October 1959.

With that takeover in sight, the staff expanded. C.J. (Chuck) Henry, Ralph Bucklen and Ted Mallory were hired to help begin Metro operations July 1, 1962. They scoured the West Coast for treatment plant operators who would help run the district plants Metro would acquire. Miller hired Fred Lange from the Vallejo, Calif., sewerage system to serve as technical director.

Metro also began levying its $2 monthly sewer charge on July 1, 1962, taking note that the original engineering study called for a $2.50 fee. Metro never directly billed individual property owners for sewer service; it charged cities and sewer districts, based on the number of customers they served, and those agencies collected Metro's fee as part of their regular sewer billing.

Ground-breaking ceremonies became common. The Metro construction program was so vast that nearly every major contractor in the region worked on one or more sewer projects. Gibbs said out-of-state contractors also came to Seattle for Metro work.

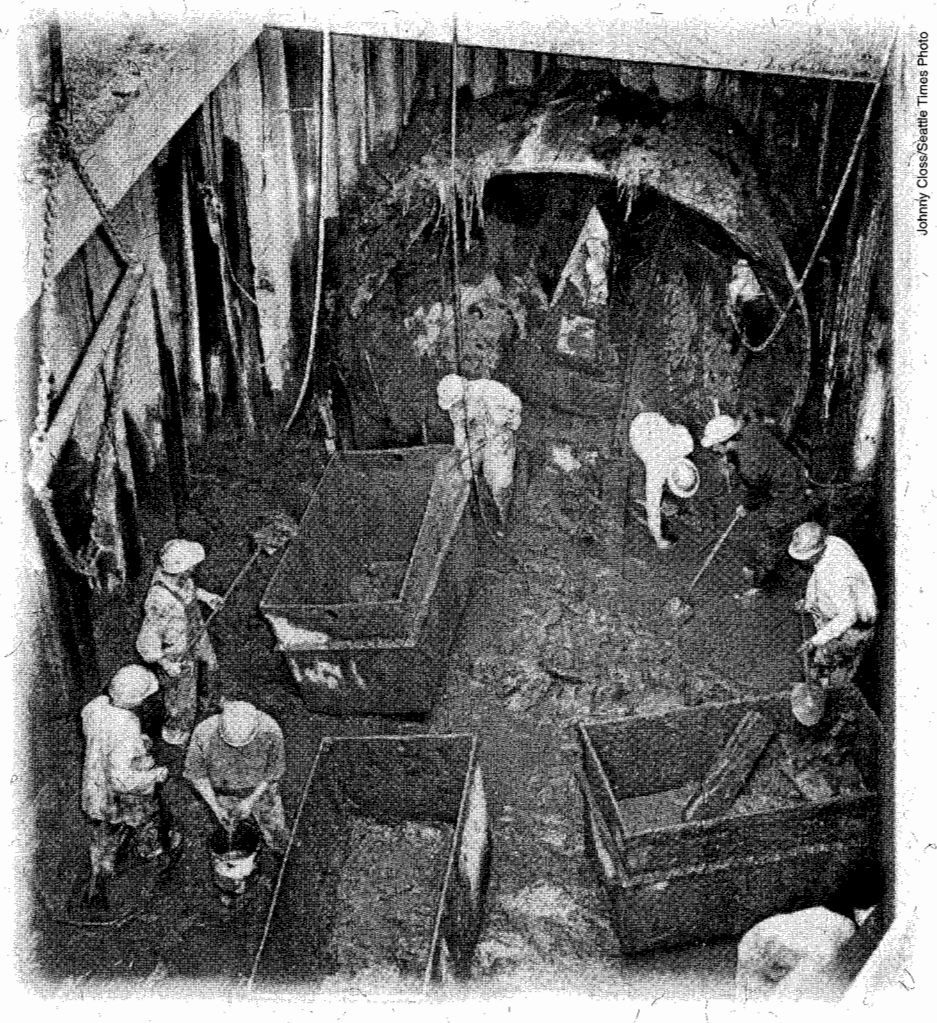
Metro broke ground for its first major project, the Renton Treatment Plant, on July 20, 1961. The secondary treatment plant would be built on 53 acres purchased from the Great Northern Railroad and the Earlington golf course; the Longacres race track would be a neighbor.

