Highway Boondoggles 8

DOUBLING DOWN ON WASTEFUL, DESTRUCTIVE HIGHWAY PROJECTS

FALL 2023

U.S. PIRG Education Fund

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Executive summary

THE $1.2 TRILLION bipartisan infrastructure bill signed into law in November 2021 provides a previously near-unimaginable opportunity to invest in transportation in America. States now face a choice: spend this money to address real and critical needs with our transportation system, or squander it on wasteful boondoggle projects that double down on the failed transportation strategies of the past.[1]

The federal dollars made available through the infrastructure deal could be spent on fixing our aging roads, making our streets safer, and providing options for Americans to travel without needing a car. In reality, many states have opted instead to spend this money on building and expanding highways – despite decades of evidence that highway expansion fails to address traffic congestion.

In FY 2023, as of the end of May, states had committed $26.6 billion in highway and bridge formula funds to support over 19,300 new projects, on top of the $53.5 billion invested in more than 29,000 projects in FY 2022.[2] While many of these projects include major necessary repairs and rehabilitation, many include expansion of highway capacity. **Of the top 20 largest projects supported by formula funds provided through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) to date, at least 17 include the widening of existing highways.**[3]

***Highway Boondoggles 8* highlights seven wasteful highway construction and expansion projects – some of which have been given new momentum by an influx of transportation dollars provided through the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). These projects, slated to cost a total of more than $15.9 billion, will harm communities and the environment, while likely failing to achieve goals such as reducing congestion or improving safety.**

Questionable projects poised to absorb millions of transportation dollars include:

- **Mid-States Corridor, Indiana**: Cost: $735 million to $1 billion. Plans for a new 54-mile highway in Southern Indiana threaten thousands of acres of forests, farmland and wildlife habitat.
- **Interstate Bridge Replacement, Oregon and Washington**: Cost: $5 billion to $7.5 billion. Under the pretext of a simple bridge replacement, an expensive and oversized highway expansion threatens to worsen congestion in Portland and nearby Vancouver, Wash.
- **Gorham Connector, Maine**: Cost: $220 million to $240 million. A proposed new 6-mile toll road threatens to worsen traffic and exacerbate urban sprawl even as local residents call for investment in rail and bus rapid transit options.
- **I-10 expansion, Texas**: Cost: $750 million. Based on unrealistic traffic figures, major expansion of the I-10 freeway will bring demolitions and displacement to downtown El Paso.

- **Bourne and Sagamore Bridges, Massachusetts**: Cost: $4 billion. The Massachusetts Department of Transportation hopes to replace the Cape Cod bridges with two new, wider bridges, potentially bringing additional traffic and congestion to the Cape.
- **The Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, New York**: Cost: $1.5 billion to $4 billion. New York City transportation authorities are set to squander a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reimagine a polluting and outdated highway, instead pursuing IIJA dollars to fast-track a misguided expansion project.
- **I-15 Expansion, Utah**: Cost: $3.7 billion. In the face of local opposition and based on overinflated traffic projections, misguided plans for a major freeway expansion in Salt Lake City are being proposed as a way to deal with the region's rapid growth.

Highway expansion harms our health and the environment, doesn't solve congestion, and creates a lasting financial burden for the public.

- Expanding a highway sets off a chain reaction of societal decisions that ultimately leads to the highway becoming congested again – often in only a short time. Since 1980, the U.S. has added well over 870,000 lane-miles of highway – paving more than 1,648 square miles, an area larger than the state of Rhode Island – and yet, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, congestion on America's roads was worse than it was in the early 1980s.[4]
- Highway expansion fuels additional driving that contributes to climate change. Transportation is America's No. 1 source of greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for 28% of the nation's total emissions in 2021.[5]
- Air pollution from transportation causes tens of thousands of deaths in the U.S. each year and makes us more vulnerable to a range of health problems, including asthma, impaired lung function, coronary heart disease and strokes.[6]
- Highway expansion can cause irreparable harm to communities – forcing the relocation of homes and businesses, widening "dead zones" alongside highways, severing street connections for pedestrians and cars, reducing cities' base of taxable property and overall community value, and stripping communities of their economic vitality.[7]
- Building new roads diverts billions of taxpayer dollars from repairing existing ones. More than 162,000 miles of major U.S. highways are in "poor or mediocre" condition and need repaving or "even more substantive" repairs.[8] Approximately 7% of the nation's bridges are considered "structurally deficient."[9]

Roughly 21% of all federal funds spent on highway projects over the last decade have gone toward adding capacity, such as a new lane or major widening, to an existing roadway.[10] In fiscal year 2021, new federally backed road expansion or construction projects cost the American taxpayer a total of approximately $18.7 billion, including state and local contributions.[11] In addition to the one-time costs of construction, these projects will cost taxpayers billions of dollars over the years to maintain, saddling future generations with expensive maintenance needs.

With more funding available than ever before to spend on addressing the real priorities of 21st century transportation, federal, state and local governments should stop or downsize unnecessary or low-priority highway projects. Specifically, policymakers should:

- **Invest in transportation solutions that reduce our dependence on automobile travel.** States should redirect IIJA funding and their own funds away from boondoggle projects and toward projects that expand transportation choices, prioritize repair and rehabilitation and reduce vehicle-miles traveled. Investments in public transportation, cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, transport demand management and other measures reduce the pressure on congested highways, as well as delivering significant public health and environmental benefits.
- **Adopt fix-it-first policies that reorient transportation funding away from highway expansion** and toward repair of existing roads and investment in other transportation options.
- **Use the latest transportation data and require full cost-benefit comparisons, including future maintenance needs, as well as socioeconomic benefits and impacts,** to evaluate all proposed new and expanded highways. Public officials should ensure that all evaluations of proposed projects use up-to-date travel information and reflect a range of potential future trends for housing and transportation.
- **Review the purpose and need of key transportation funding programs** and the conditions attached to funding awards made through these programs – for example, adding conditions that must be met before considering building new roads – as opposed to simply providing a blank check for state and local transportation authorities.
- **Invest in research and data collection** to better track and react to ongoing shifts in how people travel.

Introduction

ON SEPTEMBER 22, 2011, then-President Barack Obama stood before a crowd in front of the Brent Spence Bridge that carries Interstates 71 and 75 across the Ohio River, connecting Cincinnati with Covington, Kentucky. The speech he had traveled there to deliver focused on the need for increased infrastructure spending as part of the American Jobs Act – the cornerstone of his 2012 re-election campaign.[12]

Obama is far from the only politician to use this aging structure as an example of America's infrastructure woes. For decades, the bridge – in need of repair and struggling under the volume of traffic it carries – has been a potent symbol of the need for investment in America's infrastructure and a backdrop for the oratory of Republicans and Democrats alike, from presidents Obama and Joe Biden to former House Speaker John Boehner, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and President Donald Trump.

In the decade since President Obama's visit, however, local transportation authorities failed to raise the money needed to carry out their plans to deal with the Brent Spence Bridge. But that's all about to change.

On December 29, 2022, Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear and Ohio Governor Mike DeWine announced that the Brent Spence Bridge Corridor Project had been awarded more than $1.6 billion in federal grants through the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), at long last enabling the two states to set in motion their plans to deal with the Brent Spence Bridge once and for all.[13]

But for all the years of photo ops, the Brent Spence Bridge isn't actually "crumbling." The bridge is old, but it remains structurally sound, and officials from Ohio and Kentucky plan to keep it in operation.

Instead of simply fixing it, federal infrastructure spending will jump-start the construction of a new, 10-lane bridge alongside the existing one, and the construction of miles of widened highways and new interchanges further carving up the local area. By eliminating (at least for a time) the traffic bottleneck at the bridge, the project could very well lead to increased traffic through the corridor, more congestion on local streets that connect to the highway, and more air and noise pollution, carbon emissions and other environmental harms from highway traffic in the area.[14]

Make no mistake: Many of America's roads and bridges *are* crumbling. But the Brent Spence Bridge project is a perfect example of how transportation funds that could be used to repair our streets, roads and bridges – or improve the safety, flexibility and environmental performance of our transportation system in other ways – are instead diverted into costly, damaging highway expansion projects.

The IIJA – also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law – provides a historic opportunity to change that. The funding it provides could be used to address the nation's real and urgent transportation needs: repairing aging roads and bridges, expanding access to transit and other sustainable transportation options, and improving safety for all road users at a time of rising death and injury on America's roads.

Unfortunately, many states have chosen to spend large amounts of IIJA funds on needless highway construction and expansion. The Brent Spence Bridge is a case in point, but it is by no means the only one. Across the country, the IIJA transportation dollars now flowing into state coffers are in many cases being used to double down on the same strategy of continual highway expansion that has failed this country for generations, inflicting immeasurable harm on local communities, the environment, public health and the climate, and almost always failing to do the job it is usually intended to do: ease traffic congestion.

Some of the projects now being put in motion thanks to IIJA dollars are being funded through discretionary grant programs created under the law. Most, however, are being paid for with formula funding made available by the IIJA, over which states have near-total control. The battle over the nation's transportation future, in other words, is a battle now being waged in the states.

In this edition of our *Highway Boondoggles* report, we continue to draw attention to wasteful and damaging highway expansion and construction projects, this year with special attention to projects that states are proposing to move forward with funding from the IIJA. Some of these have already received IIJA grants and are gearing up to begin construction. Others are pursuing them, with the aim of jumpstarting plans that have been in the works for years – many of them in the face of strong local opposition – but hitherto delayed by local agencies' inability to cover their often massive costs.

While these projects highlight the large degree of autonomy afforded to individual states in choosing how to implement the IIJA, they also highlight the gravity of that choice, and its long-term implications for future generations of Americans. On the one hand, the influx of transportation funding provided by the law could be used to fix the myriad problems caused by a century of highway-centric thinking and to build a healthier, more sustainable transportation system. Or it could be used for projects that do little but perpetuate those harms into the 21st century. It's up to us to decide which course we want to take.

States are getting an influx of funding for transportation. How are they spending it?

THE $1.2 TRILLION Bipartisan Infrastructure Law signed by President Joe Biden in November 2021 has provided an unprecedented infusion of cash to invest in America's transportation system – nearly doubling the funding provided by the FAST Act that it replaces.[15] This funding could help states make major strides in fixing longstanding problems in America's transportation system: for example, repairing, rehabilitating and maintaining existing infrastructure, expanding transportation choices, and increasing transit options. But it also has the potential to fuel a new wave of highway expansion projects that do immeasurable harm to the environment, the climate and our communities.

