



James Dilts, The Sun, and the clear light of day

Evans Paull

August 22, 2022

“We were all hot shits at the Sun at that time and we were going to tell everybody about it.”

In typical self-deprecating style, James Dilts, in a 2011 interview on his role in the Road Wars

In simplistic terms, Baltimore Sun columnist James Dilts was an agent for making the democratic process work the way it is supposed to work. He helped level the playing field between the powerless outsiders and the powerful insiders—an absolutely essential role and one of the key reasons that those outsiders implausibly prevailed, thwarting the plans for two Interstate Highways.

I confess some level of cynicism when it comes to community controversies where economic interests clash with community or environmental interests: economic interests usually win out. The economic forces are better connected, partly because they have to be in order to succeed, partly because their social circles intersect with political leaders, and partly because they make strategic campaign contributions. But they also have an ace in the hole: they come to political and community controversies armed to the hilt with the best lawyers and consultants money can buy. These hired-gun experts help them bend regulations and interpret laws to the benefit of their clients.



Figure 1. James Dilts, courtesy Penny Williamson



I recently read a highly engaging book about the destruction of Florida’s wetlands, *Paving Paradise: Florida’s Vanishing Wetlands and the Failure of No Net Loss*, by Craig Pittman and Matthew Waite. The book is chalked full of well-documented examples of wetlands regulations being ignored or worked-around because public officials and politicians favorable to development were willing to look the other way. Lawyers found loopholes, consultants downplayed environmental impacts, and bureaucrats bent over backwards to approve questionable projects. The regulators that didn’t play the game did not get promoted, got moved to other positions, or even lost their jobs. But a funny thing happened during several periods of time when, for example, a major newspaper ran a series of articles exposing what was going on: with the clear light of day, public opinion shifted, and the regulations were strenuously enforced.

Unfortunately for Florida, these clear-light-of-day moments did not last, and soon the developers/consultants/politicians figured out new ways to get questionable projects approved. This is typical of what tends to happen in land use issues that involve a clash between the economic growth interests and community or environmental interests.

But what if the issue at hand was able to command public attention for years, even decades? What if reporters like Dilts exposed the tilted decision-making process in a way captured and held the public’s ever-fleeting band width?

The plan for building the expressways, I would argue, was that rare example of an issue that commanded the public’s attention in a uniquely-sustained fashion. It was an extended “clear-light-of-day” phenomenon, facilitated by the press, in general, and James Dilts, in particular.



It is hard to tell, 50 years later, whether the Sun led or followed public opinion, but the paper gradually shifted its editorial position. In the 1940s and through the early 60s the editors were unabashed highway proponents, criticizing highway blocking actions as “deplorable.” Those endeavoring to protect historic Mount Vernon from expressway incursion were described as “wrong-headed... sentimentalists.”

Then from the mid-60’s to the early 70’s the Sun was neither a forceful advocate nor a critic. It was mostly impatient for the process to work through the issues, but, at the same time, the editors were part of the chorus of voices saying the issues cannot be ignored. A Sun editorial in 1968, used sarcasm to express consternation at yet another delay: “To death and taxes is added another certainty: expressway plans in Baltimore are ‘final’ only until such time as a determination is made to have a fresh study.”¹

In the early 1970s the editorials began leaning away from at least some segments of the expressway plan. Then when the mid-70s energy crisis arrived, the editorial board came all the way off the fence and joined the opposition camp, portraying the expressways as folly. In 1974 the Sun featured editorials with headlines that could have been written by anti-highway activists: “The City won’t give up on its senseless



expressways;” “An Idea Whose Time Has Gone.” In 1976 the Sun denounced the expressway plan as a “Graveyard for City Dollars.”

However, James Dilts articulated a strong anti-expressway message at least four critical years earlier. Dilts came to the Sun in 1965, first writing for the Sunday Sun Magazine, then the Sun’s city desk. As a reporter he covered city development issues, such as, urban renewal, gentrification, mass transit, blockbusting, and, of course, the East-West Expressway.

