Tulsa, Oklahoma: The Best-Laid Plans
Tulsa, Oklahoma considers itself the birthplace of Route 66 since it was here that Cyrus Avery, the road’s historical father figure, lived, worked, and promoted the road as the country’s first all-weather cross-country thoroughfare. Avery, a Tulsa resident and property owner, was a prominent citizen who became a road advocate in 1913 when he was made Highway Commissioner of Tulsa. These were the prime years of the “Good Roads Movement,” and in this climate of roadway advocacy and transformation, Avery became the country’s leading spokesman for rural road improvement; he was appointed leader of the federal commission that created the U.S. Highway System in 1926. As commissioner, Avery argued for the southern and western routing of what would become Route 66, ostensibly so that the road would avoid the dangerous mountain roads and climates of the Rockies but with the knowledge that this would bring the road through Avery’s hometown, Tulsa, where he was both a politician and a roadside property owner. Avery’s foresight and enthusiasm have earned him a place in Tulsa and Route 66 history unmatched by any other early Route 66 advocates and pioneers.

Oklahoma’s modern Route 66 revival began in 1989 with the founding of the Oklahoma Route 66 Association. Oklahoma was the second of eight states to create such a group, and the organization remains one of the most active in the U.S. on a statewide level, maintaining a regularly updated website and publishing an annual “Oklahoma Route 66 Trip Guide” that is distributed by restaurants, motels, and visitor centers across the state. In 1995, the University of Oklahoma joined the movement by submitting the Route 66 Multiple Property Listing to the National Register. This document emphasized the preservation of the Route 66 roadbed and bridges, as much as its roadside architecture. This focus on the roadbed and its associated structures – bridges, trusses, and service stations – reflects Oklahoma’s pride in its connection to Cyrus Avery, one of the country’s most famous road advocates. Because of this history, Oklahoma’s activists have paid particular attention to the roadbed itself and the road’s engineered structures.

Activism in Oklahoma also focuses on small town and rural initiatives. Several of the state’s more well-known 66 landmarks, like the “Blue Whale” in Catoosa and the Rock Café in Stroud, have been lovingly restored and maintained over the last decade through the work of individual preservationists and property owners, and in some cases, through corporate sponsors such as the Hampton Inn “Save a Landmark” program (see picture). Unlike in New Mexico and California, however, Route 66 activism in Oklahoma has not engaged seriously with urban areas. 66 runs through both Tulsa and Oklahoma City, but neither city has shown a concerted effort to preserve or develop this resource until the last five years, when Tulsa arrived on the Route 66 scene with the city’s ambitious “Vision 2025” plan. Although the city’s 66-related efforts are now under the umbrella of Vision 2025, several grassroots movements preceded the city’s involvement and positioned Route 66 for inclusion in the city’s overall economic development plan.

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2. For website, see http://www.oklahomaroute66.com/
3. The Hampton Inn “Save a Landmark” program organizes motel employees and other volunteers in clean-up projects of Route 66 roadside architectural monuments and affixes a Hampton Inn “Save a Landmark” sign on each project. However, the program does not at present offer financial or other support for the continued maintenance of these landmarks.
According to Dennis Whitaker from the City of Tulsa Public Works and Development department, the grassroots effort to redevelop Tulsa’s Route 66 corridor began five years ago in 2000, when neighborhood leaders and business owners along 11th Street formed the 11th Street Business League. 11th Street is Tulsa’s primary alignment of Route 66, now a two-lane road that originally connected Tulsa to Catoosa to the east (home of the beloved “Blue Whale”) and Stroud to the west (the site of the route’s most well-known eatery, the Rock Café). Like many urban portions of Route 66 across America, 11th Street is a low-to-middle income part of town, populated with used car lots, light industrial workplaces, and a few run-down motels. The prevalence of used car lots is directly linked to the land-use legacy of Route 66; many of these lots are the sites of former motels that could not survive after Route 66 was bypassed by the interstate. Roadside motels from the 1940s and 1950s were often designed around large courtyards with parking spaces ringing a central shared space, then surrounded by a horseshoe of attached, single-story rooms. These motor courts were usually sited on the edge of the urban center (in what are today inner-ring suburbs), so that traveling families could be near to city services but

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4 The Rock Café was the inspiration for the roadside eatery in the upcoming Pixar movie, *Cars*; supposedly its young owner, Dawn, was one of the inspirations for the movie’s lead female character, a woman (car) who abandons her hectic city life to settle down in a small American town and run a local café. The movie will open in June, 2006.
A map of methamphetamine labs discovered in Tulsa since 2001. Route 66/11th Street is the line shown in red. Source: City of Tulsa Police Department, Special Investigations Division.

