

How the Federal Government Could Help Kill the Highways It Built

A new Senate bill includes a \$10 billion program aimed at cities that are considering removing urban freeways and repairing the damage these projects inflicted on vulnerable communities decades ago.

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In 1956, the U.S. Congress passed the Federal-Aid Highway Act, the \$25 billion program that launched the Interstate Highway System. The law, which encouraged highway construction across the country by offering 90% of the funding needed to build them, left behind a “horrific legacy” in scores of U.S. cities, says University of Virginia historian Peter Norton, author of “Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City.” As cities embraced the benefits of high-speed thoroughfares for suburban commuters, they razed swaths of downtowns and waterfronts — often targeting low-income areas and neighborhoods of color — to make room for the roadways.

Now, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has unveiled legislation that would reverse this decades-old infrastructure formula, offering billions in federal dollars for cities willing to demolish those urban highways.

As Streetsblog reported on Jan. 11, the Economic Justice Act, a spending package worth over \$435 billion, includes a \$10 billion pilot program that would provide funds for communities to examine transit infrastructure that has divided them along racial and economic lines and potentially alter or remove them. It would also help pay for plans to redevelop reclaimed land. The program contains specific language requiring projects funded through it prioritize equity and avoid displacement. It also provides grants meant to facilitate community engagement and participation as well as construction.

“It’s the first time that we’ve seen this in terms of highway removal, this sort of prioritization of people first and the [impacts] and outcomes on their lives,” says Ben Crowther, a program manager at the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU). His organization helped to write the text of the bill’s highway program.

CNU is among a host of advocacy organizations that have been lobbying for the removal of urban highways. Their efforts include a biennial report rounding up the freeways that activists most want to see scrapped and an initiative focused on replacing such thoroughfares with surface level streets and boulevards. Promoters of the idea often cite examples like San Francisco’s Embarcadero Freeway, which was removed in 1991 after sustaining heavy damage in a 1989 earthquake. That project liberated about 100 acres of the city for waterfront development. More recently, Rochester, New York filled in a segment of sunken expressway that encircles the city’s downtown and is now exploring removing the rest of the loop. As of last year, CNU recorded close to 20 American cities that had removed highways or committed to doing so. The phenomenon isn’t unique to the U.S., either. Seoul tackled a similar project in the mid-2000s, and Madrid moved to transform a highway into a park late last decade.

The bill’s timing is particularly auspicious. While it will need to navigate a Congress riven by political tensions, Democrats control the legislative branch and the White House. Pete Buttigieg — President Joe Biden’s pick to head the Department of Transportation — has been outspoken about the damage that transportation projects have done in the past. “Black and brown neighborhoods have been disproportionately divided by highway projects or left isolated by the lack of adequate transit and transportation resources,” he said in a Dec. 20 tweet. “In the Biden-Harris administration, we will make righting these wrongs an imperative.”

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The Biden administration has identified racial equity and climate change as two of four “overlapping and compounding crises” it wants to tackle. On Wednesday, the president issued an executive order tasking the Justice Department with establishing an environmental justice office. The current national focus on those topics, taken with the fact that many urban highways built in the 1960s are now reaching the end of their life cycles, make this moment a crucial one for a conversation around transportation equity and highway removal, according to Sara Zewde, an assistant professor at Harvard University and principal of design firm Studio Zewde. “Those three happening at the same time is really an inflection point,” she says.

For highway teardown advocates, the legislation is promising news. “There’s a long list of things that have to be done in order to see a highway removed,” says Claiborne Avenue Alliance co-founder Amy Stelly, a designer who has been involved with plans to demolish the much-maligned Claiborne Expressway in New Orleans. “Having the funding to actually help execute those pieces and get them done would be wonderful.”

Still, highway removals are hardly a quick or easy fix. The Big Dig, Boston’s stab at moving its congested Central Artery underground and reuniting neighborhoods long divided by the highway, became infamous for lengthy delays and extra costs. And some communities in the shadow of highways targeted for removal have expressed wariness about possible consequences, from snarled traffic to potential gentrification in neighborhoods that already saw displacement when the roads were first constructed. CNU’s Crowther described how some New Orleans residents objected to a 2014 study on removing the Claiborne Expressway because it included a rendering that showed buildings that were out of character for the existing neighborhood, underscoring fears of displacement. In Denver, meanwhile, a plan to cap a segment of urban highway led to concerns that changes would leave current residents of the nearby community behind.

While attempts to enshrine equity and public outreach in the law might help address those fears, historically unfair transportation and planning policies have left many barriers to participation that need to be addressed, says California-based urban planner Destiny Thomas. “We have done this the wrong way for so long that we are now dealing with widespread apathy when it comes to civic engagement, especially about public infrastructure and transportation planning,” she says. “This is going to require a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to righting a centuries-long wrong and to actively working to heal ongoing harm while also asking communities to involve themselves in the solution-finding process.”

To make a federal highway-conversion program effective, Thomas says a variety of “safety net supports” would be necessary, including the involvement of social workers, mental health experts, and housing advocates. She emphasized that the bill, if passed, would be only the first step in addressing inequity within transportation and transportation infrastructure, and could even be an early component of a reparations package.

“It is these types of policies that really begin to atone for the legacy of racism and slavery in this country, and so I think framing it as such is an important step for the administration to take,” Thomas says.