Fifty-four percent ($643 billion) of the funding available under the IIJA is going toward reauthorizing the surface transportation program over five years. Of that, around two-thirds – $432 billion – is flowing to highway programs (a 90% increase in highway funding, from $226 billion under the FAST Act); $109 billion to transit (a 79% increase, up from $61 billion), and $102 billion to rail (an increase of 750%, up from $12 billion).[16]

The vast majority of the $643 billion available through the IIJA for surface transportation is dispersed to state DOTs through formula funding (fixed amounts of guaranteed funding based on statutory formulas).[17] More than $200 billion, however, remains with USDOT to be dispersed for specific projects via discretionary grant awards (funds awarded to states, metro areas and tribes through a range of new, updated and existing competitive grant programs), based on the extent to which USDOT determines each project will contribute to overall national, regional and local priorities.[18]

Discretionary grant programs represent an opportunity for USDOT to direct funds toward specific priorities. For example, roughly $116 billion of the $200 billion available in discretionary grants is aimed at increasing multimodal transportation. Around $50 billion is directed toward infrastructure repair and rehabilitation – most of that (roughly $43 billion) via the Bridge Investment Program created to fund the repair, replacement or protection of aging bridges.[19] The Infrastructure for Rebuilding America (INFRA) grants program (Nationally Significant Multimodal Freight & Highway Projects) awards grants for "multimodal freight and highway projects" to "improve … safety, efficiency, and reliability."[20] And the roughly $15 billion of competitive grant programs allocated to climate change and the environment includes $7.5 billion for transportation electrification, including electric vehicles and the electrification of transit systems, plus $1.4 billion for climate change mitigation and/or resiliency via the Promoting Resilient

Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-Saving Transportation (PROTECT) competitive grant program.[21]

The final say over how to invest IIJA formula funds, however, remains primarily in the hands of state departments of transportation (DOTs) and the state legislatures that set the policy framework within which state DOTs operate.[22]

States have broad latitude to use formula funding for a variety of purposes.[23] Funds available through the traditionally highway-focused Surface Transportation Block Grant Program, for example – radically increased in size under the IIJA – can be "flexed" to other projects, including non-roadway projects such as transit, active transportation and climate resiliency.[24] The same is true of nearly all of the core programs that are typically used for repair and rehabilitation of transportation infrastructure, most notably the National Highway Performance Program and, again, the Surface Transportation Block Grant Program.[25]

The Biden administration has long expressed its preference that transportation funds should be prioritized for fixing existing transportation infrastructure, reducing carbon emissions from transportation and promoting alternative modes of transportation to car travel.[26] But many states have taken a different approach to the expenditure of formula funding provided under the IIJA.

As data from the first full year of IIJA becomes available, it is clear that decision-makers are in many cases using IIJA transportation dollars in ways that simply replicate old, highway-centric investment, taking advantage of this influx of cash to accelerate planning and construction of existing and/or previously unfunded proposed highway projects.

Formula fund spending

In FY 2023, through the end of May, states had committed $26.6 billion in IIJA highway and bridge formula funds to support over 19,300 new projects, on top of the $53.5 billion invested in more than 29,000 projects in FY 2022.[27] In fiscal year 2022, the first full year of the IIJA, states used their federal highway formula funds to kickstart a total of nearly 25,000 projects across the country.[28]

Of the top 20 largest IIJA projects supported by formula funds in the first full year of the law, almost all (at least 17) include the widening of existing highways, and most include the construction of new associated infrastructure such as interchanges, ramps and roundabouts. Three of the top five most expensive formula-funded projects (the Loop 1604 Expansion, I-35 Expansion and 635 East – all in Texas) are also projects highlighted in previous *Highway Boondoggles* reports.

Moreover, Federal Highway Administration records show that in 2022, 38 states shifted roughly $755 million allocated to climate-related programs created by the IIJA – more than a quarter of the total annual amount available through those programs – to general-purpose highway construction accounts.[30] Not all of the projects this money ended up funding were necessarily "bad" highway projects (many states used the funds to contribute in some way or another to highway-related climate resilience initiatives, and in some cases to transit).[31] But these transfers illustrate how, since the IIJA did not in itself alter how federal transportation funds flow to the states, much of the funding it provides can be siphoned into highway projects if states so choose. In other words, it is in the hands of state DOTs to decide whether these funds are put toward fixing a century of highway-oriented transportation policy or perpetuating it.

THE 20 LARGEST IIJA PROJECTS SUPPORTED BY FORMULA FUNDS.

(Source: American Road & Transportation Builders Association[29])

State	Project	Cost
Texas	Expanding Loop 1604 in San Antonio	$291 million
Texas	635 East Project in Dallas	$225 million
New York	Van Wyck Expressway Capacity & Access Improvements to and from JFK International Airport	$211 million
Arizona	Roadway Widening on I-17 Split	$200 million
Texas	I-35 Widening in Travis County	$192 million
South Carolina	Phase 1 Carolina Crossroads I-20/26/126 Corridor Improvement Project	$145 million
Ohio	I-70/71 Downtown Ramp Up Project in Columbus	$123 million
California	Rehabilitation of Pomona Freeway between the Long Beach and San Gabriel River Freeways	$121 million
California	Route 46 Corridor Improvement Project in San Luis Obispo	$119 million
Illinois	Interchange Reconstruction and Bridge Replacement on I-57 at I-74 Interchange in Urbana-Champaign	$107 million
Georgia	State Road 2/State Road 515 Roadway Reconstruction Project in Northern Georgia	$104 million
California	State Route 55 Improvements Project in Orange County	$101 million
California	Rehabilitation of Route 10 Near Coachella	$100 million
Tennessee	Interchange Modification on I-55 at Crump Boulevard in Memphis	$99.6 million
Texas	Widen Loop 375 in El Paso	$95 million
New Jersey	Route 18 Drainage and Pavement Rehabilitation in East Brunswick	$91.7 million
Tennessee	Improvements at I-75, I-24 Interchange near the Tennessee-Georgia Border	$91.2 million
South Carolina	Phase 2 Carolina Crossroads I-20/26/126 Corridor Improvement Project	$90 million
California	SAC 5 Corridor Enhancement Project in Sacramento	$88 million
Texas	Irving Interchange Project in Dallas	$80 million

Discretionary funding

States have also been quick to jump on IIJA discretionary funding opportunities for highway and bridge projects. The Kentucky Transportation Cabinet and the Ohio Department of Transportation, for example, have received a total of $1.65 billion in discretionary funding for the Brent Spence Bridge Corridor Project featured in *Highway Boondoggles 7* (2022), with $1.4 billion awarded to the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet through the Bridge Investment Program, and $250 million in National Infrastructure Project Assistance (Mega) program funds jointly to ODOT and the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet.[32]

The problem with highway boondoggles

NEW AND EXPANDED HIGHWAYS impose financial, social and environmental costs that extend well beyond the direct costs of road maintenance, while their claimed benefits, such as reduced congestion, often fail to materialize. The net result of highway expansion, on the contrary, is to attract yet more cars to our roads, which already cause immense damage to our communities, health and environment.

Highway expansions are expensive

Highway expansion costs the U.S. tens of billions of dollars each year. Roughly 21% of all federal funds spent on highway projects over the last decade have gone toward adding capacity, such as a new lane or major widening, to an existing roadway.[33] Data for fiscal year 2021 show that federally backed road expansion projects that year (either added capacity on existing roads, or new roads) cost the taxpayer a total of approximately $18.7 billion, including state and local contributions.[34]

Continued highway expansion absorbs resources that could be used for other transportation needs – including needs that are increasingly urgent in the 21st century. These needs include:

- **Road repairs**. Across the country, according to the American Road and Transportation Builders Association, more than 162,000 miles of major highways (15.7%) are in "poor or mediocre" condition and need repaving or "even more substantive" repairs.[35] Approximately 7% of all U.S. bridges are considered "structurally deficient."[36] Every day, there are 163.2 million crossings on almost 43,000 "structurally deficient" bridges across the country.[37]

  As much of the infrastructure built in the mid-20th century nears the end of its useful life, governments are struggling to meet day-to-day maintenance needs and often defer necessary repairs. This has led to a road and bridge repair backlog of more than $687 billion, including $555.6 billion needed for road repair and $131.8 billion for bridge repair.[38] As streets, roads and bridges continue to age, the cost and urgency of maintenance and repairs can only be expected to grow. And the majority of Americans recognize that this is a problem. In a 2020 YouGov poll, 79% of respondents said that we should fix our existing roads before building new ones.[39]

- **Transit repair and expansion.** Similarly, the nation faces a $105 billion repair backlog for transit infrastructure.[40] Americans also are increasingly demanding expanded access to, and investment in, public transportation. According to the 2020 YouGov poll, Americans favor government action to reduce the number of cars on the road, and support increasing the share of funding for public transportation.[41]

- **Continued transit operation.** With transit agencies struggling to recover from a precipitous drop in ridership and fare revenue during the COVID-19 pandemic and generally unable to spend federal capital grants on operating expenses, transit systems across the country are in need of billions of dollars just to survive or provide basic service.[42]
- **Local needs.** Local governments also clamor for funding to fix potholes, expand bike lanes, improve conditions for pedestrians, and engage in "complete streets" transformations and other improvements to local streetscapes, including building and/or retrofitting streets to ensure accessibility for all users. Often, these improvements cost just a tiny fraction of the cost of a major highway project but deliver significant improvements in quality of life and expand the mobility options available to local residents.
- **Measures to increase roadway safety for all road users.** Every year, thousands of Americans are killed or injured on the nation's roads. Pedestrian deaths, in particular, have been rising steadily and will continue to do so as long as our streets are designed first and foremost to move vehicle traffic as quickly as possible rather than to ensure the safety of all road users.[43]
- **Retrofitting existing infrastructure to increase climate resiliency**. Authorities in many parts of the country are already having to repeatedly rebuild transportation infrastructure due to flooding, extreme heat and other impacts of climate change.[44] These impacts are likely to become more frequent and severe over the coming decades.

Moreover, the fact that the U.S. road network is already substantially built-out, with more than 4 million miles of public roadway nationwide, means that return on investment for every mile that departments of transportation consider adding to it today is less substantial now than it once was, which also increases the opportunity cost of forgoing other alternatives that would add components to the system that are currently much less built-out, such as transit and biking/pedestrian infrastructure.[45]

Highway expansion doesn't solve congestion

Building a new highway or widening an existing one is often presented as a way to reduce traffic congestion. Nearly a century of highway construction in the U.S., however, suggests that it does not work. Expanding a highway sets off a chain reaction of societal decisions that ultimately lead to the highway becoming congested again – often in only a short time.

Businesses may choose to move or establish new locations on the outskirts of the city to take advantage of the new highway. People may choose to move farther away seeking cheaper housing. Commuters who had left early for work to avoid traffic might travel at rush hour once again. People who had taken transit might get back into their cars. This "induced travel" (sometimes referred to as "induced demand") takes up additional space on highways, ultimately resulting in the return of congestion. This phenomenon is so predictable that it has been called the "Fundamental Law of Road Congestion."[46]

Polling indicates that the majority of Americans recognize and understand this phenomenon, even if transportation planners routinely choose to ignore it. In a recent survey of more than 2,000 U.S. voters, 67% said they believed that widening highways ultimately creates more traffic. Only 11% felt that highway expansions alleviate congestion.[47]

Highway expansion damages our health and the environment

Encouraging the addition of yet more cars to America's roads worsens the already-massive harm our auto-centric transportation system inflicts on the environment, the climate, public health, and the health of our communities.

For example:

- **Air pollution:** A widely quoted study published in 2013 suggested that air pollution from road transportation is responsible for at least 58,000 deaths in the U.S. each year.[48] Subsequent research has suggested that this figure may itself drastically underestimate the extent of the damage.[49] The risk is particularly acute for the roughly 60 million Americans who live in close proximity to a major roadway.[50] One study estimates the annual cost of damage caused by air pollutants nationwide to be up to $277 billion, 16% of which is attributable to cars, light-duty trucks and SUVs.[51]

Photo: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

New and wider roads mean more traffic, and more traffic means more pollution.

