

Going somewhere, perhaps

Joe Nathanson//January 30, 2025//



In his 2022 book, “Stop the Road”, author E. Evans Paull quotes Esther Redd, then representing her Rosemont neighborhood at a 1971 community meeting:

“[This is a] White man’s road going through the Black man’s neighborhood. The city has ruined Black neighborhoods of elderly homeowners and has forced many onto welfare. The expressway will be of no benefit to surrounding low-income Black communities. It will just help White people who left Baltimore to work in the city and then take money out of the city.”

The expressway cited by Redd, who was also representing the protest group Movement Against Destruction, is the roadway Baltimoreans have come to know as “The Highway to Nowhere.” This was a 1.4-mile highway corridor intended to connect the western suburbs to Baltimore’s central business district and to a network of additional expressways running through and around the city that were also on the drawing boards.

The initial inspiration for this proposed system of interconnected expressways came from Robert Moses, who had already made a name for himself in his work in both New York City and the state of New York. He was called in to consult on Baltimore’s highway proposals in the mid-1940s. (Moses, often mis-characterized as a city planner, became the bureaucrat supreme. Starting his career as a reformer under Gov. Al Smith, he amassed power under successive governors and mayors, eventually becoming ruthless in using that power to bulldoze low-income neighborhoods to advance the construction of new roadways.)

To Moses, barreling through the Franklin and Mulberry corridor was seen as the path of least resistance, and had an added benefit – the clearance of what he saw as slum neighborhoods, or what detractors would come to label as “Negro removal.” But to those living there this was a tight-knit community where their extended families and friends lived, where their churches stood, and where many had a stake in the American Dream as homeowners.

Those 1940s highway concepts came to fruition in the early 1970s under Mayor William Donald Schaefer. As the blocks in the Franklin-Mulberry corridor were cleared, nearly

1,000 homes, scores of businesses, and one school were demolished, and about 1,500 residents were dislocated. Some were forced to sell their homes under eminent domain and at “fair market” values that were depressed by the very actions of the city.

Eventually the protests by MAD and others, including such stalwarts as Judge Thomas Ward, state Sen. Julian “Jack” Lapidus, and future U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski, came to a head, and the West Baltimore highway became a stub, surrounded by mostly vacant land. Those residents who were forced to leave were never made whole.

Now, half a century later, there is an effort to mend and bring new life into a part of the city that now sits as an ugly scar resulting from the damage caused in that earlier time. With 10 days remaining in office, the Biden-Harris administration awarded an \$85.5-million capital construction grant for the West Baltimore United Construction Phase 1.

According to the grant announcement, “The project will develop a single-block cap over US 40, remove existing highway ramps, and incorporate Complete Streets and safety improvements at key locations and intersections to improve mobility and accessibility within West Baltimore neighborhoods. Together, these investments will remove barriers to mobility, access, and economic development, and reconnect historically disadvantaged communities within West Baltimore and to the City’s Central Business District.”

Baltimore’s experience of destroying neighborhoods to construct urban expressways was not unique. The recent grant award comes via the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Reconnecting Communities program funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act; cities across the country are receiving funding designed to knit together neighborhoods torn apart.

I’ve seen Miami’s once-vibrant Overtown neighborhood, which decades earlier was devastated by the construction of two interstate expressways; it’s now the recipient of a \$60-million grant to help fund the Underdeck, a mile-long linear park below a newly elevated road. My hometown of Philadelphia had its Vine Street Expressway, constructed in the 1960s at the expense of dividing and diminishing its well-established Chinatown; now the city has been awarded a \$159 million grant to fund the Chinatown Stitch, which will cap portions of the sunken expressway to create parklands and community space. Buffalo, another city I’ve had a chance to work in, is receiving a \$55-million grant to reconnect East Side neighborhoods that have been divided for generations.

Now will West Baltimore’s residents finally benefit from the Reconnecting Communities initiative? Those involved in the West Baltimore United Project are hopeful. But the residents have heard promises before.

Joe Nathanson is the retired principal of Urban Information Associates, a Baltimore-based economic and community development consulting firm. Since 2001, he has written a monthly column for The Daily Record and can be contacted at urbaninfo@comcast.net