THE BALTIMORE BANNER

# Buffalo's $1 billion cautionary tale for Baltimore's 'Highway to Nowhere'

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The Kensington Expressway, looking south in Buffalo, N.Y. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

## A highway divided their city. Will fixing it tear them apart?

BUFFALO, N.Y. — In the middle of the 20th century, the government tore up a tree-lined parkway in Buffalo to build a trenched expressway so that cars could get to the airport faster.

Home values near the expressway collapsed. Nearby businesses shuttered. Heavier traffic created more car exhaust polluting the air. And one of the city's most affluent communities became its poorest and most segregated.

Almost every major city in America has a similar story of a highway that destroyed a neighborhood. In Baltimore, residents have long sought to tear down a blighted section of U.S. 40 known as the "Highway to Nowhere" that displaced hundreds of Black families.

Few cities have the money to do something about it. Buffalo is different.

Three years ago, the state government committed $1 billion to repair the harms of the Kensington Expressway. What happened next is a cautionary tale.

A generational opportunity to unite a neighborhood is dividing the city. A lawsuit has ensnared the project. A mayoral race looms above it.

As rival groups and rival politicians fight over the promised money, cars hurtle down the Kensington Expressway as if nothing will change.

The air quality in neighborhoods surrounding the Kensington Expressway is among the worst in New York. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

## From parkways to ‘the killing machine’

Buffalo was once an incredibly optimistic city. Just look at the architecture.

Its century-old city hall, a 32-story Art Deco skyscraper, is one of the tallest municipal buildings in the country. Radiating from downtown are neighborhoods filled with large, freestanding homes.

Thanks to the Erie Canal and, later, the railroad, Buffalo became a hub for trade and manufacturing. Waves of European immigrants moved there to work.

The city's crown jewel was its system of parks and parkways, designed in the 1800s by the influential landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of New York City's Central Park. The parkways connected the city's neighborhoods to its waterfront and expansive parks. Wealthy residents built mansions along these roads, including Humboldt Parkway.

Historic photographs of Humboldt Parkway on display at the EM Tea Coffee Cup Cafe in Buffalo, N.Y. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

But by the 1950s, the government decided that Humboldt Parkway would be better used as an expressway to the airport. The decision came as a new wave of immigration — Black families fleeing the Jim Crow South — arrived in Buffalo.

"I don't call it a tragedy. I call it a crime," said Henry-Louis Taylor, a professor of architecture and urban studies at the University at Buffalo.

In the early stages of expressway planning, Black families bought the mansions along Humboldt Parkway and the homes nearby, Taylor said, believing they were climbing into the same social class as generations of white families before them.

"Then one day the bulldozers showed up, and they realized what they thought was an urban legend was actually true," Taylor said.

A prominent Black architect, Robert T. Coles, intentionally bought a property along the Humboldt Parkway, then designed his home to face away from the roadway. The 1961 midcentury modern home became a symbol of defiance; a Black man creating peace for himself in spite of the expressway across the street.

Henry-Louis Taylor Jr., a professor of architecture and urban studies at the University at Buffalo, calls the displacement of families to build a highway a crime. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)


Taylor shows a map from a Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority report from 1934. He suggests that the maps are proof that officials knew how the Kensington Expressway would eventually segregate the city. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

The construction of America's interstate highway system that began during the Eisenhower administration displaced an estimated 1 million people, many of whom were poor, Black and living in cities. Compared to some urban highways, the Kensington Expressway displaced relatively few residents — only several hundred.

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But the destruction of Humboldt Parkway and the construction of the trenched highway created one of America's most segregated communities. Barred from the

rapidly growing suburbs, Taylor said, Black families were effectively herded into the area near the Kensington Expressway, in what Buffalonians call the "East Side."

Kathleen Tyler said there was a still a patch of green space, and a lot of white neighbors, when her family bought a home on Humboldt Parkway.

"All of sudden, overnight, we were seeing moving vans," Tyler said. "We were like, 'Hey, what happened to the Polish bakery?'"