- **Climate change:** Transportation is the largest single source of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. Americans produce more carbon pollution from transportation per capita than residents of any other major industrialized nation.[52] In 2022, gasoline consumption from transportation resulted in the emission of around 1,019 million metric tons (MMT) of carbon dioxide (CO_2), and diesel consumption emitted 457 MMT – together equating to around 30% of total U.S. energy-related CO_2 emissions in 2022.[53]

- **Motor vehicle crashes:** Approximately 40,000 Americans die in car crashes every year, and millions more are hospitalized with serious injuries.[54] In 2022, almost 43,000 people lost their lives on America's roads.[55] In 2020, the estimated cost of motor vehicle deaths, injuries and property damage totaled more than $474 billion.[56]

Other external costs of automobile use range from the costs of traffic congestion – for example, in the form of work hours lost sitting in traffic jams – to the environmental costs of water pollution from tire wear and road salt, to the military and geopolitical costs of oil dependency.[57]

The combination of climate change, air pollution-related illness and death from transportation, and the rising toll of vehicle crashes represents a genuine environmental and public health emergency – one that justifies rethinking our transportation infrastructure investment priorities. Unfortunately, in much of the country, states continue to invest precious public dollars in highway expansion projects that could make each of these problems worse.

Highway expansion damages our communities

Highway expansion can also cause irreparable harm to communities by forcing the relocation of homes and businesses, widening "dead zones" alongside highways where noise and pollution make street life unpleasant or impossible, severing street connections for pedestrians and cars, reducing the city's base of taxable property, creating noise and disruption that degrade quality of life, and facilitating the emission of pollutants that cause tens of thousands of American deaths each year and make people more vulnerable to diseases.

The high cost of expanded highways often outweighs their economic contribution – hence, auto-oriented development often leads to a situation where car-dependent sprawl is effectively "subsidized" by more economically productive, denser, mixed-use urban places.[58]

A recent *Los Angeles Times* investigation found that over 1 million people were displaced for highways from the 1950s to the 1990s and another 200,000 people have been displaced by federally funded road projects since.[59] A 2006 study found that U.S. cities would have added 8% to their population between 1950 and 1990 if urban freeways had not been built, compared to the 17% decline that occurred amid the urban highway boom.[60] Such displacement and disruption continue, including through many projects in this report.

Similarly, a recent study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia modeling highway impacts on neighborhoods found that urban neighborhoods with highways have roughly 18% fewer amenities (housing, jobs and services) than those without, perpetuating disparities in income and access to opportunity.[61]

Highway Boondoggles 2023

AMERICA'S CONTINUED construction of new and ever-wider highways costs tens of billions of dollars each year – money that could be spent on more pressing priorities, such as highway repair, transit repair and expansion, and local street improvements. These highway construction and expansion projects often fail to do the job they are often designed to do – reduce congestion – while at the same time saddling future generations with the financial costs of maintaining this new infrastructure.

In this report, we identify seven highway "boondoggles" slated to cost a total of more than $15.9 billion – projects with large price tags that are unnecessary and/or threaten to damage the environment and the communities around them.

Some of these projects have been in the works for decades, conceived in a time when concepts such as induced demand and the climate impacts of automobile use were less well understood, and when transportation needs were different from the needs of today. Of these, some that have hitherto been put on hold or otherwise prevented from getting underway due to state DOTs' inability to pay for them are being revived or pushed forward due to the sudden availability of transportation dollars provided through the IIJA.

In this report, we address four types of projects:

- New highways or relocations of existing highways.
- Projects that add new lanes to existing roads.
- Highway expansions that are unnecessarily tacked onto needed highway reconstruction and repair projects. Many highways are currently reaching the end of their useful lives and require major reconstruction, or include safety hazards that should be addressed. In many cases, however, highway agencies have added expansion onto these reconstruction projects, making them more expensive and disruptive than they could be.
- Highway reconstruction projects that are out of step with state policy goals. America's 20th century highway-building spree saw the construction of many roads that should never have been built. Some cities have begun to remove destructive freeways that cut through city centers or reimagine them for the 21st century, yet others are planning to spend billions to rebuild them essentially as they were before – perpetuating their impacts on communities and the environment and making it more difficult to reach air quality, equity or climate goals. Spending public resources to create problems that then require the expenditure of more public resources to fix is the epitome of waste.

While not every state or region is included in the following list of highway projects, nearly every state has one or more highway expansion projects that could

rightly be described as boondoggles. The projects highlighted in this report are not necessarily the worst highway boondoggles in the nation, but they are nonetheless representative of the costs of proceeding with destructive projects that do not have compelling transportation rationales.

Mid-States Corridor, Indiana

Cost: $735 million to $1 billion[62]

Plans for a new 54-mile highway in southern Indiana threaten thousands of acres of forests, farmland and wildlife habitat.

The controversial Mid-States Corridor is a proposed 54-mile new-build highway connecting I-69 near Crane Naval Depot in Martin County, Ind., to I-64 near Dale, Ind.[63] Slicing through a largely rural part of the state, the highway would devastate thousands of acres of farmland, wetlands and forests and destroy or degrade critical wildlife habitats, open spaces and other natural resources.[64] While backed by local business leaders, the highway is fiercely opposed by residents, who say it "will offer little to no benefit, and only destroy our beautiful farms, homes and environment."[65]

Proposals for a new highway along this route have been around since the early 1990s. Despite impact studies for various plans being shelved by the federal government in 2014 on the basis that such a road was "no longer warranted," a group of business leaders and elected officials known as the I-67 Development Corporation have continued to push for a new highway.[66] Their efforts culminated in the current proposals for the Mid-States Corridor, a billion-dollar road running parallel to the nearby I-69, which had opened in 2012.[67]

Having proposed several potential route options, in April 2022 the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) announced that it had selected "Alternative P" as its preferred alternative.[68] Regarding the exact road layout, the agency announced that a "freeway" or interstate model has been ruled out, leaving an "expressway," with at least two lanes in each direction, and a "super two," with one lane in each direction plus passing lanes or wide shoulders, as the remaining options.[69]

An analysis published by INDOT in 2020 estimated that construction costs for these two alternatives could run to $470.7 million and $400.5 million, respectively, not including land acquisition, right-of-way and utility relocations, design/engineering, construction management and other costs.[70] As of April 2022, the cost of INDOT's preferred option was estimated at between $735 million and $1 billion.[71]

A 2020 analysis by the Hoosier Environmental Council, Sierra Club, Indiana Forest Alliance and other local environmental groups notes that the proposed highway will have grave implications for forests, floodplains, wetlands, farmland and waterways, and threatens to destroy or degrade important wildlife habitats, including for birds (the Loggerhead shrike, the Barn owl, the Cerulean warbler and others), endangered bats (the Indiana bat, Northern long-eared bat, gray bat and four other species) and endangered river species including the Lake sturgeon and others.[72] The analysis notes that secondary impacts from related development along the route could potentially increase the loss of natural lands by 22% to 44%.[73]

During the public comment period following the release of the Tier 1 draft environmental impact study in April 2022, INDOT received hundreds of comments from local residents and businesses opposed to the project – most of them in Dubois County, including Jasper and Huntingburg.[74]

The specific way this proposed destruction is being driven and funded has sparked further anger among local residents – not least because the five members of the Mid-states Corridor Regional Development Authority (RDA) board charged with raising the funds needed to initiate the study are appointed by local governments in Spencer and Dubois counties, and the proposed route would cut through communities in Daviess and Martin counties, whose residents have no representation on the RDA.[75] As the Indiana Forest Alliance puts it, in a scathing article about the proposed highway in its Winter 2022-23 newsletter, "The bottom line is that the RDA is being driven by businessmen in the Jasper/ Huntingburg area […] who each stand to benefit greatly from a new highway to the front doors of their businesses and the real estate boom that such a highway will bring."[76] This additional development will come at the cost of yet more natural land beyond that already eaten up by the highway itself, putting additional forestland, farms and wetlands at risk.[77]

Meanwhile, critics claim, INDOT has neither demonstrated any actual need for the new highway, nor made any attempt to show that the problems they claim it will solve even exist, or, to the extent that they do, why they could not be solved by improving existing infrastructure or promoting non-highway alternatives, such as passenger and/or freight rail.[78]

Moreover, as noted in a 2020 letter submitted to INDOT by a coalition of local civic groups, businesses, churches and other organizations in response to the project's Tier 1 Environmental Impact Study Draft Purpose and Need Statement, "In justifying other highway projects, INDOT has argued that significant population *growth* is what justifies highway construction in undeveloped areas – on the basis that more people means greater demand for highway infrastructure. Here, INDOT tries to claim the opposite – that *low* population growth should be addressed by building a new highway. INDOT cannot have it both ways. It is nonsensical to claim that when an area is growing, the state should build a highway to accommodate this growth, and also that when an area is declining, the state should build a highway to create growth. By this logic, Indiana should be building highways literally everywhere."[79]

The damage that the Mid-States Corridor in its current form would inflict on the local area far outweighs any potential benefit the road might bring. Moreover, local advocates argue that even if a genuine need to add more capacity could be demonstrated, there are plenty of other potential routes that would avoid the destruction engendered by the one currently being proposed. In its Winter 2022-23 newsletter, the Indiana Forest Alliance presents maps of such alternatives using existing roads that they say promoters of the proposed highway have refused to consider.[80] "Before one square inch of ground for another high speed, new terrain boondoggle is committed," they write, the elected representatives involved "should explain why any route that does not use new terrain, i.e., does not eat up and open up thousands of acres of forests and farms to development, is not being considered for this highway."[81]

Even one of the environmental impact statement's own contributors has questioned the need for the project, saying: "Every step of the way we looked at this, no one had confidence in the project. … We're going to displace people. We're going to move farms. We're going to impact wetlands and wildlife and agricultural fields. And for what? Why are we doing it?"[82]

Interstate Bridge Replacement, Oregon and Washington

$5 billion to $7.5 billion[83]

Masquerading as a simple bridge replacement, an expensive, oversized highway expansion threatens to worsen congestion in Vancouver and Portland.

Opened in 1917, the northbound section of the Interstate Bridge was the first automobile bridge to cross the Columbia River between Washington and Oregon.[84] Now more than a century old, according to Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) the bridge "no longer satisfies the needs of modern commerce and travel."[85] Replacing it with a "modern, seismically resilient, multimodal structure," the agency says, is "a high priority" for Oregon and Washington.[86] The result: a proposed 5-mile expansion of Interstate 5 over the Columbia River between Vancouver, Wash., and Portland, Ore.

Misleadingly dubbed the Interstate Bridge Replacement (IBR), the project WSDOT and the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) are proposing is, in fact, not simply the replacement of a bridge, but rather a major freeway expansion that would almost double the size of the existing bridge while also rebuilding several freeway interchanges in the city of Vancouver and the city of Portland. While the project does incorporate a significant transit component, overall, local advocates claim, it's better described as "a freeway widening and interchange rebuilding project."[87]

Photo: Cacophony via Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 2.5 DEED

The Interstate Bridge, from Vancouver, Washington.

The project largely recycles plans for an earlier proposed freeway expansion – the Columbia River Crossing – that was shelved in 2014.[88] Concerns about those plans were already being voiced more than a decade ago. In 2011, then U.S. Representative Peter DeFazio expressed his frustration to *The Oregonian*: "I kept on telling the project to keep the costs down, don't build a gold-plated project. How can you have a $4 billion project? They let the engineers loose, told them to solve all the region's infrastructure problems in one fell swoop… They need to get it all straight and come up with a viable project, a viable financing plan that can withstand a vigorous review."[89]

Local advocates argue that current proposals for the IBR do none of these things.

