

# Shifting Urban Priorities?

## Removal of Inner City Freeways in the United States

Francesca Napolitan and P. Christopher Zegras

**Much of the original Interstate infrastructure built in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States is approaching or has already reached the end of its useful life, and now requires large investments for rehabilitation. At the same time the freeway revolt has evolved into a more widespread movement, underlined by values such as sustainability. The vigorous debate about the future of urban highways and mobility continues with the development of a fairly recent phenomenon: urban freeway removal. This paper works toward a theory of highway removal by examining three different cases in which urban freeway removal was a seriously considered option—two in which the freeway was removed and replaced with a lower-capacity at-grade boulevard and one in which the freeway ultimately was not removed. The analysis suggests that freeway removal will take place only when (a) the freeway’s condition raises concerns about its integrity and safety; (b) a window of opportunity exists, some event that enables a freeway removal alternative to gain serious consideration; (c) the value of mobility is lower than other objectives such as economic development; and (d) those in power value other benefits more than they value the benefits associated with freeway infrastructure.**

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, cities across the United States saw huge infrastructure investments in their downtowns in the form of freeways. The freeways, viewed as a necessity and sign of progress, were aimed at expanding mobility, promoting economic development, and helping to revitalize inner-urban areas (1). In 1956, large-scale urban freeway construction took off with the passage of the U.S. Federal-Aid Highway Act. Although noted urbanists of the time voiced criticism, the initial advance of the Interstate highway system met with few controversies; decision makers effectively wielded their claimed technical expertise in defusing challenges (2).

With the increasing turbulence of the 1960s came distrust of authority and top-down decision making. A growing number of people began to seriously question highways’ social and physical impacts on urban areas (3). A collection of bottom-up, neighborhood-level antifreeway movements sprang up in cities around the United States, with San Francisco home to the first revolt. As did other counter-cultural movement leaders of the time, antifreeway activists sought to establish participation and voice in the decisions that affected their communities.

Grassroots changes also began to be reflected within government via institutional changes and the introduction of new legislation.

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F. Napolitan, Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates, 785 Market Street, Suite 1300, San Francisco, CA 94103. P. C. Zegras, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Room 10-403, Cambridge, MA 02139. Corresponding author: P. C. Zegras, czegras@mit.edu.

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In 1966, the creation of the federal Department of Transportation (DOT) marked a shift in national transportation policy; the first DOT secretary advocated for more citizen involvement in highway planning and considered the “freeway revolts . . . a good thing” (1, p. 681). Relevant legislative initiatives followed in subsequent years [see Weiner (4)]: the Federal Highway Act of 1968 required stronger housing relocation programs for displaced households and broad public hearings on highway proposals, the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act required environmental impact statements for federally funded projects, the 1970 Clean Air Act established the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and gave it authority to set air quality standards, and the 1973 Federal-Aid Highway Act increased the flexibility of highway funds, allowing financing for public transportation.

The energy crises of the early 1970s and 1980s and growing environmental and social concerns brought the concept of sustainable development into the mainstream, as evidenced by the release of the Brundtland Report (5), after which a growing number of analysts, agencies, and advocates began pushing the idea of “sustainable transportation” (6). In the United States, legislation such as the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments combined with the landmark 1991 federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) reflected evolving priorities.

### A PARADIGM SHIFT?

The evolution of highway policy marks an important shift. This shift may result partly from changing attitudes toward the role of large-scale infrastructure, which itself might suggest a shift in values concerning mobility relative to other values. The shift also quite likely reflects the fact that the massive highway investments themselves—once complete—allowed focus on priorities in other areas.

Presently, many cities appear to be experiencing something of a renaissance, marked by growing populations, declining crime levels, improved quality of life, and rising property values (7). Quality of life concerns, to which traffic congestion remains a detriment, accompany this resurgence. Highway infrastructures, seen as congestion relief tools, also negatively affect the urban environment. Thus, some cities have decided to remove urban freeways, or portions of them, reclaiming the space for housing, recreation, commercial development, and reknitting the urban fabric. The result seems to be a net decrease in urban roadway capacity.

More than 30 years ago, Portland, Oregon, razed Harbor Drive freeway and thus provided the first U.S. example of freeway removal. Since then, San Francisco, California; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; New York City; and Toronto, Canada, have removed elevated freeways, and a number of other cities are currently debating the future of the aging freeway infrastructure.