

Saving America's "Last Lovely City"

The San Francisco Freeway Revolt



One of the most striking aspects of San Francisco is its relative lack of freeways, unusual for a major American city. In the 1950s, however, local and state transportation authorities presented ambitious plans to build a total of nine freeways within the city's 49-square mile area. Residents of San Francisco angrily rose up to protest the freeways and -- through two influential Board of Supervisors decisions in 1959 and 1966 -- succeeded in blocking most of the proposed routes. In an era when many other American cities were enthusiastically constructing new infrastructure for the automobile, San Francisco's "freeway revolt" was quite unprecedented. In this paper, I trace the development of this "revolt" and argue that the economic and transportation benefits of freeways became subordinated to aesthetic considerations. While concerns over property values and tourism were important factors, the perceived damage that freeways would inflict on San Francisco's unique cityscape proved to be the greatest rallying point in the revolt. San Franciscans were unwilling to let "concrete monsters" ruin vistas, impact quality of life, and ultimately spoil what they termed as America's "last lovely city."

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“There will be a freeway on the moon before we get one in San Francisco,” Mayor John Shelley declared in 1966 (Issel, 1999, 612). Shelley’s statement was no act of hyperbole. In 1966, during an era when American cities were enthusiastically planning and erecting networks of highways, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors virtually arrested all further freeway construction within the city. Widely cheered, the Board’s decision was the culmination of a decade-long “freeway revolt” aimed at preventing the implementation of transportation network plans first suggested in the 1940s. Despite an atrophying 19th century infrastructure and a worsening traffic situation within the city, business associations, chambers of commerce, and major newspapers joined in the celebrations over the defeat of the “concrete monsters.”

Living in an environment gifted with a dramatic natural setting of hills and water, San Franciscans – members of what Herb Caen called “the best

Club anywhere” – had long been wary of major building projects, fearing that incongruous development might impact quality of life, alter the city’s dynamics, or – worst of all – spoil “the view” (Wirt, 182). These considerations became the pivotal factors in the San Francisco freeway debate. Overlooking serious economic and transportation considerations, San Franciscans instead stressed the *aesthetic* damage freeways would cause in the city. By the 1960s, aesthetic considerations had become so important that California highway authorities were forced to present highly elaborate, costly freeway alternatives with the sole intention of minimizing visual impact. These, nevertheless, were rejected by the Board in 1966. The “freeway revolt” of the 1950s and 60s set a lasting precedent for the city, ensuring that most of San Francisco was untouched by major infrastructure projects and even propelling a movement to demolish *existing* freeways. This, however, has come at

a serious cost: traffic has worsened considerably over the last few decades, and strong opposition to intrusive freeways has virtually eliminated the city and state’s ability to improve San Francisco’s aging automobile transportation network.

Designing the Network: The Trafficways Plan (1940s-1950s)

Having sensed the coming age of the automobile with the completion of the Golden Gate and Bay bridges, San Francisco city officials began to debate methods for modernizing city infrastructure during the early 1940s. In 1945, the newly formed City Planning Commission adopted its first Master Plan, containing the “Major Thoroughfares Plan” transportation component. More an outline of general purpose than a detailed report, the “Major Thoroughfares Plan” called for

a system of freeways, parkways, and rapid transit lines designed to facilitate local transportation and provide easy access for an increasing number of suburban commuters. It sketched out approximate routes for four proposed freeways: the Bayshore Freeway,¹ an Embarcadero Freeway following the bayfront from Army Street to the intersection of Van Ness Avenue and Lombard Street, a Panhandle Freeway linking Golden Gate Park with the Civic Center, and a route parallel to the Bayshore Freeway that would follow Mission Street (“Four Freeways Added,” 1951, 16).

In the following years, the Board of Supervisors authorized a comprehensive survey to study freeway proposals and draft final plans. A new transportation system had become a widely discussed and highly important issue in San Francisco, as the Planning Commission’s 1948 *Report on Activities* stated:

Of all the problems confronting San Francisco in its current development as a changing city, transportation . . . is of most immediate importance. More people talk about it, more columns of news and editorial space are devoted to it, and more city departments are directly concerned with it, than perhaps any other single problem confronting San Francisco. The very survival of San Francisco as a healthfully functioning city is dependent upon resolving the not-so-slow strangulation which an atrophying transportation system is inflicting upon the city (3).

