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Needed: An expanded campaign to tear down urban freeways

A new report from the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy shows freeway removal delivering benefits on three continents.

PHILIP LANGDON

The freeway removal campaign got a boost in March when the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy released “The Life and Death of Urban Highways,” a 39-page report on the benefits that five of the world’s cities have gained by replacing limited-access highways.

“Decades of failing to deliver congestion relief and improve safety combined with the hard evidence of damaged neighborhoods have proven that the urban highway is a failed experiment,” former Denver Planning Director Peter J. Park declared in the report’s foreword.

Park, who resigned his Denver position last August after winning a Loeb Fellowship at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, has been preaching the freeway-removal message at Harvard and at the nearby Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, where he is a Lincoln/Loeb Fellow. He argues that the nation needs an expanded campaign to persuade officials and the public about the good things that come from eliminating urban freeways.

The report from ITDP, an organization that “promotes socially equitable and environmentally sustainable transportation worldwide,” makes these points:

- “When limited-access freeways are force-fit into urban environments, they create barriers that erode vitality—the very essence of cities.” Freeways block many nearby surface streets, making it harder to get from one place to another.
- “Residents, businesses, property owners, and neighborhoods along the free-

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This mid-rise, mixed-use building in downtown Asheville, NC, is the kind of development that maximizes tax revenue for cities, according to an analysis. See story on page 3.



COURTESY OF JOSEPH MINICOZZI, URBANS

Big steps for El Paso

On the far west of Texas, officials are showing how to bring back historical patterns of transit-oriented, walkable neighborhoods in a low-density, spread-out city.

ROBERT STEUTEVILLE

El Paso, which means “the step” in Spanish, took a big one toward livability and sustainability with approval of Plan El Paso in March. That’s the latest of many strides the city has taken in recent years toward smart growth.

The 19th largest city in the US, El Paso is expected to add more than 400,000 new residents by 2035 through substantial planned military base expansion and nonmilitary growth. Plan El Paso accommodates this growth in compact, mixed-use, transit-oriented development (TOD). The agenda is one of the most ambitious and multifaceted local sustainability efforts in the US.

The big transportation move is a 55-mile bus rapid transit (BRT) system that’s under construction — one of the most extensive in the country. The four BRT lines will extend from downtown to all corners of the city, connecting with existing bus routes. Major rapid transit transfer centers are slated to be development hubs, and streetscape improvements are planned.

“El Paso has been deliberately innovative, because there aren’t a lot of examples of bus rapid transit with transit-oriented development (TOD) around the US,” says Jim Charlier of Charlier Associates, a consultant on the transportation plan. “The plan used the same principles as rail TOD — being respectful of the fact that development impacts (of bus transit) might not be as strong.”

Among its assets, El Paso is a former streetcar city, with a good street network

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Even when municipalities don't have money lined up for highway removal or modification, they should start the planning for those undertakings without waiting, Park said. The City of Milwaukee, where Park served as planning director under Mayor John Norquist from 1995 to 2003, began exploring removal of the mile-like Park East stub in the mid-1990s — a time when, he recalls, “we had no idea how we were going to pay for this.”

“We did a lot of planning without the money to do the projects,” Park pointed out. After the city had planned the freeway’s removal, Harley-Davidson approached the city with the idea of planning a big entertainment center in the area. “That got the ball rolling,” he said.

“Planning is something you have to do so you’re prepared for opportunity,” Park exhorted. “Establish a vision for what you want your city, town, or neighborhood to become. Prepare yourself; broadcast a signal to the private sector that you’re ready.”

“Harley-Davidson would never have proposed freeway removal,” but the planning done by the city enabled the company to recognize the opportunity that would open up once a better circulation system was in place, Park said.

“Was Wisconsin DOT receptive? No,” said Park. “They said [the freeway removal] wouldn’t work.” But the governor wasn’t willing to fight the idea once the motorcycle manufacturer saw it as the linchpin for development.

At the Lincoln Institute, Park’s advocacy sparked debate about sources of support for freeway removal initiatives. Park said that in Milwaukee, people warmed to the idea of getting rid of the highway because they recognized that the downtown had already begun improving: “Ten years earlier, there probably wouldn’t have been belief in the downtown.”

