



METROPOLIS

How America Can Break Its Highway Addiction

In the 1980s, an unlikely alliance slowed the construction of nature-destroying dams. We just might be able to pull it off again.

BY DAVID ZIPPER

AUG 28, 2024 • 5:40 AM

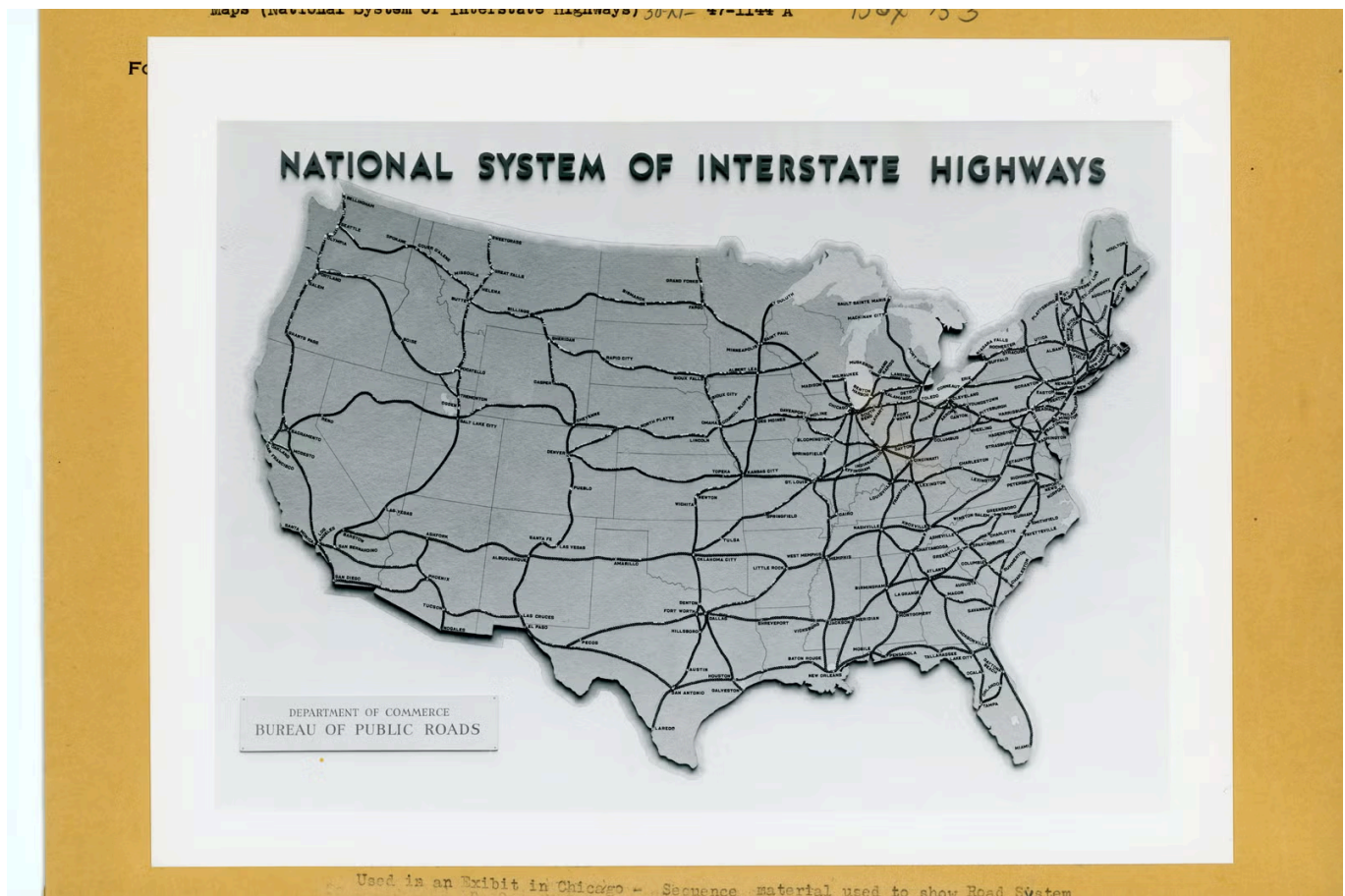
The neighborhood of Allendale, in Shreveport, Louisiana, lies just west of downtown. Long a nexus for northern Louisiana's Black community, Allendale's population is now just over 4,000, down from 12,000 in 1980. But there are newer developments in the area, such as the public housing complex that opened earlier this year, and a number of homes where families resettled after fleeing Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Allendale's gems include a park standing atop the site of a Civil War fort and a 19th-century waterworks, now a museum and a national historic landmark, that is the last steam-powered municipal water treatment plant in the United States.

