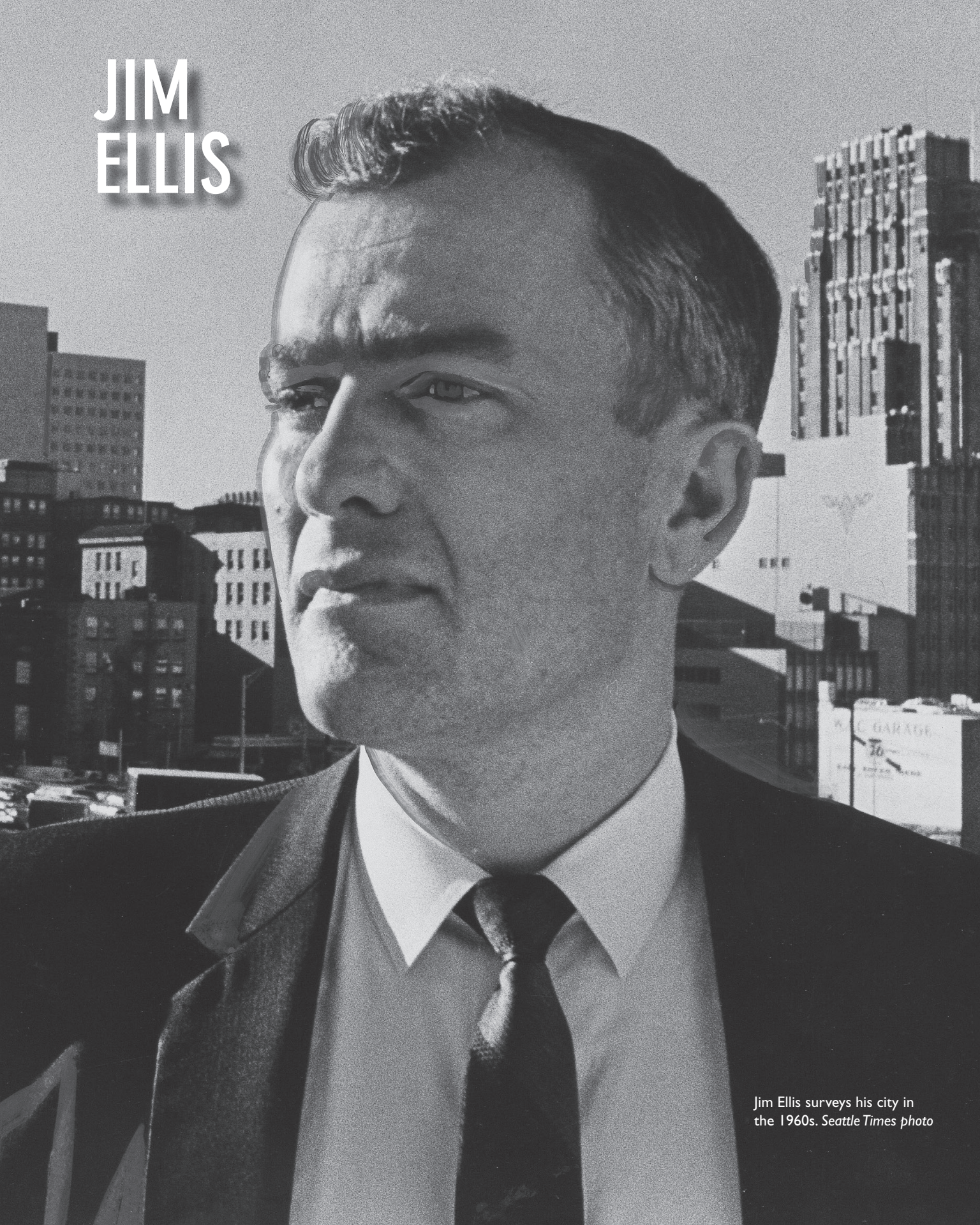
JIM ELLIS



Jim Ellis surveys his city in the 1960s. *Seattle Times photo*

"Doing something extra"

From a hilltop rambler he says cost "an arm and a leg to build—$30,000!"—in the early 1950s, Jim Ellis surveyed Lake Washington shimmering in the spring sunshine and reflected on his eventful life. It was 2010. His visitor complained that driving from Olympia to Seattle took two hours. "It's going to get worse before it gets better," Ellis said, shaking his head.

It's not as if he didn't warn us.