One Lincoln Institute attendee suggested that a regional governmental organization would be the natural place to turn for advocacy of freeway replacement. But Fred Salvucci, who teaches at MIT and worked with Governor Michael Dukakis and Boston Mayor Kevin White on lining up money to put Boston’s Central Artery underground, said regional organizations may be dominated by car-dependent suburbanites and thus may be more interested in keeping freeways in place than in ripping them out.



RINUX VIA FLICKR, COURTESY OF ITDP

The Cheonggyecheon creek in Soeoul after freeway removal

Referring to the Big Dig project that depressed the Central Artery, Salvucci told *Better! Cities & Towns*: “If we had regional government, we’d be dead.” The Metropolitan Area Planning Council was pro-highway, he pointed out. Key support for major changes came, Salvucci said, from the mayors of Boston and Somerville, the City of Cambridge, and from citizens of those communities — all at or near the region’s core. “What helped was that the cities were small, and neighborhood groups had a chance to convert them.”

A NATIONAL CAMPAIGN

The Congress for New Urbanism has been conducting a “Highways to Boulevards” initiative — encouraging various cities, including Seattle, New Orleans and Buffalo, New York, to replace elevated expressways with surface streets, usually boulevards. Park argued for an even bigger, effort saying, “There’s an opportunity for a new campaign.”

An intensive national campaign, he said, might build on the same values — prosperity and freedom from congestion — that business and government used in the 1950s to gain approval for the Interstate Highway system. So far, said Park, “mayors are the ones who have mostly led these [freeway removal] efforts.”

“We need partners who have a lobbying structure,” said a Lincoln attendee said. She noted that AARP has a lobbying presence and should be interested in promoting walkable environments for the

good of its members, ages 50 and up.

“The very first thing people will ask is: Where will all the cars go?” Park acknowledged. There’s more than one answer. Some motorists will switch to transit. Some will make fewer trips. Some will choose different routes. “A lot of the time, they will get to where they’re going faster,” Park asserted. “They will not have to overshoot their destination and backtrack,” as they often do on limited-access highways.

“Limited access,” he made clear, is not the solution to congestion. In cities, he said, limited-access highways have turned out to be less a remedy than an obstacle. ♦

El Paso

FROM PAGE 1

— but with low-density development and limited public transit. It also has a lot of sprawl and a building and development culture geared toward churning out automobile-oriented, single-use landscapes.

“We realized that the newest neighborhoods don’t provide the best value added to the rest of city — whether from the perspective of carbon emissions or return to general fund in taxes,” says Mathew McElroy, deputy director of Planning and Economic Development. “The city council and mayor took a deliberate decision to build differently because of the value of more compact,

traditional development patterns.”

Thirty-five thousand people left the urban core from 1980 to 2010, McElroy says — a trend that officials are determined to reverse. “We are leaving vast amounts of public infrastructure underutilized,” he says.

The catalyst for the new approach came with a 2005 Department of Defense plan for consolidation of military bases, which directed about 20,000 more troops to El Paso in coming years. In a study, Defense’s Office of Economic Adjustment determined that El Paso’s comprehensive plan was out of date and that the low-density development patterns were costly for the city in the long run.

Following that analysis, the city adopted the SmartCode in 2008 and hired the new urban firm Dover, Kohl & Partners to update the comprehensive plan and organize land use around rapid transit in 2010. Many consultants, including Charlier, contributed to the planning that was paid for through a \$2.2 million Defense Department grant, \$250,000 from the Texas Department of Transportation, and local funds.

The SmartCode, approved as the housing market and economy were collapsing, was a hard sell at first. “Developers have been building [sprawl] for years and before that, their fathers did it the same way,” McElroy says. “We paid for a market study by Zimmerman/Volk Associates in the comprehensive plan. The good thing was that study found a huge unmet demand for urban housing. Now we have to get developers to believe that the ZVA study is a quality document.” (See “Changing land-use and development culture,” on page 8.)