Nevertheless, in these early years of enthusiasm for expressways and highways, some in San Francisco stressed caution. L. Demming Tilton, the city’s first planning director, warned that a freeway “is a device that can make or break the city . . . It can cut the city into unrelated parts, or bind it together” (Issel, 621). UC Berkeley city planning professor Theodore J. Kent suggested that an expanded public transit system would be more appropriate for San Francisco and surrounding regions (Rose, 1990, 58).



Draft plans for the San Francisco freeway network published in 1947. Several of the freeways shown here, such as those along the oceanfront, San Mateo County line, and fringes of the Presidio, were eliminated before the 1951 ‘Trafficways Plan’ was released.

Despite these opinions, on July 17, 1951 the City Planning Commission endorsed construction of an extensive network of new roadways by adopting the landmark “Trafficways Plan” as an element of the Master Plan. “Trafficways” authorized construction of three types of roadways: freeways, primary thoroughfares (major surface arterials that would be turned into expressways),² and secondary thoroughfares (city streets that would be widened and upgraded). In addition to the freeways recommended in the 1945 “Major Thoroughfares Plan,” “Trafficways” added more routes: by the time it was updated in 1955, the plan included freeways bisecting the Pacific Heights, Mission, Sunset, Richmond, and Haight-Ashbury neighborhoods. Also included was a new transbay bridge to Oakland – the Southern Crossing – which would help “link all portions of this great metropolitan area so as to stimulate and soundly influence efficient and convenient transportation and traffic flow” (*The Case for the Southern Crossing*, 15; Nolte, “Southern Crossing,” A-1).³ San Francisco now had a total of nine proposed freeways packed into its 49-square mile area.

The massive scale of freeway construction proposed did not immediately create protest; in fact, “Trafficways”

enjoyed tremendous support in the early 1950s. Before it was approved by the City Planning Commission in 1951, “Trafficways” had been endorsed by the Downtown Association, the Chamber of Commerce, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, and many other organizations. Business groups hoped that freeways would inject new energy into a downtown that was beginning to suffer due to decentralization and suburban growth. Indeed, the main objectives of “Trafficways” seemed to cater to business interests: “Development of an efficient, economical, and balanced system of major trafficways . . . employed where it is most suitable and effective from the standpoint of present and prospective traffic movement and from the standpoint of the present and desirable future use of adjoining land areas” (*The Master Plan*, 1963, no page).

Aside from some protest in the middle-class Cow Hollow neighborhood, most city residents supported freeway construction and did not express concern over the highways’ impact on their neighborhoods (*Annual Report: 1949-1950*, 5). This was largely due to the long-range timeframe adopted by “Trafficways”: the plan was not supposed to be fully complete for another twenty years (“Four Freeways Added,” 1951, 16), and thus “construction of its

elements seemed remote” (Lathrop, 1969, 2).

Beginnings of Dissent: The Original “Freeway Revolt” (1950s)

In his book, *Power in the City*, Frederick M. Wirt comments that in “perhaps no other city in America do citizens so seriously discuss” aesthetic implications of new development. Wirt claims that this “sensitivity to environmental beauty” stems from an overwhelming pride San Franciscans have in their city, and creates “an aesthetic of place” (182). Maintenance of San Francisco’s beauty has evolved into a key quality of life factor. Freeways, therefore, were bound to become a significant topic of discussion not for their effect on local traffic patterns but because of their aesthetic impact.

The California State Division of Highways (DOH) was quick to realize the importance of aesthetic considerations in San Francisco. DOH officials claimed that the Bayshore Freeway – the first element in “Trafficways” to be constructed – created a “system of Skyways” where “the beauty which has long been San Francisco’s fame . . . unfold[s] to the public entering from all directions” (Issel, 1999, 626). In its 1955-56 *Capital Improvement Plan*, the San Francisco Department of City Planning noted that “a national art award was recently granted to the Department of Highways for the design of its . . . junction of the Bayshore, Central, and Embarcadero Freeways . . . The state engineers have opened up new vistas that can be seen by motorists from these new viaducts” (4).

