

A-12 Sunday, February 2, 1986, The Anchorage Times

Project 80s has created a few problems

by Mitch Lipka
Times Writer

At the beginning of the decade, when the flood of black gold from Prudhoe Bay into the state treasury reached its peak, Anchorage tapped nearly \$300 million for then Mayor George Sullivan's massive public building plan — Project 80s.



Sullivan's dream, now realized, has given Anchorage facilities of complexity and size never before seen in Alaska.

But so many projects so large can create headaches. In all, 27 Project 80s facilities have been built or are under construction, said municipal Capital Projects Director Barry Quinn. So far, a total of \$290 million has been made available to the municipality for these capital projects.

A point to keep in mind, Quinn said, is the facilities have been designed for what Anchorage is expected to need in 30 to 50 years.

"That's a pretty awesome responsibility, building facilities that won't reach their maximum use until you are long gone and your children are using them," he said.

Despite the foresight of Sullivan's plan, there was some opposition to Project 80s. People objected to the locations of facilities, their size and cost.

Anchorage is now replete with monuments to the boom — major modern architectural projects far beyond what most cities of 250,000 would ever expect to see. At its inception, Project 80s was described by Sullivan as bringing Anchorage "into the 20th century."

"We realized the infusion of oil money would build five or 10 world-class buildings," said Anchorage Assemblyman Gerry O'Connor, a longtime Project 80s proponent. "It sure doesn't hurt having all these facilities," he said.

Among the Project 80s facilities completed or in progress are the George M. Sullivan Sports Arena (\$32.5 million), William A. Egan Civic and Convention Center (\$24.6 million), Z.J. Loussac Headquarters Library (\$41 million), the Bartlett High School swimming pool (\$10 million), Anchorage Museum of History and Art (\$23 million) and the Performing Arts Center (\$55 million).

The projects, funded by state legislature-approved grants, progressed rapidly — many in two

years from start to finish. The speed of construction and the number of projects saddled the municipal Capital Projects Office — founded in 1982 — with too much work too fast.

"There was no question that the municipality, as far as capital projects go, was way over its head . . . in terms of capabilities," Quinn said. "We'd never built a building that big (the library)."

"We had 10 of those buildings . . . all of them going into construction at roughly the same time," he said. "It was a crisis condition when I took over."

O'Connor agrees with Quinn's assessment and added that despite the problems, Project 80s has made Anchorage a better place to live.

"Of course we were way, way over our head," he said. "I think we realized this, which is why we set up the Capital Projects Office."

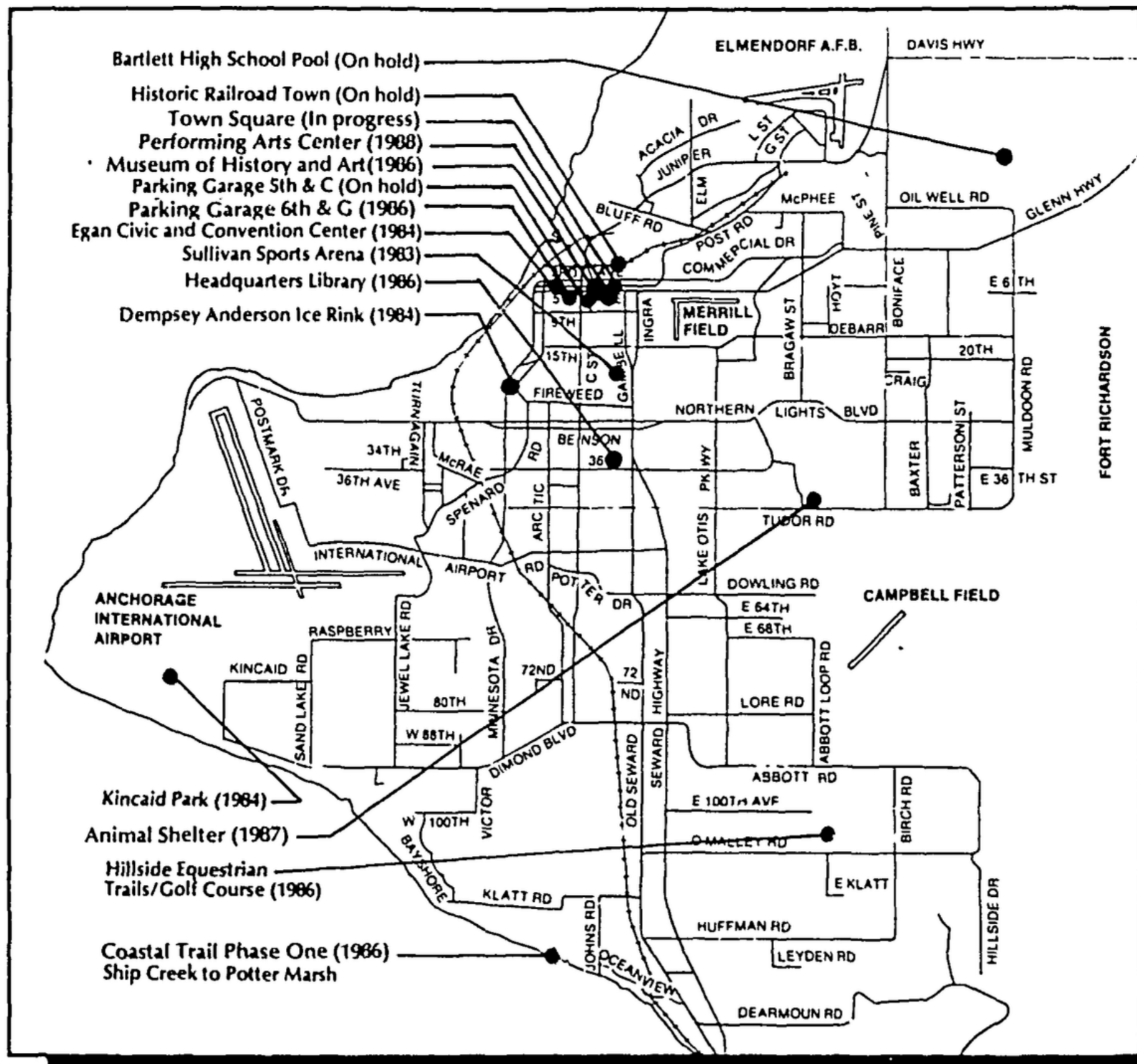
"We're just very lucky (to be able to have all the projects). And of course you've got to realize some things are going to happen because we didn't plan this for 10 years," O'Connor said.