The Space Needle and Monorail put Seattle on the cover of *LIFE* and a host of other periodicals in 1962. "But when the world's fair was over we weren't ready for 1970, let alone Century 21," the visionary civic activist said.

It was Ellis who mobilized a task force of young Seattleites in 1958 to rescue Lake Washington from the run-off of suburban sprawl—20 million gallons a day of raw and partially treated sewage.

His second act was an omnibus 1968 bond issue called Forward Thrust. It funded parks and recreation projects, sewer and arterial highway improvements and a sports stadium that, after some fits and starts, made Seattle a major-league city. The Forward Thrust proposition that failed twice—rapid transit—haunts Seattle a half century later. "Freeway" has become an oxymoron.

In 1968, Ellis worried that King County—some dubbed it "Pugetopolis"—was becoming "lemming-like …masses of self-centered people" marching "sightless into a sea of blinking signs and tin cans."

"When we created Metro to clean up the lake, they called it 'a blend of Big Brother and Communism,' " Ellis said. "Forward Thrust was dismissed as 'the full employment act for bond attorneys,' namely me and my law firm. If you listen to the naysayers you'll never get anything done. I've always liked to get things done."

HE'S 97 NOW, in the sunset of a life well lived. Forward Thrust was a half century ago. His autobiography—binders filled with fastidiously annotated transcripts—remains unfinished. But his legacy is secure, his prescience remarkable.

There was a time, however, when Jim Ellis was "so consumed by grief, guilt and anger" over the death of his brother, Bob, an Army infantryman during World War II, that

he didn't know if life was worth living.

Ellis handed his visitor a photo of a log cabin the brothers built in the summer of 1937. "My father, who loved the outdoors, bought a piece of property along the Raging River in the Cascade foothills. He decided it would be a good lesson in self-sufficiency for Bob and me to build a cabin—all by ourselves. I was 15 years old; Bob was 13. Our kid brother, John, was only 8, so he stayed home. Our father dropped us off with our two dogs, food, tools and tents and said, 'Go to it.' By the time school started, we had a pretty decent cabin. We called it 'Hermit Heaven.' It was a wonderful learning experience."

Another photo features Bob. He's taller than Jim; otherwise they might have passed for twins. They were that close, too.

When Pfc. Robert L. Ellis's life ended at 22 in Germany just as the Allies were strangling the Third Reich, Jim was a meteorologist at an Army Air Forces base in Idaho. "I was devastated," Ellis said, his voice thick with emotion. He walked over to the windows and gazed out on the lake. He has told this story innumerable times because it's therapeutic, so central to the person he became. But each time, when the emotion wells up, it's 1945 all over again. "Mary Lou and I were newlyweds, but I told her I wanted to volunteer for combat duty. She shook me by the shoulders and told me I had to get hold of myself. Did I want to try and get myself killed to make up for Bob's death? What would that accomplish? 'Why not make your life count for his?' she said. She was right. I got hold of myself and decided I would do something extra in my life to try and make the world better."

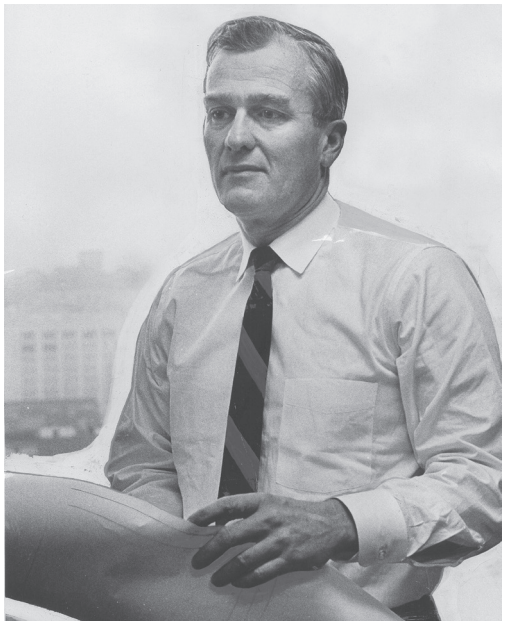
After law school at the University of Washington, he set out to do just that.

