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# Realignment: Highways and Livability Policy in the Post-Interstate Era, 1978–2013

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**Michael R. Fein**

## **Abstract**

While federal policy makers have pursued “livable” communities since the late 1970s, they have rarely agreed on precisely what “livability” entailed and how best to achieve it. When U.S. Secretary of the Department of Transportation Ray LaHood promised in 2009 to make livability the hallmark of an ambitious interagency partnership with the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Environmental Protection Agency—and, in the process, to undo long-standing patterns of auto-dependency—it appeared that LaHood was poised to shift American transportation policy in a bold new direction. And yet other policies, such as those that govern the alignment of highway interchanges serving super-regional shopping malls, continued to promote the dominance of highway-driven economies. This article demonstrates how the failure to confront historic development patterns fostered by the Interstate highway system undermined LaHood’s campaign for livable communities.

## **Keywords**

Interstate highways, livability policy, highway interchanges, land use policy, highway economies, urban planning, shopping malls, transportation history

In June 2009, U.S. Secretary of the Department of Transportation (DOT) Ray LaHood unveiled a new Sustainable Communities program devoted to the pursuit of “livability.” Partnering with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), LaHood pledged that new principles of “livability” would guide future interagency projects. In meeting livability goals, federally sponsored projects would offer economical transportation choices, promote public health and clean energy, diminish pollution, and even reduce dependence on foreign oil. These guidelines, the reasoning went, would encourage local political leaders and planners to pursue development characterized by walkable neighborhoods, accessible transit, and safeguarded landscapes. In short, as LaHood explained, livability meant “being able to take your kids to school, go to work, see a doctor, drop by the grocery or post office, go out to dinner and a movie, and play with your kids at the park—all without having to get in your car.”<sup>1</sup>

Such language proved intensely polarizing. Those on the right, such as Heritage Foundation Fellow Ronald D. Utt, attacked LaHood’s ideas as evidence of President Barack Obama’s support for “social engineering schemes.” *Newsweek* writer George F. Will labeled LaHood the “Secretary of Behavior Modification.” Meanwhile, those on the left, such as Sustainable Cities director Kaid Benfield, hoped LaHood’s ideas signaled an end to a half-century of nearly single-minded commitment to American automobile and metropolitan decentralization.<sup>2</sup> And others, including Greg Cohen, president of the American Highway Users Alliance, found the concept of livability simply too imprecise to measure the efficacy of proposed transportation projects. Like its conceptual cousin, “sustainability,” it seemed like a humpty-dumpty word, used to mean whatever its speaker wished it to mean.<sup>3</sup>

From any vantage point, LaHood’s vision of the “livable” community was far reaching. First, it involved bridging the bureaucratic divides imposed by multiple federal agencies, including HUD, DOT, and the EPA. These three agencies were established between 1965 and 1970 as part of major executive reorganizations, designed to coordinate national policies related to urban housing, transportation, and environmental protection. As cabinet-level agencies, they constituted an improvement over the old, fragmented patterns of issue advocacy that made it difficult for the Executive Office to balance various transportation programs, address the interrelated causes of pollution, or pursue the broad “health of cities” goals that had languished in HUD’s predecessor agencies. But these new departments also fostered disconnected “silos” of expertise, authority, and institutional interests, as when President B. Lyndon Johnson decreed that urban mass transit belonged not to HUD but to the DOT. As a result, Johnson’s decision pitted

transit backers against those involved in highways, aviation, and heavy rail in an unevenly matched competition for federal resources. LaHood's pursuit of an interagency livability initiative sought to reorder these institutional arrangements. What is more, he sought to realign the goals of the DOT by reducing automobile dependency, encouraging centralization rather than sprawl, and supporting local rather than regionally oriented development and mobility.