El Paso is the largest municipality to approve a citywide version of the SmartCode — form-based regulations that are being used in scores of cities and towns around the globe. Miami, with a code called Miami 21, is the second largest. El Paso’s code is optional, so the city must persuade developers, who have had little or no experience with New Urbanism, to give it a try. When developers came in for zoning changes on parcels totaling 600 acres, El Paso officials saw an opportunity to turn down the conventional proposals and ask the developers to use the SmartCode.

The city paid Placemakers, an urban design firm that drafted the city’s SmartCode, to draw up schematic plans for the developments, called Montecillo and Aldea. Aldea is owned by Walmart, which is moving forward with a 180,000-square-foot store, embedded in a new mixed-use neighborhood. That’s quite innovative by Walmart standards.

The city sweetened the deal for Montecillo and Aldea by offering the developers what is known in Texas as a 380 grant agreement. The agreement is like tax-increment financing — the grants, which pay for construction of infrastructure, are disbursed as new real estate tax revenues come in from the developments. Montecillo and Aldea are eligible for \$20 million in infrastructure funding through this agreement.

El Paso makes an effort to expedite permitting for plans that are based on the SmartCode. “The work you do in a SmartCode application easily shaves six months of time compared to a conventional application,” McElroy says.

The city could take one more important, step, suggests planner Scott Polikov of Gateway Planning in Fort Worth, a firm that completed a downtown plan for El Paso in 2006. That step would be to rezone two or three of the key BRT corridors,



FROM PLAN EL PASO

An aerial of planned development and roundabout in the Five Points neighborhood of El Paso.

making the SmartCode the default regulation in those locations so that landowners and developers know what standards will be used. “They have got great momentum going — now is the time to take it to the next level and take advantage of the terrific planning that Dover Kohl has done,” Polikov says.

THREE KINDS OF DEVELOPMENT

El Paso is a big, diverse city, and changing the direction of planning and development naturally deals with many conditions. Plan El Paso deals with three broad situations: greenfield, suburban retrofit, and infill/redevelopment.

On its urban fringes, El Paso owns more developable land than just about any other city in the US, McElroy says. More than 3,000 acres of public land in the northeast and northwest of the city are planned for long-term development according to the SmartCode. “We wanted a better, more sustainable form of



Mesa Street, a Bus Rapid Transit corridor, near the University of Texas-El Paso today (above). Below, a vision for redevelopment.



FROM PLAN EL PASO

development in the land we control," he says. The Northwest neighborhood plan was created by Dover, Kohl.

Aldea and Montecillo are also greenfield sites, on which the new urban firm Moule & Polyzoides has been hired by developers to work out design details.

Of the three broad categories, suburban retrofit is the most challenging. Numerous areas in the city are typified by very wide streets, huge blocks, and commercial power-centers — all extremely oriented to cars.

One example is the BRT transfer center that will be built at a big-box development area called Remcon Circle, which planners envision transforming into a mixed-use urban center. A second example is the Mesa Street corridor, a typical suburban strip commercial arterial, which planners see being converted to a mixed-use boulevard and avenue. That would cost hundreds of millions of dollars, McElroy estimates.

