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Friday, June 28, 2013 [25 Comments](#)

## Highway Revolts Break Out Across the Midwest

by [Angie Schmitt](#)

The evolution of state and regional transportation agencies is painfully slow in places like [Missouri](#) and [Ohio](#), where officials are plowing ahead with pricey highway projects conceived of decades ago. But plenty of Midwesterners have different ideas for the future of their communities, and they aren't shy about speaking up.



Protesters picket outside the headquarters of the Southeast Michigan Regional Council of Governments against plans to spend \$4 billion on two highway widenings. Image: Transit Riders Union

One after another, residents of major Midwestern cities have challenged highway projects in recent months. People in Detroit, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Cleveland and Oklahoma City have reached the conclusion that spending hundreds of millions of dollars on road widenings might not be in their communities' best interests.

And it's not just a few activists. Challenges have come from people like Council Member Ed Shadid in Oklahoma City, institutions like the Michigan Suburbs Alliance, and local governments like the city of Maplewood, just outside St. Louis.

Detroiters held signs outside a meeting of their regional planning agency earlier this month, picketing plans for [\\$4 billion worth of highway expansion projects](#). Though the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments ultimately green-lighted the plans, members of the agency had to sit through two hours of negative public comments first. Not only was the public moved to speak out, so were the city of Detroit and the county of Washtenaw, which officially opposed the project.

And in Oklahoma City, the grassroots group Friends of a Better Boulevard has twice fought back state DOT plans to install a wide, highway-like boulevard in a developing area near the city's downtown. As we reported this week, the [FHWA recently intervened](#) on the group's behalf and forced ODOT to consider a proposal to restore the street grid instead of building a new road.

Meanwhile, in Wisconsin, environmental and civil rights groups may soon [obtain a court injunction](#) against a \$1.7 billion interchange outside Milwaukee, on the grounds that project sponsors did not consider its potential impact on sprawl and transit-dependent communities. And in Cleveland, a few scrappy activists and the Sierra Club [are opposing](#) a \$100-million-per-mile roadway that would displace 90 families on the city's southeast side.

Now St. Louis has a highway battle on its hands. In many ways, this fight echoes the other protest movements. The South County Connector — like Cleveland's "[Opportunity Corridor](#)" — is a "zombie" highway project. It was first conceived in 1957. The original concept was for an "inner belt expressway." Its [stated purpose](#) is to "improve connectivity between south St. Louis County, the City of St. Louis, and central St. Louis County" and "improve access to Interstates 44, 64, 55, and 170."

But again, a strong opposition movement is beginning to emerge. James White, mayor of Maplewood, [one of the affected communities](#), described the project's purpose this way: "to shift one conflict traffic area to another location."

In a recent letter to St. Louis County, White lambasted the project. "Multi-modal transportation concerns in the region are severely lacking, and this project will at best have no meaningful effect and at worse create massive barriers to future progress," [the letter](#) said. "We have seen no details nor been given any meaningful assurances that this project would do anything other than bisect and segregate our community further."

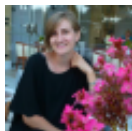
The St. Louis County Department of Highways and Transportation doesn't seem to be responding to the criticism very graciously. In response to complaints about the South County Connector, an agency

spokesperson told a local reporter, "[We're a highway department, not a bicycle department.](#)"

Jennifer Allen of the local advocacy group Trailnet said the highway project will potentially weaken investments the region has made in light rail and a comprehensive system of off-street trails. There are other problems as well. The traffic modeling used to justify the road is from 2002, before the [driving slump](#) began and when St. Louis had a larger population.

"It's just outmoded planning," Allen said. "If you're a highway department all you see as a solution are highways. We've got to make that shift towards larger thinking about mobility."

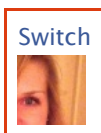
How long will it be before the transportation authorities in this region catch up with the general public?



[Angie Schmitt](#) is a newspaper reporter-turned planner/advocate who manages the Streetsblog Network from glamorous Cleveland, Ohio. She also writes about urban issues particular to the industrial Midwest at [Rustwire.com](#).

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**Bill Collins** • 20 hours ago

Angie: Thanks so much for pulling this article together. Here on the east side of Cincinnati, we are sharing it with folks who are critical of ODOT's plans for the proposed Eastern Corridor project. It's great to hear about people around the region who are raising objections to some of these proposals for expensive, sprawl-inducing projects. -- Bill

^ ▾ Reply Share ›



**nikun888** • 8 days ago

[tinyurl.com/l3cselt](http://tinyurl.com/l3cselt)

^ ▾ Reply Share ›



**LimestoneKid** • 11 days ago

What the elevated section of I-81 did to Syracuse was downright criminal.