During a ground-breaking ceremony, a fleet of convertibles carried dignitaries through the 108-inch-diameter sewer pipes that were to be used in the plant to illustrate the immensity of the work Metro had begun. The plant, now called the East Division Reclamation Plant, has an ultimate capacity of 144 million gallons a day. In its first phase, the plant would treat an average dry-weather flow of 24 million gallons a day.

One of the toughest projects was a 3.3-mile sewer tunnel running from Matthews Beach to the North Trunk sewer. Because it would be bored through deep, wet soil, the tunnel would be constructed under air pressure. The air pressure, which would keep the water out, was regulated by state law. Engineers soon determined that working conditions specified by the law were outmoded and dangerous to workers and would cause significant delays and higher cost.

Bruce McKim/Seattle Times Photo

About 160 feet below surface, workers examine wooden sheathing in a Metro tunnel project near Ravenna Park in north Seattle in April 1965.



Johnny Close/Seattle Times Photo

Workers in September 1968 slog through mud in the cofferdam at the end of a two-mile tunnel running under Second Avenue in downtown Seattle. The sewer project took workers to depths up to 160 feet.

Metro Milestone

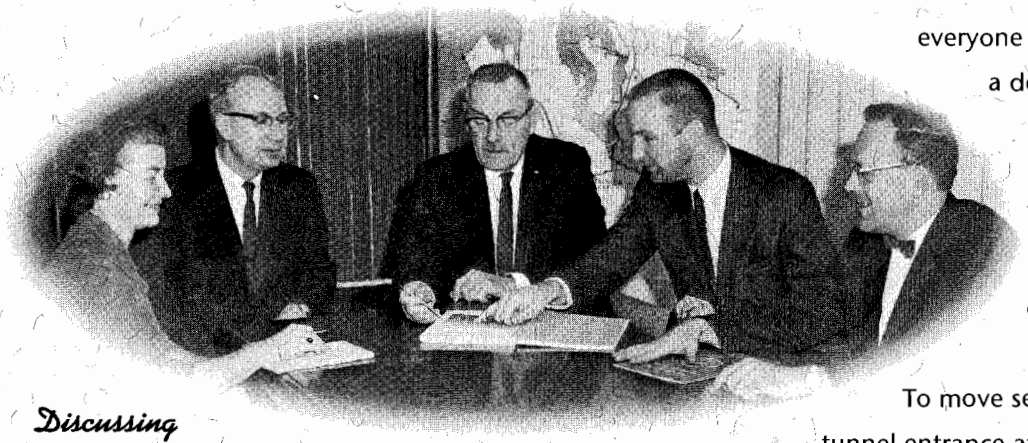
Sept. 11, 1962

Voters reject a proposal to give Metro authority to plan and operate a regional transit system.

Metro Milestone

Feb. 23, 1963

The first treatment plant effluent is diverted from Lake Washington. Metro celebrates with "Lake Washington Day."



Discussing the planned Metro water pollution control construction program are, from left, Maralyn Sullivan, administrative assistant and clerk of the council; Chuck Henry, who became Water Pollution Control Department director; Fred Lange, who retired as Metro's second executive director in 1967; Tom Gibbs, who succeeded Lange as executive director; and Bob Loomis, director of Finance and Administrative Services.

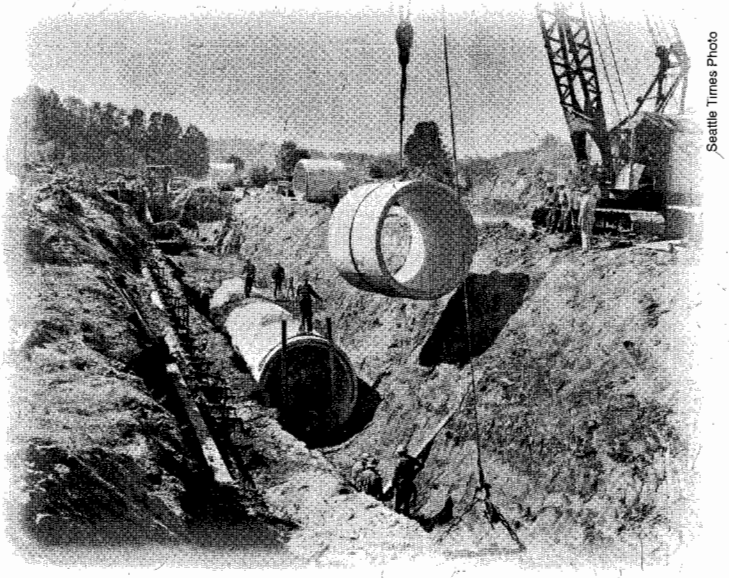
Metro convened a symposium of experts who recommended changes. The Legislature agreed and the tunnel was built on schedule under air pressure of as much as 32 pounds per square inch at a cost of $6.7 million. Metro built about 10 miles of tunnels under new regulations of the state Department of Labor and Industries without a fatality or claim for permanent injury.