In 1967 the Sun elevated Dilts’ work to a weekly column, under the banner of “The Changing City” —this became a vehicle for more opinion-oriented pieces, as well as an outlet for Dilts’ creative writing talents. As fellow-journalist Mark Reuter put it, “Jim liked people, eccentrics, eccentric places and neighborhoods, and wanted to see what made them tick. He was not interested in job titles or status. He understood Baltimore and saw it in a visceral way.” Reuter described Mr. Dilts as an “elegant writer” who was “worthy of the New Yorker.”

Dilts’ 1967 4-page spread entitled, “Fell’s Point: A Dickensian Part of Baltimore Is Periled by the East-West Expressway” was his first foray into the expressway issue, and it was a doozy. His gift for prose seamlessly captures the history and the appealing quirkiness, but also the existential threat to Fell’s Point. For example:

The merchant aristocracy that occupied these homes in the early days soon gave way to the men who sailed the ships that gained them their fortunes. Their homes became sailors boarding houses, saloons, and dance halls, and new joiners’ shops, sail lofts, and ship chandleries sprang up. In those days the bowsprits of schooners and barkentines hung far out over Fell’s and Thames streets... But where once ships engendered much of the local excitement, more recently this has been provided by the automobile, and now much of what makes Fell’s Point distinctive seems fated to be flattened by an 8-lane expressway, supported 30 feet or so above street level by 6 or 8 concrete legs.

James Dilts and the “Urban Mafia”

In an interview with Johns Hopkins of Baltimore Heritage, Dilts recounted how “The Changing City” column started. He said, the Ford Foundation sponsored a three-month urban affairs seminar at Northwestern, which is where Dilts had gone to college.

Dilts said, “So I got my editor at the Sunday Sun to send me to this thing... We listened to all of these urban experts, and... went around Chicago and looked at things. So then when I came back, I decided I ought to do something, since they had paid for it. So, I started this column called “The Changing City.”

“Jane Jacobs inspired me – she got me interested in these highways... There were a lot of interesting groups involved in... the expressway fight. I used to call them the Urban Mafia.”

“We would meet in church basements and stuff like that. There were guys... from CORE, the archdiocese, from a lot of different groups, and... we would all trade secrets..., and then I would write about it. I tell you, when I was writing these articles about the expressway in Baltimore, I was around there until like 2:00, 3:00 in the morning, writing this stuff. I was on fire. I was on fire. There was nothing like it.”

Source: Baltimore Heritage:
<https://baltimoreheritage.org/a-tribute-to-jim-dilts-in-his-own-words/>



In 1969 (four years before the energy crisis forced nearly everyone to take mass transit more seriously) he defined the issue as “Roads or Rails,” firmly arguing against the prevailing wisdom that Baltimore needs both. He challenged Baltimore’s movers and shakers, who continually advocated “a balanced transportation system,” by asserting that:

The question, really, is whether Baltimore should build rails OR roads. As the expressway situation becomes more open to discussion and as bills are introduced in the legislature to get the mass transit system rolling, the question will become more pressing. After all, to say that the city must build expensive new subways and freeways simultaneously to alleviate the traffic jam is a little like calling in both the doctor and the undertaker at the first sign of illness. It might be a good idea to try one first and perhaps the other won't be needed.²

Dilts’ columns were always well documented and beautifully articulated—I rank him right up there with Barbara Mikulski as an influential opinion-maker.

There was another impact that is less obvious, but just as important. The Road Wars story is chocked full of instances where people acted against the wishes of their superiors, their clients, and against the interests of more powerful groups. They did the right thing, knowing they had cover, because James Dilts (and the press, more generally) would have exposed any meddling from above. Unlike Florida (except for the rare “clear light of day” periods), they were able to act with integrity without repercussions.

At the head of this list is consultants Nathaniel Owings and the Urban Design Concept Team, who carried out an astonishing coup d’etat in 1968, sending the planned Inner Harbor/Federal Hill bridge to the dustbin of defeated expressway plans even though they worked for city and state agencies that wholeheartedly supported that plan. This list also includes Robert Giles, the consultant hired to minimize the impacts of the highway on Leakin Park, who instead wrote a report that said it was bad public policy to build the highway through the park. Another consultant, Robert Kerr, ostensibly hired for the purpose of undermining the case for Fell’s Point’s preservation status, instead backed the case for the listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

City employees, Robert Embry (Commissioner of Housing) and M. J. Brodie (Deputy Commissioner of Housing) kept a heartbeat going in Fell’s Point by adopting a program to rent out vacant houses. Their boss, William Donald Schaefer, wanted that heartbeat extinguished, but he would not overturn his deputies’ decisions because it would have looked bad in the press. Similarly, John Pierce (Maryland State Historic Preservation Officer) stuck to his guns and advised against the highway through Fell’s Point even though his superiors might have rewarded him for soft-peddling the preservation impacts.

