



USDOT Ladders of Opportunity Every Place Counts Design Challenge

CASE STUDY: PARK EAST FREEWAY

MILWAUKEE, WI

The Park East Freeway was a 1-mile freeway stub in Milwaukee. The freeway was removed in 2003 and replaced with a surface boulevard, attracting new mixed-use development adjacent freeway's footprint.

PROJECT TYPE

Highway Stub Removal, Highway to Boulevard

DURATION

The original Park East Freeway was stopped in the 1970s. In the mid-1990s local advocates led removal efforts, resulting in the highway coming down in 2003.

BACKGROUND

The 1-mile Park East Freeway was the spur of an halted freeway that was to connect Interstate-43 to downtown Milwaukee. The area around the Park East Freeway remained underutilized building vacancies, surface parking lots, and industrial buildings after the project stalled in the 1970s. Eventually, city planning staff and leadership began to see the freeway stub as a barrier to redevelopment efforts. With city support, a freeway removal campaign coalesced around the removal of Park East Freeway and conversion to an at-grade boulevard.

In 2003, the freeway was removed and replaced with McKinley Avenue. The urban street grid was restored. The City of Milwaukee created a redevelopment plans for the area. Under the direction of City Planner Peter Park, the city drafted a form-based code for the renewal area to encourage development that reinforced the original form and character of the area. The land adjacent to the freeway was ultimately redeveloped as

a combination of commercial, retail, townhouse, and apartment uses.

The decision to rehabilitate the Park East Freeway area hinged on several key factors: the abandoned freeway separated the North side of the city from its downtown, it interrupted the street grid, and it created a barren area in the city.

COST

\$25 Million for removal and boulevard

BENEFITS

- Freeway removal reduced traffic congestion and stimulated economic development
- Freeway demolition, as an alternative to attempted reconstruction, saved \$25 to \$55 million in funding
- Average land values per acre in the footprint of the parkway grew by over 180% after construction between 2001 and 2006
- Accessibility between downtown and the North side of the city has improved significantly
- Conversion of one-way streets into two-way contributed to greater ease of use
- Narrowing of road width effectively increased road safety
- Addition of sidewalks and bridges improved pedestrian access
- Block configurations created 24 acres of available land for development in downtown area (see lessons learned)

CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

Regional Planning: All major challenges to the project were stemmed from regional community concerns. Opposition was spearheaded by Milwaukee resident George Watts, who argued that the freeway was important for local shopowners' revenue.

Street Network Absorbs Traffic: Some business owners contended that highway removal might congest streets and worsen the perceived status of the existing community. Ultimately, concerns were addressed by commissioned studies showing that the severely underutilized freeway was not likely to significantly contribute to local congestion if demolished.

These projections were confirmed once the freeway stub was removed. The local street network absorbed the traffic, even with limited transit options.

The Importance of Political Will: The removal of the freeway ultimately came down to political leadership to push the vision forward. Then-Mayor John Norquist supported the removal, asserted that limited access freeways are incompatible with urban areas and that they ultimately reduce a city's value. The county board of commissioners ultimately agreed and voted for full removal, instead of replacement of the freeway.

PROJECT WEBSITE

city.milwaukee.gov/Projects/Park-East-Redevelopment/Park-East-History.htm



Park East Freeway being torn down in 2003. Photo credit: Milwaukee Department of City Development

MORE INFORMATION

www.cnu.org/highways-boulevards/model-cities/milwaukee

Life and Death of Urban Highways, ITDP & EMBARQ, 2012

Cover page: Aerial of the former Park East Freeway, looking toward downtown Milwaukee. Photo Credit: ParkEastMKE



The Park East Corridor today. Photo Credit: Scott Paulus, Milwaukee Business Journal