One of many used-car lots along east Tulsa’s 11th Street/Route 66 corridor. Source: Author.
could enjoy the informality and camaraderie of the motor court experience. Because of the popularity of this motel form, historic motels on Route 66 often occupy large, deep lots with a significant amount of commercial street frontage. As such, they are ideal sites for businesses like used-car-sales because the sites can accommodate a large automobile inventory while providing exposure to a commercial corridor and proximity to a viable market (in this case, low-income residents of west Tulsa).

Like other urban pieces of the old road, 11th Street in Tulsa today suffers from neglect, disrepair, and a general seedyness that contrasts sharply with the “car-hops and milkshakes” image of Route 66’s heyday. But much of 11th Street’s downtrodden appearance results from the blankness of its empty lots and auto body shops – not from the vice associated with older motels, as in Albuquerque or Flagstaff. Tulsa has lost so many of its historic Route 66 motels to demolition that these properties have not emerged as a magnet for vice. Rather, in Tulsa, the type of crime plaguing motels in other Route 66 cities is spread out over the entire city; for example, methamphetamine labs have been found not only in Tulsa’s urban areas, but also in affluent suburbs, in rural areas, and even in the honeymoon suite of a local Residence Inn. The Tulsa Police Department has mapped the incidences of meth labs throughout the city from 2001 to 2005, and the maps show a wide geographic spread, with only 1 lab discovered along 11th Street/Route 66 in 2005. Perhaps the scarcity of 66 motels in Tulsa has not only limited their exposure to vice, but has also helped emphasize their historic importance and has prompted more investment in their upkeep. Jack Patel, for example, has spent thousands of dollars of his own money on the restoration of the Desert Hills neon sign, and currently, it is the only fully restored motel sign along the 11th street corridor (see “66 Spotlight on Jack Patel”).

The Battle of the Plans

But even without the proliferation of vice, 11th Street in Tulsa is hardly a tourist-friendly destination. The road looks almost industrial, with deep setbacks, scattered vacant paved lots, and a complete absence of pedestrian activity. Perhaps it was this contrast with the iconic image of Route 66 that motivated the founders of the 11th Street Business League to meet in 2000 and discuss the necessity for improvements to their roadway and strategies for marketing the road to Route 66 tourists. The group achieved immediate results. Within one year of its founding, the 11th Street Business League had lobbied the city for increased attention to broken streetlights, property crime, and prostitution along 11th Street, including an application to the city for $145,000 worth of capital improvements for street lighting.

The timing of the 11th Street Business League was fortuitous, for around the same time, in 2001, a citizen’s action group called TulsaNow was forming in response to two redevelopment bonds that failed to pass citywide elections. In the late 90s, the Tulsa city government had proposed a plan called the “Tulsa Project” in which the

6 http://www.tulsapolice.org/sid.html. See map.
city would reshape itself as a “tertiary” convention market, building facilities to attract smaller events such as high school sports tournaments instead of professional (if minor league) events. However, this project failed at the polls and was followed by another failed capital campaign called “Tulsa Time” that focused on the construction of a smaller convention center with a greenway connecting to the Arkansas River. Determined to demonstrate their city’s willingness to change, the founders of TulsaNow began brainstorming about possible urban redevelopment plans for the city, including several projects that highlighted the city’s remaining historic buildings. The group began by holding meetings and asking local developers, preservationists, and representatives from the Tulsa Redevelopment Authority to speak on these issues, and Tulsans began to pay attention to the group’s public hearings.

In October 2002, TulsaNow organized a public event called “The Battle of the Plans.” At this event, citizen planners were encouraged to present their ideas for Tulsa’s revitalization, regardless of scope or feasibility. Accordingly, plans ranged from the relatively mundane (redevelopment of the Arkansas River waterfront) to the impossible (a plan for an “Eiffel Tower-size derrick” that would be connected via elevated tram cars to a series of derricks positioned around the city). Several plans incorporated a Route 66 theme, but only one presented implementable strategies for Route 66 corridor redevelopment; this plan was the product of the 11th Street Business League, which by then had changed its name to the Route 66 Business League of Tulsa.

By the time of “The Battle of the Plans,” the Route 66 Business League had incorporated itself as a 501(c)3 and had stated its mission as, “to design and implement a comprehensive economic improvement strategy for the East Tulsa Historic Route 66 Area... that includes but is not limited to crime prevention, code enforcement, physical improvement and economic development.” The League held its first official meeting in January of 2003, following the successful presentation of its proposals during “The Battle of the Plans.” Although the Battle was not a formal, competitive process, it drew public and press attention and positioned the League as a force for change along the Route 66 corridor. The Battle also drew more attention to Route 66 as a cultural resource for the city of Tulsa.

