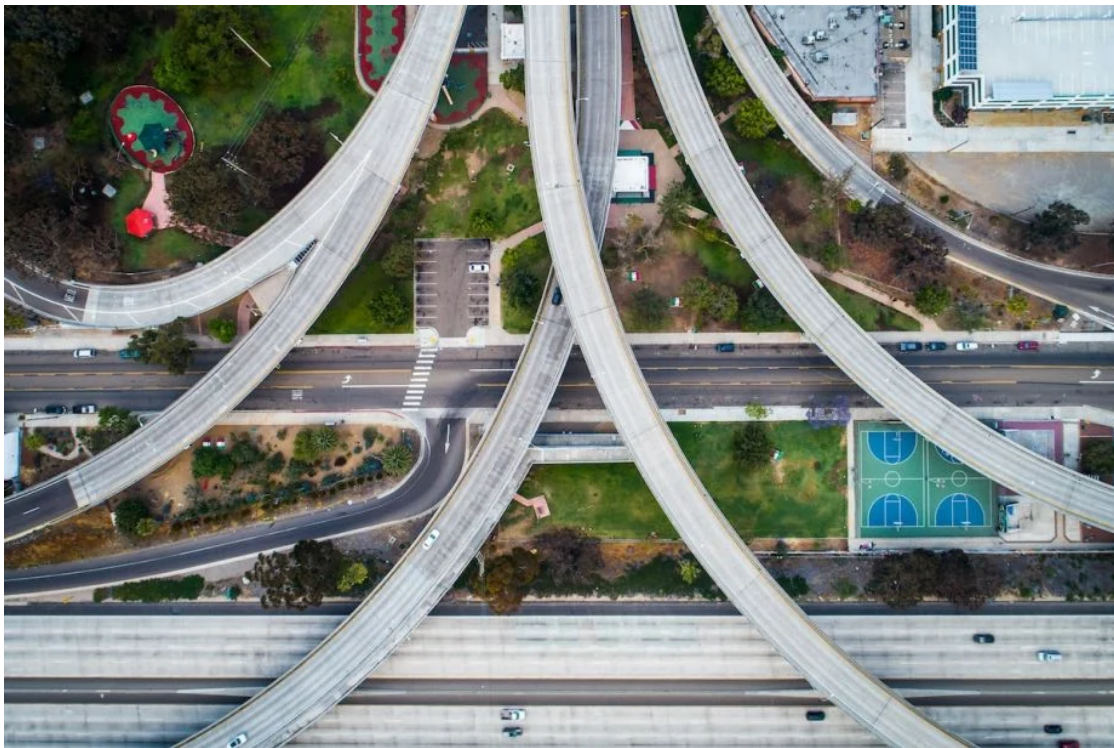

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Enough Talk. It's Time for Transportation Agencies To Finally Remove Some Highways.

Op-ed: Transportation agencies around America are preventing highway removal and advancing highway expansion. Just look at Minnesota.

JOE HARRINGTON OP-ED DECEMBER 11, 2024



(Photo by Abraham Barrera / Unsplash)

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Recent years have brought a new wave of excitement in American cities around the concept of highway removal. But examples of highway removals in the U.S. are few and far between.

Highway removal, [when done well](#) like in [Rochester, New York](#), can revitalize urban areas by reclaiming space for community-centered development, stimulating economic growth and reconnecting neighborhoods previously divided by freeways.

The benefits for the communities living along highways are obvious: People have experienced health, environmental, economic and mobility harms for the last 70 years. Communities originally displaced [lost billions](#) in generational wealth opportunities in the ensuing displacement and residents today [continue to bear harm](#).

Through a climate lens, highways are the linchpin of our carbon-intensive car-driven transportation and land use system. As transportation accounts for [a third of U.S. emissions](#), cutting back on highway infrastructures and spending now is vital for meeting global climate goals and safeguarding communities from environmental and health impacts.

Looking at dollars and cents, [highways are a poor economic investment](#). They occupy nearly 25% of U.S. urban land — an area equivalent to West Virginia and valued at \$4.1 trillion — yet their supposed benefits don't justify these enormous costs.

As highways meet the end of their useful life and are up for (potential) reconstruction, we have a rare opportunity to right these harms and reimagine a better future. Otherwise, the highway and all its attendant problems continue in perpetuity.

So why don't more U.S. states and cities ditch highway addictions? It's complicated.

Sluggish policy responses

On the federal level, policymakers haven't caught up to this push, favoring incremental tweaks to highway policy. The U.S. Department of Transportation's recent [report to Congress](#) on decarbonizing U.S. transportation did not mention highway removal once, favoring fixing existing highways and discouraging new ones.

Some states like [Minnesota and Colorado](#) have turned to mitigation and vehicle miles traveled (VMT) reduction and greenhouse gas emissions targets. [Implemented well](#), these measures can be effective at tamping down highway expansions if using modeling practices that accurately measure VMT implications and associated emissions. But in most cases, these policies focus on ratcheting down highway spending and mitigating emissions, not paving the way for highway removal.

