

Beltway comes full circle

Key Bridge opens at 10 A.M. today

The Francis Scott Key Bridge—the long-awaited crossing of Baltimore's Outer Harbor—is scheduled to open to traffic this morning at 10 o'clock.

With the opening of the toll bridge and its approach roads, the Baltimore Beltway—on which construction began 23 years ago—will come full circle, ringing the heart of the metropolitan area with motorways of superhuman scale.

The new bridge, 1.6 miles long, soars 185 feet above mean high water from Hawkins Point in Baltimore city to Sollers Point in Baltimore county, arching over the waters of the Patapsco River just north of the tiny island bastion of Fort Carroll.

In every direction from the harbor span lie dramatic vistas of the Port of Baltimore—of the huge Dundalk Marine Terminal and Bethlehem Steel's giant Sparrows Point plant, of the Chessie System's Curtis Bay yards and the Penn Central's Canton yards, and, far beyond, of the downtown skyline to the north and the open waters of the Chesapeake Bay to the south.

The new route created by the bridge and its 8.7 miles of approach road will cut by a third the distance that trucks bearing cargoes too bulky or too dangerous for the Harbor Tunnel must traverse in skirting the city's heart as they make their way along the principal trucking routes of the Atlantic seaboard.

The bridge will also link—with another and more direct route than the tunnel affords—the densely populated working-class neighborhoods and industrial centers that lie at both ends of the harbor crossing.

It will open to high-speed heavy trucking the prime industrial land of Anne

Arundel county's largely undeveloped Marley Neck.

And for other motorists, those passing the city headed north and south, the bridge will offer a third choice to supplement the tunnel route and the western passage around the Beltway.

Built at a cost of \$141 million and financed by revenue bonds of the Maryland Transportation Authority, the bridge has been under construction since early 1973; the approach roads, several years longer. Opening of the new span to traffic comes nearly a year behind the construction schedule.

Tolls—at 75 cents a trip for passenger automobiles and 50 cents an axle for trucks, identical to those for the Harbor Tunnel—will defray the debt service on the bonds. Commuter tickets bought at either harbor crossing will be honored at both.

Until 1970, highway planners intended for the new bridge's site a second tunnel beneath the harbor—a role that will be played by Interstate 95's crossing at Fort McHenry, scheduled for completion by 1982.

One of the more unusual features of the beltway's final segment is the road's crossing of Curtis Creek. There, just downstream from the U.S. Coast Guard's Curtis Bay yard, a drawbridge spans the creek.

A half-dozen or more times a year, according to state transportation department spokesmen, the span must be opened for passage of a Coast Guard cutter beneath the beltway, halting traffic on the artery for 10 or 15 minutes.

The Key Bridge, spanning the Patapsco, is said to be the longest three-span, continuous steel, through-truss bridge in the United States.