

Highways to Boulevards

A FACT SHEET

The Movement

In the 20th Century, the American era of highway-building created sprawling freeways that cut huge swaths through our cities. Too often vibrant, diverse, and functioning neighborhoods were destroyed or isolated by their construction, devastating communities and economies alike. Today, many of these urban freeways are reaching the end of their lifespans—and their continuing purpose and worth is being called into question.

The Highways to Boulevards movement seeks to replace aging limited-access highways out of context with their urban surroundings with city streets and boulevards that include cars, but do not make them a priority. These streets serve a wider variety of users and act as places of commerce and gathering, as well as networks for transportation. Here are the benefits:

▶ A vibrant public realm

Few people enjoy walking underneath a highway, let alone spending time around it. By contrast, the streets and public spaces that can replace highways offer community members places to relax, shop, and enjoy

each other's company. Well-designed city streets foster a strong public life and contribute to civic character.

▶ Economic gains

When the Interstate system and other state highways first encroached on cities, they converted valuable land in the heart of downtowns and along waterfronts into clogged arteries of traffic that produced virtually no direct income for local economies. The removal of an urban highway creates the opportunity to reclaim part of its former right-of-way for development, which boosts a city's tax base, provides access to jobs, and increases household wealth along the corridor.

▶ A healthy environment

Freeways concentrate hazardous vehicle exhaust near residences, businesses, and schools. Many segments of urban highways run through the densest parts of cities, exposing exponentially more people exposed to toxic fumes and particulates from vehicle traffic. Known health risks from proximity to highways include increased rates of respiratory ailments and cardiovascular illnesses. Dispersing traffic across multiple streets instead of concentrating it on a highway keeps pollution in neighborhoods below a dangerous threshold.



San Francisco chose to remove the Embarcadero Freeway in 1991 to restore the city's access to its waterfront.

History

After the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, San Francisco chose to remove rather than reconstruct two of its damaged highways, the Embarcadero and Central Freeways. Traffic “armageddons” were predicted when they were closed, but failed to occur. Boulevards replaced the freeways instead, opening up the waterfront and uniting the city’s neighborhoods.

Recent developments

Since 2000, the pace of highways to boulevards projects has accelerated. To date, American cities have either replaced or committed to replace a freeway with more urban streets eighteen times. Those that have completed highways to boulevards projects have found their economies and tax bases rising and their urban fabric healing.

The diversity of cities undertaking these projects is also noteworthy. This is not a movement confined to any one geographic region, nor limited only to larger cities or those that are experiencing immense growth. Even small and mid-sized cities have opted to measure community progress and quality of life by a set of metrics other than travel time.



Rochester, NY began in 2017 to fill in its Inner Loop and restore the city’s urban fabric.

Highways to Boulevards projects completed:

- Harbor Drive**
Portland, OR (1974)
- Embarcadero Freeway**
San Francisco, CA (1991)
- Central Artery**
Boston, MA (1991)
- Central Freeway**
San Francisco, CA (1992)
- West Side Highway**
New York, NY (1996)
- Interstate 880**
Oakland, CA (1998)

- Park East Freeway**
Milwaukee, WI (2002)
- Riverfront Parkway**
Chattanooga, TN (2004)
- Interstate 195**
Providence, RI (2007)
- Sheridan Expressway**
New York, NY (2019)
- Interstate 395**
Washington, DC (2019)

Highways to Boulevards projects in-progress:

- Route 34/Oak Street Connector**
New Haven, CT (2010)

- Inner Loop**
Rochester, NY (2017)
- Robert Moses Parkway**
Niagara Falls, NY (2018)
- Alaska Way Viaduct**
Seattle, WA (2019)

Highway to Boulevards projects committed:

- McGrath Highway**
Somerville, MA (2013)
- Interstate 375**
Detroit, MI (2017)
- Interstate 81**
Syracuse, NY (2019)