Led jointly by ODOT and WSDOT, in collaboration with eight bi-state partner agencies, under the direction of the governors, legislative committees, transportation commissions and/or transportation departments from both states, the project has already seen runaway costs. In 2020 it was predicted to cost up to $4.8 billion. By the end of 2022, that figure had risen to $7.5 billion.[90] And given transportation agencies' well-documented history of cost overruns, it will likely rise even further. These costs may be met by competitive grants through the IIJA, as well as formula funding from the two states.[91]

Proponents of the project have argued that the widening will merely involve the addition of one "auxiliary lane" in each direction – i.e., adding only enough capacity to widen the existing bridge from six lanes (three in each direction) to eight (three plus an auxiliary lane – so, four lanes – in each direction).[92] However, project plans show a 164-foot-wide road wide enough for up to 12 lanes should ODOT and WSDOT decide to restripe it in the future.[93]

This design also brings new safety concerns – namely, creating "dangerous … elevated roadways and steep on-and-off ramps," the latter with grades of up to 7%.[94] By one analysis, the 4% grade of the main span would be steeper than almost any other interstate bridge in the country, creating hazardous conditions in winter weather.[95]

Local advocates opposed to the proposals claim that the team behind the IBR project has consistently refused to engage with local concerns, even ignoring recommendations from its own panel of bridge and highway experts assembled to review earlier plans for the Columbia River Crossing, which, for example, recommended dividing the project into three separate, independent phases to mitigate financial risk, and eliminating at least one of the planned interchanges to improve traffic flow and keep costs down.[96]

There have also been accusations that authorities' assessment of the need for and impacts of the proposed bridge widening has been based in part on flawed and misleading traffic modeling that has inflated predicted traffic volumes and congestion on the existing bridge.[97]

WSDOT doesn't have a great record when it comes to traffic projections. The final environmental impact statement for the Columbia River Crossing, published in 2011, predicted annual traffic growth on I-5 of 1.3%; actual growth from 2000 to 2019 was 0.3% per year.[98] Subsequent independent analysis showed that the IBR projections had overestimated future traffic volumes by tens of thousands of vehicles per day, figures that were used to justify the plans that became the foundation of a vastly oversized project.[99]

Even irrespective of the numbers, some residents argue that the IBR plans will, in fact, create more congestion in the area, not less. While planned peak time tolls of up to

$5.69 each way will reduce traffic volumes on the I-5 bridge itself, the absence of tolls on the parallel I-205 Glen Jackson Bridge would simply divert "tens of thousands" of these vehicles to I-205, leading to gridlock on the I-205 bridge.[100]

Under the slogan "Right Size, Right Now," the Just Crossing Alliance, a coalition opposed to the IBR plans, proposes an alternative: a bridge of a size appropriate to the traffic volumes that can be expected with tolling, as well as improved transit and a significantly smaller price tag.[101] They argue that the focus should be on replacing the bridge rather than widening the freeway, and that the agencies involved should look seriously at alternative options, such as a tunnel or an alternative bridge type that could use existing approaches and eliminate the need to widen the road and build interchanges.[102] In short, as City Observatory's Joe Cortright puts it: "The bloated size of the project and its $7.5 billion cost, and the availability of better alternatives […] call for rethinking this project, now."[103]

Gorham Connector, Maine

Cost: $220 million to $240 million[104]

A proposed new 6-mile toll road threatens to worsen traffic and exacerbate urban sprawl.

Generally speaking, Maine has largely avoided making highway-sprawl mistakes on the scale seen in other parts of the country. However, residents of Portland and its environs fear that this could be about to change.

The Maine Turnpike Authority (MTA) has proposed building a new 6-mile, four-lane limited access highway spur linking Gorham and Westbrook to South Portland and the rest of the I-295 infrastructure that cuts through Portland's downtown.[105] Slated to cost at least $200 million, this new highway would link the Maine Turnpike at Exit 45 to the Gorham Bypass off Route 114 in Gorham, with the claimed objective of relieving congestion on the two existing two-lane roads between Gorham and Westbrook and Portland.[106]

The idea of creating improved highway connections between Portland and areas west of the city has been around for decades – and it is not entirely unpopular among local residents. Currently there are no highways leading west or northwest from Portland toward the towns in its vicinity, which have been growing rapidly due to sprawl-conducive land use policies. Formerly self-contained towns like Westbrook and Gorham, and the once-rural adjoining towns, are increasingly becoming dormitory towns for Portland.[107] As a result, existing roads into the city experience some moderately slowed speeds due to congestion.[108] In 2012, a feasibility study commissioned by the Turnpike Authority to study the possibility of a new connector linking the Gorham Bypass with the Maine Turnpike proposed – among other things – a new road.[109]

However, the study also explicitly states that that road will not solve the traffic problem.

Rather, the authors stress that for any such project to succeed it would need to be combined with an effective regional public transportation strategy that would create a substantial increase in transit ridership and bus routes, as well as land-use policies that direct growth away from single-family homes on large lots and instead create pockets of housing and commercial density that would make transit a feasible and cost effective travel option.[110] (As it is, Gorham and Westbrook are served by just two bus lines to Portland, both of which travel in traffic, with no signal prioritization, bus lanes or any other enhancements to speed service.[111])

A decade later, despite the governor's stated commitment to mitigating climate change and limited progress on transit projects and land use changes in the area, MTA is pressing ahead with its highway.

In November 2019, the MTA Board authorized MTA to proceed with the initial environmental studies, selected land acquisition and public outreach planning for the project.[112] In 2022, MTA reconstructed the turnpike's Exit 45 interchange to "accommodate growing traffic numbers," apparently laying the groundwork for a future Gorham Spur.[113] As of August 2023, the agency was working to determine financial feasibility and gathering information necessary to establish possible routes for the highway prior to deciding whether to pursue a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Maine Department of Environmental Protection.[114]

While the exact route is yet to be decided, initial plans indicate that it would likely require the destruction of part of the Gorham Country Club golf course and the demolition of several homes in the area. In 2021, MTA was anticipating the route impacting homes in Gorham and Scarborough, where the agency had already pre-emptively acquired several parcels of land.[115] By June 2023, having "basically completed" its process of identifying the most viable route and purchased most of the homes it envisages being demolished, MTA is engaged in "identifying significant environmental impacts, especially to wetlands."[116] That their "wetlands mitigation plans" will "likely include creating new freshwater wetlands somewhere in the area" suggests that the proposed route will cause significant damage to existing wetland habitats.[117] The road may also cut through or near Smiling Hill Farm, a local dairy, ice cream parlor and petting zoo beloved by generations of children. In 2021, the farm issued a statement opposing the project, saying "one of our greatest fears is now a reality – a drastic change to our rural farm way of life."[118]

As MTA pushes ahead with the project, a rising chorus of voices has been speaking out against it. In 2022, Portland City Council unanimously passed a resolution calling on the MTA to stop its work on the highway until rapid transit options have been properly examined as an alternative way of reducing traffic.[119] The council argued that a new highway runs counter to local and state plans to combat climate change and called for any final decision on the project to be consistent with Maine's emissions reductions goals.[120]

These sentiments are echoed in a 2022 editorial in the *Portland Press Herald*, whose editorial board argued that "land-use planning reform and a transit study should come before construction of a $200 million-plus highway project."[121] The article notes that congestion in Westbrook, Scarborough, Standish and Gorham is the result of "decades of economic pressure that make people look to once-rural areas for more-affordable housing."[122] The low-density development that ensued, and the increase in car travel that this created, put added strain on roads not designed to handle this increased traffic volume. "Without allowing for denser development and offering a real transit alternative," the editors argue, "building a faster road from Gorham to Portland could simply drive the development further west."[123]

In 2022, GrowSmart Maine – a statewide nonprofit advocating for the integration of smart growth principles in community planning – likewise came out against the proposal, arguing that while "ongoing traffic issues" are real, these issues are not going to be solved by building a new

highway. Being the result of "multiple longtime factors," they require a "multi-prong solution," and that solution must start with "land use planning that directs most new development to walkable districts in targeted growth areas and lays the groundwork for more transit options."[124]

Indeed, the Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG) recently received $800,000 in federal funding to assess the possibilities for transit along the corridor – specifically, a rail or bus rapid-transit link between Gorham and Portland.[125] The towns served by these proposals have become home to many low-income residents, including immigrants and blue-collar workers priced out of Portland's real estate market – residents who would benefit greatly from improved bus service.[126] Instead of waiting for the results of the GPCOG study, however, MTA appears to be powering ahead with the new highway.

While no official budget has yet been released, speaking in November 2021, MTA Executive Director Peter Mills said he anticipated the project to cost "at least $220 million," possibly up to $240 million.[127] Thanks to a cap imposed by the Legislature in 2017, MTA can borrow up to $150 million for the project, with the remainder of the costs to be covered by a combination of revenues and bonds, plus funds from combined turnpike reserve accounts.[128] As of June 2023, MTA claims that the project will not use any state or federal highway dollars.[129]

In sum, opponents of the new highway argue that this is a self-defeating project that will merely exacerbate suburban sprawl – in other words, reinforce the very conditions that are causing the traffic problems in the first place – and hence increase air pollution and carbon emissions in surrounding communities.[130]

I-10 expansion, El Paso, Texas

***Cost: $750 million*[131]**

Major expansion of the I-10 will bring demolitions and displacement to downtown El Paso.

Opened in the 1960s, Trans-continental Interstate 10 (I-10) is the longest interstate in Texas, stretching 881 miles east to west across the state.[132] With much of the highway's infrastructure now more than half a century old, in 2016, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) initiated the Reimagine I-10 project to assess the need to renovate a 55-mile stretch of freeway, split into four segments between the New Mexico-Texas state line and Farm-to-Market road (FM) 3380 at Tornillo, southeast of the city of El Paso.[133]

Segment 2 of this project centers on plans to rebuild and expand highways through 5.6 miles of downtown El Paso between Executive Center Boulevard and Loop 478 on Copia Street.[134] The downtown segment of the project is currently anticipated to cost approximately $750 million – potentially up to $800 million – $300 million of which has already been approved by the Texas Transportation Commission.[135] TxDOT has yet to secure full funding, but continues to move forward with project studies.[136]

TxDOT has narrowed down its initial list of 18 different build alternatives to a shortlist of three, plus one no-build alternative.[137] Changes to current lanes on I-10 will include the reconstruction of the main lanes and retaining walls, bridges and ramps.[138] The bulk of this expansion includes two additional lanes running for 5.6 miles and two frontage roads in the downtown area.[139] All build alternatives propose new eastbound and westbound "adaptive lanes," an additional general purpose lane in each direction, a shared

use path, and new accommodations for pedestrians and cyclists along overpasses.[140] Alternative D proposes an extra bicycle and pedestrian bridge, while Alternatives G and H will have collector-distributor connectors and bicycle tracks in both directions for certain sections.[141] TxDOT claims that these measures will help relieve congestion, reduce crashes and bring infrastructure into line with current standards.[142]

According to TxDOT, peak afternoon traffic on the highway of around 200,000 vehicles per day in 2018 will increase by 50% over the next two decades, rising to 300,000 by 2042.[143] However, traffic data from 2003 to 2019 show that annual average daily traffic volume (AADT) on this stretch of highway over this period has remained almost exactly constant.[144] In 2021, AADT dropped to a low of 155,000.[145] While this is consistent with the broader decline in commuter traffic due to the pandemic and the rise of remote working, even if volumes rise again, long-term trends indicate that TxDOT's projection of 300,000 is likely to be a major overestimate.

