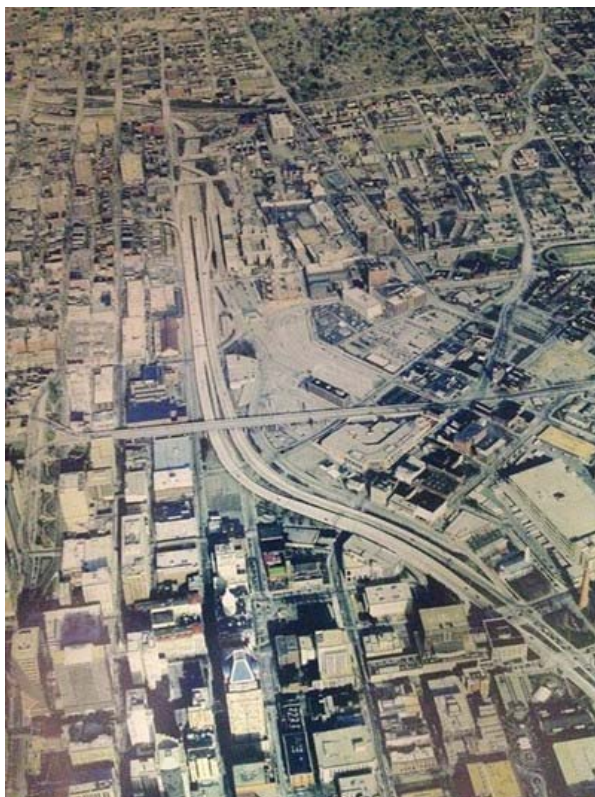


Expiration Date

Portions of urban highways are being removed in cities around the world. Is it the JFX's turn?
by Mat Edelson



[click to enlarge](#)

An overhead view of the Jones Falls Expressway, which celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in December Photos and renderings Courtesy of Gorove/Slade Associates And Ab Associates

What if you threw a fiftieth anniversary celebration, and the most important invitees didn't show? On Dec 16, 2011, the Jones Falls Expressway, the highway credited with keeping downtown Baltimore from completely going to pot following the infamous suburban White Flight of the 1960s and 70s, and for delivering more than 100,000 commuters daily to their urban points of employment and entertainment, marked a half-century of hovering above, below, and right on top of Mother Earth.

And yet the very people responsible for deciding whether the JFX will make it another fifty years—let alone another five—had an interesting reaction to the concrete and steel structure's golden jubilee.

Utter silence.

From the city council, not a peep. From the mayor, nary a word nor proclamation. The governor? You could hear the crickets chirping in place of his usual media machine.

Was this an oversight? Not for the major media in town. The Baltimore Sun, the TV talking heads, they all noticed.

The same couldn't be said for the very people whose political lives are in no small part sustained by the commerce and commuters that flow through this central artery. They avoided all mention of the moment. Heck, they didn't even send a nice note. About the only peep out of city hall was a pro forma press release under the City's Department of Transportation banner, a muted five-paragraph missive designed to go unnoticed: It wasn't

even posted on DOT's own press release website, nor did the release bear a single quote from any official—not the mayor, not even anyone in DOT.

Which begs an interesting thought: Would the head honchos all rather the JFX just go away?

The JFX, by all accounts, is facing an expiration date. The debate is about when exactly does this terminus terminate? A study commissioned by then-mayor Sheila Dixon's administration in August 2009 recommended a date so far in the future that the O's most certainly will have won another World Series: We're talking 2049, give or take a few rough snow and salt-filled winters.

