THE BALTIMORE BANNER

Rochester gave up on a highway and filled it in. Should Baltimore?

Giacomo Bologna

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A hotel and mixed-use development fills what once was the eastern portion of Rochester, N.Y.'s Inner Loop East highway. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

Converting a trenched highway into a grade-level street was cheaper, quicker and more

popular than alternatives

ROCHESTER, N.Y. — When Rochester was trying to decide what to do with the highway that tore through its downtown, it could have followed the lead of other cities.

Many were embarking on long, complex and costly tunnel projects that buried highways underground. Rochester did something that was both more radical — and much simpler.

Rochester removed its highway.

In a project that took three years and cost $30 million in today's dollars, the city filled in a sunken portion of expressway, converting it to a grade-level street where new development has sprouted.

"In midsize cities, like Rochester, we often struggle with 'Can we do big things?'" said Erik Frisch.

A decade ago, he was a bureaucrat tasked with fixing a notorious portion of Rochester's Inner Loop expressway. Today, he is one of Rochester's top officials overseeing development in the city — including the deconstruction of more of the Inner Loop.

Erik Frisch, deputy commissioner of Rochester's Department of Neighborhood and Business Development. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

A city takes the lead

Similar to the "Highway to Nowhere," a section of U.S. 40 in West Baltimore, construction of the Inner Loop Expressway destroyed hundreds of buildings in Rochester, uprooting residents, businesses and churches.

The Inner Loop was designed to encircle downtown Rochester with easy access for drivers. Instead, it choked off access to the city's core to anyone not in a car.

Even though the highway ran through the heart of Rochester, it belonged to New York's Department of Transportation, an agency that generally tries to maintain or expand its lanes of traffic, not remove them.

That didn't align with the goals of Rochester, where leaders realized that the Inner Loop East was like a moat, separating neighborhoods from the downtown.

So Rochester's city government took the lead on the highway removal project — something that Frisch said was key to its success.

Starting with an official planning document in 1990, Rochester decided it would one day fill in a trenched portion of this highway that ran approximately two-thirds of a mile, the Inner Loop East. Subsequent planning documents reiterated this goal.

After years passed with no action, some people grew skeptical, Frisch said, but Rochester finally began work in 2014. By that point, he said, everyone was well aware of the project, and no organized constituency formed to oppose it.

"We were very confident that this was the right thing to do, and we had the political support to do it," Frisch said. "And so we persevered. We pushed through."

Rochester wrapped up the removal in 2017. Atop the former expressway, private developers have built hundreds of units of mixed-income housing, along a bike path and a boulevard.

Perhaps the most eye-popping part of the Inner Loop East project was its relatively low cost: $22 million, or roughly $30 million in today's dollars. The city won a U.S.

Department of Transportation grant that covered much of the cost.

Preparation is key, Frisch said. Every highway has a lifespan, and at some point, a decision has to be made: Should a highway be rebuilt? Or removed?

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“If you miss that opportunity, it could be another 30, 50 years until you’ve got another shot at removing that highway because the government has just sunk tens or hundreds — or maybe more — of millions of dollars into that infrastructure.”

The removal of the Inner Loop East turned Rochester into a darling of urban planners across the country. Advocacy organizations, planning professionals and national news publications started writing about Rochester’s accomplishment.

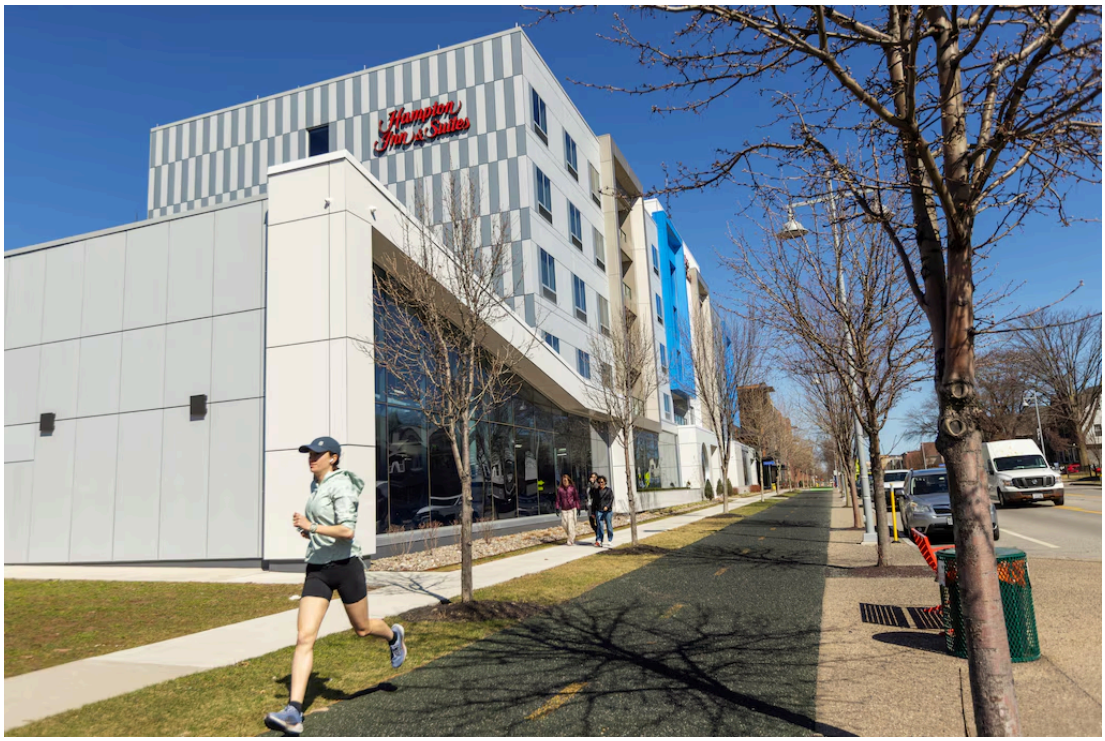
“It’s definitely a source of pride,” Frisch said. “Communities like ours sometimes have a hard time seeing that we can do great things, that we can be on the cover of national magazines for a good reason.”

