

# THE OAKLANDSIDE

## ROAD SAFETY

# 'Sky's the limit': Caltrans is getting serious about replacing I-980

State transportation planners want feedback about transforming the freeway that sliced downtown and West Oakland apart.



by **Jose Feroso**

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Downtown seen from the West Oakland side of I-980. Credit: Darwin BondGraham

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When the I-980 freeway was completed in 1985, it separated West Oakland from the rest of the city. To build it, 500 homes, 22 businesses, and four churches were demolished or moved, and valuable land was taken from a predominantly Black community.

Now, after years of conversations between transportation engineers, city planners, politicians, and residents, the city and state are finally moving ahead with a plan to try to make the community whole again.

State transportation officials recently told members of Oakland's Bicyclist and Pedestrian Advisory Commission that they are at the beginning of a process to "identify a new concept and vision for transportation and land use" of the freeway. They hope to start getting feedback from the public in January 2024.

Once they've gotten input from the public, Caltrans will study the viability of different ideas. This is expected to happen in the fall of 2026.

"It's a long process, but there's a lot of decision-making, a lot of input, a lot of feasibility analyses that will have to be done to determine what will be the best approach," Caltrans planner Becky Frank told the bike and pedestrian commission members earlier this month.

"We're super excited to open things up and start reaching out to the community," said Hunter Oatman-Stanford of Caltrans. The engineer said it had taken three years of work to get the grants so they could start the engagement process.

There are many options for the I-980's future. It could be ripped out entirely, kept as is, or even [capped](#) and turned into a bigger version of New York's [High Line](#) park.

At this stage, Caltrans' Vision 980 team said they don't want to influence the public about what kinds of ideas are more realistic or what would be a better use for the freeway.

"The sky's the limit," Frank said.



## Support to tear out the freeway is strong



Pedestrians cross the 11th Street bridge, one of just several overpasses above I-980, which separates downtown and West Oakland. Credit: Darwin BondGraham

The I-980 was built as a potential connector to a second Bay Bridge, but a second crossing was never constructed. Oakland residents were divided from the start about the freeway, with many people who lived in downtown and West Oakland opposing it. Many people have said for decades that it was a mistake to build it.

Oakland Congresswoman Barbara Lee has called the I-980 a “[scourge](#)” that has been a “barrier to economic opportunity.”

Last year, on a tour of Oakland U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said the economic and cultural separation of West Oakland from downtown was evident and [needed remedying](#). “We saw a dramatic example of the consequence of highway construction from the previous generation...but there are opportunities now to make right what was wrong,” Buttigieg said.



In an [interview](#) last year, OakDOT's Kelley said the 980 freeway "divided the Oakland community" and that it was an example of how government can be "complicit in spreading inequities, like decisions where infrastructure and funding are placed."

Oakland planning studies, including the [Downtown Oakland Specific Plan](#), have focused on the history of the 980 freeway's disparities and the potential benefits of its removal. They've promoted the possibility that clearing out the freeway would open up 1.5 million square feet for retail and business, and 5,000 new apartments.

Caltrans' Frank said the Vision 980 team will contact community organizations and residents, including by email for those who [sign up to their mailing list](#), to alert them to outreach events.

## "A freeway that created barriers"



City and government officials took a bus tour of Downtown Oakland last year that included the I-980. U.S. Transportation Department Secretary Pete Buttigieg called it a 'gash' that divided neighborhoods. Credit: Amir Aziz

The Vision 980 project has broad goals, including improving public transit connections, adding new spaces for bikes and pedestrians, and freeing up space for development.

Planners are also weighing the potential benefits of removing thousands of polluting cars next to Oakland neighborhoods like Hoover-Foster and Uptown.

While Caltrans is leading the Vision 980 project, BART, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, AC Transit, the Port of Oakland, and other business and community organizations, from truckers to racial-equity advocates, will be part of the conversations.

The Vision 980 project is being developed alongside the state's [Highways to Boulevards program](#), which receives \$150 million in federal dollars to remake neighborhoods through large infrastructure projects.

Some Oakland residents do not support the removal of 980. They say new housing development near downtown would reinforce gentrification. Many Black residents generally [mistrust the impacts](#) that changes to major infrastructure can have on their communities.

BPAC commissioner David Ralston, a policy advisor for the Bay Area Air Quality District, said at the meeting last week that while he is supportive of the work to get the Vision 980 project off the ground, he is still a bit cynical about it because he feels it may have been politically motivated by a plan—the status of which is now uncertain—to develop Howard Terminal, a piece of land owned by the Port of Oakland. The A's explored building a ballpark, housing, commercial, and office space at Howard Terminal but have abandoned the idea since deciding on relocating to Las Vegas.

“The connections from West Oakland to downtown, I don't want to say it's disingenuous, but that may be the main reason why [it was happening],” Ralston said.