Everyone working in the tunnel, including casual visitors, was required to have a physical examination first. And everyone finished up a tunnel visit with a long sit in a decompression chamber, which eliminated the possibility of the bends, a painful and crippling ailment common to tunnel workers and divers. After working four hours in the tunnel, workers decompressed for three and a half hours.

To move sewage from the Kenmore area to the tunnel entrance at the Matthews Beach pumping station, Metro built a seven-mile-long underwater pipe along the shore of Lake Washington and planned to add a second line in the future to serve increasing population. The pipe, supported by concrete pilings, was built offshore to avoid tearing up neighborhoods.

As Metro continued planning and building, it also began finishing things. In July 1962, it dedicated the small Carkeek Park Treatment Plant with a beach party for children. In October, Metro acquired West Point—where R.H. Thomson's sewer still spilled raw sewage on the beach—from the U.S. Army.

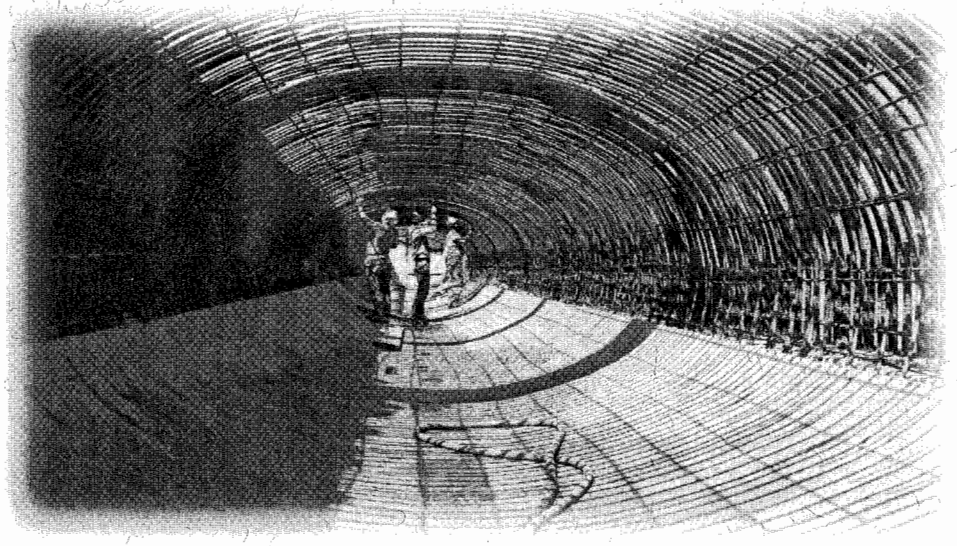
In February 1963, the first treatment plant effluent was diverted from Lake Washington, and in April the Richmond Beach Treatment Plant was completed. In July, a contract was awarded for the $12 million West Point Treatment Plant.



