"People Before Highways!"

The Fight Against I-95

Stuart Spina

Children's laughter, joggers, bicyclists, friends chatting on the benches and grass; such are the sights and sounds that almost never came to be. The Southwest Corridor Park stretches 4.7 miles from Back Bay Station near downtown Boston to Forest Hills in the outlying neighborhood of Jamaica Plain. The park connects many neighborhoods along the way and has several MBTA Orange Line subway stations dotted along it. Walking or biking up the corridor today, you would never guess that an eight-lane expressway was originally planned to roar through these neighborhoods.

Build a Highway, Destroy a Neighborhood?

After World War II, many U.S. cities were faced with two huge problems: 1) people and businesses abandoning the city for the new, growing suburbs, and 2) the decay of the older sections of the city. The federal government decided to solve this crisis with two bold, nationwide plans. The first was "urban renewal," which made available millions of dollars for cities to rehabilitate—or else totally demolish and rebuild—sections that city officials felt were "blighted" and "slums." Legally, there has never been a specific definition of what "blight" is; thus, a small group of city officials had the power to label anywhere they wanted as blighted. The residents, however, had very little say in the matter. The second plan was to build a system of highways that would connect these newly revitalized cities to the suburbs, as well as to cities across state lines. In 1956, the federal government approved $1.85 billion in funding to build these highways. Unfortunately, the government gave little thought to how these plans would impact people and their communities.

The proposed interchange between I-95 and the planned Inner Belt. Courtesy: Cambridge Historical Society

In Massachusetts, the Master Highway Plan for the Boston Metropolitan Area proposed a network of highways flying out from Boston in every direction. Notably, two of those highways, the Southwest Expressway and the Inner Belt, are missing from today's maps. The story of how those highways never made it onto the map is a story of how people can unite to have a say in what happens in their community.

The Southwest Expressway was proposed to bring I-95 into the heart of Boston, and it would cut through thickly-settled urban communities. The complementary Inner Belt would connect the Southwest Expressway with the other highways radiating out from Boston; thus, motorists could save time and avoid going all the way into downtown to change between the highways. Neighborhood displacement and destruction were unavoidable given the scale of these two projects. The Massachusetts Highway Department had a very powerful tool: eminent domain. Eminent domain allows the government—federal, state, or local—to take private property in the name of the public interest. The owners receive only a fraction of what their property is worth in exchange. Even though they faced a fight that seemed impossible to win,

residents were determined to fight back and save their communities.

Organizing Intensifies

"People before highways!" and "Beat the belt!" would soon became rallying cries from Jamaica Plain to Cambridge to Roxbury. More than 3,600 residents showed up in force at the first two public hearings in Cambridge and Roxbury on the two highway projects. Despite this opposition, the state highway department started to take hundreds of acres of property. Homes, apartment buildings, schools, churches, stores, factories—all had been taken in the "public interest" and quickly condemned. Demolition of the seized neighborhoods quickly followed. And yet the people kept fighting. Many people who had already lost their homes and communities, stayed in the struggle. Organizing intensified. Unlikely allies—from the director of the Museum of Fine Arts to working class mothers—joined together to take back the vision and ownership of their communities.

Nearly 1,000 people protested on the Boston Common in 1966 at the "Beat the Belt" rally. Soon other communities joined the fight and many politicians who initially supported the highway plans threw their power behind the people. Urban planners from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University worked with residents to highlight flaws in the plan and its proposed impacts.

Victory!

After another rally in 1969 Governor Francis Sargent ordered all highway construction stopped in Greater Boston. He then appointed a special committee to study alternatives to Boston's transportation problems. This committee issued its report in 1972 which proposed investments in public transit and other more sustainable modes. After further lobbying, the highway dollars were reallocated towards public transit, parks, and community development. The fight in Boston inspired other fights across the country. Most importantly, after almost a decade of struggle, the community has a lasting example of its victory in the Southwest Corridor Park, which boasts miles of pedestrian and bike paths, basketball and tennis courts, playgrounds, and green space—instead of eight lanes of noise- and smog-producing highway!

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Sources and for Further Reading: "Boston Transportation Planning Review," Executive Office of Transportation and Construction, 1973. Jamaica Plain Historical Society: <www.jphs.org/transportation/people-before-highways.html>. Joint Board for the Metropolitan Master Highway Plan, "Master Highway Plan," Boston: Public Works Commission of the Commonwealth of MA, 1948. Vrabel, Jim. *A People's History of the New Boston*, Boston: Univ. of MA Press, 2014, pp. 139-149.

Instead of an eight-lane highway, the community has the Southwest corridor park.