

THE HIGHWAY REMOVAL AND RECONNECTION MOVEMENT

REFLECTS COMMENTS BY FORMER TRANSPORTATION SECRETARY ANTHONY FOXX, INTERVIEWED MAY 2020

Evans Paull
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Two miles of the highway formerly known as Robert Moses Parkway in Niagara, New York are being removed so that residents and visitors can reconnect with the Niagara gorge. Mayor Paul Dyster is looking at the project as an economic generator, saying, "With easy access to new hiking and biking trails and an expanded gorge-side park, the North End, after completion of the parkway project, will instantly become a magnet for investment and new home ownership." The symbolism of removing the "Robert Moses Parkway" really needs no explanation.

This paper was originally a sub-section in my book, *Stop the Road, Stories from the Trenches of Baltimore's Road Wars*, Boyle and Dalton, September 2022. It was edited out but is now expanded and posted on my website as a stand-alone paper, while also acting as a supplement to the book, as well as a companion piece to my PowerPoint presentation at the August 2022 National Brownfields Conference, "Rethinking Highways."

Communities all across the country are reevaluating highways built decades ago that are now regarded as detrimental to other community objectives. You could summarize this by saying that many communities made decisions that were overly influenced by the lure of federal 90-10 money and the prevalent attitudes of that time, a period when engineers promised to make cities competitive with suburban growth areas by ramming expressways through the heart of the city. Many of those cities now regret those decisions as modern-day urban development thinking reflects the values of place-making, with walkable communities and complete streets representing how we want our cities to look and feel.

As Baltimore's highway fighters phrased it back in the day, we want "cities that are to live in, not to drive through."

The new federal [Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program](#) (a 1.0 billion carve-out from the Biden Infrastructure commitment) is a shadow of the \$20 billion proposed, but it is serving to refocus attention on re-thinking urban highways.

Most of these highway teardowns and reconnections fall into three typologies: 1) highways that unfairly targeted minority neighborhoods, with a result that formerly cohesive and solid but poor neighborhoods were bisected or even wiped out; 2) highways that separated the waterfront from neighborhoods and/or downtowns; and 3) Inner loops and highways that divided downtown from neighborhoods with a result that downtown investment and/or neighborhood renewal was constrained.

In my 2020 interview with Anthony Foxx, Obama's Transportation Secretary, I asked if he was able to advance projects that he regarded as good examples of each these three typologies. His responses are included in each sub-section, below.

HISTORIC INEQUITIES

The first typology in the highway removal and reconnection movement is highways that bisected or eliminated lower income and disadvantaged/African American/minority neighborhoods. The original wording of Biden's Reconnecting Communities proposal focused on these historic inequities. The adopted program is broader than that, but the criteria still favor "facilities that are located in underserved, overburdened, or disadvantaged communities."

Baltimore

Baltimore was guilty in this typology not once, not twice, actually for three neighborhoods: [Harlem Park/Highway to Nowhere](#), Rosemont, and Sharp-Leadenhall, all covered in great detail in the book. The Highway to Nowhere (Franklin-Mulberry corridor) is a particularly egregious example because the highway was built one year *after* the adjoining Leakin Park segment was stopped due to a court injunction. The city never went back to court – never attempted to have the injunction removed, leaving the Franklin-Mulberry corridor as, not just an embarrassing unconnected piece of the Interstate System, but also as a symbol of the city's unfairness to and disregard of its Black residents.

However, Baltimore also has a lot of company in the category of what one commentator described as "urban renewal highways."

Pittsburgh I-579 cap

I asked Secretary Foxx if there were instructive examples from his stint as Secretary of Transportation. Foxx pointed toward Pittsburgh where, "We were able to cap a freeway... that reconnects the community that had been bisected by a freeway." This refers to the I-579/Crosstown Boulevard Cap Project, meant to reconnect the Hill District with downtown jobs and education services. The cap over a depressed section of the expressway will provide "pedestrian and bicycle pathways that will connect to a transit and free subway system in Downtown." The expressway and related urban renewal projects carried out in the 1950s had nearly wiped out the Lower Hill district, which is now poised for redevelopment by the Pittsburgh Penguins. More about the Boulevard Cap project [here](#).

Oakland - Mandela Parkway

One of the projects that many cities would like to emulate is Oakland's decision to eliminate 1.3 miles of the Cypress Expressway, replacing it with the community-friendly Mandela Parkway. This was another Bay Area project where the 1989 earthquake (in this case destroying the Cypress Expressway) provided an opportunity to rethink the highway. The project is summarized as follows:

The \$13 million, 1.3-mile Mandela Parkway was the catalyst in this reconstruction effort, uniting for pedestrians the two sides of West Oakland. The parkway boasts many amenities that support

walkable, healthy communities including: 68 species of trees, two bike lanes, walking paths, grass lawns, and acorn shaped light fixtures, touching on the local nature of the city.

For more detail, see [this description and history](#).

Chattanooga/Riverfront Parkway

The Highland Park neighborhood has benefited from two related projects. Riverfront Parkway (a one-way pair) was converted to the two-way Martin Luther King Boulevard in the early 2000s. A follow-up project further reduces auto lanes and includes bike lanes, described [here](#) and [here](#).

Detroit/I-375

Detroit's Black Bottom neighborhood, once the center of the city's Black culture, was almost completely razed for urban renewal and to make way for I-375, a one-mile-long connector between I-75 and Jefferson Avenue. Now, the highway is slated for removal and replacement as a boulevard. More [here](#) and [here](#).

