



Four Principles for a Federal Highways to Boulevard Program

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Introduction

For many Americans, controlled-access highways are a regular part of their daily landscape. They take these high-speed roads for granted, with little consideration of how they were built, the damage they have caused, and the massive amount of money and subsidies that are needed to support them. But the hard truth is that at least one million Americans, if not more, were forcibly moved through eminent domain seizures to build the Interstate highways we have today.¹ Millions more Americans who live next to a highway still endure the noise, pollution, danger, and disinvestment caused by the road.

To address this issue, in late 2020, Senate Democrats introduced the [Restoring Neighborhoods and Strengthening Communities Program](#), a \$10b, five-year Highways to Boulevards pilot program that supports community freeway removal in neighborhoods across the U.S., with grants for engagement and capacity building, feasibility studies, and capital construction. This program is part of the Economic Justice Act, a \$435b proposal to make immediate and long-term investments in low-income communities and communities of color.

If passed, this highway removal program will represent a momentous step in federal transportation policy. **For the first time, it will consider the social and economic ramifications of highway infrastructure, put community priorities at the center of decision making, and both acknowledge and repair the damage that federal infrastructure projects have caused.**

Built in the 1950s and 1960s, many urban highways have reached the end of their designed life span and now require billions of dollars to rebuild. Instead of rushing to repair them, we should question whether they meet the transportation needs and demands of the 21st century. We should also consider how we can leverage transportation infrastructure investments to meet multiple community goals. To use one example, the Texas Department of Transportation is considering spending over \$1b to rebuild a 1.4 mile segment of Interstate 345 in Dallas. Is this the best use of federal, state, and local dollars to serve the immediate community, the economic development of the city, and the region's mobility needs? What else could be achieved for that price tag?

¹ Raymond A. Mohl. "[Urban Expressways and the Central Cities in Postwar America](#)," *Poverty and Race Research Action Council Civil Rights Research Brief* (PRRAC: 2002), 2.

Background

The construction of the federal Interstate system, as well as other ancillary highways, threatened demolition and relocation for the many communities whose neighborhoods highway builders set their sights on. These highways were constructed to facilitate suburban development and were often wielded as a tool to remove “urban blight” from cities—code for the targeted destruction of communities of color in their path, with effects that continue to this day. Black and brown communities did not have the political resources and connections to prevent forcible relocation and the destruction of community landmarks, despite vocal opposition.

Some communities in the path of highways unraveled to the point of disintegration. When Rochester, New York, opted to remove its Inner Loop and replace it with a boulevard, the community living around the highway was no longer the same as the one living there when the highway was built. Others, such as New Orleans’ primarily Black Treme neighborhood, have persevered through a highway’s construction and residents still live with its effects. They’ve taken steps to reclaim the space underneath the highway and incorporate it back into the public realm, but such measures are little substitute for the beautiful tree-lined avenue and local businesses the Claiborne Expressway razed.

In other places, new inhabitants occupied neighborhoods damaged by highways, as longtime residents who had the means to do so moved. After the California Division of Highways built Interstate 5 through Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, a significant portion of the neighborhood’s Jewish population moved away to the Westside. In their place, a generation of Mexican immigrants, seeking inexpensive housing, moved in, inheriting only the small sliver of Hollenbeck Park the highway didn’t destroy.

No matter how people have come to live around highways, they face ongoing negative physical and psychological impacts. Highways drive disinvestment, create toxic places to live, and inflict traffic violence on surrounding communities.

Four Principles for a Federal Highways to Boulevards Program

The Highways to Boulevards movement offers a way for people who live near highways to repair, rebuild, and reknit their communities. It seeks to articulate community visions for neighborhoods without freeways, transforming broken liabilities and righting historical wrongs. Informed by these visions, communities may replace freeways with city streets, parks and green spaces, homes and apartments, stores and shops, and public services and amenities, built within their current rights-of-way.

Highways to Boulevards conversions increase access to human needs and allow for the creation of community-driven neighborhoods. To date, fifteen Highways to Boulevards projects that are either complete or currently underway have demonstrated the benefits of the movement. Although these projects vary in magnitude and scope, they have produced largely similar positive outcomes in four key areas: public realm, health and environment, connectivity, and economic development.

The federal government underwrote many poorly planned or ill-conceived highways and a federal Highways to Boulevards program can help repair the damage this infrastructure has caused. Under President Barack Obama, the USDOT established a program called Ladders of Opportunity: Every Place Counts Design Challenge, a federally funded initiative to reconnect

neighborhoods separated by transportation infrastructure and improve community health, mobility, and opportunity. Created by Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx, the Every Place Counts Design Challenge provided technical assistance to communities seeking to mitigate the negative impacts caused by the highways that bifurcate them. Though short-lived, the program marked the federal government's first foray into rectifying the damage the Interstate system has caused to communities.