FORMER governor and U.S. senator Dan Evans, then a young civil engineer, remembers the first time he saw Jim Ellis in action, doing something extra: "In 1953, when I plunged into civic life, Seattle's Municipal League was infused with the energy of young veterans with college degrees. Jim, a graduate of Yale, was the League's 32-year-old attorney. Wiry, with intense eyes and a disarming smile, Jim isn't very big, yet he is one of the most persuasive human beings I've ever known. His vision for a model community—clean air and water, greenbelts, rapid transit, parks and recreation accessible to all—was punctuated by painstaking preparation. Jim put in so much work ahead of time that

By the late 1950s parts of Lake Washington were unsafe for swimming. This photo from 1958 was part of the campaign to create the Municipality of Metropolitan Seattle ("Metro") to oversee sewage treatment. *Seattle Municipal Archives*

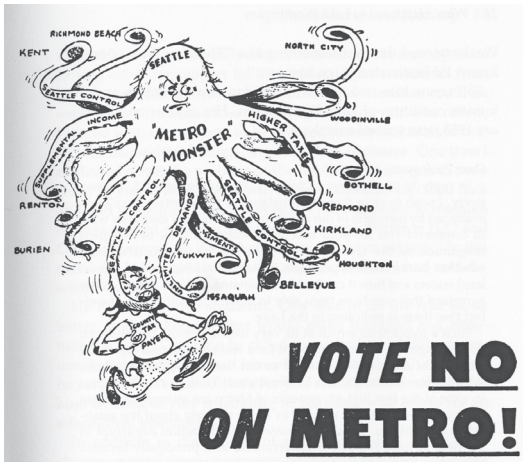
he knew the answers before you came up with the questions. He is the greatest civic activist in Seattle history."

In the 1950s, long before there were any federal environmental programs, one of the biggest challenges to cleaning up Lake Washington—famously once posted with "No Swimming" signs—was convincing all the municipalities to cooperate. Emmett Watson, the popular *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* columnist, put it this way: "One of the charms of democracy—and one of its exasperations—is that each town council, each committee, each city government, is an ego unto itself." Ellis sent his troops "out on the revival circuit to try and open a lot of closed-door minds."



Ellis during the Metro campaign. *Seattle Times photo*

In 1956, future U.S. senator Slade Gorton was a Columbia Law School graduate fresh from a stint in the Air Force. He signed on as a member of the Municipal League's speakers' bureau, the Town Criers, and volunteered to make the rounds of service clubs in the suburbs. It was a tough sell that taught him a lot about retail politics. "Jim preached that regional problems required regional solutions," Gorton remembers. "Seattle was going to vote for Metro. Everyone knew that, but there was a lot of opposition outside the city—in Renton, Redmond, Issaquah and the other suburbs, not to mention rural King County. I got to go to places where the vote was going to be five- or six-to-one against it." Opponents styled the "Metro Monster" as an octopus whose tentacles would strangle any opposition to "Seattle rule and domination."



Opponents of Metro portrayed the plan as an octopus that would strangle any opposition to "Seattle rule and domination." *Seattle Municipal Archives*

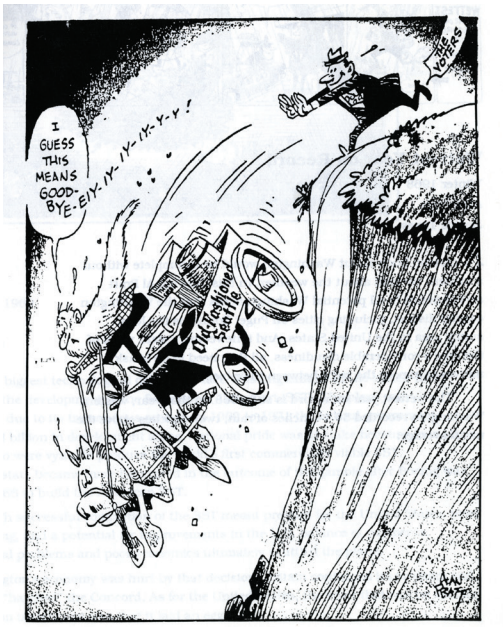
The plan was scuttled by suburban voters in March of 1958. So Ellis shrewdly pulled back the boundaries here and there to jettison the losing precincts. The revised plan was resoundingly approved in a second vote that September.

W.T. Edmondson, the internationally respected zoology professor at the University of Washington, wrote that Ellis seemed "to have had a knack of bringing out the best in everybody." Ellis, characteristically modest, has always said the title of his book will be *Friends Along the Way*—"about all the people who didn't get credit for all this stuff."