Soon, construction of the expressway reached Tyler's neighborhood. Instead of a shady greenway, she and her childhood friends played alongside what some activists call the "killing machine."

One friend tried crossing the expressway, Tyler said, and a car struck her, crippling her for life.

Patrick Cray Sr. in front of the now-empty lot where his home stood during middle and high school. Cray, who grew up within a block of the Kensington Expressway, partly blames the traffic pollution for his asthma. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

Patrick Cray Sr. grew up on a side street next to the Kensington Expressway. A track and field athlete in high school, Cray trained by running laps around his block, pushing himself harder and harder. He gulped down air in a neighborhood that has some of the worst rates of asthma, heart disease, disability and low life expectancy in New York, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Cray, 70, can still run a mile in a little over 8 minutes, but he takes medication morning and night to control his asthma, and sometimes the coughing still overwhelms him.

Other family members were not so lucky. Several suffered from lung and heart disease before dying relatively young, Cray said. He believes the pollution is partly to blame.

## 'You can get it done'

As far back as the '80s and '90s, Black East Side residents started talking about ways to repair, or at least mitigate, the harm created by the expressway.

Other cities were undertaking ambitious infrastructure projects, like the Big Dig underground expressway in

Boston, sparking new conversations and ideas about urban planning.

While in some cities local government officials took the lead in executing these projects, that didn't happen in Buffalo. Instead, in the late 2000s, a group of Black Buffalonians formed a group called the Restore Our Communities Coalition, or ROCC.

One of the first things the group did was ask the city for help, longtime Mayor Byron Brown said in a 2021 speech.

"I can't get it done," Brown recalled telling ROCC. "But you can get it done."

The group found an ally in the New York Department of Transportation, a partnership that has since become controversial.

Typically, transportation officials build highways. They widen and repair them. But they rarely remove them. Critics say the department steered community members toward an unnecessarily complex solution: turning the highway into a tunnel, which preserves lanes of traffic but is complex and costly to build.

ROCC's meetings with transportation officials were open to the public, but many people in Buffalo — even residents near the expressway — never heard about their plan. And there was skepticism that it would ever get done: Why would anyone, let alone the government, take on such a huge infrastructure project on the East Side?

Kathleen Tyler, owner of EM Tea Coffee Cup Cafe, drives along the Kensington Expressway. While her coffee shop and home are geographically close, the highway makes it difficult for her to commute between the two. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

Taskia Ahmed, 5, rides a scooter on the front porch of her family’s home near the Kensington Expressway. Ahmed’s parents said they want the expressway tunnel project to be completed quickly so there would be a park nearby for Taskia to play in. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

A family crosses a pedestrian bridge over the Kensington Expressway. About 75,000 cars a day spew exhaust in an area once covered by trees. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

But when Democratic President Joe Biden took office in 2021, these types of projects suddenly became a priority. The U.S. Department of Transportation began awarding billions of dollars to "reconnect communities" by redoing how highways interact with neighborhoods.

In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul — a Democrat and a Buffalo native — committed $1 billion in 2022 to ROCC's vision for the Kensington Expressway, and the federal government agreed to fast-track its review.

The project felt tantalizingly real when Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg visited Buffalo in March 2023 to celebrate the federal government's decision to chip in $55 million.

Flanked by New York's most powerful elected officials, Buttigieg said none of this would have been possible without ROCC.

"You never gave up," Buttigieg said. "You worked tirelessly…to pull a vision together."

But that vision was starting to unravel.

Cars travel along the Kensington Expressway. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

Buffalo's Chapin Parkway is a modern example of what Humboldt Parkway once looked like. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

## $1 billion and backlash

Brad Wales and his students were installing a refrigerator outside a community center on the East Side — think Little Free Library, but for fresh produce — when he turned to the woman next to him and asked what she thought about the tunnel.

Wales, a white man, is an architect who teaches at the University at Buffalo. He lives in a trendy neighborhood called Allentown — not in the East Side — but what little he knew about the tunnel project made no sense.

Candace Moppins, a Black woman and community leader on the East Side, agreed.

They decided to keep talking about the tunnel. The talks turned into weekly meetings. Attendance grew, and the same questions kept cropping up.