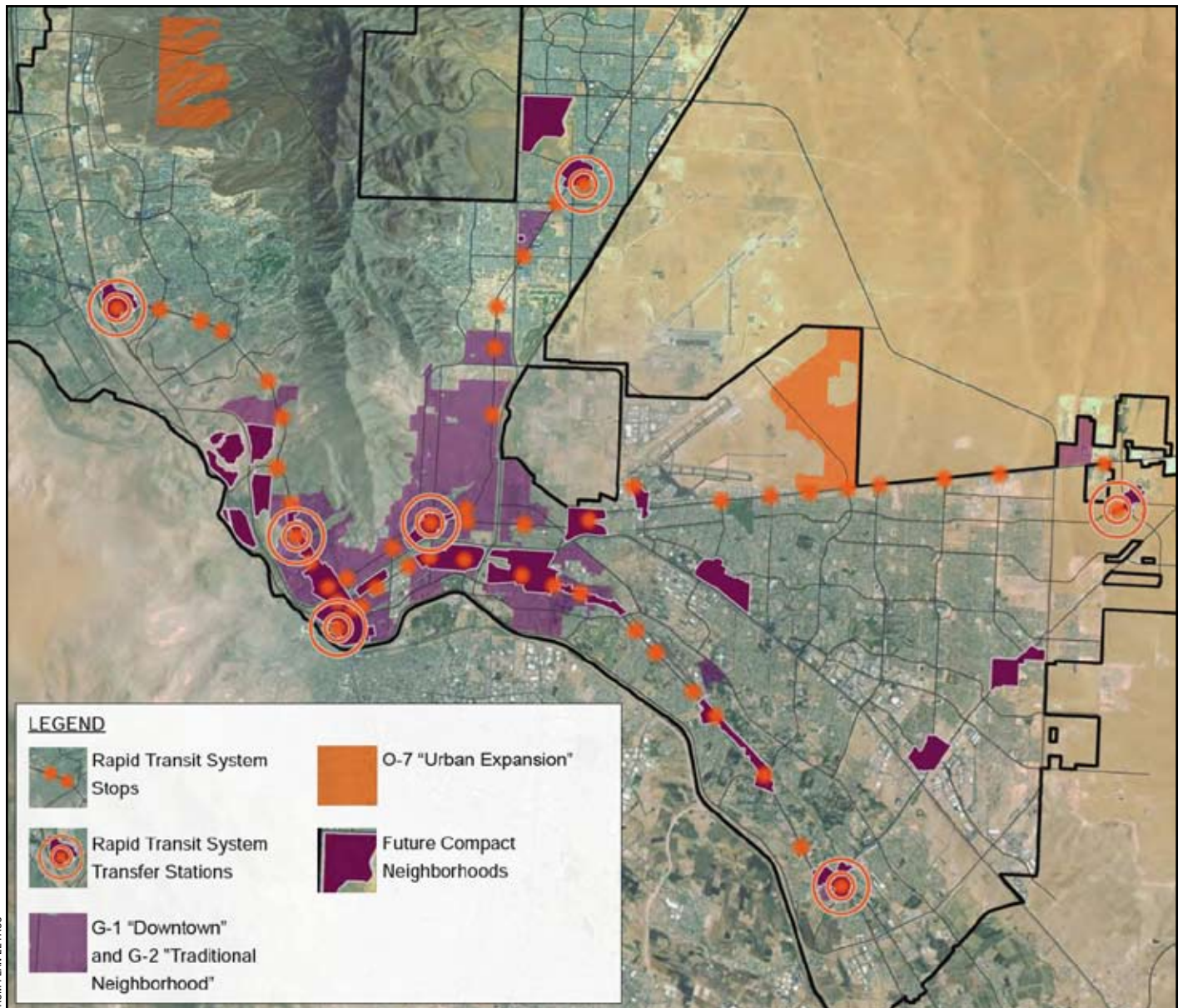
These kinds of projects make for some of the most dramatic images in Plan El Paso, but they are not likely to be imple-

mented soon. "Those big box sites are longer-term projects," McElroy says. "... In the short term we can plant appropriate street trees and put in better sidewalks. But as the malls die, these are retrofit opportunities."

The biggest impact in the coming decade is likely to be in infill/redevelopment areas. El Paso's population density is a little under 2,500 people per square mile — the city can accommodate a *lot* more development while improving the quality of life. There are hundreds of such opportunities — especially along rapid transit corridors and near four transfer stations in and around downtown. "We have immediate 'wins' that we will pursue — and Five Points and Oregon Street (which runs by University of Texas-El Paso and other major institutions) are examples," says McElroy.

These locations have fine-grained street networks — but often low-quality streetscapes that are not safe because traffic moves too fast. City officials have immersed themselves in details — from curb return radii, currently too big, to street

Bus Rapid Transit corridors, transfer stations (where transit-oriented development is planned), and future areas for compact development (purple and orange sections) are mapped out in Plan El Paso.