But another study from potential developers suggested the tipping point for removing the lower part of the JFX should come far, far earlier. As in, soon. It is a fascinating suggestion, perhaps overly optimistic in its projections for a financial windfall for the city's property and sales tax coffers, but not without precedent.



click to enlarge
A rendering of a Jones Falls Expressway proposal that would knock down the end of the way, creating space for a widened boulevard and opportunity for development on the eastside of the JFX
Photos and renderings Courtesy of Gorove/Slade Associates And Ab Associates

The list of cities that actually have taken action is surprisingly long, and there is a movement afloat to rethink the urban highway, and how it fits into the urban landscape. While most everyone has heard of Boston's 1991 to 2007 "Big Dig," which, among other projects, buried a 3.5-mile stretch of I-93 below a newly-greened Beantown park at an astronomical cost (\$15 billion for the whole project and counting), many other burghs are either moving or tearing down sections of highway that bisect their towns. Fort Worth and Providence relocated large sections of highway to improve quality of life and revitalize neighborhoods, while Milwaukee; San Francisco; Portland, Oregon; and Seoul have completely dismantled sections of roadway, replacing them with boulevards and accompanying mixed-use properties that attract and support street life.

In some cases the redesigns were mandated by Mother Nature; after San Francisco was whacked by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, portions of the Embarcadero Freeway and the Central Freeway off the Bay Bridge were severely damaged. The choice was rebuild or reimagine. At great controversy—and to the great consternation of traffic planners who predicted complete gridlock if the freeways weren't rebuilt—the latter path was chosen. In Milwaukee, it was a maverick mayor's political will that removed a stub of highway that had been an underutilized blight on the landscape. The case of Seoul has particular reverberations for Baltimore. A busy highway built on top of a river (sound familiar?) in the South Korean capital was torn down. The area's

reconstruction daylighted the waterway and completely changed the face—and health—of Seoul several years ago.

"The summer temperatures are eight degrees cooler on average where the river is than with the highway. There's 21 percent less particulate matter (some studies have linked particulate matter from urban highways to increased rates of asthma), noxious gases are down 20 percent, and (other) pollutants are down up to 65 percent in certain areas," says Fort Worth-area urban planner Patrick Kennedy, who has blogged extensively on the topic and is considering pitching the mayor of Dallas on a highway removal project.

The irony of removing urban highways is that the mastermind of the interstate highway system never intended to have them built in the first place. When President Dwight Eisenhower, a military general who had been impressed by Germany's Autobahn during World War II, promoted highway building during his 1950s administration, he had the Cold War first and foremost in his mind. "It never occurred to anyone to run (highways) through cities; the idea was to connect cities to each for the purpose of commerce and to evacuate major urban areas and move Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles across the country," says Jeffrey Tumlin, a San Francisco urban planner who has studied the potential removal of a stretch of I-10 through downtown New Orleans.

But with the Feds offering the lion's share of dollars to build new highways, nary a city in America passed up the opportunity in the next decade to run highways through existing right of ways and other places where land was cheap—often through long established African American communities such as New Orleans's I-10 Treme district. Baltimore's proposed I-170, the so-called "Highway to Nowhere" that now comprises a 1.4-mile submerged stretch of I-40 from MLK Boulevard to the West Baltimore MARC station, dislocated thousands of mostly African American residents and sent the area into an economic tailspin.

There was more than a hint of racism in practice; urban highways often cut off expanding black neighborhoods from their white counterparts and business districts. "In the case of the Geary Expressway in San Francisco, there are memos that talk about halting the African American spread. I've seen it starkly in print. They use a lot of code words, but there it is," says Tumlin.

Fortunately the conversation in recent years has shifted to the economics of the matter. These concrete children of the 1950s and 60s are reaching a critical juncture in their existence. With only routine maintenance, the lifespan of highways built in that era is roughly forty to fifty years. The last elevated section of the JFX running

from roughly Chase Street to Fayette Street was completed in 1984 (it would connect to the expanded President Street section in 1987), some twenty-two years after opening the first stretch, which Baltimore Planner George Kostritsky at the time called "a useful but hideous concrete ribbon."