Between 2020 and January 2023, three public meetings were held to discuss engineering and environmental constraints for building plans.[146] In particular, local residents have raised concerns about the project's displacement of homes and businesses, arguing that the I-10 expansion plan – potentially requiring the demolition of up to 30 residential and commercial buildings – is reminiscent of the highway's original construction, which cut off the historic Sunset Heights neighborhood from downtown upon its completion in the 1960s.[147]

El Paso residents have also expressed concerns that the proposed I-10 expansion would worsen congestion instead of alleviating it. A 2022 independent analysis by consultancy firm Smart Mobility, Inc., supports these concerns, concluding that adding more lanes will not only be futile for reducing traffic volume on I-10, but would also encourage more cars to use the highway for short, local trips.[148] In sum, the project's opponents argue, TxDOT's predictive models presented inaccurate projections that overestimated benefits of the widening.[149]

While accepting the need for repair and rehabilitation of I-10's infrastructure, opponents of the project maintained that the latched-on expansion project would be both expensive and environmentally destructive to local communities.[150] El Paso County already fails to meet EPA's national air quality standards, and residents fear that a widened I-10 will only bring more air pollution, including to neighborhoods that already suffer from disproportionately high rates of asthma.[151] In 2022, El Paso City Council passed a resolution to ask TxDOT to remove frontage roads from the plans and add more walking spaces, street lights, parking and trees.[152]

In late 2021, El Paso received $900,000 from the Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) federal program to study the feasibility of adding a deck plaza on top of I-10.[153] This grant is intended to fund concept and design studies to imagine a walkable and recreational green space that can blend with residential areas and mitigate the health and environmental impacts of the highway.[154] While there is strong local support for adding green spaces, local advocates suggest that proponents of the I-10 project have cultivated the impression that the deck park is a part of that project – which it isn't – and that to get the deck park, the community needs to support this unnecessary highway expansion boondoggle.[155]

Bourne and Sagamore Bridges, Massachusetts

Cost: $4 billion[156]

MassDOT eyes IIJA funds to build wider bridges to Cape Cod and expand nearby highway infrastructure, bringing increased traffic, air pollution and congestion to the Cape.

The Bourne and Sagamore bridges across the Cape Cod Canal provide the only roadway access to the Cape Cod peninsula from mainland Massachusetts. Built in 1935, these landmarks now struggle under the volume of traffic they carry and are badly in need of maintenance and repair. A 2019 study by the Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), the federal entity that owns the structures, deemed them "functionally obsolete" – that is, unable to handle the volume of traffic they currently carry.[157] The Bourne is rated as "structurally deficient" and the Sagamore as in "fair" condition, although there are "no imminent safety concerns" with either of them.[158]

In 2020, the USACE recommended replacing the structures with two new, wider bridges – necessary, it claimed, to alleviate traffic congestion.[159]

The project's sizeable price tag and MassDOT's failure to secure federal funding has thwarted the agency's plans to move forward. Initially estimated at $1.5 billion, the projected cost has now risen to $4 billion.[160] MassDOT has already spent around $25 million in state funds on studies and data collection initiatives, but funding for the bulk of the project cost has yet to be identified.[161] By January 2023, applications for funding from three separate discretionary grant programs under the IIJA submitted by MassDOT in 2022 had been rejected.[162] The project will, however, receive a $1.6 million Bridge Planning grant to accelerate planning work.[163]

Despite continued uncertainty over how the project will be funded, as of August 2023, MassDOT was in the process of developing and refining options for the design of the bridge and roadway.[164] While the design is

Photo: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

A multi-billion-dollar project to replace Cape Cod's famous Bourne and Sagamore bridges threatens the environment and local communities.

still yet to be finalized, in November 2022 MassDOT published a number of options, indicating that their preferred alternative was arch bridges similar in style to the current structures.[165]

Each existing bridge, according to MassDOT, would likely be replaced with twin bridges sitting side-by-side.[166] In other words, where there are now two structures, there will, if these plans go ahead, be four. According to the agency's project manager for the project, each new structure would likely have two 12-foot-wide travel lanes, a 12-foot-wide entrance/exit lane, a 10-foot-wide shoulder and a 4-foot-wide shoulder. Each bridge would carry traffic only going in one direction.[167]

This will most likely be accompanied by additional roadway infrastructure on either side of the bridges. The USACE report notes that "additional improvements" are under consideration, which "while not necessary to accommodate the new bridges or increase traffic capacity, will further improve transportation on and off Cape Cod."[168] MassDOT has recommended a variety of significant roadway improvements and expansions associated with the bridge replacement.[169] This is consistent with plans articulated in the USACE study to "modify the approaches to match the new bridges, and ease traffic entering and exiting the highways in the vicinity of the bridges."[170] The cost of these is not included in the overall project cost.[171]

The proposed increase in lane capacity has local residents concerned that the new bridges – capable of accommodating cars traveling at speeds up to 15 mph to 20 mph faster than on the current bridges – will bring more and faster traffic to the Cape.[172] (Speed limits are likely to be 55 mph on the Bourne Bridge and 60 mph on the Sagamore Bridge – the limit on both existing bridges is currently 40 mph.)[173] Residents have also raised concerns about pedestrian safety issues arising from the construction of new interchanges, particularly given the proximity of the Bourne middle and high schools and Upper Cape Cod Regional Technical High School, as well as impacts on local homes and businesses.[174]

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Residents fear that MassDOT's plans for the Bourne and Sagamore bridges will bring more and faster traffic to Cape Cod.

While the worst of the Cape's already dire traffic problems stem from vehicles getting on or off the bridges, congestion elsewhere on the Cape is already notoriously bad, and, since the Cape is a peninsula, limited as to how much more it can take. Residents have raised concerns that the increased capacity of the new bridges will result in even more congestion on already overcrowded local roads, increasing the number of cars clogging Cape Cod's picturesque villages and beachside parking lots and increasing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.[175]

Experts agree. Jim Aloisi, a former state transportation secretary and board member of the advocacy group TransitMatters, was recently interviewed by the Cape & Islands NPR station about the project. "Every piece of data, every lesson from history is that any roadway, highway, bridge expansion is typically followed by the same levels of congestion," warned Aloisi. "If you build it, people will come."[176] In February 2023, Kevin Sullivan, state transportation secretary from 1999 to 2002, speaking on CAI's "Morning Edition," stressed the need to keep all options on the table – including rail and ferries – rather than simply assuming that more and wider roads are the answer: "If people are worried about climate change, you've got to look at rail as an alternative."[177]

Investing in additional transportation options to and from the Cape, such as ferry, rail and bus service, could reduce the need for travelers to rely on personal vehicles. Though not a substitute for the bridges, the volume of traffic the bridges are expected to carry could be reduced by the addition of more options for getting onto the Cape. Investment in the Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority could improve local transportation options on the Cape itself and provide visitors with a way to enjoy the region's attractions without overrunning the area with cars, as could connecting up the Cape's legendary but disjointed network of bike trails. As it is, neither rail nor other non-auto modes of transport have been discussed in any serious way as alternatives to the bridge replacement.

Currently, rail service to the Cape is limited to the Cape Flyer – a seasonal rail that operates only on weekends over the summer.[178] A 2021 study by TransitMatters found substantial local support for a year-round service, including from municipal bodies in Wareham and Bourne.[179] The study argues that faster and frequent all-day service would make rail a more attractive option for reaching the Cape during peak tourist season, and since much of the track is already in place, leaving upgrades to stations at Wareham and Buzzards Bay as the only major upfront costs, it would be a cost-effective use of funds. At present, plans for any such investment in rail service have "not moved beyond the conceptual phase."[180]

With the majority of funding for the Sagamore and Bourne bridges project still to be identified, MassDOT and USACE say they will continue to seek federal grant opportunities, and that they intend to pursue IIJA funding for the FY 2023 round of Notice of Funding Opportunities (NOFOs), with the aim of securing funding by September 2025 and starting construction around a year later.[181]

In August 2023, the office of Massachusetts Governor Maura Healey announced a change of approach. Whereas previous attempts had sought funding for both bridges simultaneously, the administration now says it will shortly submit applications for $1.45 billion in federal funding primarily to replace the Sagamore Bridge.[182] The new proposal staggers the project, with construction of the new Sagamore Bridge set to begin in in 2028 and the Bourne Bridge in 2029, assuming funding can be secured.[183] In the meantime, signaling the state's continued commitment to pushing this project through, in May 2023 Healey pledged to double the state's contribution, providing up to $700 million.[184]

The Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, New York

Cost: $1.5 billion to $4 billion[185]

New York City is set to squander a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fix a polluting and outdated highway.

Built between 1937 and 1964, the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (BQE) is an enduring symbol of the destructive, car-centric transportation planning of the early- to mid-20th century.[186] Today, the BQE is Brooklyn's only interstate highway and a major freight corridor, carrying roughly 130,000 vehicles every day – 13,000 of them trucks.[187]

The aging highway has been in dire need of rehabilitation for decades. An in-depth assessment of the various structures along the corridor conducted by the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT) in 2016 warned that if "significant repairs and replacements" are not made by 2026, it could be necessary to impose vehicle-weight limits and truck diversions to reduce weight on the highway.[188] As a result, that year, officials announced their intention to rehabilitate a 1.5-mile section between Atlantic Avenue and Sands Street in Brooklyn.[189]

With IIJA money starting to flow, the administration of New York City Mayor Eric Adams ditched the plan formulated in 2019-2020 by an expert panel under former mayor Bill de Blasio, which would have funded the most urgent repairs on BQE Central immediately but allowed a 20-year period to formulate a more comprehensive, long-term solution.[190] In September 2022, the administration announced that it was "seizing [a] once-in-a-generation opportunity to speed up [a] long-term fix" for the city-owned section of the expressway, signaling its intent to expedite the project and pursue IIJA dollars to do so.[191]

In late 2022, the administration began a process of public engagement to inform design for the 1.5-mile city-owned section of the expressway (around 12% of the BQE's total length) including the historic triple cantilever, with the aim of beginning construction within five years.[192] The current timeline has public engagement efforts taking place between 2022 and 2025, environmental review from fall 2023 to 2025 and design from 2025 to 2026, with construction slated to begin in 2027 and continue through 2031.[193]

The project being proposed by NYCDOT, which encompasses multiple bridge structures along the corridor, including the triple cantilever plus numerous ramps and retaining walls, would entail not just the repairs and maintenance that the expressway urgently needs, but also its expansion.[194]

While the final design is far from being decided, two main options are currently being evaluated: a two-lane or three-lane roadway, both of them wider than the 67-foot-wide road as it exists today.[195] The two-lane configuration would see two 12-foot lanes plus shoulders on the inside and outside, resulting in a 38- to 44-foot roadway in each direction.[196] In a three-lane configuration, there would be three 12-foot-wide lanes with shoulders on both sides, meaning a 50- to 56-foot roadway in each direction.[197] Following a detailed evaluation of these alternatives, the environmental impact study is expected to begin in fall 2023.[198]

The BQE runs through the densest neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Queens, some of it within a few feet of residential buildings, playgrounds and schools, subjecting thousands of local residents to toxic air pollution, creating dangerous conditions for pedestrians and effectively cutting off Brooklyn from its waterfront.[199] If the administration rushes its current plans through, writes former NYCDOT Director