"BY 1965 forecasters were predicting that King County's population might double to two million in 20 years," historian William H. Mullins wrote in a study of the Forward Thrust campaign. "The most optimistic economists thought the state could gain 60,000 jobs every year, most of them along the newly completed segment of Interstate 5 running between Tacoma and Everett through Seattle. Ellis fretted that the region was doing little to prepare for growth."

Ellis picked Seattle's Downtown Rotary Club, which met at the landmark Olympic Hotel, as the venue for his Forward Thrust speech on November 3, 1965, because it featured 350 of the city's movers and shakers—"people who had been in the trenches on Metro and the World's Fair."

The story spotlighting his speech was splashed above the fold on the front page of that night's *Seattle Times*. **"ELLIS SEES 'GOLDEN AGE' "** the headline read. If Seattle and King County united "in a total effort" they could usher in a "golden age" of livability within a decade, Ellis told the club. Rapid transit, the cornerstone of his plan, would reduce air pollution, preserve the city's vital core and obviate the need for intrusive freeways. "If sole reliance is placed on existing freeway lanes, congestion will throttle growth," he warned. The only way to permit open space in the heart of the city and meet peak-hour transportation demands, Ellis said, would be to construct high-rise structures and non-polluting "electric" rapid-transit lines. A major league sports stadium could attract professional baseball and football franchises, while a "world trade center" would anchor Seattle's position as the hub of Pacific Rim trade. New parks, plazas, greenbelts and community centers would make for a more livable city. Likewise, more low-income housing, lest rising property values make city living too expensive for "average" folks, including newlyweds and retirees. It was also crucial to keep "urban sprawl from swallow-



Al Pratt's opinion page cartoon for The Seattle Times features a neat visual pun: The voters are thrusting "old-fashioned Seattle" over a cliff.

A bumper sticker issued by the opponents. *Seattle Municipal Archives*

ing the countryside."

Achieving all that would require a "Forward Thrust Committee" of 100 volunteers with "World's Fair zip," Ellis declared, arms outstretched for emphasis. "Cooperation without rivalry will have to be unstintingly given by public officials."

The next day, *Times* columnist Walt Woodward observed that "one who does not know Ellis might be tempted to ask what brand of hashish this 43-year-old attorney smokes. After all… $200 million in bonding authority!? How can this be done?" Anyone who did know Ellis understood, however, that this "bold new challenge to the metropolitan area he loves so well and serves so faithfully is not an idle pipe dream," Woodward added.

The speech was also big news in the *Post-Intelligencer*. Thousands of free copies were distributed. Ellis appeared on TV and hosted call-in radio shows. "That's all everyone talked about," said John Spellman, a Forward Thrust volunteer who went on to become county executive and governor. Eddie Carlson, the live-wire hotel executive who had headed the World's Fair Commission, enlisted on the spot, as did Mayor Dorm Braman, an exponent of rapid transit. Mullins wrote that Forward Thrust:

> [H]eralded a new cycle of urban reform that blossomed in the 1970s. Ellis's eagerness to temper the ill effects of untrammeled growth reflected the values of "quality-of-life liberals" who were just emerging throughout the United States, especially in the West. According to the urban historian Carl Abbott, "These middle-class city people worried that breakneck development was fouling the air, eating up open space, [and] sacrificing neighborhoods to the automobile." President Lyndon Johnson, commenting on beautification and open space in 1965, was speaking the language of Forward Thrust when he asserted, "We must restore what has been destroyed and salvage the beauty and charm of our cities."

Ellis worked 80-hour weeks for 18 months and inspired 40,000 man-hours of donated labor from the region's brightest people. "It was invigorating to be part of such an amazing brain trust," Spellman said. "With his track record, personality and speaking ability, only Jim Ellis could have galvanized support for a plan that ambitious."

Governor Evans and Gorton, who was then the House majority leader, shepherded the Forward Thrust enabling legislation through the Legislature and onto the ballot.

A typical home in greater Seattle was valued at $20,000 in 1968 ($146,000 in 2018

dollars). The total local cost for the whole Forward Thrust package, $820 million, amounted to $49 a year for a home owner in Seattle, $36 for someone in the suburbs and $17.50 outside the Metro boundaries. Factoring in state and federal matching funds, King County stood to achieve improvements worth nearly $2 billion. Opponents branded Forward Thrust the "greatest conceivable monument to socialism ever offered in our community" and "a death chant for democracy."

