

This month Governing Magazine takes on the issue of urban freeways, with Syracuse as prime example.

GOVERNING

THE STATES AND LOCALITIES

Why Would You Have a Highway Run Through a City?

That's what a growing number of cities are asking themselves -- Syracuse being the latest that may tear down its elevated urban expressway.

BY [DANIEL C. VOCK](#) | JULY 2014



Daniel C. Vock/Governing

Robert Doucette, a developer in Syracuse, N.Y., often commutes to work by walking or biking from his house near Syracuse University to his office downtown. The route is little more than a mile long, but it requires crossing one major obstacle: a hulking highway viaduct that cuts a large swath through the center of the city.

This elevated stretch of Interstate 81 carries 56,000 vehicles a day. Though it is propped up on piers, it has a major impact on the landscape below. As many as six lanes of traffic run beneath the expressway, including feeder ramps and access roads. Pedestrians teeter nervously on raised curbs as they wait for a signal, then “make a break for it,” Doucette says, as they try to avoid unseen vehicles making turns.

As a developer, Doucette sees the 1.4-mile-long viaduct as a wasted opportunity. Interstate 81 is the line of demarcation between the city’s two most vibrant neighborhoods: downtown and University Hill. But it is not a clean separation. For blocks in either direction of the interstate, parking garages and surface lots dominate the landscape. The aging highway cuts off many streets on the city’s grid. “There is this gulf,” he says. “What we’ve done is take an incredibly important piece of this city off of the development map. This highway runs through the part of the city that should be some of the highest-producing parcels of land in the region.”

Doucette and many city leaders want the unsightly interstate gone. They want to reroute the highway around the city and replace the elevated interstate with a wide ground-level boulevard. But tearing down an urban freeway can be hugely controversial. (In 1991, San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos lost his job partly because of his support for a plan to knock down the waterfront Embarcadero Freeway, which had been damaged in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.) While many planners see these elevated highways as dated eyesores that choke off urban revitalization, replacing them can cost billions and, critics say, worsen traffic congestion -- without any guarantee that removing the roadway will lead to new development.



San Francisco's Embarcadero Freeway was razed in 1991 and replaced with a palm-lined boulevard and plazas. (David Kidd/Governing)

Still, a growing number of cities are considering whether highways designed for the Eisenhower era make sense in modern cities. New Orleans has received federal money to study the prospect of removing the Claiborne Expressway, which was built over the main thoroughfare in a black neighborhood. Cleveland is moving to convert its West Shoreway along Lake Erie to a boulevard. In Connecticut, New Haven is also reconnecting parts of its city grid by turning highway segments into avenues. Even officials in auto-friendly Detroit are investigating whether to get rid of an aging one-mile freeway downtown. Despite the city's bankruptcy, downtown Detroit is actually experiencing a modest development boom. An influx of residents to the city's midtown neighborhood, along with the anticipated introduction of light rail and development of the waterfront, are changing the needs of the area, says Will Tamminga of the Detroit Economic Growth Corp., one of the groups conducting the study. And San Francisco's Embarcadero teardown is now widely regarded as a positive and important step for the city.



The Claiborne Expressway in New Orleans is being considered for removal. (AP/Gerald Herbert)

“The logic behind building freeways in urban areas is collapsing,” argues John Norquist, a former mayor of Milwaukee and, until recently, the president and CEO of the Congress for the New Urbanism. While mayor, Norquist demolished a mile-long freeway in downtown Milwaukee in 2002, which rejuvenated the area where the highway once stood. Today he’s one of the country’s fiercest advocates for removing urban interstates, which he says are better suited for rural areas. In cities, he says, expressways cut off pedestrian movement, commerce and social interaction. “It’s really a rural form visited on cities.”

Pushing the teardown trend is the age of the highways themselves. Roads built in the 1960s -- particularly elevated spans that travel across a series of bridges -- are nearing the end of their useful life, which means

they may need to be replaced entirely. That's an expensive proposition. In Detroit, for example, Interstate 375 needs \$80 million just to keep it in good working order. With big price tags like that, transportation planners are examining all of their options.

At the same time, cities, with the encouragement of the Obama administration, are rethinking their street plans. Amenities such as bike lanes, wide sidewalks, streetcars and green space are becoming more common. Traffic engineers, Norquist says, are moving away from the old model of channeling cars from residential roads with cul-de-sacs, to service roads, on to arterial roads and ultimately to freeways. Instead, he says, engineers are using much more nuanced models for the roads they create.

Changes in society are at work too. The automobile, while still by far the dominant mode of transportation in the U.S., has lately lost some of its appeal. It used to be that the number of miles Americans drove went up every year. Since the recession, though, the country's driving has leveled off. Teenagers are waiting longer to get their driver's licenses. And young adults flock to cities and neighborhoods where restaurants, bars and shops are within walking distance -- or maybe a short bus trip or train ride away.

But none of those factors guarantees that scrapping elevated highways will be popular, or smart, in every city. Such a fundamental change in a city's landscape raises big questions of whom the transportation network should be designed to serve, and at what cost.

In Syracuse, discussions over Interstate 81 have divided the region since before it was even built. When the idea of the interstate was first proposed in the 1950s, residents feared it would create an earthen wall that would split the city until officials explained that bridges would carry the highway over the community, says Dennis Connors, curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association.