Baltimore looks to Rochester

Baltimore's latest master plan, completed last year, included a section on Rochester's Inner Loop East project, calling it a "precedent for the Highway to Nowhere."

"The removal of the highway removed a symbolic and physical barrier between low income communities in Rochester," Baltimore's master plan says. "Doing so helped to create a walkable, livable environment that supports the local economy and the health and safety of residents."

Halle Flansburg makes a drink for a customer at Ugly Duck Coffee, situated alongside the former Inner Loop East in Rochester, N.Y. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)



A new hotel sits on what was once Rochester's Inner loop East highway. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

Rochester Institute of Technology students Bonnie Kim, Zejun Lin and Brandon Lu play a video game from their table at Nerdvana, a restaurant and bar with a library of digital and cardboard games, in Rochester. The space opened following the filling-in of the city's Inner Loop East highway. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

The road to removal in Rochester wasn't without a few bumps.

Rory Van Grol, owner of Ugly Duck Coffee, opened his Rochester coffee shop in 2016 in the space of a former art gallery. It was a block away from the expressway removal project, he said, which at that point looked like a big pile of gravel.

Before the project, Van Grol said, he loved the neighborhood, noting a nearby theater, a florist and the existing arts community. But during construction, water would get turned off, seemingly at random and with little communication, making it hard to run a coffee shop, he said.

After the removal work was over, a portion of the filled-in expressway sat vacant, fenced off and covered in rubble, rock and garbage, Van Grol said.

The neighborhood association pushed the city to turn it into a green space, he said.

"I would encourage people to be part of their neighborhood organizations or business organizations and advocate together," Van Grol said. "Without any buy-in from the community that's there, you're not going to flourish afterwards."

Still, Van Grol said, the expressway removal was great overall. He wants Rochester to go even further in deprioritizing cars, and he's not alone.

The Inner Loop East conversion was so popular that Rochester is moving to demolish a longer, much more heavily trafficked portion of the expressway, the Inner Loop North.

About 45,000 cars traverse that 1.5-mile section each day, compared to 7,500 on Inner Loop East. Deconstruction of the north section involves demolishing an elevated highway and bridge, Frisch said.

This more ambitious project is expected to cost at least $225 million.

A section of the Inner Loop in Rochester, New York. The project, which will remove the northern part of the highway and replace it with new development, is expected to begin in a few years. (Lauren Petracca for The Baltimore Banner)

Buffalo's expensive tunnel looms

However, that's a fraction of the money the state is planning to spend in Buffalo. New York committed $1 billion for a plan to turn a 0.75-mile stretch of highway into a tunnel.

Buffalo's project is now in limbo as advocates fight over how to best spend that money. Some want Buffalo to follow Rochester's lead and remove the highway, too.

But others point out that there are about 75,000 daily car trips on that road — 10 times as many as on Rochester's Inner Loop East.

Baltimore's Highway to Nowhere is somewhere in between, with about 27,000 daily car trips.

While Baltimore city planners are holding up Rochester as an example to follow, city transportation officials are pushing a plan that's a mini version of Buffalo's tunnel.

They proposed building a one-block cap over the Highway to Nowhere, which is almost a mile and a half long, with the expectation that more caps can be built over the trenched highway later.

In January, just before President Joe Biden left office, the federal government awarded $85.5 million to the Baltimore City Department of Transportation, much of which would go toward this idea.

But for now, it's just an idea. And under the Trump administration, the fate of that federal money is unclear. Baltimore might be forced back to the drawing board.

What's next?

There's a lot to learn from both Buffalo and Rochester, said Jeffery Tompkins, an urban planning and land-use strategist based in Indianapolis who has worked on projects from Los Angeles to New York.

Unlike Rochester, Buffalo had no clear city leadership, and no shared vision of how to address its expressway problem, Tompkins said.

Cities should first determine the outcome they want, he said, then figure out how to make it happen.

Is this about racial justice and repairing past harms? Is this about revitalizing an economically depressed neighborhood? Or is it about something else entirely?

Instead, cities often skip these tough questions. Rather than planning proactively and building consensus, he said, they wait until government funds appear, then scramble to spend them.

According to Tompkins, the scramble devolves into a fight. Ideas are pitted against each other, advocates take opposing positions, and the city becomes mired in "analysis paralysis."

Tompkins said there's an obvious lesson to learn from Rochester: Start planning now.

"Otherwise, we're going to be sitting on our hands when a billion dollars comes," he said, "like Buffalo is."

Banner reporter Daniel Zawodny contributed to this article.

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Giacomo Bologna
giacomo.bologna@thebaltimorebanner.com

Giacomo "Jack" Bologna covers business and development at The Baltimore Banner.

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