The federal [Reconnecting Communities Grant Program](#) is perhaps the best example of creating policy approaches to address highway removal. The program created a competitive grant process to

provide funding to study and implement community reconnection projects and to support local and state action to remove highways. But many funded projects over the first two years don't [actually include removing highways](#), focusing on half-solution mitigation measures like highway caps and land bridges.

The program will exhaust its funding in the 2024 cycle — two years ahead of schedule — due to concerns about potential policy changes under the next administration. Its future now depends on the congressional transportation reauthorization in 2026, where funding for more planning grants and connecting current grant recipients with capital funding opportunities will be critical, albeit unlikely under the Trump administration and a Republican-controlled congress.

How DOTs are blocking highway removal

State transportation departments across the U.S. maintain an outdated focus on highway construction but are creating new approaches to fight against highway removal efforts. Their [entrenched traffic engineering mindsets](#), earmarked funding and institutional resistance to change impede efforts to promote alternatives to highways, from [Minnesota](#) to [Texas](#).

In Minnesota, a state perceived as a [forward-thinking transportation reformer](#), we've seen MnDOT strongly resist removing highways while [quietly widening others](#). Their toolkit for fighting highway removal includes a variety of approaches, ranging from evaluation metrics and modeling.

Traffic modeling: On a procedural level, agency processes built for evaluating highway alternatives are inadequate to assess highway removals. A recent report by my team at Our Streets, a Minnesota nonprofit focused on transportation policy, and our partners, Norm Marshall of [Smart Mobility](#) found that [MnDOT's travel demand model is highly flawed](#) in its ability to analyze highway removal impacts and cannot provide reliable results.

Like other [DOTs around the country](#), the agency's playbook uses the same models to [justify expanding highways](#) around the country, costing taxpayers billions and failing to reduce traffic. The DOT applies the same modeling logic to implementing [Minnesota's greenhouse gas standard](#) for highway development, watering down its effectiveness through misleading modeling results.

Evaluation metrics: MnDOT's own evaluation metrics do little to fairly evaluate highway alternatives. In many cases, we've seen the agency outline these criteria based on [purpose and needs documents](#) that prioritize cars and fail to consider some of the benefits highway removal could bring to adjacent communities.

For example, the Twin Cities Metropolitan Planning Organization defines equity as follows: "Equity means expanding access to opportunity for people of all races, ethnicities, incomes, abilities, and national origins." By contrast, MnDOT's measure on the [Rethinking I-94](#) process, the region's most ambitious potential highway removal corridor, evaluates equity with the following question: "Does the project option have the potential to enhance transportation choices for individuals? (Yes/No)"

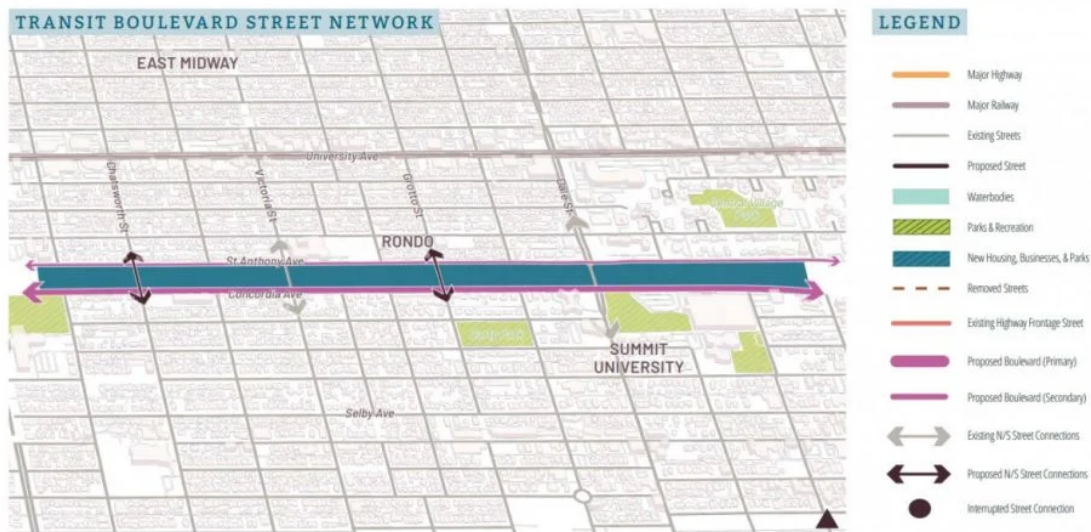
Climate, environmental justice, and sense of place metrics are similarly vague yes-or-no questions; with all options receiving similar scores, despite vastly different outcomes across the spectrum from highway removal to highway expansion.

Land use analyses: Comparing MnDOT's land use analyses to those of other planning organizations throws the agency's priorities in sharp relief. MnDOT's Rethinking I-94 study, placing a potential

boulevard centrally, showed less land use potential than a [report](#) by [Toole Design](#), [Visible City](#) and [Smart Mobility](#) considering alternative road placements to maximize developable space.