Through this program, and our own work with communities that have successfully removed highways, we have compiled four principles essential for successful, community-focused highway removal. These principles can and should be incorporated into any program the Biden administration creates as well as any removals that local and state agencies undertake independent of a federal initiative.

We are calling on President Joseph R. Biden Jr., Congress, and the USDOT to adopt a federal Highways to Boulevard program that espouses these principles and provides guidance for state and local projects.

Such a program will not be a silver bullet for community restoration, but it begins to address many of the underlying inequalities in the built environment. It can be a truly reparative program that puts communities first and offers remedies to the injustices inflicted by highway building. Highway removal can be a powerful tool to spur economic development, especially for communities that have long experienced disinvestment. But in order to be truly successful, a federal Highways to Boulevards program must achieve the following principles:

Principle 1: Root the Program in Community Priorities

Too often, communities only have the opportunity to respond to a state DOT proposal to alter a highway, not create their own. Community feedback is solicited after alternatives have already been proposed, which limits the capacity for change and undervalues the lived experience of residents.

A federal Highways to Boulevards program should provide grant funding to community-based organizations to help gather meaningful input from residents and determine their visions for the future of a highway corridor, before the physical planning begins. The grassroots movements advocating for highway removal don't have the financial capacity of a state DOT or even a municipal government. With this program, they can apply for these grants on their own and bring information and professional expertise from outside the normal channels of infrastructure development to build a community vision.

The program should also mandate that the community be involved in the entire conversion process to ensure follow through. This includes establishment of a community advisory board to oversee the project as it progresses.

Principle 2: Adopt New Metrics that Create Streets for People

Over the past several years, state DOTs have undertaken a string of sub-par Highways to Boulevards projects, many of which replicate highway-like qualities in their replacement designs. This is because state DOTs design Highways to Boulevards projects to fulfill outdated metrics like level of service, which only measure a road's capacity to move cars quickly.

If the streets that replace highways still cater to a high volume of vehicle traffic moving at a fast pace, then many of the benefits of highway removal will fail to manifest. These streets will still be a barrier for pedestrians, businesses that are supposed to rely on foot traffic will founder, and property values will remain stagnant. Eight uninterrupted lanes of at-grade traffic mimics the effects of a highway, including dire public health consequences for nearby residents.

Street designs that include cars but do not make them the highest priority are key: the test of time has shown that fewer lanes are adequate for auto traffic but can still be designed for people and bicycles, with well-proportioned sidewalks, frequent and well-signed crossings, street trees, and one or more medians that create a desirable and walkable avenue.

A federal Highways to Boulevards program should lay out a new set of metrics for state DOTs to promote this type of street design. Projects should have to reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT) so that they will not replicate a highway's environmental injustices. Any requirements to meet a level of service threshold should be waived; otherwise, the status quo will be preserved and communities will be left with streets that are effectively highways in disguise.

Multi-modal accessibility scores that combine transportation and land use data to evaluate the number of people who can easily access jobs and services in a project area should also be adopted. This ensures a corridor's land uses are planned to work in tandem with its transportation systems and decenters planning for the automobile.

Principle 3: Adopt New Metrics that Create Streets for People

At its core, the Highways to Boulevards movement is more than just a transportation issue; it intersects with housing and affordability, economic development and access to jobs and services, environmental justice and public health, racial equity, and community development.

The removal of a highway is a divestment from expensive automobile infrastructure. It presents an opportunity to capture and convert trips taken by private cars into other, less expensive and more environmentally friendly modes of travel. If a federal Highways to Boulevards program requires projects to reduce VMT, then it also needs to provide funding for other modes of transportation that can help achieve that goal.

The program's capital construction grants should be eligible to cover not only the removal of the highway, but the critical infrastructure that supports other forms of mobility. This should range from sidewalks and bike lanes all the way to public transportation like bus rapid transit with dedicated lanes. Unlike the highway, this infrastructure serves the community members in and around the highway corridor, who often lack these sorts of quality-of-life amenities.

