

The Road Wars that started in the 1960s are not over

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) October 27, 2022



In the years following World War II, with a growing economy and the vast expansion of automobile ownership, there was broad support for investment in highways that would knit the country together. While there was already 1944 legislation envisioning a 40,000-mile system of highways on the books, it took the leadership of President Dwight D. Eisenhower to bring about the passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956.

Also known as the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, Ike's signature domestic legislation, with an initial authorization of \$25 billion for the construction of 41,000 miles of roadway, was the largest public works program in American history through that time.

But the president did not understand all the details of the bill he had signed. Thinking that highways would be built to connect broad regions and metropolitan areas across the nation, he was dismayed when he learned that the funds could also be used to build expressways to and through urban centers.

'Stop the Road'

Ike's surprise and displeasure with the realization that interstate highways could cut through existing city neighborhoods is revealed in a new book by E. Evans Paull, "Stop the Road: Stories from the Trenches of Baltimore's Road Wars." Paull, retired after a 45-year career as a city planner and private consultant, describes the battle lines and portrays many of the combatants in this trench warfare.

At stake were efforts to save downtown and waterfront communities – Federal Hill, Fells Point and Canton among them — from destructive highway alignments. Battles were also waged to protect established African American neighborhoods, including the Rosemont community in West Baltimore and Sharp-Leadenhall in South Baltimore.

On another front, there was the campaign to save Leakin Park, described as a "1,200-acre hidden gem" of urban wilderness. Also documented are grievous battles lost, most notably the "Highway to Nowhere," the highway stub running along the Franklin-Mulberry corridor on Baltimore's west side.

The book, filled with intriguing details and stories of behind-the-scenes maneuvering, is based on Paull's wide-ranging interviews with key figures, 55 in all. Sources also included the private

archives of Judge Tom Ward, who in 1967 teamed up with Lu Fisher, "the Ruxton radical," to form the Society for the Preservation of Federal Hill and Fells Point.

Battle of acronyms

The opponents of these damaging highway plans organized under various banners, each with their creative name. There was the Movement Against Destruction (MAD), with one of its early leaders, Art Cohen, serving as a frequent source for the author. There was also RAM, Relocation Action Movement, organized to secure appropriate compensation for those that were displaced by proposed highways.

Add to this SCAR, the Southeast Council Against the Road, so named by a local social worker on her way to becoming a force in City Hall and later in the U. S. Congress, Barbara Mikulski. But, without doubt, the most creative naming ploy was that of VOLPE, Volunteers Opposed to Leakin Park Expressway. (The U.S. secretary of transportation at the time was John Volpe.) Serving as attorney for these volunteers, George Nilson, filed suit against USDOT and is quoted, "So, I thought it would be kind of amusing if the lawsuit ... would be captioned "VOLPE versus Volpe" because people would think it was a domestic relations case about a couple whose marriage was coming asunder, and it was sort of exactly that."

More Road Warriors

There were many individuals involved in these campaigns, some well-known and others less so. Among the latter was Mildred Moon, known as the "mayor of Sharp Leadenhall," whose efforts lessened the damage of the Interstate 395 highway spur to her neighborhood, which had its roots as a proud community of African American Freedmen.

Then there was David Chapin, who as a recent Princeton graduate with no technical background secured a position with the highway planners, the Interstate Division for Baltimore City. There, "he taught himself to speak 'highway' and then ... the basics of highway engineering." With that knowledge, he --- along with a number of others --- was able to shift the I-395 alignment, preserving several blocks of houses for future Otterbein homesteaders.

The Road Wars that started in the 1960s are not over. Reflecting on the choices being made today, Ev Paull offered me this comment:

"Much of the Road Wars reflects a time when our economic and political leadership forgot what we want our communities to look like, and building highways became the goal irrespective of the community impact." Today's decision-makers need to heed those community concerns.

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