

URBAN HIGHWAY REMOVAL

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Connect Cities and Neighborhoods

Removing an aging highway can reconnect city neighborhoods and allow access to the waterfront.

Enhancing the User Experience

Highways are being repurposed with multi-modal boulevards to reconnect neighborhoods and enhance the user (residents, commuters, visitors, business owners) experience.



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INSIGHT Thought Leadership



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Since the mid-20th century, US cities have been served by a highway system that was built to support military transportation. The resulting infrastructure brought the unintended consequence of expediting suburban migration, leaving divided and blighted once-thriving neighborhoods.

Now cities across the country with aging highways are looking to reverse decades of social and economic decline by moving forward with land use and transportation plans that promote improved quality of life. Boomers and Millennials are leading the movement back into cities and villages for a walkable/mixed-use lifestyle less reliant on cars. Highways are being repurposed with multi-modal boulevards to reconnect neighborhoods and give residents access to waterfronts or other natural features previously blocked by highways.

Highway removal projects can be a cause for concern among suburban commuters that use the system as a connection to their urban destination. However, highways should remain a means of connecting regional cities and metropolitan areas across the country, but not to connect destinations within a city.

9 KEYS FOR SUCCESSFUL URBAN HIGHWAY REPURPOSING

Public Engagement

The significance of a Public Participation Plan (P3) to programming and financing cannot be understated. The public must be informed about the design elements, environmental impacts, and construction schedules. Failing to balance the views of residents, commuters, and businesses could result in “compromised” projects that fail to achieve best practices of land use and transportation planning.

Vetted Land Use Strategies

Well-vetted land use strategies are essential for repurposing urban highways into multi-modal boulevards. These strategies guide the programming and design of boulevards to accommodate traffic volumes and integrate medians, bike lanes, on-street parking and green infrastructure.

Intersections with Neighborhood Streets

Existing urban highways have limited access points to accommodate high-speed passenger vehicles and trucks between the suburbs and city core. These corridors though are barriers between neighborhoods and waterfronts or other natural environments. As highways are repurposed to boulevards, design should provide more intersections with existing or new neighborhood streets. In cities reconnecting to their waterfront, historic bridges and new crossings can be established to enhance neighborhood connectivity.

Walking, Biking, and Transit

When designing walking, bicycling and transit, new boulevards should be designed to offer equal priority to multiple modes of transportation and on-street parking should be placed in areas along the corridor that support adjacent land uses.

Enhancing the User Experience

As urban highways are repurposed, cities need to enhance the user experience and consider the needs of commuters, visitors, residents, and business owners. Well-designed sidewalks, bike lanes, transit stops, green infrastructure, way finding, and intelligent transportation systems (ITS) enhance all user experiences.

Cost Benefit Analysis

A cost benefit analysis can demonstrate that traffic impacts are not significant to residents, suburban commuters will find alternate routes or adapt to time delays, and the improvements can have economic benefits including improved access and better quality of life for the entire community.

Funding

A project schedule, with phases and milestones, can help elected officials and funding agencies know when capital will be required. Development of residual highway property and adjacent parcels will generate tax revenues and economic benefit to counties, cities, towns and school districts, including sales tax revenues that will accrue to the state and local municipality.

Phased Approach

Project planning, design, and environmental assessment are the first tasks in urban highway repurposing. The construction of alternate travel routes, and improvements to neighborhood streets, must precede closing and demolition of highway segments, followed by construction of at-grade boulevards. Upon completion of a new street network, infill development of abandoned right-of-way can begin.

Economic Development

Removing highway barriers and creating boulevards with enhanced street grid networks greatly improves conditions for new economic development. Previously underutilized land can become desirable for private investors.

Looking Forward

As the popularity of urban living continues to grow, cities across the country are looking at ways to incorporate infrastructure elements from the past: walkable blocks and streets, housing and shopping in close proximity, and accessible public spaces. Removing highways that divide cities is the first step in knitting neighborhoods back together and creating an appealing walkable, urban lifestyle.