

Avante Owens, walking home from football practice, crosses West Street, a former two-lane street that in the 1960s was turned into a six-lane arterial. Fifty years later, the streetscape is being made more friendly for walkers. (Sean Kirst / skirst@syracuse.com)

Avante Owens hadn't saved enough money for the bus, so he walked home last Thursday after football practice at the Institute of Technology, at Syracuse Central. He used West Street, the most direct route, even though it cut down on his options: It's a busy street, with a long stretch where pedestrians hoping to cross from one side to the other don't have the benefit of a stoplight.

Near Otisco Street, Avante paused to contemplate the traffic signals for a new crosswalk, set to go into operation Monday. "Would I use it, if you could cross without cars coming?" Avante said. "Yes!" he said, answering his own question, with emphasis.

For as long as he remembers, crossing in that area of West Street has been an anxious, risky proposition. A half-century ago, engineers and civic officials weren't thinking about 15-year-olds, walking home, when they began the work that did away with what had been a two-lane street.

The state built West Street in the

early 1960s, at a cost of almost \$3 million. According to records at the Onondaga Historical Association, more than 110 buildings were knocked down to create the West Street arterial, six lanes of traffic from Herald Place to West Onondaga Street, an arterial at the core of an expansive highway dream:

West Street would become one leg in a downtown "Inner Loop" for motorists, joined by Adams Street, Interstate 81 and Interstate 690. The larger goal was allowing motorists to jump onto West Street and travel south to Seymour Street, which would be widened into a "connector," leading toward a western highway that never happened known as the Geddes Expressway.

You see a remnant of the plan in exit ramps for Route 695 that seem to end at West Genesee Street, in Fairmount. If it had all come together, they would have merged into a stretch of highway sweeping toward the farmland and housing tracts of Onondaga, a highway linked to I-81 and known generically as the "western bypass."

It was supposed to include a link that would run straight through Syracuse, a connector that would

have leveled a swath of city fabric. But the construction of West Street — and the demolition and distress that went with it —

was the beginning of a civic lesson best summarized by one word: Stop!

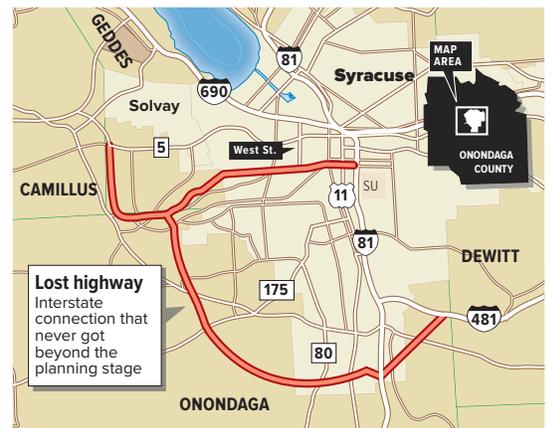
"It's hard to imagine how much damage could have been done if they continued," said Andrew Maxwell, director of policy and innovation for Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner. By the late 1960s, residents of the Near West Side were protesting state plans to make the heart of their neighborhood a cut-through for a highway. They won the support of a common councilor named Lee Alexander, the future mayor, who in 1967 said: "When it comes to highways, the state regards cars before people."

That opposition, coupled with changing realities, caused the project to fade away. "The need

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A REDESIGNED ARTERIAL REVERSES THE PHILOSOPHY OF 'CARS BEFORE PEOPLE'



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Crosswalk signals change in philosophy on streets

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just never emerged as they thought it would," said James D'Agostino, director of the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council. "At the time we were on a growth curve, and no one could ever see it stopping, and it did."

West Street became a reminder, a six-lane memorial to that massive highway dream. "What they did with it is the same thing they did with Interstate 81," said Pete O'Connor, director of public works for the city. "They separated a neighborhood from downtown."

O'Connor grew up in the James Geddes apartments, on the Near West Side. He remembers, from his childhood, how easy it was to cross the old West Street and reach the shops and theaters at the heart of the city. That changed with the construction of the arterial. It wasn't until a few years ago that city officials began working with the state in an attempt to knit the street back into the neighborhood it borders.

Maarten Jacobs, director of the Near West Side Initiative, recalled a key moment in the effort: The state held a public forum in 2013 about Interstate 81, at Fowler High School. The initiative rallied dozens of neighbors. They stood up, one by one, to vent their frustrations about West Street.

Spurred by similar concerns, Maxwell and O'Connor said the city contacted state transportation officials about rethinking West Street: They wanted bicycle paths, on-street parking, fewer lanes. The state, conscious of handling heavy traffic, was initially reluctant, Maxwell said.

So O'Connor said he wrote a letter to Carl Ford, regional state transportation director. Before the coming of the interstates, O'Connor wrote, the city — not the state — controlled West Street.

Maybe, O'Connor wrote, it

was time for the state to give it back.

While that didn't happen, the dynamic began to change. "Carl's been awesome, phenomenal about all this," Jacobs said. Engineers from the city and the state listened to people who live nearby. The result, Maxwell said, was a collaborative \$1.2 million project that shifted the entire concept of West Street:

There's a new bike path along the old service road. The arterial has gone from six lanes to four in many areas, and it now offers on-street parking. For the first time, there's a sidewalk on the western stretch of West Street, near downtown, and there's talk of eventually using the eastern edge as a pedestrian link for the Onondaga CreekWalk.

There is also a new fence on the median, both for decorative purposes and to discourage people on foot from trying to cross at dangerous points. How much risk do they face? Motorists driving too fast have already slammed into that fence and damaged it three times, O'Connor said.

Monday will offer the most powerful symbol of change: The state will unveil its new crosswalk near downtown, with a signal that turns red, stopping traffic, when pedestrians press a button. That means the elderly, or parents with little children, or people using wheelchairs will no longer need to travel all the way to West Fayette Street to find a safe way to cross West Street.

The crosswalk, too, involved compromise. With the old traffic patterns, Maxwell said, state engineers worried about whether it would be safe for pedestrians to cross, even with a light. State transportation officials, who weren't available for comment last week, were reassured once the city agreed to close off a nearby section of Marcellus Street, thus eliminating another source of traffic.

"It's an amazing effort, in

so many ways," said Marilyn Higgins, a Syracuse University vice president for community engagement and one of the founders of the Near West Side Initiative. The neighborhood was so appreciative, she said, that it gave Ford, the state's regional transportation director, a community "risk taker" award last summer.

Higgins and Jacobs said there'll be a community celebration at the crosswalk, in the near future, that will include a marching band that will be able to march safely across the street.

Rick Destito, a developer whose family lives on the Near West Side, called the crosswalk a symbol of a turnaround in civic philosophy: If you look at newspaper clippings from the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the arterial was built, no one was thinking about what it meant for people on foot.

In 1960, Mayor Anthony Henninger said new expressways would be the "bloodstream" of a revived downtown. The city's 1959 general plan spoke of the primacy of "rubber-wheeled vehicles." The idea was creating loops of highway, both around downtown and the entire metropolitan area. West Street would be the launching pad, a template, at the heart of all of it.

The arterial, completed in July 1964, turned into something else.

"It feels like a wall," Destito said. "There are a lot of things about a city you don't notice until you try and walk around with little kids in strollers."

The new crosswalk, he said, is a small project that makes a sweeping statement on where we're going, in Syracuse:

"Rubber-wheeled vehicles" will stop, so human beings can cross the street.

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Pedestrians for years have had to cross six lanes of West Street. (Post Standard file photo, 2011)