Vision 2025

At the same time, the leadership of Tulsa County was busy brainstorming ideas for a new city and county vision plan, which would focus on economic development and attracting new large, corporate industries to the Tulsa area. In October 2002, the city and county government held the first in a series of “Dialog/Visioning 2025 Citizens’ Summits” to hear any and all ideas from the public about improvement and development projects for the City of Tulsa. These first summits, basically a higher-profile version of the “Battle of the Plans”, presented yet another forum for the Route 66 Business League to garner attention for the corridor. However, this forum had the advantage of local

9 Articles of Incorporation of Route 66 Business League of Tulsa, Inc.. May, 2002.
Jack Patel, the owner and proprietor of the Desert Hills Motel on Route 66 in Tulsa, says that his business relies “90% on locals” needing weekly or monthly stays, and that he sees, at most, one foreign tourist per week during the peak season of July, August, and September. This is despite the fact that Mr. Patel has spent thousands of dollars on restoring the Desert Hills’ neon sign in an effort to attract Route 66 tourists. Interestingly, Mr. Patel noted that most of his overnight visitors who are traveling Route 66 are from other countries – mostly Western Europe and Japan. He remarked that very few American Route 66 tourists stay at the Desert Hills, despite his efforts to list the motel on several Route 66-themed websites (one of which is maintained by Emily Priddy).

Mr. Patel tries to balance the need to make a living serving local clients with the tourism potential of his classic, 195 motel; “It’s tough – it’s never going to be like Vegas, where you’d expect more tourists. I’m trying to kind of stay in the business, and also make a place where there is something to see for out of town people.”

Knowing that his income depends on local clients, Mr. Patel has made an effort to keep up with the chain motel competition without pricing himself out of the local market. “Of course we had to make changes, you can’t just keep the old black and white tv, nowadays people want more convenience, updated air conditioner in the room, phone, primo tv and everything, so we try to provide all that just like big chain motels… But if you want to make any super improvements, you’d have to get big time financing. And for the local people, you don’t need that much [improvement]. You just want to stay where they can afford it, and where we can stay in business. Because if you make super changes, then we’d have to make enough rent to pay it off. But we try to stay with rates that they can afford.”

With the encouragement of Emily Priddy and other, Tulsa-based Route 66 activists, Jack has completed extensive renovation of his 1953 motel during his five years of ownership and has paid particular attention to his sign, a distinctive and well-known motel sign among Route 66 aficionados. With the help of his wife, he has also maintained his rooms up to the standard of comparable chain motels, and he keeps two rooms free at all times for tourists. The rest of the rooms, set further back from 11th Street, are used by regular daily and weekly tenants. Mr. Patel offered me a tour of his two open motel rooms, and I saw for myself that the rooms were just as well appointed as a room at a comparable motel along the Interstate, with color cable television, a clean and serviceable bathroom, and a new air-conditioning wall unit.

For a motel like the Desert Hills, built in 1953 and purchased after years of decline, maintenance and economic viability present a distinct preservation challenge. Preservation, in the sense of maintaining the motel’s original landscaping, interiors, or decoration, can mean expensive labor, material, or consulting costs, a luxury that a cash-flow dependent business like the Desert Hills cannot afford. When Jack Patel purchased the Desert Hills from his uncle ten years ago, the motel was in disrepair, inside and out. “At that time,” Mr Patel says, “More than half of the rooms were down, not rentable. And slowly we just did most of it by ourselves and got it up to where we could rent it

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2  Jack Patel Interview.
Jack Patel in front of the Desert Hills Motel sign. 11th Street/Route 66 is in the background. Source: Author.
out.” His renovation included extensive interior work, as well as paving over the unusable swimming pool and re-landscaping the exterior. Old pictures of the Desert Hills show that much of its 1950’s motel character, typified by the deteriorated swimming pool and courtyard, didn’t survive the renovation process. Decorative elements, too, fell victim to the need for safety and economy; “The poles that were holding the structure were metal, wrought iron, we don’t have that anymore,” said Mr. Patel. “They broke one by one, rusted out, the maintenance was too much.”

As sad as a loss of historic architectural character can be to a preservationist or a Route 66 “roadie,” the renovation of the Desert Hills allowed Jack Patel and his wife to make a living off the motel and to attract a safer and more stable tenant population. Before Jack Patel renovated the Desert Hills, it was known as a frequent stop for police officers along 11th Street, Tulsa’s Route 66 corridor. However, in recent years, the motel’s reputation has also benefited from Mr. Patel’s efforts. In an interview with Dennis Whitaker, Tulsa’s Director of Economic Development, he told me that, “Jack Patel turned his operation around… the police got called there for decades. Recently, I asked a policeman if they’d been called there recently, and he just laughed and said, No, they’re wonderful.”