^ ▾ Reply Share ›



**Ted King** → LimestoneKid • 10 days ago

House link :

*Syracuse Looks to Highway Removal to Revive Downtown Economy* (17 June 2011)  
<http://dc.streetsblog.org/2011...>

Outside link :

**CNU's Freeways Without Future 2012** Section 9  
<http://www.cnu.org/highways/fr...>

More links available at Google [ freeway removal syracuse ].

^ | v | Reply Share ›



**HamTech87** • 11 days ago

I'm always shocked by the support of the trade unions for these expansions. Expansions just make the future overall maintenance bill bigger. And critical to union members' concerns, lessen government's ability to pay future pension and healthcare obligations.

But as was seen in the run-up to the Tappan Zee Bridge boondoggle, the trade unions are key supporters.

^ | v | Reply Share ›



**Peter** → HamTech87 • 11 days ago

It shouldn't be a surprise. Trade unions have to keep their members employed. Jobs now pay dues now, pay pension obligations now. The hope is that later projects will pay for the pension obligations down the line.

^ | v | Reply Share ›



**Miles Bader** → Peter • 11 days ago

Yeah, but subway lines need construction workers too (indeed, in the U.S. they need 15 times as many as anyplace else!)

Also, tearing down highways: tons of jobs! Nice physically separated bike paths: need constructin'! Bike parking: total infrastructure. Road narrowing and nice sidewalks need lots of specialized manual labor (I've been watching them widening sidewalks around here, using some sort of paving bricks, and it takes tons of people doing a lot of detail work)... Not to mention all the new buildings required in the newly popular denser city cores—buildings which are significantly more expensive than the cheap slapdash stuff that gets constructed in the 'burbs, and thus far more amenable to price gouging by subcontractors....

Tearing down the highway system and replacing it with a beautiful mixed-mode

alternative and dense IOD seem like a trade-union's dream come true... it would take many, many, decades—decades of construction... ^^;

10 ^ [v] Reply Share ›



**Mark Walker** • 11 days ago

I love it when conservatives say "we can't afford" transit even as they ladle out billions for highway projects. It's like saying we can't afford vegetables because we're spending too much on Doritos.

21 ^ [1 v] Reply Share ›



**John Dough** → **Mark Walker** • 10 days ago

I love it when liberals say, "Since we're already subsidizing highway users at the rate of a penny a trip, it's only fair that we also subsidize transit riders at the rate of a dollar a trip." It's like saying the government is already giving us free water, it owes us free beer, too.

^ [5 v] Reply Share ›



**Angie Schmitt** → **John Dough** • 10 days ago

John, we are going to spend twice as much on that single interchange we mentioned in Milwaukee than the federal government will spend on walking and biking throughout the United States this year. I think your assumptions are a little off.

7 ^ [v] Reply Share ›



**John Dough** → **Angie Schmitt** • 10 days ago

Hi Angie,

Who said anything about walking or biking?

As a matter of fact, I believe walking and biking are legitimate parts of the highway, road and street landscape and they both ought to be safely accommodated on highways, roads and streets, wherever appropriate and at the expense of highway, road and street budgets. I apologize if anybody mistook my comment as saying otherwise. I applaud those who walk and bike for to get where they're going!

I define transit as including buses, trains and similar conveyances where the driver is paid, but not including walking or biking. Maybe the assumption that everybody uses that definition was my first mistaken assumption. What are my other assumptions that are a little off?

My comment had to do with the tendency of some people who seem to

feel entitled to public transportation that is paid by others--for example, people who seem to believe if ANYTHING is subsidized, EVERYTHING should be subsidized, no matter whether the benefits match the costs.

My apologies if some liberals take offense at that. I was just having a little fun at Mark Walker's expense.

^ 3 ▾ Reply Share ›



**Angie Schmitt** → John Dough • 10 days ago

Here, how's this? "Drivers cover 51 percent of US highway spending."  
<http://dc.streetsblog.org/2013...>

3 ^ ▾ Reply Share ›



**John Dough** → Angie Schmitt • 10 days ago

Fuzzy math.

I was not impressed with either the Tax Foundation's report or your predictable trumpeting of its erroneous results in January. Besides, it just supports my point. You use highway subsidies to rationalize transit subsidies. In this case, the supposed highway subsidies are phony.

How about this?