In contrast, San Francisco residents were horrified by the completed Bayshore Freeway. This artery did do a remarkable job in improving crosstown transportation and relieving surface streets – traffic on busy Potrero Avenue, for example, fell from 30,698 vehicles per day to only 9,068 vehicles per day

after the freeway was opened (*Capital Improvement Plan: 1956-1957*, 6). Nevertheless, citizens condemned the creation of more “expensive, *unsightly*, and very durable civic blunder[s] for future generations to mourn over.”⁴ The *San Francisco Chronicle* slowly backed away from the endorsement of freeway construction it gave in the early 1950s (Issel, 1999, 627). Upon seeing how the Bayshore Freeway divided communities along its route and lumbered over blocks in South of Market, many San Franciscans re-studied freeway proposals to see how future construction would affect their neighborhoods and other sections of the city.

The bayfront Embarcadero Freeway, in particular, propelled a nascent “freeway revolt.” When construction began on the freeway in 1957, much of the central waterfront was still industrial and therefore thought to be of little scenic value. However, at the foot of Market Street stood the city’s historic gateway – the Ferry Building – and any elevated structure threatened to block the sightlines on Market. San Franciscans became increasingly concerned when the entire Embarcadero route was changed from a single-level elevated structure to a double-decked structure, effectively forming a three-story wall along the waterfront. Tremendous public pressure to preserve the waterfront failed in the late 1950s: the DOH categorically rejected an \$11 million proposal to tunnel the freeway in front of the Ferry Building. Angered citizens, in “one of the wildest San Francisco Board meetings on record,” convinced city supervisors to pass a resolution stopping freeway building at Market, but the DOH continued construction. Once completed, the structure was reviled as “the concrete monster” (Leavitt, 1970, 201).

Property values were understandably a large reason for the “freeway revolt,” but like the Embarcadero Freeway some routes were opposed because of the visual scars they would

leave on cherished city landmarks. It is significant to note that some of the most vocal protests targeted the Panhandle Freeway – the crosstown route that would have had the least impact on established neighborhoods since it would mostly run through Golden Gate Park. San Franciscans regarded the freeway as an assault on sacred ground and stated that even DOH-proposed tunneled routes through the park would be unwelcome intruders. In one of the first cases of freeway opposition from within the government, the Recreation and Park Commission of San Francisco passed a resolution opposing surface construction anywhere in Golden Gate Park (Lathrop, 1969, 3). Amid growing concerns over the freeway’s visual impact, the Panhandle Freeway was deleted from the revised “Trafficways Plan” of 1955 “pending further study” (*The Master Plan*, 1963, Transportation Plate 1).

As public opposition to the remaining “Trafficways” proposals and ongoing DOH projects swelled in the late 1950s, anti-freeway voices began to appear on the Board of Supervisors. Supervisor William Blake, who had campaigned against the Junipero Serra Freeway in Sunset, remarked that “San Francisco’s most precious asset is its breathtaking geographical beauty,” an asset that should not be jeopardized by “concrete monstrosities” (Nolte, “Obituary,” 1996, E-2). By 1959 – the year that the Central Freeway was completed – 97 different San Francisco organizations and neighborhood coalitions had come out in opposition of further freeway construction. This unprecedented “freeway revolt” reached its climax on January 26, 1959, when the Board – in a unanimous decision – dealt a deathblow to “Trafficways” by withdrawing its support of six of the nine proposed freeways.⁵ While cities around the nation were busily constructing more highways to facilitate growth, San Francisco had placed visual considerations on higher ground than economic ones and had halted

construction. JP Sinclair, a traffic engineer for the heretofore unchallenged DOH, remarked that he had “never seen anything like it” (“Board Kills Plans,” 1959, 1-2).

Second Round: Crosstown Routes Revisited (1959-1966)

Stunned by its first major highway-building setback, the DOH struggled to understand the reasons behind the freeway rejections and its implications for future plans in San Francisco. Public relations campaigns were stepped up, such as the statewide distribution of DOH booklets entitled *Freeway Facts*. Many parts of *Freeway Facts*, like the frequently asked questions section, seem to be especially written for San Franciscans:

Will the freeway spoil the appearance of the town?

