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From our archives: Protesters block I-70 over minority hiring

By Ken Leiser and Paul Hampel Jul 12, 2015

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Protesters shut down Interstate 70 near downtown on July 12, 1999, to protest a lack of minority contractors working on the interstate rebuilding project. Post-Dispatch photo

Editor's note: On July 12, 1999, protesters led by the Rev. Al Sharpton blocked Interstate 70 near downtown St. Louis to protest the lack of minority contractors on construction jobs. This article first was published on July 13, 1999.

Nearly 300 protesters seeking more highway construction contracts and jobs for African-Americans descended on Interstate 70 in north St. Louis on Monday, closing it in both directions for part of the morning rush hour.

But within hours of the protest, two major highway construction firms on the I-70 rebuilding project released the outline of a soured agreement they thought they had reached Sunday night to avert the shutdown. The eastbound lanes into downtown St. Louis were closed for nearly an hour at Goodfellow Boulevard during the blockade; westbound lanes were shut down for about 40 minutes.

Police arrested 125 demonstrators, including three juveniles. No injuries were reported in the peaceful demonstration that fanned out across all five lanes of I-70 shortly before 6:30 a.m.

"No justice, no peace!" shouted James Buford, head of the St. Louis Urban League, as he sat with other protesters in the middle of the interstate.

While organizers had threatened to mobilize up to 10,000 protesters for Monday morning's blockade, they accomplished their goal with a fraction of that number.

William Whitcomb, a mediator for the U.S. Department of Justice, said there were 900 people on hand -- many of them appeared to be onlookers -- but that only 250 to 300 stepped onto the highway.

St. Louis Police Chief Ron Henderson said his department also fulfilled its mission.

"Our main goal was twofold, " he said. "One was to make sure that nobody was injured. We were really concerned about safety. Second, we wanted to do this in a professional, orderly manner. Thus far, it looks like there was cooperation."

Among those arrested were Buford; the Rev. Al Sharpton of New York; state Sen. J.B. "Jet" Banks, D-St. Louis; and state Rep. Paula Carter, D-St. Louis.

The protesters were booked on charges of impeding the flow of traffic and failure to obey a police officer. A police spokesman said Monday afternoon that all were released within a few hours.

Organizers were to meet after a rally at All Saints Episcopal Church on Monday night to set a timetable for possible future blockades.

Talks involving minority contractors and highway officials were set to resume as early as today.

"We will not rule out further closures, " said John Bordeaux of the St. Louis branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Traffic on I-170, I-270 and Highway 40 (Interstate 64) was heavier than normal during the shutdown.

Patrol officers closed eastbound I-70 after the demonstration began and diverted that traffic onto I-170. The off-ramp from the Poplar Street Bridge to I-70 also was closed during the protest.

Dozens of I-70 commuters, however, found themselves stuck in traffic at the protest site.

"They're upset that they can't get work, but I can't get to work, " fumed motorist Stacy Nunley, a file clerk at the National Archives and Records Administration in St. Louis.

"I'm all for equal opportunity. I really support that. But I think they can find a better way to do this."

Motorist Ken Voelkerding of Swansea said the half-hour delay didn't bother him. The Boeing employee was taking care of some work by cellular phone.

"Let them do their thing, " he said. "I am still going to go to work and not let it bother me."

Organizers of the protest want more black workers and minority-owned firms working on the reconstruction projects along a six-mile stretch of I-70.

State highway officials say 14 percent of the construction budget is going to minority firms. Federal law requires at least 10 percent.

MO-KAN, a group that assists minority subcontractors in the area, is demanding that 25 percent of the contract dollars go to minority firms and 35 percent of the construction jobs go to minorities.

Two of the chief contractors on the job - KCI Construction Co. and Millstone Bangert Inc. - said they were surprised by the highway closure because they believed they had reached a deal Sunday night.

That proposal would voluntarily increase minority subcontract work on the two companies' existing I-70 contracts by \$500,000.

Thom Kuhn of Millstone Bangert said the commitment would raise the minority participation on its \$19 million project to 19 percent.

Because the contracts already have been signed, he said, "We didn't have to do any of this. For the good of the community . . . it seemed like the right thing to do."

The Rev. B.T. Rice, president of the St. Louis Metropolitan Clergy Coalition, said he believed the contractors' offer was a good foundation for a final compromise.

"We need jobs, " Rice said. "I'm more concerned about building that highway than blocking the highway."

Eddie Hasan of MO-KAN said the sticking point to the agreement with the contractors was their reluctance to agree to a demand that at least 25 percent of the work force be minority.

"That's really what was killing the deal, " Hasan said.

A spokesman for Gov. Mel Carnahan said the administration also was disappointed that the protest went forward because it appeared a deal was in hand Sunday.

Protesters began assembling on the Goodfellow overpass before dawn Monday. Their number included doctors and dock hands, counselors and construction workers.

Gerald Squalls, 35, held the small hands of his 2-year-old son, Gerald Ray Jr., and 4-year-old daughter, Kianna Rae.

"They don't understand, " said Squalls, a railroad conductor. "But when they're older, I'll tell them why and remind them they were here for this event."

Squall's children are not likely to forget the demonstration. When their father, grandmother and aunt were arrested, Gerald Ray Jr. and Kianna Rae rode along in the sheriff's bus to the workhouse on Hall Street.

Sharpton sipped coffee inside a nearby service station before the sit-down demonstration. He checked his watch. It was 6 a.m. Sharpton brushed a fleck of dust from the lapel of his blue suit.

"I get dressed up for jail, " he said.

As the sun rose over Goodfellow Boulevard, the first 100 demonstrators formed into ranks of four abreast.

Sgt. Jerry Dodson of the St. Louis police stood near a patrol car and shook his head.

"I don't really want to be here, " he said.

Dodson said he wished he could be with his nephew, Robert Dodson, a white St. Louis police officer charged with second-degree murder in the death of a black burglary suspect. Robert Dodson was in court for a preliminary hearing Monday.

"I just hope (the protest) ends peacefully and quickly, " Jerry Dodson said.

At 6:24 a.m., the command to "Move forward!" roared from a bullhorn.

James Redd, 49, stood erect in the front ranks as protesters locked arms and lurched forward.

"I'm anxious, " said Redd, of University City. "But I'm not afraid."

The crowd split - half heading for the eastbound on-ramp, the other half strolling, singing and shouting as they approached the westbound lanes.

Their timing was impeccable. As the crowds neared the roadway, vehicles driven by fellow protesters slowed to a crawl on I-70, stopping traffic behind them. The protesters safely strolled onto the road and sat down.

They had shut down the interstate.
