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Zachary M. Schrag. *The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. xiii + 376 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8246-3.

Reviewed by Rosalyn P. Doggett (Senior Development Director, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority)

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Today, Washington, D.C. has an established transit system, the Metro, with 106 miles of rail and 86 stations serving 3.5 million people in the city and suburbs. Its ridership, approaching 800,000 people each weekday, is the highest of any U.S. city save New York. The system operator, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), also has a fleet of nearly 1,500 buses.[1] In the central city, more people actually use bus service daily than the subway, but the bus system is a decidedly secondary focus of *The Great Society Subway*. Instead, the book provides a thoughtful explanation of how the subway was built and why it has not been emulated elsewhere in the United States.

Zachary M. Schrag, an assistant professor of history at George Mason University, has written a graceful, fact-packed history of the genesis, development, and current state of the Washington Metro system. Though meticulously researched and documented, the narrative has a certain novelistic flair, with episodic suspense about whether the system would actually ever be constructed and, whether once under construction, completed. It was not easy to broker the design, construction, and operation of a system serving three independent governmental entities (Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia), and it remains difficult to this day.

Schrag's basic theme is that the construction project could not have been accomplished at all had it not occurred in an era and place marked by particular historical circumstances: an expansive post-World War II America ready to spend money on public projects; a commitment to the Great Society and government-directed projects to meet social needs during the 1960s and early 1970s; the federal government's powerful role in managing land use

and transportation decisions in the city of Washington and in the region; and fierce opposition in Washington and other cities (New Orleans and San Francisco, for example) to inner-city and downtown freeways that would destroy neighborhood cohesiveness and connections to waterfronts. The planning of the system also occurred in an era when regional planning was still considered possible; in the 1960s, the federal government spent considerable sums of taxpayer dollars on city and regional planning, something it ceased doing decades ago.

Planning for the subway system began in the mid-1950s, at the same time that Congress passed the Interstate Highway Act. At least two Interstate legs planned for Washington, the Northwest and North Central freeways, were not ultimately built because of citizen opposition. The significance of the freeway battle cannot be overstated. Schrag provides excellent insight into this contretemps and supports his position that Kennedy-era appointments to the National Capital Transportation Agency (C. Darwin Stolzenbach), the National Capital Planning Commission (Elizabeth Rowe), and the White House adviser on national capital affairs, Charles Horsky, as well as their successors, were instrumental in promoting Metro as an alternative to freeways. They also fended off the freeway builders, their Congressional allies, and the machinations of Representative William H. Natcher (D-Ky.). As Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Appropriations for the District of Columbia, Natcher single-handedly held up construction of Metro from 1966 to 1971, incurring millions of dollars in price escalations, because of his desire to see the complete freeway system built. Metro construction did get underway in 1969 but approval of the necessary appropriations remained uncertain until 1971, when Congressman Robert Giaimo

(D-Conn.) staged a successful revolt against Natcher.

The author ably sketches the political landscape that resulted in the interstate compact between Virginia, the District, and Maryland that formed WMATA in the mid-1960s and WMATA's problems in negotiating with other agencies for subway rights-of-way and station locations. Then, as now, the National Park Service was most resistant to encroachments on its considerable land within the District. Along the way, Schrag gives an accounting of the complicated social and political evolution of the Government of the District of Columbia from a complete to only partial ward of Congress.

He tells us that when WMATA agreed on its ARS (Adopted Regional Subway) in March 1968, the estimated cost of a 98-mile system was 2.5 billion dollars, far higher than a 1962 estimate of 793 million dollars. When the first segments of the system opened in 1976, costs had risen still further. In spring 1979, a new estimate put the total cost at approximately seven billion dollars. The commitment to Metro was now strong enough, however, that the federal government resolutely, if reluctantly, agreed to cover the cost overruns. By the time the 103-mile system was completed in January 2001, the construction cost had risen to approximately ten billion dollars. Schrag neatly summarizes the causes: a 1973 takeover of the private bus system, unexpected construction complications, and inflation.

The complexity of Metro's construction, federal support of the system, and its original design, heavily weighted to transporting federal workers to their offices, are unique factors that have militated against replication elsewhere. (Nevertheless, some communities have adopted cheaper mass transit as a solution. An environmentally-conscious electorate in Denver passed a multi-billion dollar bond issue in 2004 to expand greatly that region's light rail system. The rail cars and other fixed capital equipment of a light rail system are less costly than Washington's "heavy" rail.)