As government sponsorship and, more importantly, the participation of the Mayor and his staff. During the “summitting” process of October 2002, the proposed revitalization of Route 66 caught the eye of the city’s Planning and Economic Development Division, and the city began working together with the Route 66 Business League to submit a proposal for inclusion in what would become the city’s “Vision 2025” plan.

Route 66 was only one of many improvements submitted for “Vision 2025”, but early in the visioning process, the City recognized Route 66 revitalization as a project that seemed to require very little capital investment to reap a significant tourism and economic development benefit for the city. For Tulsa, Route 66 was a dormant civic asset, like an undeveloped riverway or other pre-existing, natural feature, that would require a relatively small financial investment (compared to the proposed construction of a new stadium) to generate increased revenue and civic pride. Julie Miner, economist for the City of Tulsa’s Urban Development Department, explained to me the particular advantage of tourism over other forms of economic development; “The reason tourism is an important ingredient in economic development is that it’s dollars that come from outside your community. You don’t have to necessarily have a great deal of government support for [tourists]. They don’t have a house and they don’t have water lines and all that, they just stay in the hotel and spend money. So that’s gravy, and that’s why we like it. And in doing so [on Route 66], it also helps the ‘Mom and Pop’s’ and the Quicktrips.”

Dennis Whitaker and Julie Miner interview.
In March, 2000, the county collected three billion dollars’ worth of proposed projects for “Vision 2025,” and a Tulsa committee began the project selection process. A few months later, the Mayor and the Tulsa City Council voted unanimously to support the Vision 2025 plan; Vision 2025 was then presented to Tulsa voters, who passed the massive planning initiative on September 9, 2000. Now, all that was left for Route 66 advocates in Tulsa was to decide how to spend their allotted fifteen million dollars. With little fanfare, Tulsa assembled a committee of thirteen Route 66 advocates, business owners, and preservationists from all 26 miles of Tulsa’s corridor to work together with planning consultants on the city’s Route 66 plan.\textsuperscript{12}

I spoke with two of these committee members – Michael Wallis, the writer, and Brad Nickson, the Tulsa county representative for the Oklahoma Route 66 Association – to get a sense of how they felt about the planning process and the resulting document. I also spoke with project manager Mike Arand from the planning firm Dewberry, which (along with marketing firm Littlefield) consulted on the Route 66/Vision 2025 plan. All three men described a long and arduous planning process, in which representatives of the citizen committee fought bitterly over how and where the city should spend its considerable Route 66 budget. But as Mike Arand pointed out, spread over 26 miles, 15 million dollars doesn’t turn out to be as much money as everyone would like; “When word first got out that we had 15 million dollars, everybody thought, ‘Wow, you can gold-plate everything,’ but it doesn’t take very long to use it up...instead of asking for 15 million, we should have asked for 20, or even 25.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{The Route 66 Planning Process}

A major source of conflict in the planning process was the eventual decision to devote over a third of the overall funding to the construction of a new interpretive center, currently called “The Route 66 Xperience”. To understand why the committee ended up devoting so much of its budget to a new building, rather than solely to bolster the existing historic fabric and businesses, it is important to remember that the city’s Route 66 corridor plan was formulated in the context of a large-scale, city-wide revitalization initiative. This context made it possible for the Route 66 planning committee to dismiss the idea of adapting an existing building for an interpretive center, since a new building could not only take advantage of a proposed lot near the historic Cyrus Avery Bridge, but could also complement the city’s waterfront redevelopment efforts. This redevelopment context also affected the mentality with which Tulsa’s Route 66 planners approached the planning process. In Tulsa, Route 66 was one of many tools that the city would employ in its economic development, rather than a link in a national chain of resources.

Although efforts along Route 66 started with the the 11\textsuperscript{th} Street Business League, just as Vision 2025 originated with TulsaNow, both processes were eventually co-opted by the more formalized, city-sponsored planning process which began in 2003. From then on, city officials spearheaded the entire planning process, from organizing the Route

\textsuperscript{12} Different people and publications estimate the length of Tulsa’s Route 66 corridor as anywhere between 22 and 26 miles. For consistency, I will use Mike Arand’s estimate of 26 miles.