All these structures could soon fall prey to a bulldozer. The reason: A proposed 3.5-mile highway, the I-49 Inner-City Connector, would smash through Allendale, wreaking havoc on everything in its path. "State officials call it 'the Connector,'" said Kim Mitchell, a Shreveport architect who has been fighting the project, "but it's really a divider—because it isolates Allendale."

Some of the Connector's boosters seem to see leveling Allendale itself as a reason to build the road. "The area that it covers is a lot of blighted area. It could be revitalized," Greg Tarver, a Louisiana state senator, told Bloomberg CityLab last year. The project's estimated budget: \$865 million.

Those costs, both financial and human, are supposedly justified by the faster trip times that the Connector would offer. According to a 2016 study by the Northwest Louisiana Council of Governments, drivers who use the Connector would save an average of three minutes of travel time. (The study does not mention that Shreveport's traffic delays are already the lowest among Louisiana's four major metro areas, including New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Lafayette.)

From San Bernardino to Austin to Cape Cod, state transportation departments are pouring billions of dollars into highway expansions that upend communities and damage the planet, all in a quixotic quest to conquer congestion. Entirely new highways are under discussion too, often with bipartisan backing, such as I-14, promoted by Sens. Ted Cruz of Texas and Raphael Warnock of Georgia, that would slice across the Gulf Coast from Midland, Texas, to Augusta, Georgia. In 2022 federal, state, and local governments spent \$127.9 billion on highway construction, nearly twice the amount that went toward maintaining public roads—some 43 percent of which were rated in “poor” or “mediocre” condition, according to a 2021 report by the American Society of Civil Engineers.



Department of Commerce Bureau of Public Roads

The thing is, Americans already have access to 4.2 million miles of public roads, including an interstate system, completed in 1992, that can generally carry them anywhere they might like to go. It's unclear why, exactly, the country should prioritize further enlarging its highway network over repairing pavement that is in disrepair. The kicker is that, contrary to the promises of state transportation departments, new and expanded highways like the I-49 Connector consistently *fail* to reduce congestion. Instead of smoothing traffic flows, the added asphalt compels more people to drive until gridlock on the widened roadway is as thick as before. The supply of cars will, consistently, rise to meet—then clog up—the

available lanes. Solutions that can truly mitigate congestion, like improving transit service, implementing congestion pricing, and encouraging dense development, are often brushed aside as impractical. Instead, the U.S. is hooked on paving more and more highways, making old ones bigger, and adding new bits and bobs to the existing networks.

“We don’t have a U.S. Department of Transportation,” Democratic Massachusetts Rep. Jake Auchincloss told me. “We have a U.S. Department of Highways.”

America’s addiction to road construction goes back decades, enabled by naive policymaking, self-serving industry groups, and myopically trained highway engineers. Kicking that addiction is a Herculean task—but not an impossible one. We’ve been on a destruction course with excessive infrastructure before, and it nearly cost America the Grand Canyon. We corrected course then. The moment ahead of us is no less pivotal.

* * *

At first, the paths that connected cities were made of dirt, gravel, and sand. The Ford Model T’s explosive success during the 1910s was partly due to its durability in terrible roadway conditions. In his book *Divided Highways*, Tom Lewis writes that the Model T offered “high axles and three-and-a-half-inch-wide tires, the better to traverse roads cut deep with ruts made by farm wagons.” Still, it was apparent that smoother surfaces would enable faster travel in these newly popular machines.