While it is too soon to assess the full consequences of LaHood's policy, several points are clear. First, the effort of top DOT officials to position livability within a historical policy continuum revealed the instability of "livability" as a crisply definable—and thus meaningfully achievable—transportation policy initiative.<sup>4</sup> Simply put, LaHood's program lacked a usable past; without it, his pursuit of livability remained vulnerable to the critique that it was, at best, illusory and, at worst, revolutionary. Second, an examination of long-standing highway policy commitments highlights the challenges in any realignment of federal transportation policy. Since the passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, Interstate highways had been the centerpiece of U.S. transportation policy. Federal and state road engineers drew on the dedicated revenue of the Highway Trust Fund to consistently promote the interests of motorists and truckers, the groups who primarily financed Interstate construction. Those interest groups, engineers argued, sought unfettered movement with minimal regard for the built and natural environments.<sup>5</sup>

Working toward walkable, local-oriented, human-scale, "livable" communities and economies entailed a rejection of the regionally oriented commercial and commuting patterns fostered by the Interstates.<sup>6</sup> Realigning these long-standing DOT priorities would prove no easy feat. Since the end of World War II, a host of overlapping public policies had produced a deep-rooted legacy of auto-dependency. Then, in the late twentieth century, developers and road engineers' support for new highway interchange development extended this legacy through a sweeping reconfiguration of urban and suburban landscapes.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, livability initiatives lacked precisely the elements that made Interstate construction such a powerful force for change since the 1950s: political consensus, long-range planning capacity, bureaucratic autonomy and centralization, and a dedicated revenue stream.<sup>8</sup>

## Defining Livability

Following LaHood's announcement of the new partnership, top officials at the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), a DOT agency, began to compile case studies of transportation projects that met livability goals. Seeking to temper any controversy surrounding LaHood's anti-automobility rhetoric, a 2010 FHWA webinar announced that the pursuit of livability "has been a national initiative before." The report cited President Jimmy Carter's "Livable Cities" program and President Bill Clinton's "Building Livable Communities" program, and sought to position Obama's "Livability Initiative" (and its Interagency Partnership for Sustainable Communities) as building upon this legacy.<sup>9</sup> But these claims that the new livability goals fell neatly within the historical continuum of American transportation policy rested on weak evidence.

Launched in 1978, Carter's program cost \$15 million over two years. Meagerly financed at a time when the federal government was spending \$7.5 billion annually on Interstate highways, Livable Cities had little impact on and little to do with FHWA policy.<sup>10</sup> Instead, Livable Cities operated as a partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts to fund community-based arts programs, with scant attention paid to urban transportation planning.<sup>11</sup> The program was cut during President Ronald Reagan's administration, and then resuscitated a decade later as Clinton's "Building Livable Communities Program." In the late 1990s, Vice President Albert Gore encouraged FHWA officials to pursue livable cities by linking transportation and land-use planning, combating sprawl, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. But in practice, the programmatic emphasis fell on the preservation of green spaces and park land, rather than on a major realignment of transport, housing, and environmental policy.<sup>12</sup> All in all, LaHood's campaign lacked a firmly established history and constituency.

Though late twentieth-century urban transportation policy occasionally nodded toward the promotion of livable communities, policy makers appeared to be aiming at a moving target: Was it the city as cultural center that needed to be preserved? Was it urban parks and trees that made cities livable? Either way, there was little evidence to suggest that policy makers in any administration—Carter's, Reagan's, or Clinton's—were prepared to deviate from their positions on spatially neutral urban and economic policies. To them, the federal government's task was to promote national economic growth, while remaining impartial as to where that growth occurred. None of the predecessor programs to LaHood's livability initiative had sought to displace the centrality of the automobile in U.S. transportation policy. Nor did any of these earlier programs seek to undo, in any meaningful way, decades of federal urban and economic policies that supported Interstate highways over transit, metropolitan decentralization over the compact community, the suburbs at the expense of the inner cities, or regional shopping destinations at the expense

of historic downtowns. In all, these earlier programs marked inadequate interventions, modest initiatives that did not indicate any real departure from federal urban policies that ignored the inherited city as a singularly valuable resource.<sup>13</sup> In formulating each of these initiatives, right up to LaHood's, no one seemed to take account of the weight and authority that developers and builders brought to shaping the priorities of urban highway planning and politics.<sup>14</sup>