On election eve, Emmett Watson warned: "The Seattle of today, the one we mean when we say 'keep it as it is,' is not long for this century. The Seattle we know will change—more people, clogged freeways, overcrowded parks and beaches; less room, more problems. …Puget Sound no longer is a remote, cozy corner, comfortably isolated against the growth that afflicts us all. This place is, literally, going to burst its seams within our lifetime. Nothing is more certain." It was Seattle's "Day of Decision," Watson said.

A Forward Thrust button. *John Hughes Collection*

On February 13, 1968, voters authorized $40 million for a multipurpose stadium, $118 million for parks and recreation, $81 million for arterials, $70 million for sewer projects, $12 million for neighborhood improvements and $6 million for a youth service center. The major casualty was rapid transit. With the matching funds, the measure would have parlayed $385 million in local bonds into a total of $1.15 billion. Like the other proposals, it needed a 60 percent mandate and received barely a simple majority. Gorton calls it "the stupidest 'no' vote the people of Seattle ever cast." Mayor Braman, who in 1969 joined the Nixon administration as Assistant Secretary of Transportation, was glummer yet, predicting there would be "tragic results."

FORWARD THRUST'S second chance lurched into reverse in 1970. The "Boeing Bust" spelled big trouble in a countywide special election on May 19. The region's prime employer had jettisoned more than 50,000 jobs since 1968. Ellis, Evans and Spellman urged voters to consider both the immediate and long-term benefits: sorely needed jobs; nearly $900 million in federal funding to relieve gridlock; storm-water control projects, new

A Forward Thrust urban arterial project gets under way. *Washington State Archives*

community centers and libraries and public-safety projects.

All four Forward Thrust proposals were rejected, with only 46 percent supporting the public transit proposal. Wrangling over a site for the multipurpose stadium approved in 1968 added to the angst. Though the stadium funds were safe, the loss of the Seattle Pilots to Milwaukee, coupled with the Boeing layoffs, cast doubt on Forward Thrust's promises. Nearly 61 percent of the voters rejected the Seattle Center as a domed stadium site. (Ellis was disappointed that the siting issue appeared on the same ballot. It was John Spellman's persistence that saw the "Kingdome" through to completion in 1976.)

Ellis was crestfallen, especially over the failure of rapid transit. "Despite herculean efforts he and his group were not able to convince homeowners that an easier commute in 10 or 15 years was worth the added taxes," William H. Mullins writes.

"No campaign could have done better," Ellis told several hundred disappointed Forward Thrust volunteers.

"People were just scared," Ellis said in 2010. "Fifty-thousand people had left Seattle. It was just night and day between 1968 and 1970." Gallingly, the federal mass-transit funds Ellis had prodded Senator Warren Magnuson to earmark for King County were snapped up by Atlanta, "and they built a beautiful light rail system!" Ellis said, all but slapping himself on the forehead.

Ellis in the 1980s. *Seattle P-I/MOHAI photo*

Undaunted, as usual, Ellis went on to launch a successful campaign for farmlands preservation; championed the Washington State Convention & Trade Center, and in 1991 helped spearhead the Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust that created a pristine corridor across the Cascades along Interstate 90. John W. Ellis, who became one of the state's most influential business and civic leaders—he played a key role in building the Seattle Mariners franchise—says his brother taught him the importance of stepping up to the plate.

"Jim believes people live on by the things they do for others," Mary Lou Ellis once said, recalling that her husband had persevered with Forward Thrust in 1970 despite an ulcer attack that hospitalized him for nearly a month. "He has to do something public-spirited or he'd burn up inside."

Jim was listening intently to his high school sweetheart. "When you accept responsibility," he said, jaw set, "you've got to come through. You can't back out. Or if you're worth a damn, you don't back out."

"He never backed out," Slade Gorton observes. "Who accomplished more in King County in the 20th century to improve the quality of our lives?"

John C. Hughes
Legacy Washington
Office of the Secretary of State

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"He never backed out," Gorton to author, 3-24-2018

1968: The Year That Rocked Washington looks back at 1968 and its impact on Washington state through the stories of some remarkable people who lived through it. On college campuses, the campaign trail and evergreen peaks, Washingtonians were spurred to action. It was the year when Vietnam, civil rights, women's liberation and conservation coalesced—the year when tragedy led the 6 o'clock news with numbing regularity. 1968 changed us in ways still rippling through our society a half century later. *1968: The Year That Rocked Washington* features a collection of online stories and an exhibit at the Washington State Capitol in the fall of 2018. Legacy Washington documents the activism and aftershocks of a landmark year in world history. www.sos.wa.gov/legacy/sixty-eight/