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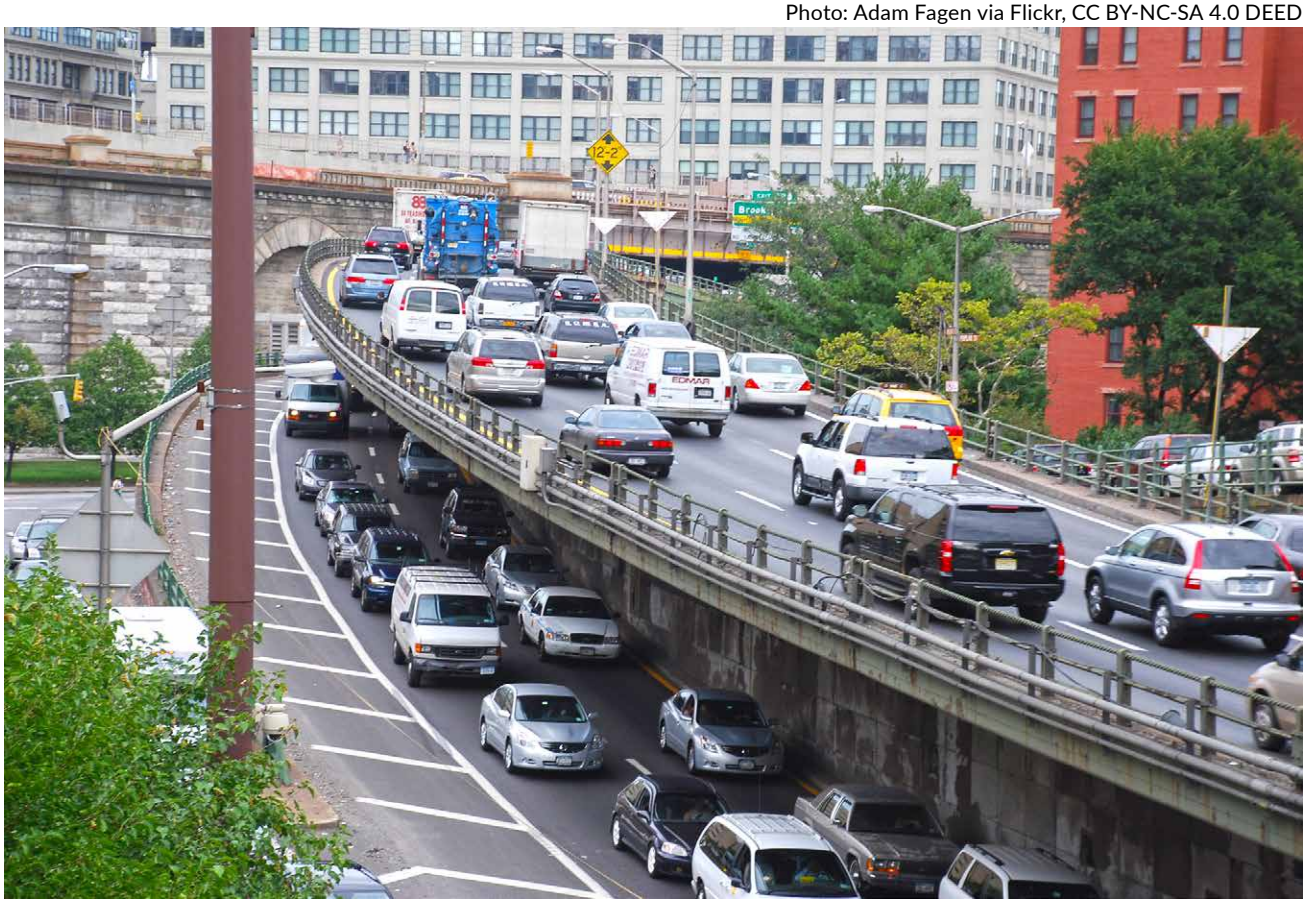


Brooklyn-Queens Expressway through Brooklyn Heights, NY.

of Policy Jon Orcutt, none of this will substantially change. Instead, "downtown Brooklyn and adjacent areas will be forever stuck with a moderately updated version of the BQE as we know it."[200]

In an August 2023 letter to Mayor Adams, Deputy Mayor Meera Joshi and DOT Commissioner Ydanis Rodriguez, a coalition of local civic groups called for scrapping the current "car- and truck-centric" plans and instead taking an approach more akin to Mayor de Blasio's earlier proposal: take "immediate action" to carry out the most urgently-needed repairs to the sections of the roadway that need them, while acknowledging that any long-term planning must be part of a corridor-wide transformation that addresses, once and for all, the serious harms created by the highway.[201] The first priority, however, should be to secure federal funding to improve public transportation to reduce the number of private vehicles on the highway, and to enact traffic reduction measures in the surrounding area.[202]

This means taking immediate steps to implement strategies such as those already laid out in the 2020 BQE Expert Panel report, which makes a series of detailed recommendations for measures that can and must be enacted right now to reduce both car and truck traffic on the expressway.

These include closing or restricting certain ramps to and from the expressway and implementing high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes to reduce traffic demand.[203] Pricing strategies, such as congestion pricing, and split tolling on the Verrazzano Bridge, would likewise ease traffic on the BQE, as would improved transit, including adding capacity on the G line, completing

the Brooklyn Queens Connector and express service on the D, R and F lines.[204] An express bus service from Staten Island to Brooklyn and a new ferry service from the South Shore of Staten Island, providing a "park and ferry ride" program to Sunset Park, downtown Brooklyn and Manhattan, would likewise all contribute to fewer cars on the BQE.[205]

Although trucks only account for around 10% of the current traffic volume on the BQE, measures to reduce the number of trucks on the road while keeping essential freight flowing are a crucial part of any solution to the problem of the BQE.[206] Such strategies, the Expert Panel report suggests, could include allowing small trucks – particularly those traveling between the Verrazzano Bridge and JFK airport – on the Belt Parkway, and creating sustainable alternatives for local freight (i.e., that which originates and/or is being transported locally).[207] Such alternatives include implementing Freight NYC, which, among other things, seeks to reduce reliance on trucks by increasing the role of "maritime and rail solutions" in freight transport.[208] Similarly, NYCDOT's Blue Highways Program is something local civic groups "wholeheartedly support" as a way of keeping freight flowing while reducing truck volumes on the BQE corridor.[209]

Were its recommendations to be implemented, the BQE panel projects, they could reduce traffic volumes on the BQE by 15% or more, to roughly 125,000 vehicles per day or fewer.[210] And its report's conclusions reiterate the urgency of doing so: "An immediate fix for the roadway, prioritizing the safety of the public, should begin now." Since parts of the road will likely become both unsafe and unable to carry the volumes of traffic they currently carry within just a few years, "actions to reduce traffic volumes and improve reliability – to extend the highway's life, reduce crashes and begin transitioning users to other routes or modes of transportation – must be undertaken right away."[211]

Spending billions of taxpayer dollars to expand the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway does the exact opposite. Rather than fixing the myriad problems plaguing this road, it will simply ensure that the damage the BQE has inflicted on its surroundings for more than half a century continues. As Congress for the New Urbanism puts it, "as the aging highway crumbles, New York City needs to decide if there's a better way forward. … The transformation of the BQE offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a more livable Brooklyn and Queens and should be seriously considered."[212]

I-15 Expansion, Salt Lake City, Utah

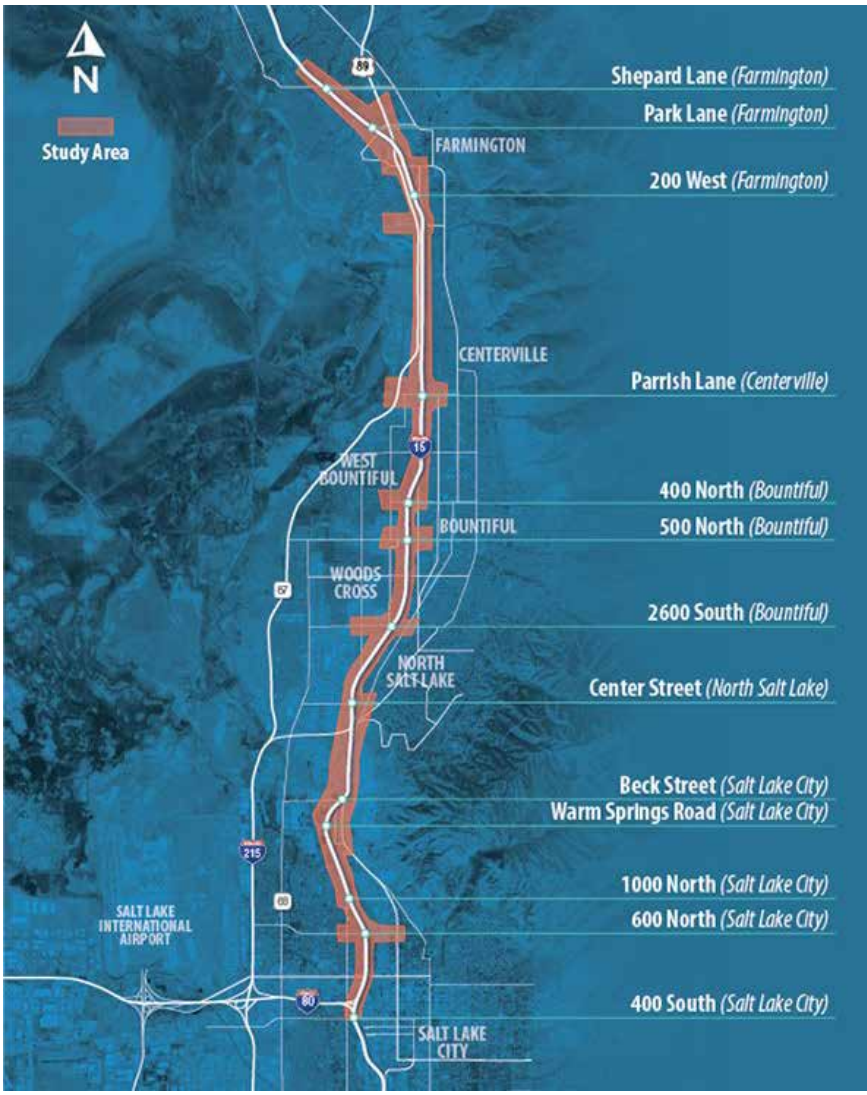
***Cost: $3.7 billion*[213]**

Plans for a major freeway expansion based on overinflated traffic projections are a wrongheaded way to deal with the region's rapid population growth.

Stretching 1,470 miles along the western mountains of the United States, Interstate 15 traverses six states, starting near the Mexican border in San Diego County, Calif., and terminating north at the border with Canada.[214] In Utah, the highway takes travelers from the southwestern to northern region of the state, passing through major cities including Salt Lake City, St. George and Provo.[215]

The portion of I-15 in and around Salt Lake City has undergone a long history of expensive construction projects.[216] Now, arguing that the aging highway needs further updating to meet the needs of a growing population, the Utah Legislature has mandated the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) to undertake another expansion, this time along a 17-mile stretch of I-15 from Farmington's Shepard Lane to Salt Lake City's 400 South.[217]

Photo: Utah Department of Transportation



Utah Department of Transportation's proposed $3.7 billion widening of Interstate 15 threatens homes, businesses, parks, recreation areas and natural lands.