*Why are we spending so much money to turn less than a mile of expressway into a tunnel?*

*Would a tunnel do anything to mitigate air pollution, or would it just create plumes of car exhaust at either end?*

*Wouldn't a tunnel cost millions of dollars annually to maintain?*

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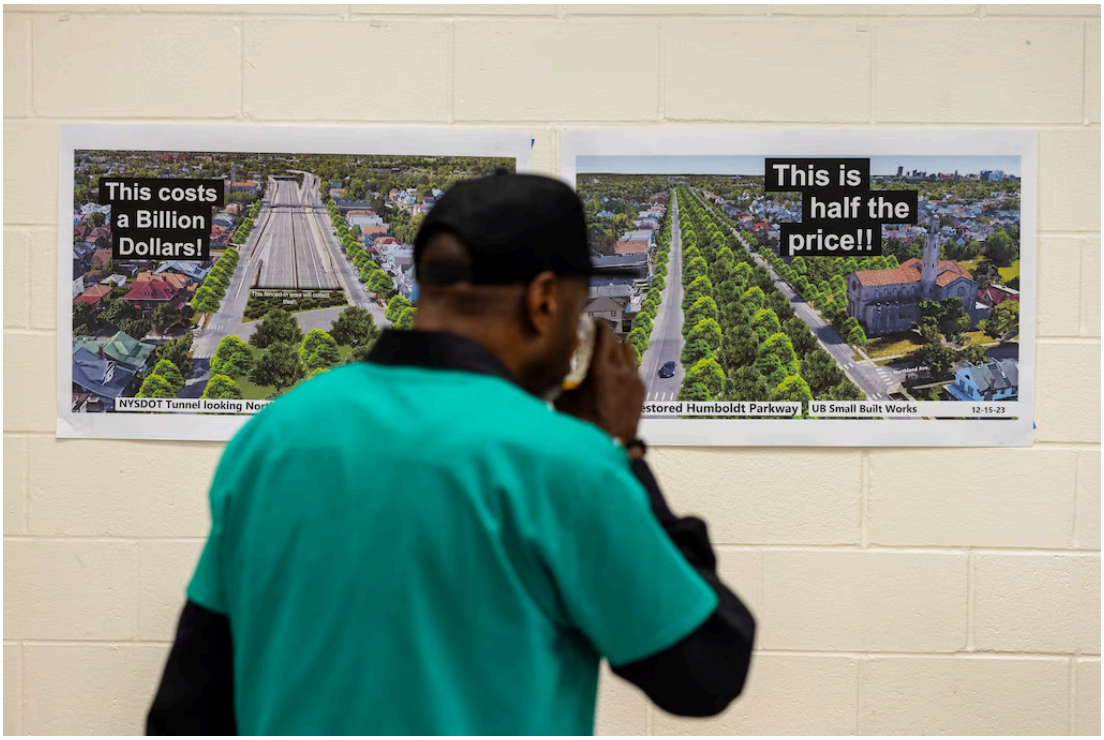
After several months of meetings, the group coalesced into the East Side Parkways Coalition, with Moppins and Wales as its cofounders. As their visibility grew, so did tension with ROCC.

The East Side Parkways Coalition is like the young, up-and-coming politician who thanks their elders in speeches while moving behind the scenes to strip them of power.

To this new group, ROCC's tunnel wasn't just a bad idea. It would, they argue, cement in place one of America's worst infrastructure projects: the replacement of Buffalo's parkway system with a soulless highway.

A community conversation event hosted by East Side Stewards and East Side Parkways Coalition in Buffalo. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)


Brad Wales, an architecture professor at the University at Buffalo, talks with former Erie County legislator Betty Jean Grant during the event. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)




The East Side Parkways Coalition argues against the replacement of Buffalo's parkway system with a highway. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

The state would start on the easiest portion of the Kensington Expressway, a 0.75-mile stretch of road that is already dozens of feet below grade. The project would "cap" that part of the highway, which could then be turned into green space while cars zoom below.