Sensing an opportunity to turbocharge the U.S. economy, the federal government began to fund roadway construction directly. The Bureau of Public Roads, formed in 1915, spent \$750 million on roads in the 1920s. In 1924, Lewis recounted, the bureau’s leader Thomas MacDonald shared his vision for the future: “My aim is this. We will be able to drive out of any county seat in the United States at 35 miles an hour and drive into any other county seat—and never crack a spring.”

MacDonald and his team were backed by a powerful corporate alliance that included the auto, asphalt, concrete, and rubber industries. With their support, states and the federal government established gasoline taxes, whose revenues would be used solely for roads, providing an ongoing and secure funding source for future construction.

Creatively designed roadways captured the public’s imagination, such as the first cloverleaf interchange, erected in Woodbridge Township, New Jersey, in 1928, which allowed drivers to move between two highways without crossings or left turns. At the 1939 World’s Fair in New York, Norman Bel Geddes’ utopian vision of a nation crisscrossed by immaculate,

congestion-free roads drew massive crowds to the General Motors booth. Upon exiting, 5 million visitors were given a pin that declared: “I Have Seen the Future.”

Clover Leaf Intersection Routes 4 and 25 near Woodbridge Township, New Jersey. Bettmann/Getty Images

American highway construction went into overdrive after World War II, as an expanding middle class moved into car-centric suburbs. In 1956 the Federal Highway Act launched the interstate system, a civic commitment to provide rapid, smooth travel between major cities nationwide.

But that still left open the question of car trips *within* urban areas, which occurred largely on roadways with stoplights and intersections that constrained traffic speeds. Although President Dwight Eisenhower made clear in a 1960 White House meeting that he did not intend for new interstates to bulldoze their way through urban neighborhoods, an alliance of highway engineers, chambers of commerce, and city officials effectively overrode him, designing routes that leveled low-income and minority neighborhoods while leaving affluent and white communities intact. That was no accident; local leaders saw the new interstate system as a golden opportunity to expunge “blight,” which they claimed acted as a barrier to development.

In Miami, for example, Overtown was the traditional heart of the city’s Black community, with jazz clubs hosting the likes of Ella Fitzgerald, Josephine Baker, and Nat King Cole. Highway engineers targeted Overtown as the site of a massive interchange connecting I-95, I-395, and State Road 836, displacing half of Overtown’s population by 1965. For decades, Overtown residents mourned what they had lost. “I get choked up every time I talk about it, just like my dad used to get choked up,” Naomi Rolle told WLRN, the South Florida PBS affiliate, in 2013. “In 1965 they ran him out of that house.”

| Interstate 95 in January 2022 in Miami. Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Those who pushed back against urban highway projects were reminded that, as Robert Moses, the master builder of roads like New York's Cross Bronx and Long Island expressways, liked to say, "you can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs." The "omelet" in this case was faster car trips. Lewis writes that John Volpe, a federal official charged with overseeing the nascent interstate system, instructed his engineers to "concentrate on the urban sections of the system, since cities had the greatest traffic congestion."

But there was a problem: New urban highways had a pesky habit of filling up with traffic almost as soon as they opened. A classic example was the Van Wyck Expressway, which Moses built in Queens in 1950. As recounted in Robert Caro's book *The Power Broker*, Moses promised that "traffic would flow freely" following the expressway's construction. Instead, residents found that "the new road had not freed them from the trap of daily travel," Caro writes. "It had closed the trap on them more firmly than ever, for new traffic, generated by the new road, was also jamming the local streets."

The phenomenon Caro described is now known as induced demand. On new highways like the Van Wyck, the added road space can at peak times persuade people to drive who might

otherwise have left earlier or later in the day, or taken transit, or perhaps not traveled at all. The result is an endless cycle in which congestion leads to highway expansion, which invites more peak-hour trips, which brings back traffic, and so on. The pattern is so inevitable that economists have dubbed induced demand the “iron law of congestion.” According to a recent report by Transportation for America, an advocacy group, the 100 largest urbanized areas expanded their total lane miles 42 percent between 1993 and 2017 (equivalent to more than 30,000 miles of lanes), exceeding their collective 32 percent population growth during that time. Despite all that road construction, total delays in those regions skyrocketed 144 percent.