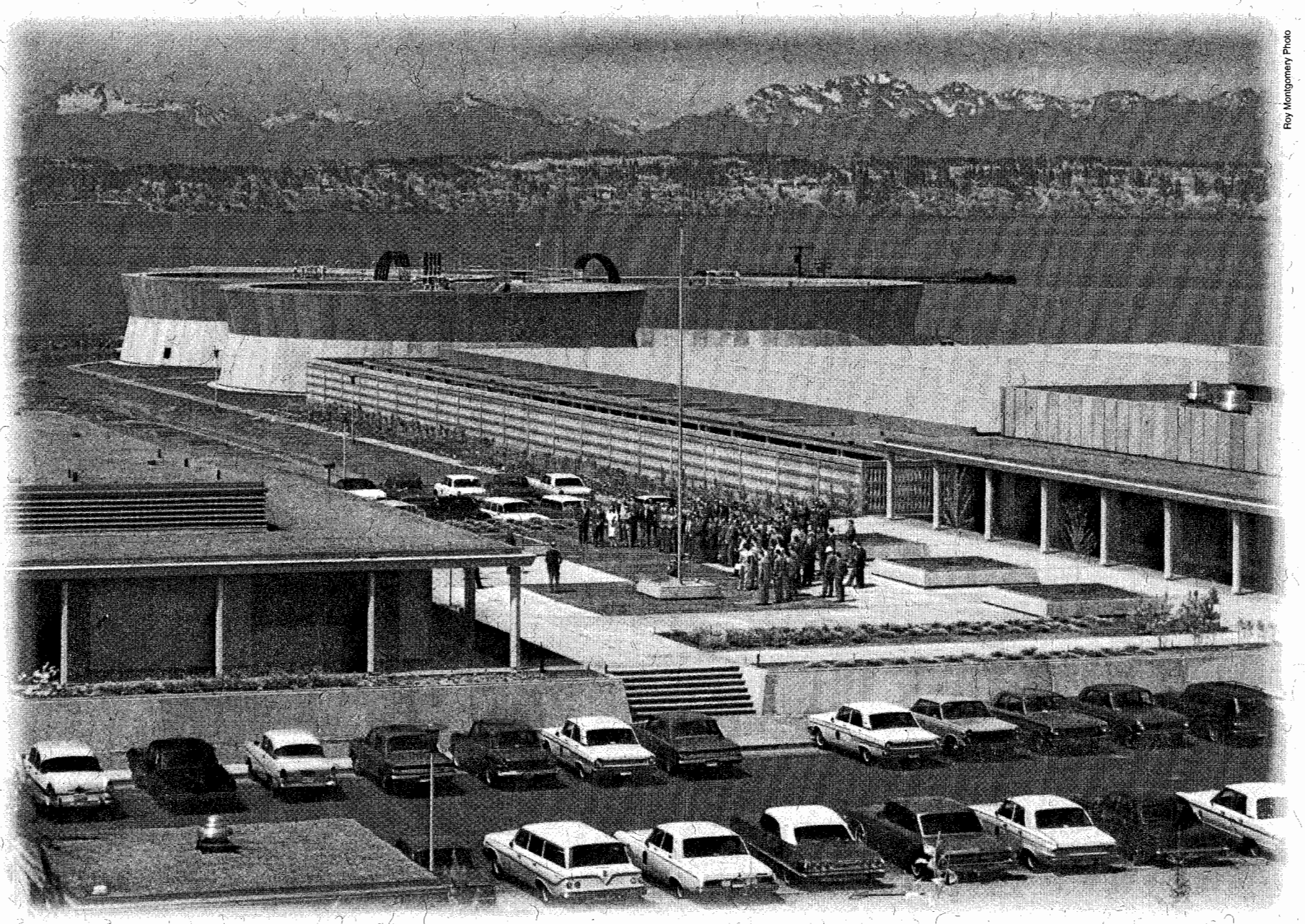
Seattle Times Photo

Workers position 10-foot-long sections of precast concrete sewer pipe near the Longacres Race Track as part of the Eastside trunkline project in September 1961.

Citizens gather at a beach party near the Carkeek Park Treatment Plant as Seattle Park Board President Waldo J. Dahl throws another "no swimming" sign on the fire. Pollution kept people out of the water until Metro's new treatment plants opened.



Workers finish preparation of steel reinforcing before concrete is poured at a sewer project near the Lake Washington waterfront in Renton. Unlike this oval-shaped line, most Metro trunklines are round and were precast.



Roy Montgomery Photo

Citizens, dignitaries and Metro employees gather to celebrate the dedication of the West Point Treatment Plant on July 20, 1966.

People power prevails

July 20, 1966. At West Point, it was sunny and a fresh northwest breeze blew across Puget Sound, ruffling the U.S. flag that flew over the recently completed treatment plant. The media were there for the dedication, along with Metro and other government officials and a crowd of citizens. Opening of the plant would end the water pollution that began in 1913 when R.H. Thomson pushed his 12-foot-diameter trunk sewer through the bluff and raw sewage began flowing into shallow water just offshore.