Whether the JFX is still useful has been debated for, believe it or not, nearly its entire life. According to a Baltimore Sun timeline, in 1968 then-mayor Thomas D'Alesandro III called the JFX "obsolete." In 1991, a commission appointed by then-Mayor Kurt Schmoke suggested taking down part of the JFX to develop the east side. And in 2005, Walter Sondheim, often thought of as the conscience of Baltimore, expressed his contempt for the JFX and called for its removal.

Why these ideas went nowhere is a combination of perceived cost and fear of carnageddon—an explosion of cars clogging the city's street grid should the bottom part of the JFX suddenly go away. The traffic part of the equation is intriguing. Historically, traffic planners felt that whenever roadway capacity was increased, so too would use, as more commuters would be induced to establish new driving patterns on what they believed would be a faster roadway. It was a never-ending game of build and clog, the fear being if one didn't build, the traffic jams would always be worse.

That thinking changed following San Francisco's Central Freeway Artery damage and subsequent reconstruction as a grade-level, multi-use road known as Octavia Boulevard. Some 90,000 cars had come west from Oakland and north from San Jose across that patch of the Central Freeway daily, and where they would go without the freeway was fiercely debated among traffic planners. Some felt "there is no way you can tear this freeway down. If you do, the traffic will back up to Sacramento (some three hours away). That's what their models told them, and they believed their models," says Tumlin.

What happened still has the naysayers flummoxed. The total number of commuters on Octavia dropped, with Tumlin crediting San Francisco's extensive street grid for absorbing the traffic. Partially as a result of the Octavia experience, a new controversial theory started getting tossed around by planners: It's called reverse-induced demand. Under this theory, it's believed that a reduction in highways won't have a deleterious effect because of several factors, including the aforementioned grid absorption and people changing their behaviors to use mass transit, carpool, or eliminate some car trips entirely.

In other words, build it and they'll come; take it away and they'll find another route—or leave their cars home. In Baltimore, the fate of the JFX—at least the elevated portion, all 4,730 feet of it from Chase Street to Fayette—is coming down to a battle of the Entrepreneurs versus the Engineers, with the referees (that would be City Hall) remaining neutral.

The entrepreneurs, who hope to develop 23 acres east of the JFX, are represented by a coalition lead by Edison Parking, owners of 9.5 acres of old rail yards there that were turned into parking lots in 1985. In a sixty-page PowerPoint entitled "Fallsway: A New Downtown Neighborhood for Baltimore, MD," Edison shows the taking down of the JFX as key to redeveloping an area that would reach east to the blighted Old Town neighborhood (and beyond that to Hopkins Hospital) and west to Mount Vernon and the Downtown business district.

The land used would include Edison's acres and tracts owned by BGE, the City, and some private commercial property. The study, with input from traffic planners Gorove/Slade Associates, University of Maryland School of Architecture and Planning professor Matthew J. Bell, and land use planners AB Associates, is, to say the least, ambitious. Renderings include a widened, greened boulevard in place of the JFX, including pictures of a park sitting on the banks of a river, presumably the opened Jones Falls. The gist of the message—one which, if successful, would greatly enhance the value of Edison's current holdings—is that the only thing standing in the way of a phenomenal new neighborhood and millions of dollars in new property taxes and sales tax for the city is that darn highway. Al Barry of AB Associates says that's not just his opinion, but that of some city planners as well; he notes that the Old Town redevelopment master plan calls for the JFX's elevated portion teardown (Barry was on the Old Town plan's steering committee, which also called for development of Edison's properties).

Edison's financial promises may be historically justified. In Milwaukee, former Mayor John Norquist says the 2003 teardown of the mile-long Park East freeway stub and the rebuilding of a four-lane boulevard, McKinley Avenue, created three new mixed-use neighborhoods and, by 2007, more than \$340 million in development. Similarly, economic analysis of San Fran's Embarcadero found employment in the rebuilt area jumped 23 percent (an increase of more than three times that of surrounding control areas), and Octavia Boulevard, which was opened in 2005, created almost 1,000 new homes with overall housing values now nearly on a par with the rest of San Francisco.