Today few urban highways are proposed as a solution for blight (Tarver, the Louisiana state senator and backer of the I-49 Connector, being an exception). But many are, despite all the evidence, promised as a congestion cure. Maryland’s transportation department, for instance, describes its proposed widening of I-270 northwest of Washington as a “traffic relief plan.” Marylanders should be skeptical of such framing. A more common experience from highway widening can be found in Houston, where the \$2.8 billion that the Texas Department of Transportation spent in 2011 to broaden the Katy Freeway to as many as 26 lanes resulted in traffic being worse than ever. TxDOT now wants to spend \$740 billion—more than the gross domestic product of Belgium—on transportation in the next 25 years, with “congestion relief” one of its key goals. Some \$160 billion would be spent solely on doubling the size of existing two-lane roads.

Because of induced demand, this Sisyphean struggle against congestion is an expensive boondoggle. Worse, the added miles of highway lanes act as an accelerant for climate change. Beyond transporting more cars—99 percent of which in the U.S. run on gasoline alone—bigger highways nudge people to move to more spacious homes on the urban periphery, where cars are often the only means of reliable transport. The result is an increase in total driving, with greenhouse gas emissions rising in lockstep, along with other forms of pollution, like tire particulates, which can kill fish when they leach into fresh water.

This tight link between highway construction and car pollution has led environmental groups to push back against roadway-widening projects. “Highway expansions that cram even more cars onto congested roads are undermining our climate goals,” declared the Natural Resources Defense Council in a post earlier this year.* Car drivers, meanwhile, are left just as exasperated by gridlock as they were before.

As destructive and pointless as highway construction can be, it continues to appeal to broad swaths of the public—and to elected leaders. “Expanding highways doesn’t reduce congestion, but it sounds like it should,” said Beth Osborne, the director of Transportation for America. “And by the time it fails, that politician won’t be there anyway.”

Part of the problem is that many highway engineers are obsessed with congestion but reject induced demand, which leads them to focus on roadway expansion—not denser development or expanded transit service—in a doomed effort to keep traffic flowing. After all, laying pavement is what highway engineers and their computer models are trained to do. “Engineers rely on [congestion-projection estimates] whenever they want to sell us a bigger and supposedly better road,” wrote University of Colorado Denver urban planning professor and engineer Wes Marshall in his book *Killed by a Traffic Engineer*.

As powerful as America’s highway addiction is, the current predicament is not hopeless. In fact, just a few decades ago, the United States managed to break a comparably catastrophic infrastructure habit: dam construction.

* * *

A

hundred years ago, dams, like highways, offered tantalizing benefits to a burgeoning nation. With electricity demand soaring, dams could produce vast

quantities of cheap power by harnessing the water flowing through them to turn a turbine: The Grand Coulee Dam, built during the Great Depression atop the Columbia River, generates 21 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity a year, enough to power 2 million homes. By blocking the natural flow of rivers and streams, dams created reservoirs to provide a reliable source of water for irrigation; in the arid Southwest, they could practically conjure breadbaskets out of desert. Where dams were, people could live, work, and produce. The colossal Hoover Dam, along the Nevada–Arizona border, transformed 1.5 million acres of scrub into farmland—and tamed the flood-prone Colorado River too.

Dams can be built in any number of ways, but they fundamentally involve blocking the free flow of a river with a structure that forces water to pool behind it, creating an artificial lake that can be used for agriculture or human consumption (and sometimes for recreation as well). More than 10,000 dams were erected in the U.S. from 1920 to 1949 by the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers, which collaborated with industry partners in sectors like construction, engineering, and concrete. Many of those dams provided massive quantities of jobs; some 21,000 people helped build Hoover Dam alone.

As Marc Reisner describes in *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*, dam proponents like Franklin Lane, Woodrow Wilson’s interior secretary, spoke with religious fervor: “The mountains are our enemies. We must pierce them and make them serve. The sinful rivers we must curb.” Everybody west of the Mississippi seemed to want a dam nearby, from farmers searching for cheap water to speculators anticipating a spike in land values to politicians eager for ribbon cuttings. “If there was a stretch of free-flowing river anywhere in the country, our reflex action was to erect a dam in its path,” Reisner writes.