Currently, I-15 in Salt Lake County has three general-purpose traffic lanes and an HOV lane running in each direction, and in Davis County, four lanes plus one HOV lane.[218] UDOT's "preferred alternative," laid out in its draft environmental impact statement released in late September 2023, would expand the road to five general-purpose lanes and one express lane in both directions.[219]

Opponents of the I-15 widening have long feared that this project will require the demolition of homes and businesses, and the displacement of local residents.[220] The draft environmental impact statement confirms that UDOT's preferred alternative could potentially see the relocation of up to 36 homes, as well as the demolition of between 13 and 16 commercial buildings, and impact 10 parks and recreation areas.[221] It would also affect more than 30 acres of "aquatic resources" (wetlands, streams, mudflats and others) and expose more than 3,000 local residents to increased noise levels.[222]

UDOT has justified the I-15 expansion in part as a means of accommodating population growth in and around Salt Lake City. Utah's current population of 3.3 million is projected to grow to 5 million by 2050, and a 2019 UDOT study assessing the impacts of this growth estimated that travel time along this section of I-15 – then around 18 to 19 minutes – would rise to 55 to 66 minutes.[223] Opponents of the I15 expansion have criticized UDOT's model as "overinflated," noting also that the agency's projections for the US-89 project – turning US-89 through Davis County into a freeway – overestimated the number of highway users by as much as 30%.[224]

Over the course of the project, according to UDOT, the agency has received almost 4,000 comments from members of the public.[225] Public comment periods on UDOT's preliminary plans highlighted the extent of local opposition, with public hearings between November 2022 and January 2023 gathering overwhelming objections to the plans. During a community hearing in December 2022, for example, approximately 60 residents showed up, with every public comment at the hearing opposing the project.[226]

As well as fears about the demolition of homes and businesses and the damage that will be inflicted on local

communities – including perpetuating the historical harms done to low-income and minority communities by 20th century highway planning – many of these comments express concern about the increase in noise and air pollution the expansion would bring to an already polluted area, as well as increased congestion due to induced demand.[227] These concerns are echoed throughout the comments submitted during the comment periods as a whole.[228]

Originally slated to cost $1.7 billion – which the Utah Legislature envisaged providing solely from state transportation funds – the estimated cost of the project has more than doubled to $3.7 billion.[229] Many of those who have submitted comments on UDOT's plans insist that this is money that could be better spent on addressing the real transportation needs of local residents. In particular, a recurring sentiment in the public comments is the desire to be able to take transit, with some residents suggesting that the tax dollars being poured into the I-15 could be redirected to building a light rail or bus rapid transit line along the route, or investing in solutions that integrate bike paths, public transit and other alternatives.[230]

Currently, public transit along this corridor takes "simply too long for such a short distance," as one resident puts it.[231] And, indicative of UDOT's history of prioritizing car transportation over transit, the FrontRunner commuter rail line between Ogden and Provo, which runs parallel to I-15 for 90 miles, has been under review for improvements since its creation in 2008.[232] In the document of public comments on UDOT's initial plans, published in January 2023, the word "transit" appears 831 times.[233] In sum, as one local resident succinctly puts it: "This city deserves better than a freeway expansion that causes more harm than good."[234]

UDOT intends to release a final environmental impact statement and record of decision in spring 2024.[235]

Updates on previously documented boondoggles

THE PROCESS OF BUILDING a highway is lengthy and complex. Of the 66 projects that have featured in our series of *Highway Boondoggles* reports over the last eight years, 18 – including projects covered as far back as our very first report back in 2014 – remain in study and review. Thirteen have been completed and 25 are now under construction. Eight have either been canceled or mostly canceled, and a further two are currently on hold. But in many cases, the debate over the projects we have highlighted over the years continues.

I-49 Inner-City Connector, Shreveport, Louisiana

Planning advances despite local pushback.

Highway Boondoggles 4 in 2018 covered the I-49 Inner-City Connector, a $600 million highway project that would extend for 3.5 miles through a residential area in Shreveport, La., slicing through the historic neighborhood of Allendale and requiring the demolition of homes and a church.[236]

In our last update in 2022, the I-49 project was still in the process of planning and drafting its environmental impact statement (EIS).[237] The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (LaDOTD) originally proposed four possible routes through Allendale.[238] Since then, a fifth route that connects LA 3121 to I-220 has been proposed and studied.[239]

As noted in our last update, residents of Allendale have proposed an alternative project: upgrading Route 71, already used by drivers to connect to I-49, into a multiuse "business boulevard." According to community group Allendale Strong, this would cost just a fraction of the cost of the I-49 cut-through, while strengthening existing communities and bolstering local businesses. As of September 2023, although the Federal Highway Administration requires all "reasonable alternatives to be considered," the Northwest Louisiana Council of Governments (NLCOG) continues to refuse to add this proposed boulevard to the scope of the project.[240]

However, in 2023, after fierce opposition from residents concerned about the highway's environmental and community impacts, NLCOG's Transportation Policy Committee suggested another alternative route – 3A – presented as an alternative that would minimize the damage inflicted on the Allendale neighborhood.[241]

However, Allendale residents continue to oppose the I-49 Inner-City Connector project, arguing that Alternative 3A does little to reduce the impacts that the community would suffer compared to current plans.[242] These new plans would not completely spare Allendale: The construction of Inner-City Connector would be a blight on the neighborhood, both visually and by bringing increased air and noise pollution to every home in the area.[243]

Furthermore, while the proposed new route avoids Allendale, it runs over Shreveport's Cross Bayou and cuts through St. Paul's Bottoms Historic District.[244] It will also impact the Downtown Shreveport Commercial Historic District and runs adjacent to – just a few feet from – the McNeil Street Pumping Station, a museum and former water station designated as a National Historic Landmark.[245]

Alternative 3A also appears to cut through the Choice Neighborhoods Bayou Grande Apartments, a new 500-unit housing project awarded $24.2 million through federal grants to spur workforce development in Shreveport's Central Business District, Allendale and Ledbetter Heights.[246] Residents have also expressed concerns that it would, among other things, block access to housing for older and disabled residents as well as local families, and argued that the project continues the legacy of imposing infrastructure development on low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color.[247]

From the outset, LaDOTD leaders have expressed concerns over the giant price tag.[248] By 2021 the project was expected to cost $500 million to $600 million, of which only about $100 million had been allocated.[249] In September 2022, however, LaDOTD secretary Shawn Wilson suggested the cost could be up to $865 million.[250] With over $6 billion in highway funding flowing to Louisiana through the IIJA over five years, LaDOTD has signaled that I-49 will be one of the projects to benefit from the grants.[251] IIJA funding has already been allocated for nearby road projects in Shreveport, and with LaDOTD clearly eyeing IIJA funds, it is possible that the Inner-City Connector could be in line for an influx of IIJA dollars in the near future.[252]

I-35 widening, Austin, Texas

Construction begins on controversial freeway expansion through downtown Austin.

Highway Boondoggles 4 in 2018 covered the Texas Department of Transportation's (TxDOT) controversial plan to widen Interstate 35 (I-35) through downtown Austin, Texas.[253] Originally expected to cost a total of $8.1 billion, the project would add new lanes in both directions along 28 miles of highway, displacing many homes and businesses.[254] In 2022, despite fierce pushback from Austin's residents and City Council, TxDOT moved swiftly through project planning and impact studies.[255]

In June 2022, nonprofits Rethink35, TexPIRG and Environment Texas filed a lawsuit against TxDOT, alleging that its division of I-35 expansion into three sub-segments served to dilute and avoid more rigorous scrutiny in the environmental study and public review processes and therefore violated the National Environmental Policy Act.[256] In June 2023, however, the lawsuit was dismissed by a U.S. district judge at the request of Rethink35.[257] According to the latter's board president Adam Greenfield, while their stance on I-35 had not changed, with other "promising legal avenues" coming up, they "[lacked the] resources to fight multiple fights at once."[258]

Parts of the project have now begun construction. The South segment from SH 71/Ben White Boulevard to SH 45 Southeast broke ground in November 2022, while the North segment from SH 45 North to US 290 East started in March 2023, both earlier than scheduled and in the face of heavy protests.[259]

In early 2023, TxDOT released its preferred alternative for the $4.5 billion Central segment, Modified Build Alternative 3,

along with a draft environmental impact statement.[260] The plan would demolish and completely rebuild the highway and frontage roads, sinking the main lanes below ground level for most of the way between Airport Boulevard and Oltorf Street and removing the upper decks.[261] While TxDOT claims that this preferred plan minimizes land use and displacement compared to previous alternatives, the expansion would still carve up an additional 42 acres and demolish 107 homes and businesses in the process.[262]

Advocacy groups and Austin residents continue to criticize TxDOT for its lack of transparency and deceptive planning processes designed to circumvent impact studies.[263] In a forceful open letter to TxDOT in March 2023, local advocacy group Reconnect Austin called the project a "a massive boondoggle that could and should provide better connectivity, better mitigate air, water, and noise pollution, better mitigate induced demand, provide opportunities for local economic development, repair the harms this highway has foisted on its neighbors, and be designed to ensure that people using this corridor are not subjected to serious injuries and death."[264]

The group's letter also criticized TxDOT's draft environmental impact statement for its failure to include sufficient information regarding pollutants and health. Specifically, the DEIS failed to include projections of the amounts of particulate matter, greenhouse gases and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that would be released as a result of the increased traffic volumes the I-35 expansion would bring to the area, as well as analyses of their potential effects such as rates of asthma for children and vulnerable adults.[265] Furthermore, with I-35 already ranked the fifth deadliest highway in the nation, Reconnect Austin is demanding that TxDOT conduct further traffic safety assessments and formulate a plan to reduce traffic deaths, claiming that the current plans for the project prioritize car speeds over safety.[266]

TxDOT's environmental review is rushing the project forward rather than teasing out its potential consequences – which is not inconsistent with the agency's past record. Between 2015 and 2022, TxDOT reported no significant impact on 130 proposed projects, despite only six of them having received detailed environmental analysis.[267] For I-35 Central expansion, the agency released a document of over 7,000 pages over the holiday period, and allowed only a short 60-day period for public review of the project.[268] Reconnect Austin requested a minimum of 90 days, with public hearings ending as late as necessary to include all community feedback.[269]

In August 2023, TxDOT jointly released the final environmental impact statement and record of decision for I-35 Central, with no public comment opportunity.[270] There are few changes from the draft environmental impact statement released in March 2023, despite outpourings of public comment highlighting its many issues and coordinated advocacy work from Reconnect Austin, Rethink35 and other local groups requesting improved environmental analyses by TxDOT.[271] The agency is moving forward with Modified Build Alternative 3 and is expected to begin construction on portions of the project in mid-2024.[272]

Ongoing concerns with the project were outlined in a local press conference, in which several City Council members spoke out against the expansion.[273] Rep. Greg Casar, who was an Austin City Council member prior to his election to the U.S. House of Representatives, outlined his opposition to the expansion at a local Town Hall event in September 2023.[274]

Rethink35 has committed to filing a lawsuit over I-35 Central, details and co-plaintiffs forthcoming.[275]

The city of Austin recently received a $1 million grant to study options of installing caps and "stitches" – widened bridges – over I-35.[276] This grant comes from the Reconnecting Communities Pilot Grant Program, a beneficiary of the Infrastructure and Investment Jobs Act designed to help marginalized communities affected by the impacts of transportation.[277] The city of Austin has been working toward creating "caps and stitches" over I-35 in a few locations, but the community is split on their benefit in relation to cost. TxDOT has made it clear that the cost of construction and operations and maintenance for each of these amenities to ameliorate the impact of its highways will be placed on the city of Austin.[278] It is possible that any positive impacts these features may have will be far outweighed by the damage caused by the highway expansion itself – a damaging and expensive boondoggle that will worsen public health and environmental inequality in Austin.[279]

New Jersey Turnpike & Garden State Parkway widening projects, New Jersey

Planning for widening between Interchanges 1 and 4 continues, with construction set to begin in 2025; costs balloon to almost $11 billion for widening of Turnpike Extension through Bayonne and Jersey City.