On the contrary, design of structures . . . will often enhance the appearance of the community.

What effect will the freeway have on nearby homes?

Interviews with people living alongside freeways showed that to 5 out of the 10 freeways made no difference, 3 out of 10 *preferred* their location and 2 out of 10 did not like it (11).⁶

Immediately after the Board's 1959 decision, state and city agencies began revising rejected freeway plans. In November 1960 they published “Trafficways in San Francisco – A Reappraisal.” The report called for an extra 9.2 miles of freeways within the city limits – considerably less than what was proposed in 1951 – to be built in the form of resurrected Golden Gate and Panhandle freeways (*Annual Report: 1960–1961*, 11).

Transportation planners were conscious of aesthetic objections to the original routes and presented costly, elaborate freeway proposals designed to have minimal visual impact on their surroundings. The Golden Gate Freeway is a particularly good example.



Various proposals put forth in the 1960s for constructing the Golden Gate Freeway through Fisherman's Wharf and the Marina District. Options included a subaqueous tube in the bay (FW) and tunnels under major Wharf thoroughfares (FT). In *Freeway Studies: Panhandle Parkway and Golden Gate Freeway*, 1966.

Original “Trafficways” designs of the 1950s called for an above-ground route: with the exception of Russian Hill (where a tunnel would be bored), many of the city's most famous neighborhoods would have been bisected and vistas along the waterfront would have been destroyed. Revised plans in the 1960s proposed extensive use of tunnels. In one design option, the Golden Gate Freeway would pass through Fisherman's Wharf in three tubes – one each under Bay, North Point, and Beach streets – and continue under Marina Boulevard in a cut-and-cover tunnel. The estimated cost for this underground route was a staggering \$311.9 million. In another, more elaborate proposal, a “subaqueous” double-decked tube would be constructed in the bay paralleling the northern waterfront. The top of the tube would be partially visible, but the route would not interfere with the landscape of the Marina and Fisherman's Wharf areas. In this design scheme, transportation considerations were entirely subordinated to aesthetic concerns: subaqueous tubes would have been ineffective in solving northern San Francisco's transportation problems as

they would have been inaccessible to local traffic. With estimates totaling over \$250 million, the tubes would also have been extremely cost-inefficient (*Freeway Studies*, 1966, no page).

The state's gestures of goodwill did not last long, however: as the 1960s progressed, the DOH rejected the costly tunneled alternatives and renewed its push for mostly above-ground Panhandle and Golden Gate freeways. Along the northern waterfront, San Franciscans once again rallied around the issue of aesthetics to denounce new infrastructure projects. By this decade, the San Francisco preservation cause had gained a powerful new ally: the tourist industry. The post-war years had seen a dramatic increase in visitors drawn to San Francisco's unique cityscape and beautiful neighborhoods. Businesses dependent on the tourist trade feared that freeways would destroy the city's appeal. George Burger, president of the Fisherman's Wharf Merchant's Association, explained, “The northern waterfront is the heart of San Francisco's lucrative tourist industry. The mere notion of putting an eight-lane freeway through here would be laughable if it weren't such

a deadly serious proposal . . . The tourist does not come to San Francisco to look at the James Lick Freeway” (Wax, 16). Recognizing these concerns, the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce began retracting its support for above-ground routes.

As in the years leading up to 1959, San Francisco neighborhood coalitions banded together to create a citywide alliance opposing all future construction. Initial DOH attempts to design freeways with minimal visual impact failed due to lingering public suspicion from the 1950s and the department’s unwillingness to fund exorbitant projects. Citizens concerned about the city’s aesthetics found a sympathetic ear in Mayor John Shelley, who spoke out against the destruction of cherished neighborhoods by telling a transportation planning conference, “In our central cities we must, at all cost, preserve the value of ‘there’” (Leavitt, 1970, 202). Many on the Board of Supervisors had similar views: on March 21, 1966, the Board voted to reject plans for a Golden Gate and Panhandle freeway. As Department of City Planning members noted, the Board decision “removed virtually all possibility” of future freeway construction in San Francisco; subsequently, the federal Bureau of Public Roads withdrew all funding for future interstate construction within the city (*Annual Report: 1965–1966*, 6; Issel, 1999, 612). The second and most decisive “freeway revolt” had succeeded.