But there was a problem: No amount of dam building seemed capable of quenching the West’s thirst for water.

“When you added a couple of lanes to a freeway or built a new bridge, cars came out of nowhere to fill them,” Reisner writes. “It was the same with water: the more you developed, the more growth occurred, and the faster demand grew.” To encourage more development in the Southwest, the Bureau of Reclamation once proposed piping water from the Pacific Northwest to the Mexican border, a distance of 1,000 miles.

View of O'Shaughnessy Dam and Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, in California. Keystone View Company/Library of Congress

In their race to build, dam engineers worried little about the calamitous impact their creations were having on local ecosystems. John Muir, the famed naturalist and founder of the Sierra Club, railed against the O'Shaughnessy Dam, which in 1923 flooded the bucolic Hetch Hetchy Valley. A "natural paradise," according to the [San Francisco Chronicle](#), Hetch Hetchy was thought to be [as beautiful as Yosemite](#), only a few miles away. [Muir was devastated](#) by its destruction, lamenting, "Dam the Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has been consecrated by the heart of man."

The ecological toll of dam building was immense. Neither overfishing nor pollution, writes David Wilcove in his book [The Condor's Shadow](#), "has endangered as many species of fish, mussels, amphibians, and crayfish as has habitat destruction." Birds were at risk too, since dams often destroyed the wetlands where they would feed and breed.

When engineers did try to mitigate the damage to wildlife, their efforts could be almost comically hapless. Wilcove describes fish ladders installed on dams in the Columbia River that allowed adult salmon to travel upstream but offered no accommodation for juveniles

heading in the opposite direction, leading local populations to collapse. That basic design flaw was repeated eight times over a period of 40 years.

The consequences of depleting salmon populations can be felt way up the food chain. Ben Goldfarb, a nature journalist who is currently writing a book about fish, noted that dams still affect the orcas that inhabit the Salish Sea off Washington state and British Columbia. “The orcas are basically failing,” he told me. “They’re not reproducing, and their population is declining. The biggest factor affecting these orcas is starvation because of the decline of Chinook salmon—which is because of the dams upriver.”

Nonetheless, Congress kept the money flowing for dam development. “The whole business was like a pyramid scheme—the many (the taxpayers) were paying to enrich the few—but most members of Congress figured that if they voted for everyone else’s dams, someday *they* would get one too,” Reisner writes. “Water projects came to epitomize the pork barrel; they were the oil can that lubricated the nation’s legislative machinery.” To keep legislators on their side, federal officials would imply that a project in their district would break ground soon, as long as Congress continued approving appropriations.

By the latter half of the 20th century, most of the best sites for dams—the places where hydropower or irrigation could produce a solid return on investment—already had one. “By then, you’ve basically built all the dams that you can easily,” said Donald Jackson, a professor at Lafayette College who studies the history of engineering. “There isn’t more water you can profitably store, and then people realize there aren’t that many free-flowing rivers.”

That did not stop Big Dam. Over 11,000 dams were built in the 1950s—more than during the previous three decades combined.

Pushback, though, was brewing. After World War II, the Bureau of Reclamation proposed building the Echo Park Dam on Utah’s Green River. The project would entail flooding most of Dinosaur National Monument, a park that now covers 210,000 acres and offers river rafting, cross-country hiking, and a chance to view ancient petroglyphs as well as 1,500 dinosaur fossils embedded in rock. Outrage followed. “Shall We Let Them Ruin Our National Parks?” asked a 1950 article in the Saturday Evening Post. Facing mounting opposition, much of it stoked by a fiery new leader of the Sierra Club named David Brower, the bureau dropped those plans and instead built the Glen Canyon Dam, which created Lake Powell.