\textsuperscript{13} Mike Arand interview, Dewberry Planning offices, Tulsa, Oklahoma, January 6, 2006.
Tulsa’s Route 66 Master Plan map, showing twenty-one planned interventions. Source: Dewberry.
citizen advisory committee to selecting Dewberry as the planning consultants. While these efforts were well-intentioned and certainly faster than allowing Route 66 revitalization to build its own momentum and capital, the city’s rapid upscaling of its Route 66 efforts also effectively deracinated the city’s grassroots movement. Not only was the city-organized planning process more structured and hierarchical, but the promise of $15 million for Route 66 alone altered the scale and expectations that many on its advisory committee were accustomed to dealing with. As a result, the committee soon found itself with an army of consultants and $15 million at its disposal, and according to Dewberry Project Manager Mike Arand, this engendered a passive and reactionary mindset among committee members; “I think in some instances [the citizen committee had] the attitude, okay we’ve hired these professionals, let’s see what they have to say. And then they reacted to it as opposed to bringing forth their own ideas and saying, we’d really like for you to consider this…So from that standpoint, they weren’t really contributors. And we originally asked them for their ideas and only got 2 -- the other 19 [of the plan’s 21 proposed projects] came from the consultants or city staff.”

The sudden influx of cash for Route 66 also brought out the territoriality endemic to local government – particularly in a city like Tulsa, which was unaccustomed to collaborating on public projects of this scale. Everyone I spoke with involved in Tulsa’s Route 66 planning process commented on the frustration of working with a few particular committee members who viewed the process as an opportunity to advance their personal or neighborhood agendas. “There were a number of people in our 13-core committee members who had agendas, and we didn’t get those agendas out on the table and resolved soon enough,” said Mike Arand when I asked him about the committee’s consensus-building process. “I thought we were gaining consensus as we went along – I’ve been at this 30-some-odd years, and I really thought we had most of them nodding their heads ‘Yes’. But when it came right down to it, their agendas came into play, and you know the first time we actually took a vote on this, it was split right down the middle, 7-6. And it stayed that way for a long time, for nine months.” Committee member and Oklahoma Route 66 Association representative Brad Nickson was blunter; “This has been one of the most frustrating things I’ve ever been involved with – the whole thing, with all the politics that’s actually going on behind the scenes. There’s been times when I sat in a committee meeting and said, ‘What are you doing? You’re wasting our time. We’re getting this stuff taken out of our hands and then put back in at the whim of city counselors, county commissioners, the Vision Board, whoever they are.’ I guess it’s been frustrating because I don’t have a government background...[and] it’s moving so slowly. We’ve missed out on two tourism seasons, dragging our feet putting this master plan together.”

Another factor that affected the planning process was the early involvement of the City’s Economic Development Department. In Albuquerque, for example, much of the Route 66 collaboration with city government has involved the city’s preservation or land use planning departments. But in Tulsa, Julie Miner and Dennis Whitaker, affiliates of the city’s department of Urban Development, have been the city employees most directly involved in the planning process. As a result, the plan reflects the city’s

14 Mike Arand interview.
15 Mike Arand interview.
### ROUTE 66 MASTER PLAN PROJECT LIST

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<td>Route 66 Historic District</td>
<td>3,200,000</td>
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**The Vision 2025/Route 66 Master Plan Project List and budget. Source: Dewberry.**

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emphasis on generating tourism and commerce, rather than exclusively preserving or redeveloping Route 66’s existing built fabric. This is not to say that the Route 66 plan does not involve preservation initiatives; the plan earmarks $800,000 of its $15 million for a historic preservation fund. Although the uses of the fund are not yet finalized, Mike Arand expressed a hope that the fund will make grants available to private property owners who would like to hire consultants to prepare National Register nomination forms. The fund may also provide low-interest, revolving loans to individuals interested in purchasing or rehabilitating an historic Route 66 structure. However, nearly $7 million of the plan’s $15 million will be spent on the construction of the new interpretive center and its surrounding parks and plazas.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{The “Route 66 Xperience”}

“We could have created homage to Route 66 that we all loved.
We could have followed our hearts and restored the bridge.
We could have distributed our investment up and down the route.
We could have done a million different things with our $15 million seed money.
But we did our research.
And we found we are not facing a Generation Gap. We are facing a Generation Chasm.
If we do not build a bridge, our memories of Route 66 will die with us.”