Conclusion: An evolving yet continuing revolt

San Francisco’s battle against freeways by no means ended with the Board decision of 1966; indeed, it continues to this day. Nevertheless, the nature of the battle changed significantly: San Franciscans began to clamor for the demolition of *existing* infrastructure after their victory against the DOH. Upon taking office in 1967, Mayor Joseph Alioto focused

the city’s attention on the much-hated Embarcadero Freeway and called for its demolition. In the following years, the city authored studies on the Embarcadero’s demolition and the Board passed multiple resolutions endorsing such plans. The report *A Transportation System for the Embarcadero Area* was released in 1974, recommending pulling down the freeway from Beale Street to Broadway. Instead of justifying the report’s pro-demolition conclusions with traffic analyses, the Department of City Planning explained that the freeway was jarringly out of place on the waterfront *landscape* and therefore had to be torn down: “The Embarcadero Freeway was designed as a route through a then primarily industrial area . . . Over time the presence and design of the Embarcadero Freeway became increasingly incongruous in light of the Embarcadero Center and massive private redevelopment . . . The elevated freeway is presently an impediment to the proper relationship between the City and the Bay, an aesthetic barrier, an environmental disruption . . .” (*A Transportation System*, 1974, 20-21).

In 1980, an amendment was added to the San Francisco Master Plan which recommended the freeway’s demolition and stressed “the reconfirmed value of the waterfront as a unique resource which needs to be reintegrated with the city.” Totally bypassing the Embarcadero Freeway’s importance as an arterial for downtown and northern city traffic, reports from the 1970s and 1980s evaluated the route for its aesthetic worth. When the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989 occurred, there was little debate about implementing two decades’-worth of pro-demolition policy. The first sections of the freeway were pulled down in 1991.

The Embarcadero Freeway was only one of the San Francisco arterials severely damaged in 1989 – on the other side of downtown the double-decked Central Freeway buckled and collapsed. Its northern-most

section, from Fell Street to Golden Gate Avenue, was unsalvageable and torn down in 1991 after Mayor Art Agnos threatened to sue Caltrans⁷ if it constructed a replacement (Epstein, “Years,” 1996, A-13). The fate of the remaining Central Freeway was to become the biggest transportation issue in San Francisco during the 1990s. The arterial was an important conduit for crosstown and Marin-bound traffic: on an average weekday, 80,000 cars traveled on the elevated structure (Nolte, “Traffic,” 1996, A-1). However, after the freeway’s upper deck was removed due to sustained earthquake damage, San Franciscans decided they liked less freeway in Hayes Valley and in 1998 passed city Proposition E to demolish the entire structure north of Market. City reports cited “a number of environmental, quality of life, . . . and urban design issues” including “the visual quality of the overpass as it crosses Market Street and enters Hayes Valley” as reasons behind the success of Proposition E (*Central Freeway Replacement Project*, 1999, 5-6).

Instead of a freeway, Proposition E called for construction of a surface level boulevard where the elevated structure stood, along Octavia Street from Market to Fell. Freeway ramps would touch down at the intersection of Market and Octavia, and northbound crosstown traffic would flow onto the boulevard to connect with the Oak and Fell corridors. In official reports, heavy emphasis was placed on the aesthetic qualities of this new roadway: San Francisco’s Central Freeway Project Office stated that “drivers, both local and those passing through, should feel they are in a special environment and look forward to the experience.” A 1999 publication, *Central Freeway Replacement Project: Octavia Boulevard Alternative*, suggested that “Octavia Boulevard could be celebrated with one or two gateway features” – such as portals – at its intersection with Market. With its vivid descriptions of landscaping and design features, the

report nevertheless seemed to neglect how the elegant thoroughfare would handle displaced Central Freeway traffic. San Franciscans, however, saw boulevard construction as a great aesthetic improvement, and in 2001 a city task force even considered proposals to tear down the Central Freeway at Bryant, six blocks south of the Market and Octavia intersection (King, 2001, A-14).