The fight between environmentalists and dam builders escalated in the 1960s, after the bureau proposed damming the Colorado River next to another U.S. treasure: Grand Canyon

National Park. Brower's Sierra Club fought those plans with everything it had, placing a full-page ad in the New York Times in 1968 that read, "If They Turn Grand Canyon Into a Cash Register Is Any National Park Safe?" Grand Canyon was spared. "The Bureau of Reclamation engineers are like beavers," Brower told John McPhee in Encounters With the Archdruid. "They can't stand the sound of running water."

Brower's efforts to curb the beaverlike engineers steadily gained allies in Washington, as the federal government started to assert itself in the battle over water projects. The 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act protected waterways like the Missouri, Snake, and Delaware rivers from exploitation, and the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act created new approvals that slowed dam construction and made it more expensive. "It simply got to the point where it cost too much to build new dams," said Dan Beard, who oversaw the Bureau of Reclamation as a Department of the Interior official in the 1970s.

Still, Big Dam remained a potent force on Capitol Hill. As Reisner details in *Cadillac Desert*, in the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter tried to kill 18 dam projects that seemed especially ill-conceived. Beard, who worked on Carter's presidential transition team, said that this "hit list" of dams slotted for cancellation sparked a firestorm in Washington when the press got hold of it. "These were dogs—I mean, just terrible projects," Beard said. "But you've got these titans of the Senate, people like John Stennis, absolutely going crazy." Although controlled by fellow Democrats, Congress brushed Carter aside and funded most of the dam projects anyway.

But there is a force that can trump even the most determined troop of engineers and their backers—and that's money problems. A soaring national debt prompted Republicans like President Ronald Reagan to seek budget cuts, laying the groundwork for an unlikely collaboration between fiscal conservatives and environmentalists that finally brought Big Dam to heel.

"It was pretty strategic," said Beard, who worked on water and environmental issues for Democratic congressman George Miller in the 1980s after leaving the Carter administration. "The environmentalists said, 'We have a core base of support, but we're not the majority. Who are the logical people to add to the coalition?' It's these guys wandering around, saying we've got to balance the federal budget."

The fiscal prudence argument proved to be a welcome complement to environmentalists' ecological concerns. "When groups like the National Taxpayers Union came on and said, 'This is a waste of federal money,' that gave a really tangible argument for people to grab hold of," Beard told me.

What Reisner called a “discrete alliance” of environmentalists and fiscal hawks backed the 1986 Water Resources Development Act, which forced local governments to fund a chunk of future dam projects themselves. Beard said that bill never would have become law without support from Republicans like Tom Petri, a Wisconsin representative at the time. “He was this sort of noble warrior about dams, saying, ‘This is wrong! This is wrong!’ ” Beard said, chuckling. “We were like, ‘Yeah, well, we all know it’s wrong.’ ”

| Department of Commerce Bureau of Public Roads

With the adoption of dam cost sharing in the 1980s, Reisner writes, “the pork barrel seemed finally to have lost its anchorings.”

A little more than 200 dams were erected annually between 2000 and 2021—the lowest figure since the 1920s—and most were a shadow of earlier behemoths. “I can’t think of a major facility built in the last 40 years that’s of the nature we built before,” Beard said.

In many places, the current trend is toward dam removal. In 2023 some 80 dams were dismantled, seeding hopes of an ecological comeback in watersheds like the Klamath River, in Oregon and California. In total, over 300 dams have now been removed from the Pacific Coast states.

For the moment, Big Highway feels every bit as powerful—in red states as well as blue—as Big Dam was in its heyday. But two generations ago, we broke our addiction to dams. The same could happen with our ever-widening highways.

* * *

Even in deep-blue states, a bipartisan coalition keeps the highway funding spigot open, said Amy Lee, a postdoc at the University of California, Los Angeles who wrote her dissertation about California's failure to constrain highway growth. "The construction-materials companies tend to be very big on the right, and organized labor tends to be very powerful on the left," she said, and these forces form a pro-highway juggernaut. In January, a coalition of construction companies and labor groups sent a letter to California's top elected leaders defending "funding for infrastructure projects that may potentially increase vehicle miles traveled"—i.e., highway expansions. (The Laborers' International Union of North America did not respond to repeated requests for comment for this article.) As with electric vehicles, highway construction seems to be a topic in which environmental and union interests diverge.