Land use analysis cross-section of the proposed “At-Grade” highway alternative to the Rethinking I-94 project in St. Paul, Minnesota.

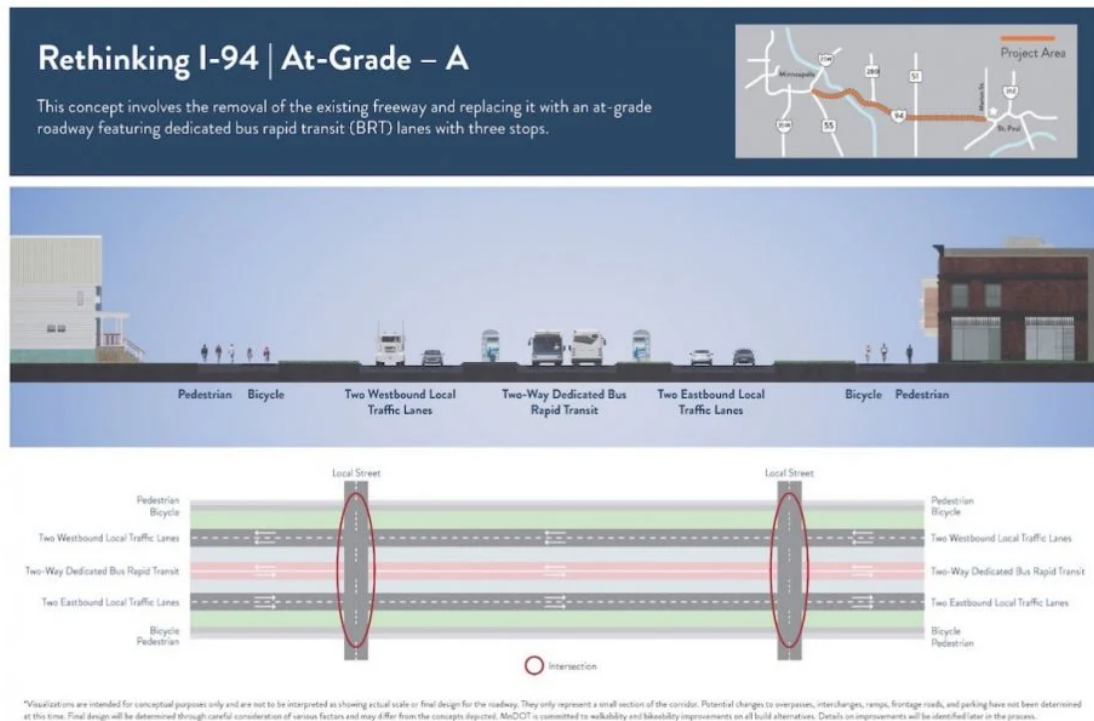


The same cross-section of highway right of way for the “At-Grade” compiled by Toole and Visible City, showing more land use potential by placing the boulevard on one side of the corridor.

Inadequate public engagement: Most of us have never experienced pre-highway American cities. For the public to understand something entirely outside of their current understanding of and relationship with highway infrastructures, transportation agencies need to ensure renderings communicate these projects’ full potential implications.

But MnDOT's high-level engagement materials are vague in representing highway removal options, failing to give the public the context needed to fully understand these proposals and their implications.

Officials have also removed opportunities for public testimony at many critical advisory meetings for highway projects, removing the main touchpoint between elected and appointed officials and the general public. MnDOT claims that it was previously unable to respond to these comments because they were not in writing, closing off public comment periods in favor of written feedback that may not ever see the light of day or reach public officials.



MnDOT's public materials on the Rethinking I-94 project in St. Paul, Minnesota.

A new roadmap for removing highways

There's an urgent need for federal guidance to leverage successful highway removal initiatives, enabling more cities to pursue this transformative approach.

The U.S. DOT should thoroughly study the implications of removing highways, creating a toolkit for state and local officials to implement such proposals. This should include funding and technical assistance to build the capacity to think big and implement ambitious projects and policy changes.

Given the Trump administration's posture and past emphasis of [investing in highway expansions](#), these changes seem unlikely. Philanthropy and forward-thinking policy organizations will likely have to fill this critical funding and expertise gap in coming years.

State DOTs need reform to properly assess and facilitate highway removal projects. Current procedures and technical practices – built by and for highway projects – need to shift as we focus on restoring divided neighborhoods, advancing our climate resilience and creating equitable cities.

And state and federal funding earmarked for highways need to be broadened to facilitate funding for these efforts. First, we must expand [highway purposes](#) to include funding for transit, biking and walking infrastructure that comes with highway removal; second, we must create a special funding bucket to advance these proposals. This is especially important as Biden’s [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law](#) has provisioned \$350 billion to states for [highway projects](#), doubling down on past planning logics.

Just as cities around the country were used as laboratories for urban renewal and highway construction, cities today have the opportunity to be forward-thinking hubs for highway removal and other truly transformative mobility policies. It’s time to be bold and push policymakers and agencies to change their ways and for American cities to finally start removing highways and restoring communities.

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