- Vision 2025, Route 66 Plan\textsuperscript{18}

In keeping with the economic development and tourism goals of the city, the centerpiece of Tulsa’s Route 66 plan will be the five million dollar “Route 66 Xperience,” a three-story interpretive center on a hilltop overlooking the Arkansas River and the original alignment of Route 66 over the 11\textsuperscript{th} Street Bridge. Littlefield, the market research consultants who collaborated on the plan, early on determined that any successful marketing of Route 66 to tourists and locals would require an aggressive outreach to a younger audience, and that the best way to engage this audience would be through a technologically sophisticated, Route 66-themed interpretive center. While the plan acknowledges the importance of the traditional Route 66 aficionados, it emphasizes the importance of reaching out to a new generation that has never known any highway but the interstate; “Research revealed that the perceptions and attitudes about Tulsa and Route 66 vary greatly depending on age and personal experience. Baby Boomers grew up on Route 66, seeing America from the back seat of an automobile while on family vacations. Their connection today is driving the road and reliving cherished memories. The Generation Gap after 1964, the birth year of the last Baby Boomer, however, is wide and deep. Generation Xers and those that are younger have no connection to Route 66. The challenge then is to transcend those generational differences by bringing the romance, heritage, and nostalgia of the old road into a ‘hip’ new world.”\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{17} Route 66/Vision 2025 Project Implementation Plan, City of Tulsa, April 2006, p 9-2.
\textsuperscript{18} Route 66/Vision 2025 Project Implementation Plan, April 2006, Introduction.
\textsuperscript{19} Route 66/Vision 2025 Project Implementation Plan, Executive Summary, p 1-1.
\end{flushright}
We learned a lot of things about today’s traveler [through market research],” recalled Mike Arand. “What different groups, age groups, types of people, are interested in seeing, not only if they come to Tulsa but if they come to Tulsa for Route 66. And we used that information to drive the evaluation of potential development and projects on the road.” In response to the results of the market research, Arand and his planning team created a list of fifteen project criteria. Among these criteria were cost of the project vs. impact, potential to attract private investment, likelihood “to support engagement beyond the windshield”, and relevance to marketing research. By the end of the planning process, the planning team and citizen input committee had identified twenty-one projects for inclusion in the final plan. Four of these – the 11th Street/Cyrus Avery Bridge Preservation, the Cyrus Avery Centennial Plaza, Avery Park Southwest, and the Route 66 Xperience – are located next to one another, near the crossing of 11th Street and the Arkansas River. The planning committee judged all four of these projects to be highly relevant to Tulsa’s economic development goals and to be likely to attract a new generation of roadies not only to Tulsa, but to Route 66 as a national resource.

The “Route 66 Xperience” will be a three-story building of approximately 33,000 square feet on a vacant lot near downtown Tulsa overlooking the Arkansas River. According to Mike Arand, the first floor will be dedicated to an interactive interpretive center about Route 66, its development, and its relevance to American history. The use of the center’s second and third levels are to be determined, but Arand and Michael Wallis speculate that the second level could house the office of the National Route 66

20 Mike Arand interview.
21 Route 66/Vision 2025 Project Implementation Plan, p 6-5.
Federation, an organization that purports to represent the combined interests of all eight of the Route’s State Associations. The City of Tulsa has also expressed an interest in placing some of its offices in the new facility. The idea of creating a “destination restaurant” on the third level has met with some skepticism, since the building will have been constructed with public funds and some committee members did not like the idea of a private enterprise capitalizing on a public project. Regardless, the building will serve, primarily, as an interpretive center designed to surprise and attract a younger audience through the creative use of interactive technology. The project is still in its early phases, but images within the planning document show large video screens, interactive kiosks, full-scale Cadillac replicas placed in a simulated road environment, and other visually stimulating exhibits. Clearly, the planning committee sees technology as the means for attracting and exciting a new set of Route 66 enthusiasts.

As for the decision to spend nearly half of the city’s Route 66 budget on a new building, several people I spoke with believed that this was the only way to bring in not only younger, but older Route 66 tourists as well. Michael Wallis, the unofficial spokesman of Route 66 and a planning committee member, supports the proposal for an interpretive center because of his conviction that a youth-oriented, interactive museum could conceivably entice visitors off of the Interstate and into the center of Tulsa. It is widely believed among Route 66 aficionados that most Route 66 tourists drive the original alignment in rural areas and then jump onto the Interstate to bypass major metropolitan areas. “In so many places, especially cities, people tend to bypass the cities when they’re traveling Route 66 because it’s a hassle to try to follow these alignments and so forth. So here are Mr. And Mrs. America out there with two and a half kids and a basset hound in your Volvo, and you want to take in episodes of Route 66, big spoonfuls. And you use the five Interstates paralleling 66 to your advantage…[So] ultimately we decided that [Tulsa] needed a big attraction to lure people in, and that’s how we got this idea of the Route 66 Xperience, or this big national interpretive center.”

The committee’s decision to focus its energy on the Xperience rather than the Cyrus Avery Bridge may indicate that the future of Route 66 tourism lies in interpretation, rather than preservation, of the built environment. Initially, according to Julie Miner, the committee planned to rehabilitate the 11th Street/Cyrus Avery Bridge, an historic structure built in 1918 by the Missouri Valley Bridge & Iron Company for $180,000. “I don’t know what we had expected – I think we expected to fix up the bridge, and to us that was a big deal, spend ten million dollars and make the bridge beautiful. And it was actually the marketing people that came up with the idea, in their research, to build this building on the river and to make it high-tech,” recalled city economist Julie Miner. “I was just as surprised at [the idea of the interpretive center] as anybody else. I would have been

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22 From what I can tell, Wallis and California’s Jim Conkle are both equally as “in demand” as speakers and representatives of the Route 66 renaissance. However, Wallis is the author of the most widely-published Route 66 coffee table book, Route 66: The Mother Road, and will voice one of the characters in the upcoming Pixar movie Cars, which takes place in a bypassed town along Route 66. Wallis, unlike Jim Conkle, has managed to turn a profit on his Route 66 passion and has written several other coffee-table books about historic roadways.


