

# END OF THE ROAD FOR THE 710?

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By Richard Risemberg

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As the Long Beach (710) Freeway project lurches forward to what will probably be yet another roadblock as it stumbles toward completion, now is the time to consider what would be a far better way to “improve” it. (Oh, what a dangerous verb when used by highway planners!)

Previously suggested improvements in the freeway’s more than two-decade history include digging a massive tunnel, and steamrolling thousands of businesses and many thousands of homes in some of the few livable neighborhoods left in that part of Los Angeles.

If we really want to improve traffic flow between Long Beach and the San Gabriel Valley, we should tear down the entire 710, because it is inherently inadequate to the task.

Before you shout, “Unprecedented,” let me point out that there is in fact considerable precedent for tearing down freeways:

- In 1974, Portland, Ore., not only dismantled a freeway, but canceled plans to build five more that would have effectively dissected the city. Instead, they put the money into an integrated bus, light-rail and streetcar system, and a reconfiguration of streets to facilitate bicycle transit. The result? Today’s vigorous, lively downtown, diverse and pleasurable neighborhoods, a booming economy, and a rating as the most livable city in the United States.
- In 1989, San Francisco took the lemon presented by a massive earthquake that knocked down the Embarcadero Freeway, and instead of rebuilding it, made very sweet lemonade, indeed, carting away the rubble and demolishing what was left standing by the shaker. The revived Embarcadero is a centerpiece of San Francisco’s civic life and economy.
- New York tore down a freeway in the 1970s and is preparing to tear down the Sheridan Expressway in the Bronx.
- Seattle and Cleveland are each planning to tear down freeways by 2012, and Milwaukee unburdened itself of one in 2002 – and, notes then-Mayor John Norquist, congestion didn’t jump. Instead, traffic dispersed around city streets and business got better.

So it’s not nearly so radical an idea as it seems. It’s not even liberal: Freeways are highly subsidized and extremely inefficient, and induce people to drive even when driving drains government treasuries and suppresses commerce. To quote from the Citizens Advisory Committee Northern Virginia Coordination Council:

“The basic problem with urban/suburban freeways is that they take up so much space for the capacity they deliver. At 1,500 cars per lane per hour, a six-lane freeway’s maximum capacity is about 11,000 people per hour ... within a 300 foot right-of-way. Urban rail systems can deliver as much or more capacity in 100 foot or less of (right-of-way). ... Heavy-rail systems like the Washington Metrorail have five times the capacity of a six-lane freeway in about one-third the space and cost about the same per mile as the Century Freeway in Los Angeles.”

By contrast, freeway fanatic Wendell Cox’s plan for Atlanta would result in a kind of hell – to quote conservative analysts Paul M. Weyrich and William S. Lind:

“Cox believes it would be realistic to create a grid of arterial roads six to eight lanes wide, no more than one mile apart, throughout metro Atlanta. He also says there should be another grid of freeways crisscrossing the region. ... He calls for building freeways underground in double-decked tunnels and double-decking other above-ground freeways. He advocates adding another deck exclusively for trucks. ... In essence, Cox is suggesting that between now and 2025, we should raze Atlanta as we know it and replace it with Los Angeles – on steroids.”

But what about freight, the real reason for the 710 (despite some proponents’ bland assertions that trucks would be banned from the extension)?

The solution is simple: heavy rail for freight to complement light rail for people. Build another Alameda Corridor trench along the 710’s route, run light rail on spans above the trench for passengers, add a bicycle freeway alongside and throw in a two-lane road for local travel. You could even electrify the freight route, lessening its impact even further, and run shuttle trains (operated by the city or a contractor) between the harbors and the big main freight yards in Colton.

Instead of crushing neighborhoods with noise, pollution and induced traffic on feeder roads, or walling them off with highways a quarter-mile wide, you would increase the freight and passenger capacity of the corridor, reduce pollution and noise, lessen congestion, and free up precious land for tax-paying homes and businesses, schools and civic facilities, and parks, and even urban farms.

Radical? Maybe. Sensible, responsible and profitable? You bet!

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