Transportation departments don't want to hear *no* on highways. In 2022 Oklahoma's department of transportation preemptively bought 23 web domains, like oklahomansagainstturnpikes.com and stoptheeasternloop.com, that could theoretically be used to rally opposition to the state's \$5 billion highway plan. Speaking up against pavement within a department can be difficult and risky. Last year, Jeanie Ward-Waller, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology-trained engineer who served as the deputy director of planning and modal programs for California's Caltrans, was demoted after questioning her agency's plans to widen I-80 between Sacramento and Davis. In an editorial published in the San Francisco Chronicle, Ward-Waller wrote, "My concerns were repeatedly brushed off by my bosses, who seemed more concerned about getting the next widening project underway than following the law."

At the federal level, even asking questions about the collective climate impact of highway building appears verboten. In 2022 Stephanie Pollack, the acting head of the Federal Highway Administration, called on state DOTs to measure the carbon emissions attributable to their highway systems. Republicans were incensed; 21 states filed a suit, and Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell advised governors to simply ignore her.

Democrats have supported highway expansions too. The White House called the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law "a critical step towards reaching President Biden's goal of a net-zero

emissions economy by 2050,” but subsequent analysis by Transportation for America found that state DOTs used nearly a quarter of the \$270 billion they received through the law to expand highways, a move sure to increase emissions. (After the infrastructure bill was passed, the head of Louisiana’s transportation department said that “some of the winners I think from this project funding will be things like the Inter-City Connector,” referring to the Shreveport project.)

With so many forces pushing for roadway expansions, opposing them requires political bravery. Decades ago, the costs of opposing dam construction were also steep: After the Sierra Club took out the ad that helped save the Grand Canyon, the organization’s tax-exempt status was revoked for lobbying. Brower was subsequently forced out, but he harbored few if any regrets. And in the long run, he won.

Look closely at the fight now playing out against highways, and there are signs of progress. For years, the environmental movement, which played such a pivotal role corralling American dam building, was focused more on improving automobile fuel economy and promoting electric vehicles than reducing the total amount of driving. In recent years, however, a number of groups have become vociferous critics of highway construction. In February, a coalition of 199 nonprofits, including national heavyweights like the Sierra Club as well as local groups such as Sustainable Claremont, called on elected leaders to “adopt a moratorium on expanding highways and a pause on existing projects until climate, equity, and maintenance goals are met.” In Colorado, lobbying from environmental groups pushed state officials to link transportation funding—including money for highways—to reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. A few months ago, environmental groups including the Natural Resources Defense Council filed a lawsuit to block California’s DOT from expanding I-80 near Sacramento (the project that allegedly cost Ward-Waller her job).

I-70 near Glenwood Springs and the Colorado River—the final stretch of the Interstate Highway System. Joe Sohm/Visions of America/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

What has been missing is an alliance between environmentalists and fiscal conservatives like the one that restrained Big Dam in the 1980s. Although some MAGAfied Republicans may worry little about squandering public money on futile projects, those committed to smaller government could be willing to listen—particularly as highway construction costs have surged 63 percent from 2019 to 2023.

Auchincloss, the Massachusetts congressman, believes that such a coalition is possible. “You could build it on the Republican side with a sort of ‘Cut out federal bureaucracy, bring things back to the states’ argument,” he told me. Lee, the UCLA researcher, feels similarly. “I think there is a potential alliance there. A people-not-wasting-money kind of coalition.”

Case in point: In 2017 Scott Walker, then the firebrand Republican governor of Wisconsin, canceled the widening of I-94 in Milwaukee, a move supported by advocates on the left. “There are some groups out there that want to spend billions and billions and billions of dollars on more, bigger, wider interchanges across the state,” Walker said at the time. “I actually think we should be fixing and maintaining our infrastructure.” (Tony Evers, Walker’s Democratic successor, has restarted the I-94 project.) Other prominent Republicans have sounded similar sentiments. At a conference in February, North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum said he worried about the long-term costs of infrastructure if “we’ve

spent all our money on roads” and that the U.S. fails to “put the investment into building the infrastructure for multimodal transportation.”

