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Michigan Must Prioritize Urban Transportation Policy that Works for All Citizens

In a Nutshell

- The era of urban highway-building from the 1940s through 1970s drastically changed the nature of Michigan’s cities and metropolitan regions. The emphasis on automobile-oriented transportation contributed to residential and capital flight to sprawling suburban developments on the urban periphery.
- The negative consequences of this trend were especially harmful to low-income and minority communities. Current transportation policies retain elements that perpetuate inequitable outcomes and complicate efforts to revitalize Michigan’s urban areas.
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A new report from Smart Growth America and Transportation for America illustrates the historical inequalities created by federal and state transportation policies, and demonstrates how current practices continue to exacerbate inequities and harm urban economies. The report, “Divided by Design,” examined Atlanta, GA, and Washington, DC, as case studies to quantify the losses of residents and wealth in those cities.

It was estimated that in Atlanta, eleven miles of Interstate 20 directly displaced at least 7,500 residents in 1960, and destroyed \$676 million in home value (in today’s dollars). In Washington, DC, five miles of Interstates 395 and 695 directly displaced at least 4,700 residents in 1960, and reduced total land value by \$3.3 billion. This analysis was limited to land directly consumed by the construction. The estimated costs do not include losses related to other road widening projects, and omitted the secondary impacts on communities and economic activity.

This scenario was repeated in major cities across the United States, with Detroit being one of the most impacted.

Detroit was the first city in the world to embrace high-speed urban freeways, beginning with the construction of the Davison Freeway in 1942. This unprecedented project reconstructed what was Davison Avenue into a “depressed” limited access highway, allowing commuters to bypass rush hour gridlock in Highland Park, a three-square-mile residential community surrounded by Detroit. The project resulted in 131 homes condemned and removed to make room for the 1.3-mile freeway, among the first of many thousands that would be removed for highway building in the coming years.

The Davison Freeway opened a new chapter in the history of Detroit and the nation. Michigan was on the forefront of a revolution in urban planning centered around the automobile. This vision was first introduced by General Motors in the 1939 World’s Fair “Futurama” exhibit. GM’s Futurama proposed reconstructing the congested disorderly cities of the early 20th century to emphasize high-speed vehicle travel.

The Futurama vision of urban motorways was widely adopted across the United States. At the conclusion of

World War II, the federal government sought to increase employment and economic opportunity by vastly expanding manufacturing and highway construction, culminating in the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act and establishment of the Interstate system.

It was believed at the time that highway construction was a solution to the problem of urban traffic congestion and many other plights of American cities. It was assumed that providing high-speed corridors between downtowns and surrounding suburbs would improve the economic vitality of both. Moreover, many saw federal highway funding as an opportunity for "urban renewal." The urban renewal movement sought to replace substandard housing and businesses with new developments, designed for easy access by automobiles. New freeways were constructed not only between cities, but within them, requiring large scale removal of the pre-existing urban fabric.

In Detroit and elsewhere, highway planning and urban renewal efforts were overtly racist. Highways were routed through black and minority neighborhoods considered to be undesirable "slums." In 1952, Detroit attorney Harold Norris noted that freeway construction had already displaced 17,000 residents, stating, "the city is creating refugees... There will be a price to pay for this inhumane eviction policy." By 1970, over 20,000 Detroit homes had been demolished to make room for freeways. Those residents whose homes were not directly in the path of freeways also suffered as their communities were destroyed, divided, and degraded by new highways and high-speed thoroughfares.

The Divided by Design report estimated that the construction of only 16 miles of Interstate in Atlanta and Washington, DC, directly resulted in the loss of over \$2 billion in home value. This does not include the losses in property values for parcels now adjacent to the highway, or any related disinvestment.

Detroit, alone, is now crisscrossed by 135 miles of highways. Many surface streets were also widened to accommodate the growing traffic demand and travel-speed expectations of motorists. Other Michigan cities were similarly impacted. Highways were routed through established neighborhoods in Flint, Saginaw, Lansing, and Grand Rapids. It is impossible to estimate the social and economic costs of Michigan's era of urban highway building.

Furthermore, it has become clear that urban highways are not a solution to congestion. A new or expanded freeway may temporarily alleviate congestion on that route. However, there is a very well-established tendency of "induced demand," where automobile drivers adjust their habits by driving more until the route is just as congested as before, and more traffic is imposed on the access routes that have not been expanded. In time, new developments are constructed on the urban periphery to take advantage of the expanded high-speed routes, necessitating more frequent and longer-distance vehicle trips and further increasing overall congestion.