Highway Boondoggles 7 in 2022 reported on the New Jersey Turnpike and Garden State Parkway widening projects, and specifically the plans to add a new lane in each direction on a 34-mile stretch of the New Jersey Turnpike between Interchanges 1 and 4.[280] This estimated $1.1 billion project is part of the New Jersey Turnpike Authority's (NJTA) larger, $24 billion 2020 Capital Improvement Program, comprising numerous highway construction and expansion projects across the state, with more than $16 billion dedicated to highway expansions.[281] While the NJTA characterizes the Interchange 1-4 widening as a traffic alleviation solution, the reality is that this expansion will merely further increase the already enormous volume of traffic on the Turnpike and exacerbate the environmental damage it causes, as well as hinder progress toward New Jersey's self-imposed greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals.[282]

The widening project from Interchanges 1 to 4 is continuing its environmental studies and permitting process that began in May 2021, and construction is scheduled to begin in 2025.[283]

Since 2021, the initial plans for the Interchange 1 to 4 expansion have been amended numerous times to reflect changes in planning and environmental review. The most recent plan by NJTA in 2022 has it extending 36.5 miles from Mount Laurel to Pennsville Township, while its costs increased to around $2 billion.[284] On top of adding a third lane to the existing road, the project will also include construction at Interchanges 1 to 4 and the replacement or rehabilitation of 56 out of 66 bridges along the segment.[285]

Local communities and advocacy groups continue to fight the project, arguing that new lanes will increase traffic volumes and worsen congestion on the Turnpike.[286] Residents also continue to voice frustrations about other highway expansions planned under the larger Capital Improvement Program, including a controversial expansion plan at the other end of the Turnpike that would widen the Turnpike Extension through Bayonne and Jersey City, leading to the Holland Tunnel to New York City.[287]

Criticism of a plan to widen 8.1 miles of turnpike from Exit 14 in Newark to the Holland Tunnel intensified after NJTA more than doubled its cost estimate from $4.7 billion to $10.7 billion.[288] In 2022, the city councils of Jersey City and Hoboken – both of them areas impacted by the project – passed unanimous resolutions to oppose.[289] Critics of the plan have argued that the expansion will only invite more traffic and bring further pollution to cities with already poor air quality.[290] This would hinder progress toward Jersey City's long-term goals to become more sustainable and car-independent.[291] The draft environmental impact statement for this project, published in October 2023, puts the cost for replacing the bridges between Exits 14 and 14A alone at $6.2 billion.

According to official updates from NJTA, the Interchange 1 to 4 widening project is still in the preliminary design phase, and is expected to start its final design, engineering and environmental permitting process in 2023.[292] Concurrently, the program team continues to meet with local, state and federal officials as well as stakeholders to review initial design concepts. Public hearings and informational sessions will also be scheduled later in 2023.[293]

Conclusion

EVEN AS MORE FUNDS than ever before become available for transportation projects nationwide, wasteful highway boondoggles continue to move forward, some of them given new momentum by an influx of federal transportation funding made available through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

America cannot afford to fritter away this critical infrastructure funding – especially when road repair needs and the desire for better, cleaner, more efficient transportation options are increasing with each passing year.

Local, state and federal governments must carefully evaluate where infrastructure funding should go, re-examine proposed highway expansion projects, and allocate funding where it will deliver the most societally and environmentally beneficial results.

Specifically, government officials should:

- **Invest in transportation solutions that reduce our dependence on automobile travel.** States should redirect IIJA funding and their own funds away from boondoggle projects and toward measures that expand transportation choices and prioritize repair and rehabilitation. Funding should be prioritized for transportation projects that reduce growth in vehicle-miles traveled, to account for the public health, environmental and climate benefits resulting from reduced driving. Investments in public transportation, cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, transport demand management and other measures reduce the pressure on congested highways, and by reducing our reliance on fossil fuels they also act as an insurance policy against future oil price fluctuations.
- **Adopt fix-it-first policies** that reorient transportation funding away from highway expansion and toward repair of existing roads and investment in other transportation options.
- **Use the latest transportation data and require full cost-benefit comparisons, including future maintenance needs**, to evaluate all proposed new and expanded highways. This includes projects proposed as public-private partnerships.
- **Review the purpose and need of key transportation funding programs** and the conditions attached to funding awards made through these programs; for example, adding conditions before funding is awarded for building new roads, as opposed to simply providing a blank check for state and local transportation authorities.
- **Invest in research and data collection** to better track and react to ongoing shifts in how people travel.
- **Revise transportation forecasting models** to ensure that all evaluations of proposed projects use up-to-date travel information, reflect a range of potential future trends for housing and transportation, and incorporate the impact of all transportation options, from public transit, biking and walking, to options such as car-sharing and bike-sharing.

Appendix: Status of previously covered boondoggle projects

Current status	Project	Year in report	Status as of Highway Boondoggles 7
Canceled	Dallas Trinity Parkway, Texas	2014	Canceled
	Tesoro Extension, California	2014	Canceled
	710 Tunnel, California	2016	Canceled
	High Desert Freeway, California	2019	Canceled
	Illinois State Route 53/120, Illinois	2017	Canceled
	Illiana Expressway, Illinois and Indiana	2014	On Hold
	Montgomery County M-83 Midcounty Highway Extended, Maryland	2022	Study and Review
Mostly Canceled	M-CORES, Florida	2020	Mostly Canceled
Completed	Alaskan Way Viaduct, Washington	2014	Completed
	C-470 Express Lanes, Colorado	2014	Completed
	I-77 Express Lanes, North Carolina	2016	Completed
	Portsmouth Bypass, Ohio	2016	Completed
	State Highway 45 Southwest, Texas	2016	Completed
	Route 20 Widening, Iowa	2016	Completed
	Interstate 66 Expansion "Within the Beltway," Virginia	2017	Completed
	I-94 North South Expansion, Wisconsin	2018	Completed
	Cleveland Opportunity Corridor, Ohio	2014	Completed
	State Highway 249 Extension, Texas	2016	Under Construction
	Widening I-70 in Denver, Colorado	2016	Under Construction
	U.S. Highway 101 Expansion, San Mateo, California	2018	Under Construction
	I-75 Widening, Michigan	2019	Under Construction
On Hold	Cincinnati Eastern Bypass, Ohio	2020	Study and Review
	Allston Multimodal Project, Massachusetts	2020	Study and Review

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Current status	Project	Year in report	Status as of Highway Boondoggles 7
Study and Review	I-11, Nevada	2014	Partially Completed
	I-94 East-West Expansion in Milwaukee, Wisconsin	2014	Study and Review
	Interstate 73, South Carolina	2017	Study and Review
	I-11, Arizona	2014	Study and Review
	I-26 Connector, North Carolina	2014	Study and Review
	Interstate 75 North Truck Lanes, Georgia	2017	Study and Review
	Interstate 84 Expansion, Connecticut	2017	Study and Review
	Madison Beltline, Wisconsin	2017	Study and Review
	I-49 Inner City Connection, Shreveport, Louisiana	2018	Study and Review
	North Houston Highway Improvement Project, Texas	2019	Study and Review
	I-5 Rose Quarter Widening, Oregon	2019	Study and Review
	I-57 Interchange, Illinois	2020	Study and Review
	I-526 Extension, South Carolina	2020	Study and Review
	"Traffic Relief Plan," Maryland	2018	Study and Review
	New Jersey Turnpike & Garden State Parkway widening projects	2022	Study and Review
	Brent Spence Bridge, Ohio and Kentucky	2022	Study and Review
	Erie Bayfront Parkway, Pennsylvania	2022	Study and Review
	Martinsville Southern Connector, Virginia	2022	Study and Review

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Current status	Project	Year in report	Status as of Highway Boondoggles 7
Under Construction	Paseo del Volcan Extension, New Mexico	2016	Study and Review
	Widening I-94 Through Detroit, Michigan	2014	Study and Review
	Mon-Fayette Expressway: Route 51 to I376, Pennsylvania	2016	Study and Review
	Tampa Bay Express Lanes, Florida	2016	Study and Review
	Widening I-95 Across the State, Connecticut	2016	Study and Review
	Interstate 35 Expansion, Austin, Texas	2018	Study and Review
	Southeast Connector, Texas	2020	Study and Review
	I-205 widening, Oregon	2022	Under Construction
	Effingham Parkway, Georgia	2014	Under Construction
	Interstate 30, Arkansas	2017	Under Construction
	I-83 Widening, Pennsylvania	2019	Under Construction
	Puget Sound Gateway, Washington	2016	Under Construction
	Interstate 4 "Beyond the Ultimate," Florida	2017	Under Construction
	Interstate 405 Improvement, Orange County, California	2017	Under Construction
	I-285 & SR 400 Interchange Rebuilding, Atlanta, Georgia	2018	Under Construction
	North Spokane Corridor, Spokane, Washington	2018	Under Construction
	Pennsylvania Turnpike Expansion	2018	Under Construction
	LBJ East Expansion, Dallas, Texas	2018	Under Construction
	Complete 540, North Carolina	2019	Under Construction
	Tri-State Tollway Widening, Illinois	2019	Under Construction
	"Connecting Miami" Widening Project, Florida	2019	Under Construction
	Interstate 81 Widening, Virginia	2019	Under Construction
	Loop 1604 Expansion, Texas	2020	Under Construction
	Birmingham Northern Beltline, Alabama	2020	Under Construction
	I-35 Reconstruction, Duluth, Minnesota	2022	Under Construction

Notes

1. Benito Pérez, "Show me the money: Financial breakdown of the infrastructure law," *Transportation for America*, 15 December 2021, archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20220521171859/https://t4america.org/2021/12/15/show-me-the-money-financial-breakdown-of-the-infrastructure-law/.

2. American Road & Transportation Builders Association, *Highway Dashboard: Tracking Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act Highway and Bridge Resources*, accessed 4 August 2023, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20230804201540/https://www.artba.org/economics/highway-dashboard-iija/.

3. American Road & Transportation Builders Association, *25,000 Transportation Projects Started in Year-One of Infrastructure Law, New Report Shows*, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20230804203524/https://www.artba.org/2022/11/15/25000-transportation-projects-started-in-year-one-of-infrastructure-law-new-report-shows/.

4. 1,648 square miles based on a conservative assumption of 10-foot wide traffic lanes and the expansion of public road lane miles from: U.S. Department of Transportation, *Highway Statistics 2020, Table HM-260*, October 2021, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20220805171401/https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/policyinformation/statistics/2020/hm260.cfm; congestion trends since 1980s: David Schrank et al., Texas A&M Transportation Institute, *2021 Urban Mobility Report*, June 2021, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20220714202243/https://static.tti.tamu.edu/tti.tamu.edu/documents/mobility-report-2021.pdf.

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