A critical moment will arrive in 2026, when Congress is expected to consider a five-year transportation plan that will allocate billions of dollars in funding and establish an array of novel policies. The new bill could look different from its predecessors, particularly because revenues collected from the gas tax are poised to plummet in an era of electric vehicles, leaving leaders on the hook for finding other ways to fund highways through measures like taxing miles driven. Auchincloss hopes they might decide to get out of the highway business altogether: “Instead of using Scotch tape and glue to fix it, let’s just think differently from first principles.” Environmental groups are already watching closely. “Those of us who care about climate change need to see the surface-transportation reauthorization as the next big climate bill,” said Kate Zyla, the executive director of the Georgetown Climate Center.

Assuming Congress does keep funding highways, there are myriad avenues for the reauthorization bill to constrain expansion, starting with directing state DOTs to repair existing roadways before constructing new ones. “We should be saying, ‘No, you can’t build something new that you can’t afford to maintain throughout its useful life,’” said Osborne, the head of Transportation for America. The U.S. Department of Transportation could also hold states accountable for the accuracy of their congestion-relief predictions for past highway projects, refusing to fund further expansions sought by state DOTs that habitually overpromise. Federal funding matches for new highways, currently 90 percent for interstates and 80 percent for federal-aid highways, could be reduced, with states invited to collect tolls, including congestion pricing similar to the program that was until recently set to launch in New York City.

Instead of a focus on congestion and car speed, federal dollars could be dispersed to maximize access, a quantitative measure of the ease with which people can reach their intended destinations. Maximizing access *can* mean building a road, when the circumstances truly call for it—but it can also mean building a railway, adding more buses, or creating a safe bike lane. “Right now we don’t have accountability or metrics built off of connecting people to jobs and services,” Auchincloss said.

Like the dam builders asked to preserve ecosystems 60 years ago, industry groups and highway engineers are unlikely to embrace redefinitions of success. “The tenets of induced travel are highly disturbing to the worldview of these big institutions that have been used to making decisions about billions of dollars,” said Lee. “Having to change analytical processes is seen as really threatening to the entire institutional apparatus.”

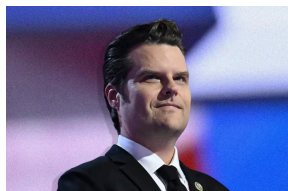
Still, Auchincloss is optimistic. “I think there’s a generational divide coming,” he told me. “It’s not going to be purely predicated on highways. It’s going to be a reconceptualization of transportation.” If so, there seems no shortage of work to be done, given the United States’ scant transit service, incomplete bike-lane networks, and nonexistent high-speed rail.

Thirty years ago, Beard confronted a comparable inflection point for dam building when President Bill Clinton appointed him to lead the Bureau of Reclamation. At the time, Beard was convinced that the agency’s *raison d’être* had to change. “I went around and met with all the bureau’s regional offices,” he said. “I walked into the room and said, ‘The dam-building era is over. Our job is to solve water problems, not to build monuments.’”

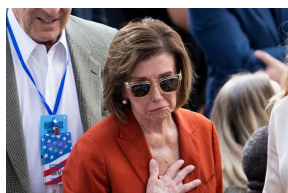
After a century of rampant roadbuilding, the U.S. highway network is ubiquitous, dominating the American landscape in bucolic rural settings as well as dense urban ones. Rather than being a tool for mobility, it has become a monument to an auto-centric lifestyle that fouls the air and depletes the public coffers. Neither the country nor the planet can afford to keep expanding it. 🟩

Correction, Aug. 28, 2024: This article originally misidentified the Natural Resources Defense Council.

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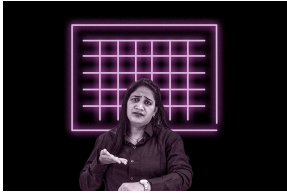
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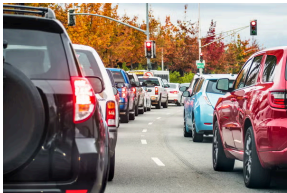
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