24 Route 66/Vision 2025 Project Implementation Plan, p 5-1. The bridge was renamed for Cyrus Avery in 2004 to recognize Avery’s advocacy role in the bridge’s construction and the subsequent routing of Route 66 through downtown Tulsa.
happy with fixing up the bridge or saving some old buildings; that would have suited me…But now it really makes sense, because if we do this, and if the National [Route 66] Federation does put their headquarters there, then that would help the whole state. It can be the place that you call and say, ‘We want to do a Route 66 trip’. And we used to be bypassed, and now we’ll have the headquarters. How cool would that be?25

Many Route 66 advocates had hoped for the full-scale restoration of the Bridge into a pedestrian thoroughfare that would be lined with period lampposts and would serve as a venue for street fairs and other festivals. However, rehabilitation of the bridge up to code would have cost the city the entire Route 66 budget, according to Mike Arand. “Well, the Bridge is considered the most significant icon of Route 66 remaining in Tulsa, so there has always been a desire to restore it to its prominence. Unfortunately, to do it correctly has a pricetag of approximately fifteen million dollars, and it would remove such a significant amount of the bridge, which would then have to be reconstructed as a replica, that it loses some of its historical significance…The idea was that we could restore it, allow people to get out on it, and use it as a pedestrian walkway from one side to the other, but the fact of the matter is that it was originally closed to traffic in 1980, and…the last 25 years of non-use has not been good to it.”26

25 Julie Miner interview.
26 Mike Arand interview. Although the bridge would have been reserved for pedestrian use, code requires that it be able to accommodate vehicular traffic as well in case of emergency. This added an additional cost to the proposed rehabilitation.
Instead, the Route 66 plan calls for the partial rehabilitation of the Bridge – just enough to keep it from crumbling into the Arkansas River. Eventually, this solution was acceptable to the Route 66 committee, perhaps because members like Brad Nickson understood that the bridge’s aging was a part of Route 66’s natural legacy; “Basically, you would have to have torn it down to below the arches, and then rebuild it. And at that point you have a new bridge; you don’t have anything that’s historically significant other than a bridge in that position. So I think we’re going to do some things to shore up some of the underwater piers to make it more stable – it’s not in any danger of falling down, but we can insure that it’ll be around several more decades. Then we’ll just use benign neglect – to me that’s kind of a romantic thing, watching it just deteriorate over the years.”

Perhaps if the price of full restoration had been lower, Nickson would not have been as sanguine about the romance of deterioration. However, the Cyrus Avery Bridge is hardly an ideal site for pedestrian activity or public functions. The bridge was replaced in 1980 by a modern interstate bridge that blocks the view to the west along the river and has made the Cyrus Avery Bridge obsolete as a means of vehicular transportation. “The intent was always to allow people to get out on the bridge and walk across the river, that type of activity,” recalls Mike Arand. “But if you’ve been there, you know that there’s an elevated highway on one side and a railroad bridge on the other side of the highway...so its out in the middle of all these overpasses and bridges, and its probably not a good location for any type of a festival. So under this initial program, we are only going to spend somewhere between five and six-hundred-thousand dollars to remove the vegetation, make each end look a lot better aesthetically, put up period lighting, that kind of activity. But we’re not going to do any of the structural repairs that are the big ticket items.” Instead, the plan will commemorate Cyrus Avery with a bronze statue called “East Meets West.” In the proposed statue, Avery stands next to a 1920’s automobile and greets a man in a wagon leading a team of horses; the statue is meant to symbolize Avery’s role as a progressive proponent of the automobile and the roadways that served it. Surprisingly, this million-dollar cast bronze statue does not seem to have been a point of contention for the planning committee, perhaps because it represents the plan’s only overt homage to the “Father of Route 66.” This statue will be the focal point of Cyrus Avery Centennial Plaza.

The Other $8 Million

Although the “Route 66 Xperience” and its associated projects will consume half of the overall planning budget for the corridor, the plan also proposes streetscaping, neon-sign preservation, and small-business incentives. The overall streetscaping budget totals $2.1 million dollars, and addresses all twenty-six miles of Route 66 in Tulsa. Not to be outdone by Albuquerque or Rancho Cucamonga, Tulsa also proposes the construction of two Route 66 gateways at the eastern and western edges of town, at the cost of

27 Brad Nickson interview.
28 Mike Arand interview.
Tulsa’s proposed gateways, above; a proposed street intersection, below. Source: Dewberry.