Addressing other stretches would be much harder, and involve digging new trenches, rerouting underground streams and burying miles of expressway.

Why not instead give up on the highway, or at least parts of it, and fill in the trench, restoring Olmstead's original parkways vision for Buffalo?

Already, the East Side Parkways Coalition has achieved visibility in a way that ROCC never did.

Its supporters are active on social media. They don green T-shirts. They hold rallies. And they plant lawn signs across the city that decry the "Toxic Tunnel."

Last year, the coalition worked with other stakeholders on a federal lawsuit against the New York Department of Transportation, saying the state had only completed an environmental assessment study, when a much more extensive environmental impact study was needed.

In a scathing order this March, the judge agreed. He wrote that a person couldn't build a Tim Hortons fast-food restaurant in Western New York without doing a rigorous environmental study, let alone a $1 billion infrastructure project.

The project is now on hold until transportation officials complete an environmental impact study, a process that could take a year or longer.

The East Side Parkways Coalition heralded the judge's ruling as a major win, but ROCC has vowed to fight on.

"I'm not giving up my car," said Sydney Brown, a board member and one of the many drivers who rely on the Kensington Expressway.

It's convenient, she said, and its conversion into a lower-traffic parkway would push more cars onto neighborhood streets in a way that would be noisy, disruptive and dangerous for those who live there.

Sydney Brown, a Restore Our Community Coalition (ROCC) board member and a driver who relies on the Kensington Expressway. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

The expressway handles about 75,000 car trips each day and is a major artery for the city, but some advocates believe cutting it off could be a good thing.

Not far from the expressway are former commercial corridors that are pockmarked with vacant storefronts. Relatively few cars travel those roads anymore, and some argue that increased car traffic would resurrect business districts.

## Do voters care about parkways?

Michael Gainer lifted his pant leg to show where the dog bit him. He had been canvassing for his long-shot mayoral bid when the dog lunged. It was worth it. The

dog owner signed Gainer's petition to get on the Democratic primary ballot.

For the first time in two decades, Byron Brown — whose administration became synonymous with apathy and malaise — is not on the ballot, and Buffalo is hungry for change.

Gainer, who founded an East Side nonprofit that sells salvaged building material, says restoring the parkways would change the trajectory of the city. But first he needs to win the mayoral race.

On this day in March, Gainer knocked on doors in the East Side neighborhood of Hamlin Park, the longtime political base of ROCC. He wanted to prove a point that even residents here do not want the tunnel.

Buffalo mayoral candidate Michael Gainer talks with Jamel Baxter while canvassing in Buffalo. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

Most people he encountered were unfamiliar with the movement to restore the parkways. Some said they were more concerned with issues like potholes. When Gainer knocked on his last door of the day, he got an even bigger surprise. He met one of the tunnel's strongest advocates.

Joel Russell, a public school social worker who was friends with the woman who founded ROCC, disparaged the more recent movement to restore the parkways as trendy and unrealistic.

"It's so in vogue. It's so like popular right now," he said of the East Side Parkways Coalition.

He said he was tired of idealist progressives who never get anything done. He wanted results — like ROCC had gotten when the state committed to funding the tunnel.

Was Gainer prepared to risk a $1 billion investment in the East Side?

Russell never came around on Gainer's parkways idea, but after a winding political conversation, he signed Gainer's petition to be part of the mayoral race. Gainer was elated, but it didn't matter. A judge later ruled that some of his signatures were improperly collected, knocking him off the Democratic primary ballot.

Gainer is now planning to wage an independent mayoral campaign with a newly created party called Restore Buffalo, effectively putting the parkways issue on November's ballot.

He would likely face state Sen. Sean Ryan, a well-funded Democrat with strong name recognition who is expected to win the June 24 primary.

Ryan hasn't picked a side in the fight over the Kensington Expressway. He said he is focused on trying to keep that $1 billion of state infrastructure committed to Buffalo.

"We've got to follow the community, find out what they want to do," Ryan said. "Right now, the community has not settled."

Several members of Patrick Cray's family suffered from lung and heart disease before dying relatively young, he said. He believes the pollution is partly to blame. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

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