Another reward of Schrag's book is a fine chapter on the design of the Metro stations. Most visitors to Washington are impressed by the simplicity and clarity of the soaring, coffered arches that roof the underground stations. Like many other achievements in Washington, numerous individuals had a part in this design. As the author shows, however, the integrity of the design is a testament to Chicago architect Harry Weese's insistence on the majesty of public spaces and on creating space intended to inspire awe, not merely to serve the utilitarian trips made by Metro passengers.

The author further credits Jackson Graham, WMATA's first general manager and a retired Army Corps of Engineers General, with possessing a holistic view of Metro as not just an engineering and architectural project, but also a construction, public relations, and political project. Most of all, Graham, who oversaw the building of the first portions of the system, had an unwavering work ethic and ability to inspire loyalty among his staff. This legend lives on today in WMATA. Schrag provides many telling vignettes about the difficulties that had to be overcome in this massive construction project and the compromises made to keep it moving forward. For example, when the Federal Aviation Administration could not decide upon the location of a new terminal at Washington National Airport (now Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport), Graham placed the Metro station away from the existing terminals. Passengers had to wait twenty years for a new terminal that provided a convenient link to the station. Safety issues, the effects on existing businesses, union issues, and engineering and underground blasting difficulties are only some of the construction problems that the author illuminates.

Schrag correctly points out that, though necessary, the many quantitative studies of alternative routes; of projected costs and revenues; of estimated modal splits among automobile, transit, and other forms of transportation; and other "scientific" assays intended to justify Metro were all ultimately flawed. The system was built not so much because these studies were definitive, but rather because of the conviction of Metro supporters that the system was vital to the economic health of the Washington region. Schrag contrasts the area jurisdictions' use of Metro to shape their communities and support economic development. As he observes, Arlington County, Virginia, and Montgomery County, Maryland, sought to maximize use of the system to revitalize decaying portions of their communities and, in order to reduce automobile usage, to concentrate population and commercial growth within walking distance of Metro. Conversely, Fairfax County, Virginia, did not. Within the District, legislators fought for a Green Line for distressed, underserved neighborhoods; today, ironically, those areas are rapidly gentrifying.

In Fairfax, as in well-to-do areas in the other jurisdictions served by Metro, residents have tenaciously resisted more intensive development that could be associated with the transit system, equating such development with diminished services rather than the enhanced environment promoted by Transit-Oriented Development ad-

vocates: mixed-use, walkable communities, less reliance on automobile use. These issues still rankle, and only now are supporters of more diverse environments beginning to challenge those who have resisted change.

Have we learned other lessons from the building of the system?

One can only wonder. Washington still lacks subway links to two of its three regional airports, Washington-Dulles International Airport and Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport. Metro might have links by 2015, but that date is probably optimistic because of the same wrangling that caused delays in the construction of the current system. Furthermore, the Federal Transit Administration has repeatedly said that it could not afford to help build a rail system. As a result, local governments have discussed providing Bus Rapid Transit to Dulles as an alternative to fixed rail. However, WMATA board member and Fairfax County supervisor Dana Kauffman recently wrote that the mistakes of the past should not be repeated because of the perceived lack of funds. In particular, he noted—as Schrag points out—that the absence of a third rail track for Metro trains creates problems when one track goes out of service, as it often does because of a failed train or a medical emergency. Furthermore, the lack of redundant elevators (initially Jackson Graham strongly resisted any elevators) creates hardship for the handicapped and others who cannot mount escalators. However, neither of these necessities is currently planned for the Metro extension

to Dulles.

Kauffman has also urged that the Dulles extension be placed underground at one of Washington’s major regional shopping and office centers, Tysons Corner, Virginia, where multi-family housing is now being added. He correctly points out that an underground route would create the potential for a closely knit, pedestrian-friendly “downtown,” something that an elevated system is unlikely to foster. At present, feasibility studies are underway thanks to the persistence of Kauffman and like-minded advocates. Boston’s Big Dig may not have set the standard for cost-conscious solutions to achieving urbanity, but it will undoubtedly be remembered for having knit the city back together again after the dislocation caused by postwar freeway construction.

Since he covered such a vast region and expanse of time, Schrag could easily have expanded each of his later chapters to achieve more depth. However, he has provided a comprehensive and, from this reviewer’s knowledge, accurate picture of his subject matter, one that conveys the myriad of turning points that resulted in today’s Metro.

Note

[1]. The reviewer wishes to note that though she is an employee of the agency that operates the Metro system, she is involved in Transit-Oriented Development, not the subway’s operation.

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