“East Meets West”, the proposed million-dollar statue for Cyrus Avery Plaza. Source: Dennis Whitaker.
Perhaps the largest non-Xperience related expenditure is the enhancement of six arterial street/11th Street intersections for $1.2 million each. The plan includes design guidelines for the implementation of these enhancements, which specify the placement of “Route 66” logos in sidewalks and crosswalks of the new intersections. Like Rancho Cucamonga, Route 66 streetscaping enhancements also include bus shelters and planters with the famous Route 66 shield logo.

Lastly, the plan recommends a few, long-term strategies for the maintenance and further enhancement of Tulsa’s corridor. One of the most interesting recommendations is for the creation of a “Route 66 Authority”, an organization similar to a Business Improvement District with the power to levy taxes on its members. “The idea behind the [Route 66] Authority is primarily promotion and marketing. But they could also use it...for capital improvements if they wanted to,” said Mike Arand. “But [the planners] didn’t want to make it particularly onerous on [business owners] because they’re already paying property taxes, so we recommended that the money collected be used to hire staff and to underwrite the annual communications and promotions budget for the corridor.” This is, perhaps, one of the plan’s most interesting proposals, and it would make Tulsa the only one of the four case study cities to institute a tax-levying authority over Route 66 businesses. Certainly, the activism of the 11th Street Business League proved that Route 66 businesses can work together toward a common goal; an Authority would partner these businesses with the institutional leverage of the City of Tulsa and could result in a powerful force for promotion and development of the corridor’s commercial interests.

Tulsa Conclusions

The story of the Route 66 Renaissance in Tulsa is, on the surface, much more straightforward than the story in Albuquerque or even Flagstaff, where larger contexts of preservation and activism have had a greater impact on Route 66’s development. In Tulsa, engagement began at the grassroots level but was quickly co-opted by the city’s Vision 2025 planning initiative. While this will inject $15 million into the Route 66 effort – more than all other cities I’ve studied, combined – it has reframed the Route 66 Renaissance as a government action guided by city hall representatives and private consultants. Certainly, any effective revitalization of Route 66 will involve both government participation and government funding; for example, Albuquerque’s efforts illustrate an effective balance between grassroots and government activism. Outside experts, too, have their place in Route 66 revitalization, as illustrated by Albuquerque’s recruitment of a private planning firm to help implement a transit corridor along Central Avenue. But Tulsa, simply because of the scale of its budget and efforts, has bypassed the fine-grained community-based planning that has made Albuquerque’s efforts so successful.

Even the members of Tulsa’s Route 66 Citizen Advisory Committee seemed shocked into silence by the scale of the city’s budget. Grassroots advocates like Brad Nickson are accustomed to dealing with budgets in the thousands, not the millions, and this rapid upgrading seems initially to have stunned these citizen advocates into silence while they adjusted to a new scale of thinking. As Nickson said in our interview, “Any-

thing that happens along the route, I’m happy,” as if he was afraid to look too closely at
the route’s good fortune. But now, after more than a year of committee work, citizens
like Nickson may be more prepared to join the debate about Route 66, and the planning
process should take advantage of the committee’s year of learning. As is often the case,
Tulsa’s planning committee hasn’t had any time for formalized reflection on the planning
process; the emotions and frustrations I saw in my interviews suggest that this would be a
valuable step as the plan moves closer to adoption.

And although the opportunity for the planning process to foster grassroots creativ-
ity may have been lost, the plan itself can make up for this loss by allocating funding
specifically for citizen-based planning efforts along the corridor. Amazingly, none of the
city’s Route 66 money has been allocated to foster grassroots efforts; the closest the city
has come to this is with its “Pearl” fund, which allots $700,000 for the public purchase
of façade easements and to provide incentives for individual building preservation. But
this is a far cry from providing financial support to the organizations that have kept the
memory of Route 66 alive for the last thirty years and will most likely be responsible
for corridor’s continued development, once the city has moved on to other urban issues.

Much of the work of groups like the Oklahoma Route 66 Association has focused on
outreach and boosterism; Tulsa should take advantage of this group’s existing expertise
in this field by partnering with the Association to enhance its communications efforts.
The city should also consider other ways to encourage small-scale Route 66 development
through a broader based grant-making program. In other words, financial support need
not be through direct grants to organizations alone; the National Park Service’s Route 66
Corridor Program’s matching grants have enabled individuals and organizations to pursue
National Register listing, oral history gathering, structural evaluations, and a variety
of other strategies that gradually enhance Route 66. Tulsa should consider adopting a
similar program.

30 Brad Nickson interview.