<http://ti.org/antiplanner/?p=7...>

Or, how about this...

<http://ti.org/antiplanner/?p=7...>

...which concludes...

"...(M)ost people who claim that roads are heavily subsidized use that claim to argue for more subsidies to transit, Amtrak, and other modes of travel. ...(The TF report) certainly is giving support to those who want more

[see more](#)

^ 2 ▾ Reply Share ›



**Joe R.** → John Dough • 10 days ago

One more thing-the topic of this article is about people in cities opposing highways running through these cities. Constructing highways in cities is enormously expensive. Moreover, it directly benefits only those who work in the cities and live in the suburbs. The highways actually have a negative effect on quality of life and property values in the city. Why should we

have what amounts to a subsidy from the city to the suburbs for a mode of transport which is largely incompatible with cities? Funny how people who drive complain about "their" gas taxes being used to fund mass transit in cities but object when city residents don't wish to spend enormous sums to accommodate their driving habit even in large cities. I hear nonsense like this all the time, such as a quote from someone who lives in Westchester complaining that bike lanes in NYC are making it harder for them to park their SUV. Last I checked someone from Westchester can easily take the train into NYC. NYC should be able to reapportion street space to benefit its residents rather than people who feel like driving in. How would someone who lives in Westchester feel if NYC wanted to extend a subway line right through their cul-de-sac? Well, that's exactly how urban residents feel when state DOTs try to ram highways through their neighborhoods.

7 ^ | v Reply Share ›



**Joe R.** → John Dough • 10 days ago

Putting aside for the moment indirect subsidies which amount to hundreds of billions annually, the numbers you give only apply to highways. Local roads are generally paid for with local income and real estate taxes which everyone pays, and yet there are generally no fees for using local roads. Mass transit at least charges users a fee to use it. There's little doubt here in the US roads are massively subsidized compared to mass transit.

Getting to indirect subsidies, motor vehicle travel causes pollution which in turn costs health care systems hundreds of billions annually. Moreover, deaths from transportation-related pollution number roughly ten times the number of deaths directly caused by motor vehicles. That's about 300,000 people dying annually in the US alone, plus the 35,000 motor vehicles directly kill. These are huge costs which road users currently don't have to pay. And then add in the costs of wars to secure oil supplies. In truth, these indirect subsidies dwarf any direct subsidies by an order of magnitude, easily.

Incidentally, I don't necessarily feel subsidizing transportation is a bad thing. ~~Quite the contrary, actually. A dollar put into transportation can~~

[see more](#)

6 ^ | v Reply Share ›



**Angie Schmitt** → John Dough • 10 days ago

Well, I can't argue with the antiplanner! ;)

^ | v Reply Share ›



**John Dough** → Angie Schmitt • 9 days ago

You shouldn't. You're unarmed.

^ | 1 | v Reply Share ›



**Guest** → John Dough • 9 days ago

He's a total hack. Not even very good at pretending he's legit. O'Toole said after Sandy NYC should replace its subways with an underground system of buses. That was probably the all-time dumbest thing ever said by anyone claiming any expertise in transportation.

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›



**John Dough** → Guest • 9 days ago

Unlike that whacko Obama, or his personal hack, LaHood, who want to spend gazillions of dollars we don't have building high speed trains we don't need, that would crisscross vast empty spaces to connect 80 percent of Americans, who are already connected by highways and airplanes.

Nothing nutty about that, is there?

^ | 1 | v Reply Share ›



**Guest** → John Dough • 9 days ago

Yeah, you're right, the idea that America would have the same quality of infrastructure Europe and Asia really is cray!

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›



**John Dough** → Guest • 9 days ago

What could it hurt for America to be a little more like Spain and Greece, eh?

I'm curious. What part of my post did you miss? The gazillions we don't have or the trains we don't need?

^ | 1 | v Reply Share ›



**spijim** → John Dough • 7 days ago

The gazillions we don't have that we're going to spend on highways that we don't need.

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›



**John Dough** → spijim • 7 days ago





Agreed. We shouldn't spend money we don't have on highways we don't need.

1 Reply Share ›



Bolwerk → Mark Walker • 11 days ago

In all fairness, conservatives are usually quantitatively illiterate and spend money like drunken sailors.

8 1 Reply Share ›



Roy Crisman → Bolwerk • 11 days ago

Innumerate.

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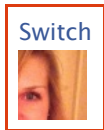
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– *Joe R.* In response to "[Car Ownership May Be Down in the U.S., But It's Soaring Globally](#)"

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