Gov. Dan Evans, who helped swing passage of the Metro enabling act as a freshman legislator in 1957, was there. Dr. W.T. Edmondson, the UW scientist who identified water-quality problems in Lake Washington, stood in the crowd, along with unselfish citizens who worked for years on behalf of clean water.

Nearly 13 years after delivering the YMCA speech that started it all, James R. Ellis used the dedication ceremony to honor volunteers who helped in the creation of Metro.

"This is a fitting dedication because it recognizes that many people made it possible," Ellis said. "Ten years ago this concrete and steel was a will-of-the-wisp and these miles of great tunnels and pipe were a fragile idea. It took many people to spin that idea into a concept and many more to transform that concept to this site.

"The bridge to this time and place was not built by power, nor by wealth, nor an established elite. In plain truth, it was built by the citizens of people no larger than ordinary life."

Speaking from the heart, Ellis lauded the citizen effort.

"We are transients on these hills and shores and the waters are not ours to spend. Ten years ago the urban drainage basins of the nation were heavily polluted.

"Today most of these waters have gone from bad to worse —but not here. Today most of the nation's press are looking for scapegoats—but not here. Today most local councils are still waiting for someone else to do it—but not here.

"Here we watch a welcome turning point in the story of our lakes and rivers and inland sea. Here we mark some proof that urban man can live and work in a beautiful land without destroying beauty."

Metro Milestone

Nov. 20, 1964

Fred Lange appointed executive director, succeeding Harold E. Miller.

Creating the can-do ethic

From the beginning, through Metro's assumption of public transit responsibilities in 1973 and until the very end, the ethic was there: "Do better than promised."

It guided Metro and its staff for more than 35 years. It stimulated 12-hour work days, often stretching across six or seven days a week. It built a waste-disposal system and a mass-transit system, both among the best in the nation.

It instilled a sense of self confidence, a spirit of determination and a commitment to quality that led to the deeply felt belief that Metro could do anything—and do it right. It led to an attitude critics one day would condemn as arrogance.

"It came from Jim Ellis," said Penny Peabody, who began work at Metro as a public information officer and who would later become chair of the Metro Council. "It was made part of our culture and it was put into practice by Tom Gibbs."

There was no class on the Metro ethic for new employees. "It was there," said Gibbs, who joined Metro as a young engineer and who became its third executive director. "Hal (Miller) drummed it into me. We set tough goals and then beat them."

Richard Sandaas, a former Metro Councilmember and Metro executive director, said: "The ethic allowed Metro to depart from traditional ways of doing things. We had the accountability to get things done, we also had the ability to map it out. We had the opportunity to take risks. We capitalized on that."

In a sense, it was like a campaign, said Aubrey Davis, a Mercer Island resident who chaired the Metro Council's Transit Committee during creation of Metro Transit. "All the people knew what had to be done, wanted it done well and could see progress."

Metro has done reasonably well, Davis added. "That has led to a higher sense of satisfaction than many government activities can afford."

Ted Mallory, a retired Metro technical services director, said staff regularly met with Ellis in the early days, when Ellis was Metro's legal counsel. He credits Ellis and Miller for instilling the ethic in

the small, young staff. "They both were very dynamic and positive and had great expectations of the Metro staff. They expected 150 percent every day," Mallory said.

For Gloria Overgaard, manager of transit operations, the ethic meant service. People worked whatever hours it took to do the job. "There was a tremendous sense we were there to serve the public and we would do whatever was necessary."

When Mike Bergman joined the transit development staff in 1980 no one told him there was an ethic to be heeded. "But the work-place ethic sunk in over time. It was an ethic that encouraged independence of thought."

For Bob Matsuda, a 30-year employee who retired in 1995 as special projects and research coordinator on the water-quality staff, the ethic was represented by a pride in the agency and in its accomplishments. "People felt what they were doing was important. There was a strong sense we were stewards. The people paid us, we ought to do it. I learned through observation; it was a culture that was very obvious. We were not told 'this is how you will perform,' but it was an observed excitement, a new challenge."

Daryl Grigsby, who became director of Metro's Water Pollution Control Department in late 1993 after working for the city of San Diego 11 years, is convinced the ethic still exists.