In part, LaHood's difficulty in pursuing livability as a policy initiative reflected the challenges in articulating a definitive meaning of the term. As the Dutch political historian Harm Kaal explains, livability has been an idea that captivated policy makers, and, in the American context, has resulted in a proliferation of efforts to measure and rank the most and least livable cities in the nation. In this way, it captured a diverse array of statistics—everything from crime rates to pollen levels—and reflected as well the peculiar American insistence on mapping the imperatives of competitive advantage and commercial dominance onto every aspect of human life.

But livability was also a normative concept that was useful not only to depict, but to shape, reality. As early as the 1950s, it was employed by rural geographers seeking to fend off depopulation in the Dutch countryside. In subsequent decades it was used throughout Europe and the United States in pursuit of such varied goals as public art and green spaces, access to public services and infrastructure, high levels of employment, as well as vital, diverse, and compact communities.<sup>15</sup> So long as livability meant whatever authors and politicians wished it to mean, the pursuit of livable communities remained as elusive as its definition.

We should not insist on a fixed, crystallized definition of livability. We must, however, remain sensitive to the difficulties imposed by these ambiguities. The more fundamental problem, however, relates to the depth of support for policies (or the absence of policy) that work at cross-purposes to the goals of livability. By way of illustration, I will focus on one area of transportation policy making—the siting of interchanges—and the impact of this policy on the patterns of work, commerce, and residency that are so integral to modern definitions of the livable community.

### **Interchanges, High-Speed/High-Volume Travel, and Regional Commerce**

In 1978, as Carter's ill-fated Livable Cities Program began, officials at the Pyramid Companies—which would soon grow into the largest mall developer in the northeast—set their sights on Guilderland, New York, situated just southwest of Albany, at the intersection of two major Interstate highways, the New York State Thruway and the Northway (I-87). Established in 1968 by Syracuse entrepreneur Robert Congel, Pyramid Companies opened its first mall in Saratoga in the mid-1970s and more than a dozen others over the next decade.<sup>16</sup> A key player in this second wave of super-regional mall construction, Congel recognized the new development opportunities afforded not just by an expanding base of suburban consumers but also by the new nodes commercial development brought into being by high-speed, high-volume, long-haul highway travel. Aware that the Capital region was served by only one major shopping center, built in 1966, Congel eyed Guilderland for new development specifically because of its location at a major arterial junction.<sup>17</sup>

Congel proposed to construct a massive new mall called "Crossgates," an intentional reference that simultaneously identified the regional retail destination *and* the juncture of the two massive Interstates. The projected mall was also situated at the heart of the historic African American Rapp Road community. In her history of Rapp Road, Jennifer Lemak details how public hearings held by the town zoning board in July 1981 "turned ugly" as residents spoke out four to one against the mall developers. Residents worried about traffic, noise, pollution, and the threat to Pine Bush, the neighboring old growth woodlands. They also feared the taking of residential land that had belonged to a black settlement dating to the 1920s, when William Toliver, a Pentecostal minister, sought a "place in the country" where a religious community of black migrants from Mississippi might take root.<sup>18</sup> First with the arrival of the New York State Thruway in 1954, and later with the 1971 construction of the Washington Avenue Extension, clear features of urbanity appeared within a quarter-mile of the formerly rural Pine Bush community that residents had nicknamed "the Holy Land." By the end of the 1970s, having viewed aerial photographs of the area within the vicinity of the highway interchange, Congel announced that Pyramid Companies planned to construct a major regional mall on the site of the ecologically vulnerable Pine Barrens and the historically significant Rapp Road community. Defenders of both were unable to turn back an aggressive multimillion-dollar corporation, and Congel opened Pyramid's Crossgates Mall in 1984.<sup>19</sup> [See Figure 1]