Here is a short book excerpt that provides an illustration of Dilts’ impact on decision-making, as well as his way with words. The issue was the that the highway plan would bisect the solidly middle class African American community of Rosemont. The following happened in April 1968 after Mayor Tommy



D'Alesandro III rejected a viable option for bypassing Rosemont. The alternative plan had been drafted by the aforementioned consultants, the Urban Design Concept Team.

[Rosemont leader] Joe Wiles appealed to the feds, which, at first, resulted in little policy gain but produced a scathing [James Dilts] column in the Baltimore Sun. Wiles sent a letter to Alan Boyd, whom he had met at a Relocation Action Movement meeting back in 1967. Frank Turner, one of the original architects of the Interstate System, replied to Wiles letter in typical bureaucratese:

Alternate alignment considerations were studied, as you noted, and determination then made . . . that the team should concentrate their efforts in the original corridor toward development of a design solution which would contribute to the environment of the area, and which would bring to bear the skill and the thinking of all planning disciplines so that the final design solution would reflect full public and private interest.

The Sun's James Dilts subjected this reply to a journalistic skewering:

What does one make of such official gobbledygook? How, by any stretch of the imagination, can a highway that the Design Concept Team has shown will destroy Rosemont possibly 'contribute to the environment of the area'? Which area? What environment?

[The expressway is] our domestic Vietnam—the same line of reasoning...that we must destroy you to save you... How long, one wonders, will the city engage in urbanicide? When will the federal government recognize the foolhardiness of desperately spending money to build communities such as Rosemont with a Model Cities Program, while busily knocking down the ones they already have with a highway program. Mr. Wiles and the residents of Rosemont hope it will be soon. "The city," Wiles said, "has some devious ways of doing things." Mr. Wiles is the master of understatement.³

In October 1968 Urban Design Concept Team presented new options for the I-95 corridor to Lowell Bridwell, Federal Highway Administrator, including the Fort McHenry Bypass. When discussion turned to Rosemont, Bridwell said he was "not likely to look with any favor on any route that slashed through the Negro neighborhood of Rosemont."⁴ We do not know what influenced Bridwell's defense of Rosemont, but I suspect it was two things: Wiles' work behind the scenes and embarrassment over Dilts' scorching column.

Stop the Road chronicles the actions of many unsung heroes, the outsiders and activists who miraculously prevailed over Baltimore's economic and political establishment. A primary reason that they were able to gain the upper hand was that James Dilts (and the press) gave them a forum, with a result that public opinion clearly shifted. The book sums this up: "The disappearing consensus meant greater scrutiny of everything from a modified highway ramp to a flawed Environmental Impact Statement. Every *i* needed to be dotted, every *t* crossed. There were no shortcuts, but there were plenty of detours."

Penny Williamson, Jim Dilts wife and widow (interviewed in 2020), gives a fitting conclusion. She said Jim was "very proud... that he was able to bring another voice, a voice that needed to be heard, to the public."



She added that, "Once he got a really strong sense of the importance of something, he just didn't let it go... He really had a very strong ethic about what cities ought to be and how they should preserve what was special about them... He mainly wanted to light up the buildings, the issues, the people that he felt were important, and he did it with real grace."

Evans Paull is the author of the forth-coming book, *Stop the Road, Stories from the trenches of Baltimore's Road Wars*. You can follow the book at <https://stop-the-road.com/the-book/>,



¹ The Sun, "Elusive Expressway," Dec 14, 1968; pg. A18

² James Dilts, "The Changing City: A Question Of Roads Or Rails," Jan. 5, 1969.

³ James D Dilts, Changing City--'We Must Destroy You To...,' The *Baltimore Sun*, Aug 4, 1968, pg. FD3; ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁴ The *Baltimore Sun*, "Two-for-One Plan," editorial, Oct 31, 1968, pg. A18; ProQuest Historical Newspapers.