FROM PLAN EL PASO

sections, which are often too wide. You can find these details in Plan El Paso. The city will invest capital improvement money to plant street trees with irrigation, close driveways, install proper sidewalks, put in roundabouts and bulbouts, and take other measures to make streets more appealing.

“We understand that without quality streets and a quality public realm, people will never choose to walk or take a bike,” explains McElroy.

MAKING THE BUS APPEALING

The decision to go to BRT was based on cost. “This market couldn’t afford to go straight to light rail,” says McElroy. The city is already looking to a potential streetcar downtown, but for an immediate transit system that serves most of the city, officials believed that BRT was the best fit. The city is split by topography, with development following arterial roads in the valleys.

One challenge is that the bus has traditionally been used mostly by low-income residents. Express bus service in parts of the city, which began a few years ago, is attracting a broader group of riders, McElroy says.

BRT will operate at 10-minute frequencies in peak periods (6 to 9 AM and 3 to 6 PM) and at 15-minute frequencies in off hours. Every line will have curbside stations with level boarding (15-inch curbs), real-time arrival information, one fare for the entire system that is paid prior to boarding, and stops with distinct design. Sixty-foot articulated buses will be used.

El Paso’s buses will mostly operate in regular travel lanes, unlike many rapid transit systems. Signal prioritization and other measures will be used to prevent buses from getting delayed. This saves money, but also avoids making streets wider



FROM PLAN EL PASO

Placitas, or small squares, are planned throughout the city.

— an important consideration when the city is trying to attract development to corridors. El Paso’s BRT plan represents a balance between a conservative cost approach and designing the system to attract new riders and mixed-use development. The BRT system is planned for completion in the next three years, with the first lines scheduled to open in the fall of 2013. ♦

Note: In April it was announced that Mathew McElroy of El Paso was the recipient of the Groves Award from the Transect Codes Council and CNU, recognizing outstanding leadership in Transect-based planning. McElroy was honored for his efforts at code reform, SmartCode rezonings, and commitment to CNU accreditation.

Changing land-use and development culture

A new approach to the built environment requires comprehensive education on the part of regulators and land-use professionals, so that plans don’t just sit on the shelf. Like many aspects of Plan El Paso, the city has gone the extra mile in this area.

Perhaps the best professional education program focusing on New Urbanism is run jointly by the University of Miami and the Congress for the New Urbanism. Four hundred and thirty-seven (437) people have gone through the CNU-Accreditation (CNU-A) program, of which 17 percent of the total have been from El Paso. “In the most recent exam registration, residents of the City of El Paso made up 81 percent of the registrants,” notes Abigail Bouzan-Kaloustian of CNU.

Mathew McElroy, deputy director of Planning and Economic Development, explains the city’s education program:

“The New Urbanism and SmartCode were both very new for City of El Paso staff, the design community, and for developers. Everyone had heard of it, knew a tiny bit of it here and there, but no one that I came across could profess any real expertise. We had developers, for example, saying, ‘I have a great project, it’s got skinny streets!’ — never mind that the streets got skinny because they took out the planting strip, left 36 feet between the curbs, and were doing it with a rolled curb. Prior to my joining the city, we actually approved several subdivisions like this.

“When City Council started pushing for a different form of development, we realized we had to engage in a detailed and widespread education effort. At that point a co-worker and I decided to prepare for the CNU-A exam and passed just at about the time we had a few more public projects not meet with Council’s vision. I recommended to our city manager that all department heads with either capital projects or who are involved in development review take the exam.

“We prepared 12 two-hour courses and a four-hour practice exam. The department heads went first, then all senior managers — 67 of them passed the exam. “We have more than 90 enrolled now preparing for the next exam, but what’s exciting about this group is that it’s the private design community — the architects and engineers designing new neighborhoods in El Paso. If they want to work for the city, then they must have a project assigned CNU-A, which got us pretty much everyone in town enrolled.

“The exam needs to evolve and get tougher, focus more on streets, detailed design guidance, but it’s a great tool in markets like mine to at least begin to get past just the big ideas, get into the details, and think differently about how we build so that we end up with better projects. That way no one can say that they didn’t understand the design the city wanted.”