As historian Roger Biles points out in his book on federal urban policy, Carter administration officials offered minimal aid for the preservation of cities as cultural centers; those same officials offered less support to geographically peripheral and historically disenfranchised and underrepresented communities seeking to guide their own future development. During the Reagan years, urban policy continued to be built around the notion that private

investors such as Congel should dictate the pace, trajectory, and location of economic growth.<sup>20</sup> Congel's success suggests that Pyramid Companies was able to thrive in this environment that privileged the interest of private capital over the protestations of local residents who asserted the imperatives of their own livable communities. And corporate leaders had public help: following construction of the mall, engineers at the New York State Thruway Authority realigned a dedicated I-87 "Crossgates Mall" interchange so that travelers could glide off the exit ramp *directly* into the Crossgates Mall parking lot.<sup>21</sup> In 2013, the mall website boasted that "one can come from Buffalo, Montreal, New York City and Boston without hitting a traffic light."<sup>22</sup> While Rapp Road residents lamented the changes to their community, public officials and private developers understood equally well that regional mobility and regional commerce went hand in hand.

In the mid-1990s, while the Clinton administration promoted its "Building Livable Communities Program," Pyramid was in the midst of financing a major expansion of Crossgates Mall, and its public relations team now boasted 1.7 million square feet of retail space and 20 million annual visits. The enlarged mall further isolated the Rapp Road community and diminished opportunities for effective transit service to surrounding areas. Authors of a traffic study conducted in October 2010 noted that under the current configuration, mall employees arriving via mass transit were forced to utilize the Washington Avenue Extension *on foot* to gain access to the mall, despite the fact that, as an expressway, state law prohibited its use by pedestrians.<sup>24</sup> In this example, we can see that the Interstate highway interchange and the mall that emerged alongside it embodied a set of policy choices that were and remained antithetical to the goals of livability. This contrast is evidenced by the extension of regional shopping habits, the destabilizing of local (and, in this instance, historically black) communities, the absence of compact, walkable and transit-oriented development, and the increase in vehicle miles traveled necessitated by these choices. As the Pyramid Company's literature promised, its malls' successes were based on volume-driven, retail domination, with 187 million annual visits to all Pyramid-owned malls. [See Figure 2]

Of course, highway travel has always been essential to mall success, tying Americans' "love affair" with the automobile to what Jeffrey Hardwick terms their "love affair with consumption." Pioneering mall designer Victor Gruen claimed in 1948 that "the real shopping center will be the most profitable type of chain store location yet developed, for the simple reason that it will include features to induce people to drive considerable distances to enjoy its advantages."<sup>26</sup> As historian Lizabeth Cohen details in her analysis of postwar consumption, developers presented shopping malls as a "rational" response to the consumer demand posed by new suburbanites and facilitated by newly constructed Interstate highways. Situated within vast asphalt parking lots, these oases of consumption brought a new level of private management and commercial homogenization to the retail experiences that were formerly the province of diverse downtown shopping sectors.<sup>27</sup>

Ultimately, though, the success of mall developers' challenge to central business districts and market towns rested on their ability to transform the very nature of "centrality." Whereas once a crossroads indicated a commercial center, retail-based property managers now characterized the traffic signal as a threat to the uninterrupted mobility that increasingly defined the spatial geometry of twenty-first-century commerce. And yet, as historian Christopher Wells explains in *Car Country*, such an outcome was not inevitable. Rather, such landscapes were the product of interlocking policy decisions—from local zoning ordinances to the federal tax code to highway finance schemes—that channeled development to critical interstate junctures along the urban periphery.<sup>28</sup> The result was a new highway economy, in which the high costs of auto-dependency were increasingly embedded.