Despite the preserved beauty of San Francisco, nearly half a century of virulent freeway opposition has begun to take its toll. The city's limited and aging freeway system – composed only of the Bayshore, Southern, Southern Extension (I-280 east of Bayshore), and the truncated Central freeways – is becoming less capable of handling increased traffic flow. Surface streets have become hopelessly congested. In Sunset, where no further attempts to construct a freeway were made after the Junipero Serra route was rejected, 19th Avenue has doubled as a major local arterial and a crosstown route for through traffic. As a result, the thoroughfare has become “beyond clogged”: it carried around 120,000 cars per day in 1997, approximately the same amount of traffic as the eight-lane MacArthur Freeway in the East Bay (Nolte, “Grand Central,” 1997, A-13).

In 2000, a report published by the city's Transportation Authority painted a gloomy picture of future traffic conditions. The authority predicted that by 2020, travel times within the city would increase by 20 percent, vehicle miles traveled would increase by 18 percent, and the number of hours spent in congested traffic would increase by 200 percent. To counter this projected gridlock, traffic planners recommended \$6.6 billion in transportation improvements (Epstein, “Even \$5.6 Billion,” 2000, A-16).

Unfortunately, San Francisco's aversion to further freeway construction has made comprehensive transportation improvement for the automobile nearly impossible. In a city where 1960s-era partially tunneled freeway plans were enough to stir the ire of residents, contemporary solutions to traffic problems have become *prohibitively* elaborate and expensive so as to avoid controversy over possible aesthetic impact. In April 2000, the Transportation Authority urged the Board of Supervisors to consider a freeway plan very similar to the 1951 “Trafficways” report: its components included routes along Van Ness Avenue, 19th and Park-Presidio avenues, and the Oak and Fell corridor.⁸ However, these freeways would be *entirely* tunneled. Once completed,

the city would have a 7.5 mile-long network of underground “supercorridors,” including a continuous 5 mile-long tunnel in Sunset from the San Mateo County line to the Presidio (Epstein, “Underground,” 2000, A-1). Construction would be a herculean task, as it would disrupt San Francisco's busiest thoroughfares possibly for years. The tunnels would also be hazardous: they would be bored through unstable ground consisting mostly of dune sand. The extravagance and costliness (absolute cost has not yet been determined) of the plans will likely sink it, and the proposal will run into legal problems: the Master Plan now contains language prohibiting further highway capacity within city limits. Yet, despite being dismissed as “exotic ideas” by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, these tunneled freeway plans are the only possible automobile transportation solutions in a city that absolutely refuses to construct more surface routes (Epstein, “Even \$5.6 Billion,” 2000, A-16). In an era where increasingly serious traffic issues are wholly subordinated to aesthetic considerations, San Francisco has an impossibility as its only freeway alternative. Such is the cost of preserving America's “last lovely city.”

Author Notes

1. The Bayshore Freeway encompasses present-day US 101 and Interstate 80, which begins at the San Francisco city line by Candlestick (3Com)Park and feeds into the Bay Bridge in downtown.
2. The best example of a built primary thoroughfare is Geary Boulevard, which was widened into Geary Expressway between Gough and Masonic during Western Addition redevelopment projects.
3. Aside from the Southern Crossing, another proposal, drafted in 1949, called for a transbay span from Telegraph Hill to San Leandro. The new bridge would intersect with the Bay Bridge on Yerba Buena Island, “which would be leveled for a giant freeway interchange” (*The Case for the Southern Crossing*, 15).
4. Italics added.
5. The rejected freeways included the Western Freeway (a 1955 modification of the Panhandle route), the Junipero Serra Freeway in Sunset, the Park-Presidio Freeway in Richmond, the Central Freeway north of Turk, the Golden Gate Freeway, the Mission Freeway north of 30th, and the Crosstown Freeway.
6. Italics and bold appear as in actual text.
7. In 1972 the DOH was absorbed into the new California Department of Transportation, or Caltrans.
8. In another throwback to the 1950s, Senator Dianne Feinstein in 2000 recommended a new study for a Southern Crossing. Between the 1950s and 2000, the Southern Crossing had been studied and rejected five times. Feinstein and bridge supporters, however, proposed a transbay span far to the south, near the San Francisco International Airport (Nolte, “\$600,000 Sought,” A-16).

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