How to do Better

While it is widely understood that the highway-building policies of decades past imposed myriad problems, many of those policies remain enshrined in state and federal policies. Many investments being made today will further embed the harmful and inequitable decisions of the past.

Fortunately, most of these harmful policies act as guidance rather than prescription. Michigan is free to evolve beyond 1950s thinking to provide a built environment and transportation system that works for all Michiganders. The Divided by Design report concludes with guidance to road agencies on how to correct the injustices of the past and prevent future harm.

Measure What Matters Most

Current transportation planning approaches overwhelmingly prioritize moving as many cars as quickly as possible. Road "improvement" projects are intended to improve metrics such as "level of service (LoS)," a measure of delay compared to free-flowing traffic. When applied to urban areas, this approach imposes costs on the transportation system and the community in general. Road agencies should prioritize investments that provide net benefit to the community, rather than only drivers who want to pass through quickly. Transportation sys-

tem investments must consider community priorities such as safety, accessibility, and environmental quality.

Repair the Damage and Stop Making Past Mistakes

Transportation planning in Michigan has prioritized the automobile for 80 years. There are some signs of improvement, such as the planned conversion of the one-mile Interstate 375 to a boulevard, and the removal of Pontiac's Woodward Loop. However, many transportation projects continue to make the mistakes of the past—prioritizing the unfettered movement of automobiles above all other considerations. For example, MDOT plans to spend over \$3 billion over the next decade to reconstruct Interstate 94 through Detroit, including adding an additional travel lane in each direction. This costly expansion will induce more traffic, more congestion to connecting streets, more pollution, and more maintenance cost liability. Michigan's urban communities cannot recover and thrive if transportation agencies continue to prioritize high-speed automobile travel through neighborhoods.

Prioritize the Safety of Everyone Over the Speed of a Few

Road agencies, and especially state DOTs, developed policies, culture, and organizational structures in the 1950s centered around building out the Interstate highway system. Highway design appropriately prioritizes moving vehicles quickly with minimal friction. However, when these design approaches are applied to busy surface streets, the result is uncomfortable and dangerous for anyone not ensconced in a vehicle. Michigan's road agencies should identify areas where frequent intersections and pedestrian traffic make high-speeds dangerous, and implement design standards that slow traffic down.

Always Consider Land-use and Transportation Together

Many issues that are labeled as transportation problems are often, in fact, land-use problems. For many decades, too much development in Michigan has occurred on the urban periphery. As homes and commercial areas are built farther apart, more trips must be made by vehicles, and those trips require longer distances. The result is increasing traffic congestion and burdensome transportation costs. Road agencies and transit providers are then given impossible tasks of alleviating congestion and providing transit services in these sprawling automobile-centered areas. Addressing these problems will require a long-term commitment to adopting both land-use and transportation policies to decrease the necessity of residents to make frequent and lengthy vehicle trips.

Summary

The Divided by Design report is an outstanding resource to better understand how transportation policy in Michigan and the U.S. has hamstrung local economies and destroyed communities. While these harms are now well documented and understood, many aspects of these harmful policies live on today. If transportation policies continue to emphasize high-speed traffic through neighborhoods, and land-use policies encourage suburban sprawl development on the urban periphery, the state will be challenged in its efforts to bring about economic and social vitality for all its residents.

The optimal path forward is not to restrict automobile travel or make it impossible for people to drive. It is about enabling Michigan's cities to best serve their residents. A well functioning city will incorporate land-use patterns and a transportation system that provides viable alternatives to driving. By providing walkable, bikeable, transit-oriented neighborhoods, Michigan can reduce the necessity of car ownership and vehicle travel, reduce the time and cost burdens on residents, and encourage sustainable investments in the community.

It took decades of auto-oriented planning and policy to result in the built environment that exists today. Restoring many of Michigan's communities will require decades of sustained commitment by multiple government agencies. It is critical to stop perpetuating existing problems by repeating the mistakes of the past.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Eric joined the Citizens Research Council in 2022 as an expert in civil infrastructure policy. Previous to his position with the Research Council, Eric spent nearly ten years as a transportation systems analyst, focusing on the policy implications of emerging technologies such as autonomous vehicles, connected vehicles, and intelligent transportation systems. Eric has been a Michigan-licensed professional engineer (PE) since 2012. As a practicing engineer, Eric has design and project experience across multiple domains, including highways, airfields, telecommunications, and watershed management. Eric received his Bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Michigan State University in 2006. Eric also holds Masters degrees in environmental engineering and urban/regional planning, both from the University of Michigan.

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