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From Freeways to Boulevards: Lessons from Rochester, New York



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Issue

Urban freeway removal has been uplifted as a path forward from the legacy of discriminatory freeway construction projects. Cities across the U.S. and worldwide have removed or capped freeways as an attempt to improve local urban environments and residents' quality of life. There are numerous potential benefits, including increased community connectivity, improved air quality, and additional land for housing, bike lanes, or parks. However, freeway removal projects have also been associated with gentrification and displacement (Cervero et al., 2009; Kang & Cervero, 2009; Patterson & Harley, 2019).

This project is a mixed-methods case study of a completed freeway-to-boulevard project in Rochester, New York. In the 1950s, Rochester constructed New York State Route 940T, or the "Inner Loop," that encircled the downtown area, cutting through densely populated residential areas, demolishing homes and businesses, and disproportionately harming Black neighborhoods (Landmark Society, 2021). By the 1990s, Rochester's population had declined and the Inner Loop was underutilized, particularly along the eastern section, and was widely considered an undesirable barrier separating downtown from residential neighborhoods. From 2014 to 2017, the Inner Loop East Transformation project removed two-thirds of a mile from the eastern section of the Inner Loop and replaced it with an at-grade boulevard lined with bike lanes and trees and surrounded by mixed-use residential communities. A second project to continue the teardown and redesign of the Inner Loop is currently under development.

Study Approach

To spatially assess potential effects of the project, this project compared the areas bordering the Inner Loop East in the

years before and after the project was completed, using a combination of census data, air quality estimates, asthma emergency department visit-rate data, traffic volume data, and bicycle/pedestrian counts (Figure 1). The researcher also conducted interviews with planners, community advocates, and residents. Evidence from the interviews was supplemented with document analysis of news coverage, social media commentary, public meeting notes, and city planning documents. These methods were intended to uncover how the Inner Loop East Transformation project impacted residents' quality of life and how the community engagement and project design contributed to the observed outcomes.

Key Findings

The Rochester Inner Loop East Transformation project had the following impacts:

- **Improved connectivity and mobility.** Bike and pedestrian counts increased in the wake of the project, and traffic from the Inner Loop was redistributed across the street network without creating issues with congestion.
- **Created new affordable housing units.** Ten new multifamily projects were developed with a total of nearly 700 units, and based on data by local housing developer Bret Garwood, 75% of those are considered affordable housing by federal standards and at least 125 units are supportive housing for extremely low-income residents.
- **Likely contributed to rising property values and rents, leading to gentrification and displacement of Black residents.** While the total population in the study area increased, the percentage of Black or African American residents decreased by nearly 22%, a much higher rate than in the city as a whole. The total number of Black or African

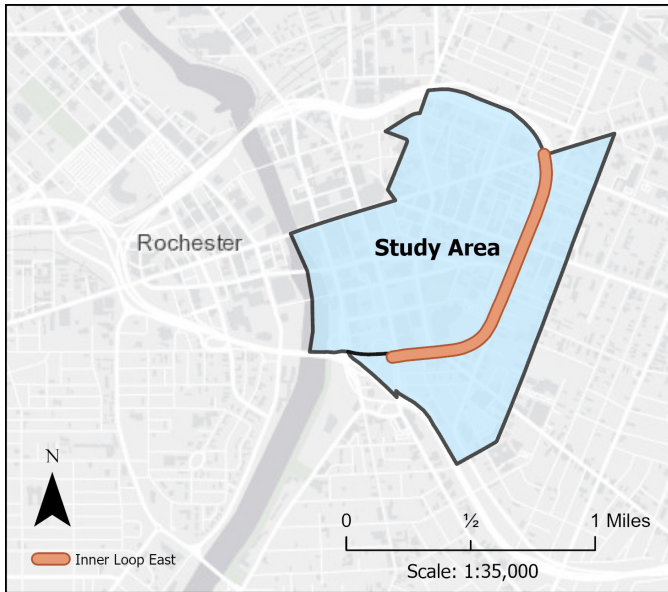


Figure 1. Map of the combined study area around Downtown Rochester, New York

American residents peaked at 1,096 in 2013 but dropped to a low of 329 in 2021. In contrast, the proportion of white residents increased from 59% in 2013 to 77% in 2021. Median per capita income in the study area also increased over 150%, compared to 27% citywide. Additionally, the percentage of residents with at least some college education increased from 63% to 85% in the study area, while it increased by only 4 percentage points citywide. Lastly, median gross rent increased nearly 40% in the study area, compared to 5% citywide.



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Conclusion

The study identified the following key lessons for future projects to address air quality, traffic, displacement, and community engagement:

- Boulevards do not necessarily require the same vehicle carrying capacity as the freeways they replace; traffic will reroute and disperse across the grid.
- Improvements to alternative transportation modes (e.g., bus service) should be implemented in tandem with freeway removal to support mode shift.
- Asthma-related emergency department visits increased during project construction years, highlighting the importance of stringent air pollution mitigation efforts during freeway removal projects.
- Substantially reducing traffic-related air pollution will require removing freeways with higher traffic volumes.
- Community engagement around land use decisions should set clear priorities related to housing density and opportunities for ownership, mix of market rate and affordable housing, architecture and design standards, public gathering spaces and green space, and specific community needs (e.g., grocery stores).
- Gentrification and displacement are a concern, even in areas of low residential density.
- Neighborhood stabilization measures beyond the development of affordable housing are needed to avoid displacement due to increasing rents and property values.