The interstate was ultimately placed in the 15th Ward, the center of the city's black population, in part because so much of the neighborhood was already being cleared for urban renewal projects in the 1960s. Downtown business owners managed to get the interstate moved a little farther from the city center than was originally proposed, but they didn't want the highway too far away, Connors says, because they were worried about losing customers to stores along highways in the suburbs.



The interstate was placed in the 15th ward, the center of Syracuse's black population. (Onondaga Historical Association)

But downtown merchants did suffer, as did the city as a whole, in the ensuing decades when manufacturers such as General Electric and Carrier moved their operations out of the city. One bright spot was University Hill, a neighborhood that featured several hospitals, Syracuse University and the State University of New York's medical and forestry schools. Those sprawling campuses pretty much stop, though, where they butt up against the towering interstate. Downtown, meanwhile, is also experiencing a resurgence, as developers refurbish long-neglected 19th-century buildings with condos and restaurants.

Amid all this change is talk of upgrading the elevated segment of the highway. It has reached the end of its useful life, the state says, and will have to be replaced by 2017. It will not be an easy fix. The road is too narrow for today's standards. There are no shoulders, and only Jersey barriers separate cars from oncoming traffic. The curves are too sharp for vehicles to safely travel at 55 mph, and exit ramps are placed too close together to be safe under modern guidelines. So the state transportation department is looking at options to completely replace the stretch of highway.

State officials shared 16 different ideas with the public in May. They ranged from an \$800 million plan to build a new viaduct that would meet today's engineering standards to a plan to run the interstate through a tunnel near downtown that would cost as much as \$3.3 billion. But the options that are generating the most interest would get rid of the downtown interstate altogether.

Under that scenario, the elevated highway would be eliminated and a ground-level boulevard (or multiple boulevards) would take its place. With a boulevard, advocates say, pedestrians and cyclists could cross the road more easily, making the area more attractive for retail shops and other development. The interstate

would be rerouted to follow an existing bypass east of Syracuse. That concept is especially popular among the city's elite. The mayor, members of the city council, Syracuse University's leadership, downtown developers and civic organizations have backed plans to scrap the elevated highway.

"This is the biggest decision we will make in the next 40 years, and it feels like it," says Marc Norman, the director of Upstate, a project of Syracuse University's architectural school that showcased student proposals for the debated corridor. "Creating a better city should be the starting point."

"It's more than just a transportation issue," adds Sandra Barrett, executive vice president of the Onondaga Citizens League, a group that backs the boulevard. "It's about the community. It's about neighborhood development. It's about the environment. It's about moving people, not just cars."

Still, many business owners oppose the idea. The owners of Destiny USA, a huge mall in the north of the city, along with several hotel owners, oppose the idea of reconfiguring Interstate 81, because the new route would leave them off the official interstate.



Ninety-one percent of the traffic on Interstate 81 through Syracuse is local. (Daniel C. Vock/Governing)

Mark Nicotra, the town supervisor of Salina, north of Syracuse, says his community's economy is built on easy access to highways. The town sits at the intersection of interstates 81 and 90 and calls itself the "crossroads of central New York." But if the viaduct is removed and I-81 is rerouted to the bypass, Salina will no longer be on the reconfigured interstate, Nicotra says. The town's logistical businesses will have a more difficult time delivering their goods. "81 is our Main Street," he says. "We don't want it to go away, because we feel it will impact the town."

The New York State Motor Truck Association is following the discussion closely, says Kendra Hems, the group's president. Although none of the options sound attractive, she says, the truckers are especially worried about the boulevard. Truck drivers are encouraged to use interstate highways as much as possible, but eliminating that option could compromise safety and efficiency. As urban planners design streets that are friendlier to pedestrians and cyclists, they often fail to accommodate trucks. Narrow streets and wide sidewalks make it harder for trucks to turn, while stoplights and traffic-calming devices limit their efficiency. "In order for these cities and communities to stock their shelves, we still need to allow these trucks to come in," Hems says.

In the lakeside village of Skaneateles, 20 miles from the Syracuse viaduct, longtime resident Steve White worries that he would see firsthand the impact of eliminating the highway. White and other Skaneateles residents worked for years to reroute garbage trucks from the New York City area on their way to an upstate landfill, so they would not pass through their picturesque town. At their peak, one garbage truck barreled down the town's main thoroughfare every three minutes, bringing fumes, noise and the possibility that an accident could contaminate the pristine lake, which the city of Syracuse uses, unfiltered, for its drinking water.

The Skaneateles residents only curbed the truck traffic by reaching a voluntary agreement with the landfill. But if the highways are reconfigured, White fears, the trucks could revert to their previous routes, lowering the tourist appeal of the village's downtown where White and his wife own an antiques shop. "The reason I'm so adamant about this is that it is going to affect my pocketbook, as well as a ton of jobs through here and a lot of real estate value," White says.

The ultimate decision on the fate of Interstate 81 lies with the state transportation department and the Federal Highway Administration. The state hopes to reach a decision by early next year. "We have to provide for mobility for all users," says Beau Duffy, a spokesman for the New York State Department of Transportation. "We have to look at mobility for people who use 81 to get in and out of Syracuse each day [and] the people who are traveling through Syracuse to other destinations. But we also have to consider the local impact. All of those things get looked at."



[Daniel C. Vock](#) | Staff Writer