"I thought I had a good grasp of how local government works," he said. "Coming to Metro was an eye-opening experience because of the quality of the people and their dedication. Being part of an organization that makes a difference to the whole region and having a legacy of things to look back at is definitely energizing.

"Most wastewater utilities just do their thing. But here it's being part of the group that cleaned up Lake Washington and Elliott Bay and is still making major contributions to Lake Sammamish and the Duwamish River."

Ellis acknowledges imposing the ethic on the staff. "If you do something you promised, it's not news. If you do more, you get public credit.

"I wanted government to be trusted, and I was no more idealistic than Miller or Gibbs. It was like a crusade, the meetings when we talked about how we could make things different."

Ellis remembers that engineers said it would take 10 years to carry out the plan to clean up Lake Washington, Elliott Bay and the Duwamish River.

"I said, we promised 10 but let's do it in nine."

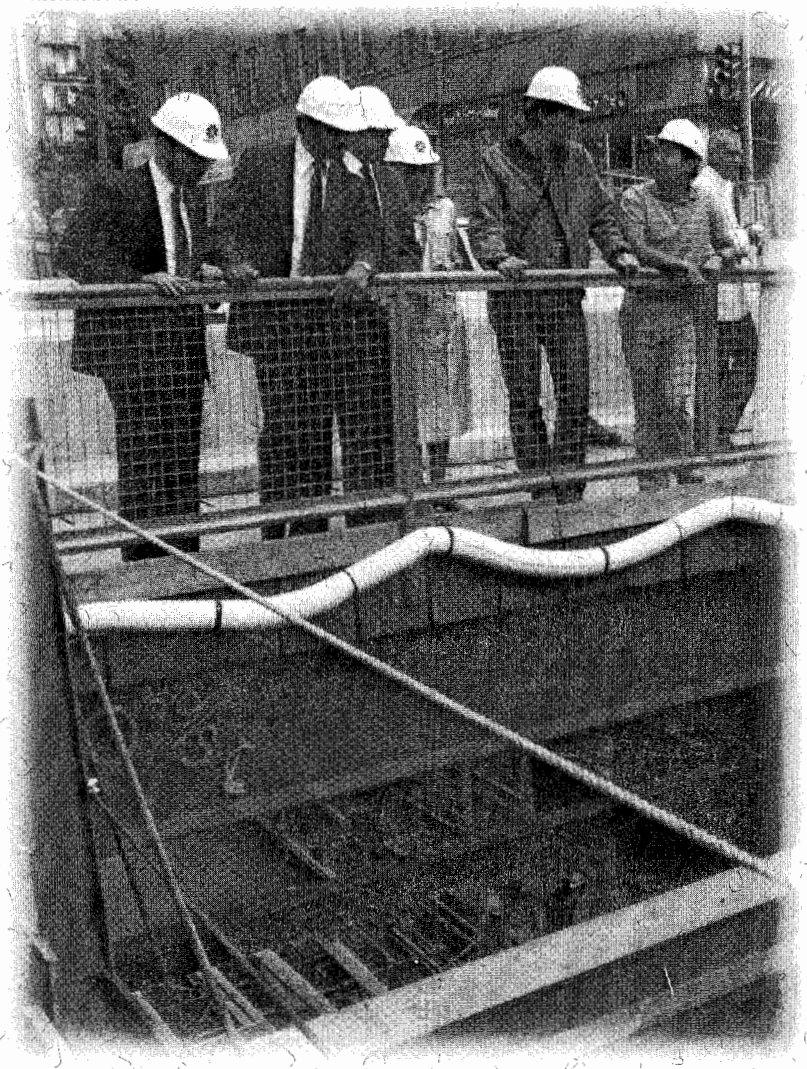
And they did.

Metro Milestone

July 22, 1965

Renton Treatment Plant dedicated in memory of Harold E. Miller, Metro's first executive director.

Ned Ahrens Photo



Members of the Citizens' Transit Advisory Committee view construction of the downtown Seattle transit tunnel in September 1987. Formed in January 1974, the citizens' committee advised the Metro Council's Transit Committee on key transportation projects and services.

Ned Ahrens Photo

Members of the Citizens' Water Quality Advisory Committee review a water pollution control project in 1989. For 20 years, CWQAC served as an advocate for developing environmental and technical solutions to the region's water-quality problems.