"We went from the old-time buggy stage to the 20th, no, 21st century, in one year."

The price paid for rapid progress has manifested itself in each of the major construction projects. Project 80s has been a learning experience for municipal administrators who have now seen the gamut of construction lapses.

Among the problems faced by the Capital Projects Office:

- Structural defects and design problems have plagued the Z.J. Loussac Headquarters Library for two years. The building was scheduled to open July 1985 and likely will not have its first book checked out until this fall.
- Cost overruns, problems with architects and escalating building costs apparently will send the Performing Arts Center well over its \$55 million budget



This map shows locations of Project 80s facilities throughout the Anchorage area

and — like the library — it may only be partially completed.

• The Sullivan Arena, unpopular among some residents for its looks, acoustics and inadequate parking, also has had its share of problems. A lawsuit settled out of court for some \$460,000 and an ice rink leaking freon can be counted as strikes against the arena.

• When asbestos was found in the museum's ceiling, construction there was held up for nearly a year, adding about \$500,000 to the project's cost.

"In the long run those things are minor," Quinn said. "In the long term, you will have a group of buildings that will change the character of this community."

Even after many of the projects have been built and their problems long since corrected, the unprecedented building program still has its critics.

Among the strongest objections to Project 80s was the anticipated operations costs — still a major point of contention among local politicians.

The 140,000-square-foot head-

quarters library, which will cost more than \$41 million to build, will need an additional \$10 million a year to operate and maintain.

That represents nearly 5 percent of the municipality's \$211 million annual operating budget. Because the library is a service and not a revenue producer, the burden of paying for the services falls on the taxpayers.

However, Sullivan said because of how the major Project 80s facilities have been paid for, Anchorage is getting off cheap.

Unlike other cities with major building projects, Anchorage had state grants which allowed it to pay cash. No bonds were sold; no debts are owed on any of the major Project 80s facilities.

"When they talk about operation and maintenance costs, they overlook the fact that we have no debt service on these buildings," Sullivan said. "Any other community in the United States building the type of facilities we have has had to float bonds and they have had to pay the principal, the interest, and the 'O and M' costs."

"We can have facilities here with just the O and M costs, no debt service," he said.

One of the facilities, the sports arena, named for Sullivan, is the only building not expected to cost the city any money. A slight operating profit for 1985 is predicted when the books are audited.

The Egan center costs Anchorage about \$400,000 annually to subsidize.

By 1982, cost overruns on Project 80s totalled some \$17 million. It is uncertain how high the overruns will total when all the projects are completed.

Plans for three of the major projects — the library, the Performing Arts Center and the Bartlett High pool — will have to be scaled back because of problems and escalating costs. It is uncertain how this will be done.

The most uncertain of all the Project 80s facilities, the Bartlett swimming pool, is still in the design stage. Officials won't know how complex a facility they will be able to build until bids for construction are turned in.

Officials axing center's extras

by Ron Gluckman
and Mitch Lipka
Times Writers

Faced with cost overruns of as much as \$8 million at the Performing Arts Center, city officials are scrambling to bring the project back within its \$55 million budget.

The budget ax already has chopped some of the artistic amenities from the center in a cost-cutting campaign that recalls the recent redesign of the uncompleted Z.J. Loussac Headquarters Library.

Only a month ago, The Anchorage Times reported severe problems at the library, which is about \$4 million over its \$41.6 million budget.

An engineering review of the library showed the building was not structurally sound. Delays attributed to alleged mismanagement by the project's architect and additional work needed to reinforce the building put the library over budget and forced the municipality to scale back the project.

Instead of three elevators, the library will open with one. An 8,000-square-foot section of the library has been walled off until money is available to furnish the room, city officials have said.

City officials feel they have more room to adjust to projected cost overruns at the uncompleted Performing Arts Center downtown because they have caught the problems at an earlier stage of construction.

A new construction estimate on the center forecasts that the remaining work would cost up to \$8 million more than is available. City officials believe adjustments can be made that will not significantly downgrade the project.

Plans for porcelain enamel panels on the sides of the building have been replaced with the option of less expensive plaster matting. The roofing will be metal shingles instead of metal sheets. Fiberglass or painted plaster may replace shiny metal in other portions of the building.

Norman Pfeiffer, one of the architects of the center, said the switch in building materials may save the municipality as much as \$2 million to \$3 million.

Further cost-cutting still may be required, but Pfeiffer said the city has decided against any immediate action that would "impact the aesthetics of the building or the groups that use it."

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