More communities attempting to correct historic inequities:

- [I-40 cap project in Nashville](#)
- [New Orleans/Claibourne Ave](#)
- [St. Paul/Re-Connecting Rondo](#)

WATERFRONT

Baltimore

Much of [Stop the Road](#) is devoted to telling the story-behind-the-story of how Baltimore's ragtag band of neighborhood activists, preservationists, and environmentalists managed to overthrow the city's leadership, thereby saving the historic waterfront communities of Fell's Point, Federal Hill, and Canton. One website post introduces readers to [Bob Eney](#), the Fell's Pointer who can "turn a slum landlord into a preservationist," and was instrumental in stopping the I-83 connector.

In my interview with Foxx he commented that, "Yes, I think it was a terrible mistake to route freeways along these waterways... [Many communities were] not as successful as Baltimore was in [preventing]... a freeway alongside the waterfront."

Seattle Viaduct Project

Foxx's top example of a successful waterfront reconnection project was the Seattle Viaduct project, which he described as, "Seattle is probably the best example of something that was done in a restorative way... They've now buried the freeway that runs along the waterfront [in a tunnel], and they've opened up that space... It's one of those projects that I'm very proud of."

The Seattle Viaduct is a \$3.3 billion project that relocates a two-mile stretch of SR 99 from an overhead viaduct to an underground tunnel, thereby reconnecting downtown Seattle to the waterfront. The tunnel opened in 2019 with much fanfare. This, of course, was not accomplished so that Seattle's downtown offices could be supplied by barges loaded with computer supplies and paper. In the last 50 years the

collective thinking about highways and waterfronts has turned around so completely that Seattle, the State of Washington and US DOT were willing to spend over \$3 billion to re-connect the city and its waterfront. For more about the project: [here](#) and [here](#).

Philadelphia/Penn's Landing

Readers of [Stop the Road](#) may recall that Baltimore's Planning Director Larry Reich was drawing on his past experience in Philadelphia where I-95 separated Penn's Landing from the Delaware River. We now note that Philadelphia is attempting to rectify that error by building a lid over a depressed section of I-95 in order to reconnect the neighborhood to the riverfront. Readers might also remember that in Baltimore there was a proposal to build a three-block platform over what is now known as the [Highway to Nowhere](#) (one of a string of broken promises to the Harlem Park neighborhood). In 1969 that three-block lid would have cost \$5 million – Philadelphia's one block lid is costing \$225 million (heavily trimmed from the original estimate of \$1 billion). More about the Penn's Landing highway lid: [here](#), and [here](#).

San Francisco/Embarcadero

San Francisco was an early adopter of removing freeways to reconnect with waterfronts. One writer described the Embarcadero Freeway as "'Oppressive' does not begin to describe it." But now, he says, "Take a walk today on the 2 1/2-mile promenade between Fisherman's Wharf on the north and China Basin on the south, and it's hard to believe that an elevated freeway ever scarred the open air." San Francisco's decision to not rebuild the Embarcadero after the San Francisco earthquake is often cited by teardown proponents because the predicted traffic nightmares did not happen, but the predicted renewal of the waterfront did. More about Embarcadero [here](#) and [here](#).

More waterfronts reconnected

- Portland, another early adopter, removed Harbor Drive in the mid-1970s and replaced it with by Tom McCall Park, which now accommodates numerous summer festivals. See [this article](#).
- Milwaukee removed the [Park East Freeway to reconnect downtown and Riverwalk](#).
- Trenton New Jersey masterplan calls for [replacing I-29 with an urban boulevard](#) to reconnect the downtown area to the waterfront.
- in Boston the [\\$17 billion Big Dig project](#) was carried out partly to reconnect with the waterfront.
- In [Providence I-195 was relocated](#).

The list goes on.

All these highways were planned when the working waterfront was ebbing away but almost no one foresaw the alternative vision of the waterfront as a valuable amenity. Thankfully, Baltimore is not among the cities faced with the overwhelming and sometimes impossible task of relocating superhighways carried out before anyone understood a completely different potential for the waterfront.

DOWNTOWN INNER RINGS/BARRIERS BETWEEN DOWNTOWN AND NEIGHBORHOODS

Baltimore

The third typology, highways that create barriers between downtown and neighborhoods, is one that Baltimore partly avoided on the west side of downtown by building MLK Boulevard instead of the earlier plan for an expressway, an option that was rejected largely due to the efforts of Road Wars unsung hero, [Tom Ward](#). However, on the eastside of downtown there have been calls to tear down the lower section of I-83 and make it a boulevard. No proposals have gotten very far, but the highway is viewed by many as holding back both the downtown and the neighborhood sides of the expressway.

Rochester

Again, circling back to Secretary Foxx for examples, he cited Rochester as a community where “we were able to deconstruct a portion of a freeway... as one of the early TIGER Grant Programs.” This refers to the removal of the “Inner Loop East” that divided downtown from the eastside neighborhoods of Park Avenue, Neighborhood of the Arts, Monroe Avenue, and Wadsworth Square. The project is substituting a narrower and slower speed boulevard, and the resulting development parcels are being strategically redeveloped with an eye toward knitting the communities back together with downtown districts. For more information is on the [city website](#).

Dallas/I-345 Downtown link to Deep Ellum

A grassroots advocacy group, [A New Dallas](#), is gaining traction in their campaign to dismantle or replace I-345, thereby reconnecting Deep Ellum to the downtown area, while opening up 245 acres of “currently underutilized land adjacent for more walkable, transit-focused development.” More [here](#) and [here](#).

Other downtown loops up for rethinking:

- [Kansas City/I-35 and I-70](#)
- [Oklahoma City boulevard replaced I-40](#).

The best single source for intelligence on all three typologies is the Congress for the New Urbanism: their [Highways to Boulevards](#) website, and their every-other-year publication of “[Freeways without Futures](#).”

E. Evans Paull

202-329-4282

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