In terms of what replaces a highway, a federal program should also incentivize projects

that build amenities beyond transportation infrastructure. This will vary based on community needs; Highways to Boulevard projects have the power to transform the land occupied by the highway into a variety of housing types, green space, retail, and other services that a community lacks. These projects have the potential for development and investment that far outstrips the cost of removal. For example, Rochester, New York spent \$22m to fill in the Inner Loop and reclaim 6.5 acres of land from the highway, which has yielded \$229m in development over its first two years.²

Investments in the built environment should be balanced with investments in people as well. A comprehensive federal Highways to Boulevards program will offer support to businesses that are community-oriented to help ensure the development of a complete neighborhood with a wide variety of services, amenities, and cultural institutions. It should leverage the expanding economic opportunities in the neighborhood by funding workforce development programs that serve local residents and train them for the jobs a Highways to Boulevards project brings with it in construction, transportation, and community development.

² Kevin Oklobzija. "[Inner Loop projects beginning to take shape](#)," *Rochester Business Journal*: September 18, 2019.

Principle 4: Prevent Displacement of Legacy Residents

The removal of a highway will increase the attractiveness of nearby neighborhoods, and subsequently property values and rents may be expected to rise. In this scenario, lower-income families and individuals who currently live around a highway will find they can no longer afford to stay. The relocation of Interstate 880 in West Oakland and its replacement with the much more attractive Mandela Parkway serves as a case study, with a larger decrease in the long-time Black population (-28 percent) and increases in property values (184 percent) along Mandela Parkway, compared to West Oakland as a whole between 1990 and 2010.³ This should not be the outcome.

A portion of the funding made available through a robust federal Highways to Boulevards program should be put toward displacement protections that take effect before construction begins. Like the designs for what comes after the highway, there is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to combating displacement. Protections to keep current residents in their homes can include tax abatements for property owners, rent

control and first-time homebuyer programs for tenants, and community land trusts to steer new development, but this short list is far from exhaustive. What is important is that the federal government encourages cities that initiate these projects to tackle displacement from the start and provide them with the means to do so.

The equitable development plan created in response to the creation of the 11th Street Bridge Park in Washington D.C. provides a great example of how to protect legacy residents when infrastructure investments are made. Early in project planning, the nonprofit Building Bridges Across the River created a community land trust that acquired properties on the market and sold them back to residents at subsidized rates to enable them to build wealth before the market appreciated.

³ Regan F. Patterson and Robert A. Harley. “[Effects of Freeway Rerouting and Boulevard Replacement on Air Pollution Exposure and Neighborhood Attributes](#),” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16 (21) (Nov. 2019): 4072.

Looking Toward the Future

Over the last five years, the pace of highway removal has accelerated, with two projects completed, four underway, and two more committed. The events of 2020 have only demonstrated the increasing need for additional highways-to-boulevards conversion projects. The drastic drop in driving during the early stages of the pandemic exposed shortfalls in highway maintenance budgets and exacerbated the problems of the funding schemes that were already struggling to pay for these roads. Campaigns for racial justice have also set highways squarely in their sights. It is no surprise that protest movements have occupied highways, given the racist legacy of highway building and the spatial inequalities they continue to perpetuate today.

In this context, highway removal has become an increasingly important tool for community revitalization. But the benefits unlocked by taking down an expressway must be channeled to the members of the current community. As more and more state and local agencies take up these projects, it is essential that they achieve the best possible outcomes. The federal government can set an example and provide guidance by adopting a Highways to Boulevard program that espouses these four principles and centers legacy residents. A successful program, like the one proposed in the Economic Justice Act, will benefit municipalities and states through the economic empowerment of disinvested communities, not at their expense, like last century's transportation infrastructure.

About CNU

Members of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) help create vibrant and walkable cities, towns, and neighborhoods where people have diverse choices for how they live, work, shop, and get around. People want to live in well-designed places that are unique and authentic. CNU's mission is to help people build those places.

With nineteen local and state chapters and headquartered in Washington, D.C., CNU works to unite the New Urbanist movement. Our projects and campaigns serve to empower our members' efforts, identify policy opportunities, spread great ideas and innovative work to a national audience, and catalyze new strategies for implementing policy through design approaches.

All New Urbanists share the conviction that our physical environment has a direct impact on our chances for happy, prosperous lives. Our movement includes professionals, leaders, advocates, citizens, and other like-minded organizations working to identify and address the range of issues impeding the development and redevelopment of well-designed neighborhoods, public places, commercial corridors, and rural environments.

CNU works to unite that movement as a connector, convener, alliance builder, and teaching platform. Our staff, members, partners, and allies are the international thought leaders on building better places, and CNU helps bring them together. CNU is committed to ensuring that good urbanism are available to all through our work on equity and inclusion.

CNU is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization headquartered in Washington, D.C.

Learn more about our Highways to Boulevards program at cnu.org/our-projects/highways-boulevards.

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Cover photo: New development along Rochester, New York's former Inner Loop (the right-of-way of the former highway is now the grass lots to the right of Union Street). Credit: Stantec

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