That's one take on the potential economics, and it caught the ear of someone in the Dixon administration. They



click to enlarge
A look at the potential design and plan for a new Fallsway neighborhood just east of the lower end of the Jones Falls Expressway Photos and renderings Courtesy of Gorove/Slade Associates And Ab Associates

quietly commissioned their own study, to the tune of around \$60,000, to look into the matter. That study, officially for the City's Department of Transportation, narrowly focused on what it would take to maintain the lower JFX in various permutations. The study was done by longtime Baltimore engineering firm RK&K. Although the report hasn't been officially published, an insider with first-hand knowledge of the study said four options were viably discussed: leaving the highway as is; taking down the lower elevated portion and building out the existing service roads (Fallsway and Guilford Avenue); taking down the elevated lower portion and building a new boulevard; and taking down only the last half of the elevated portion (the upper portion covers train tracks that may prove problematic to redevelop). The last three options all call for an immediate expenditure of more than \$200 million, enough to give any politician pause.

The first option—and the one RK&K recommended, given the current economic downturn and their belief that there's plenty of development opportunity elsewhere in Baltimore—is to keep the elevated section intact and nurse it along. They estimated that it would take \$7.6 million to maintain the section through 2024, at which point a deck overlay—the highway equivalent of putting another layer of shingles on the roof, as opposed to tearing off the underlying wood—would cost around \$66 million and extend the section's life to somewhere around 2050. At that point, a choice would have to be made: Redeck the entire structure—including possibly replacing deficient girders and beams—at a cost nearing half a billion dollars.

Or tear the sucker down.

Earthquakes notwithstanding, the only way the lower JFX is going to expire prematurely is through an act of a political derring-do. John Norquist, whose Congress for New Urbanism advocates for urban highway removal, said he had to fight road builders and their champion, then-Wisconsin governor Tommy Thompson, to get rid of the Park East freeway. "We had this turd in the punch bowl," says the colorful Norquist of the Park East, "and when I became mayor I asked, 'What adds the most value to the city?' and we made a deal with the governor."

Despite the potential revitalization dollars, no one is talking deals down in City Hall. In fact, no one's talking at all about the future of the JFX. The mayor's office offered no comment, while a spokesperson for City Council President Jack Young said: "It's not something the Council President is focused on at the moment." A similar lack of interest was expressed by the Greater Baltimore Committee, which has seen Edison's proposal.

That leaves the civic activists, who aren't exactly raising a mighty wind. Admittedly, from an activism viewpoint, taking on a highway—especially one that's already been built—is a bit daunting. Unlike the famous highway-stopping battles that saved Fells Point in the 1970s and propelled then-champion Barbara Mikulski to national prominence, the civic voices calling for the JFX's removal are scattered and unorganized. But like the JFX, they too may be on a timetable to teardown. Stu Sirota, owner of TND Planning Group and an urban planner involved in remodeling the Belair Road corridor, says he's seen more quality of life projects occur in the city in the last five years than he'd seen in the previous fifteen, and he believes in the power of cumulative effect. "It's going to take so much time, energy, and effort to make (the teardown) happen," says Sirota. "I'd rather see the city spend money on bike lanes and making modest visual changes that will have a real transformational change, and those things will start adding up towards larger changes ... like tearing down freeways."

Ultimately, Baltimore's politicians may have to take a leap of faith that the city's extensive street grid system can absorb losing part of a freeway for a well-thought-out boulevard that enhances city life. Aesthetically, urban planners such as Baltimore's Heather Strassberger make a compelling case for such a boulevard. "When you have foot traffic, you have window shopping and eyes on the street," she says. "When you create a twenty-four-hour environment, you've got people wanting to live in the area because it's attractive, there's nightlife. It's not like a business district where everyone goes home at five."

Usually via a highway.

Follow Urbanite on Facebook and Twitter for the latest stories, updates, and events.

« Baltimore, Unplugged

Favorite

Print

Share