If the goal of contemporary livability policies is to reduce these costs, then Interstate highway interchanges are critical to this analysis, since they serve the kind of regional economic development that undermines more compact patterns of commerce, work, and residency. Even at the dawn of the Interstate-era, no one doubted the capacity of interchange siting decisions to reconfigure economic development. In 1966, a series of Pennsylvania State University studies examined borough and township supervisors, managers, and council members' opinions toward land use and planning policy around highway interchanges. More



**Figure 1.** Crossgates Mall. I-90 (topmost arc); Washington Avenue Extension (U-shaped Expressway, above); I-87 (right); U.S. Route 20 (below). Note: The Rapp Road community is located between the mall and Washington Avenue Extension.<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 2.** Pyramid Companies: Domination through Volume.<sup>25</sup>

than 90 percent of those surveyed approved of the choice of location for the newly constructed interchanges, and just as many considered it “desirable” for “the local government to take part in decisions affecting that growth and development” sparked by these new transportation corridors. But respondents balked when it came to advocating direct “government control.” For example, when respondents were asked if they supported a statement indicating that land use should be determined by the individual property owner, rather than zoned as commercial, industrial, or residential, a startling 44 percent agreed. And when asked whether they had ever “publicly voiced an opinion either for or against planning in their respective communities,” only 36 percent had done so. At a time when the Interstate Highway System appealed to many as a way of linking communities through national infrastructure, these studies confirmed that local officials saw proximity to highway interchanges as critical to economic growth. And, yet, local

officials—ambivalent about government’s dictating the pace and character of growth—were reluctant to endorse formal land use policies.<sup>29</sup>

Within a decade, however, such attitudes had changed. *Growth Shapers*, a study released in 1976 by the Council on Environmental Quality, revealed how interchanges had become vehicles for sprawl and decentralization. The land use impact of Interstate development hastened the decline of the compact community, while promoting new development geared toward through traffic: “motels and service stations” or, in the study’s words, “garish strip commercial development.”<sup>30</sup>

In a way, this was an old complaint. In 1939 Thomas H. MacDonald, Chief of the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR), had issued similar objections to the “unsightly stands” that characterized “ribbon development” alongside existing highways, “catering inefficiently and with little profit to the purchasing power of Americans awheel.”<sup>31</sup> MacDonald touted roads featuring limited access as more conducive to the needs of a smoothly running highway economy, and, a generation later, Interstate highways had spurred the replacement of the roadside hot dog stands with a somewhat less transient form of commercial architecture. But, as the authors of *Growth Shapers* indicated, development induced by new highway interchanges created conditions for potentially unchecked growth. Moreover, this growth brought with it a host of secondary costs, ranging from air pollution and waste water issues to traffic delays and car accidents. By the 1970s, “Americans awheel” had come to appreciate the social and environmental costs of sprawl more clearly, and their views on highway economies grew less optimistic.

Again, a Pennsylvania study offers a revealing illustration of the shift in attitudes regarding highway interchange development. A 2000 report prepared for the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission investigated the prospect of building a direct interchange between I-95 and the Pennsylvania Turnpike (I-276), in order to replace several miles of circuitous surface roads in Bucks County. The crux of the inquiry was whether a new interchange would enhance the region’s economy. Since the 1970s, the construction of new interchanges had hinged on finding the right balance between expected economic growth and the sorts of environmental costs identified by the 1976 *Growth Shapers* report. But the authors of the more recent Turnpike Commission study questioned whether growth could be confidently predicted at all. Indeed, they offered a far less sanguine look at the economic impact of interchange development than the authors of the 1966 investigation, in which local officials judged interchange proximity as essential to their community’s economic future.

In the post-Interstate era, economic growth was no longer assured. A series of case studies in the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission report revealed that absent effective zoning and siting decisions, distressed areas might see no economic improvement; in other instances, the development of major interchanges did not develop new economic activity so much as it shifted it from other nearby regions, according to new patterns of accessibility. Of course, “accessibility” was and remained based on the notion that road engineers could “shrink” distances by reducing travel time to new residential developments, office parks, and retail establishments. But while new infrastructural efficiencies promised to collapse huge distances, in fact, they simply invited drivers to contemplate a wider circumference of vehicle miles to travel: precisely the opposite goal envisioned by livable communities initiatives.



## Palisades Center Mall Direct access to the New York State Thruway (I-87/I-287)



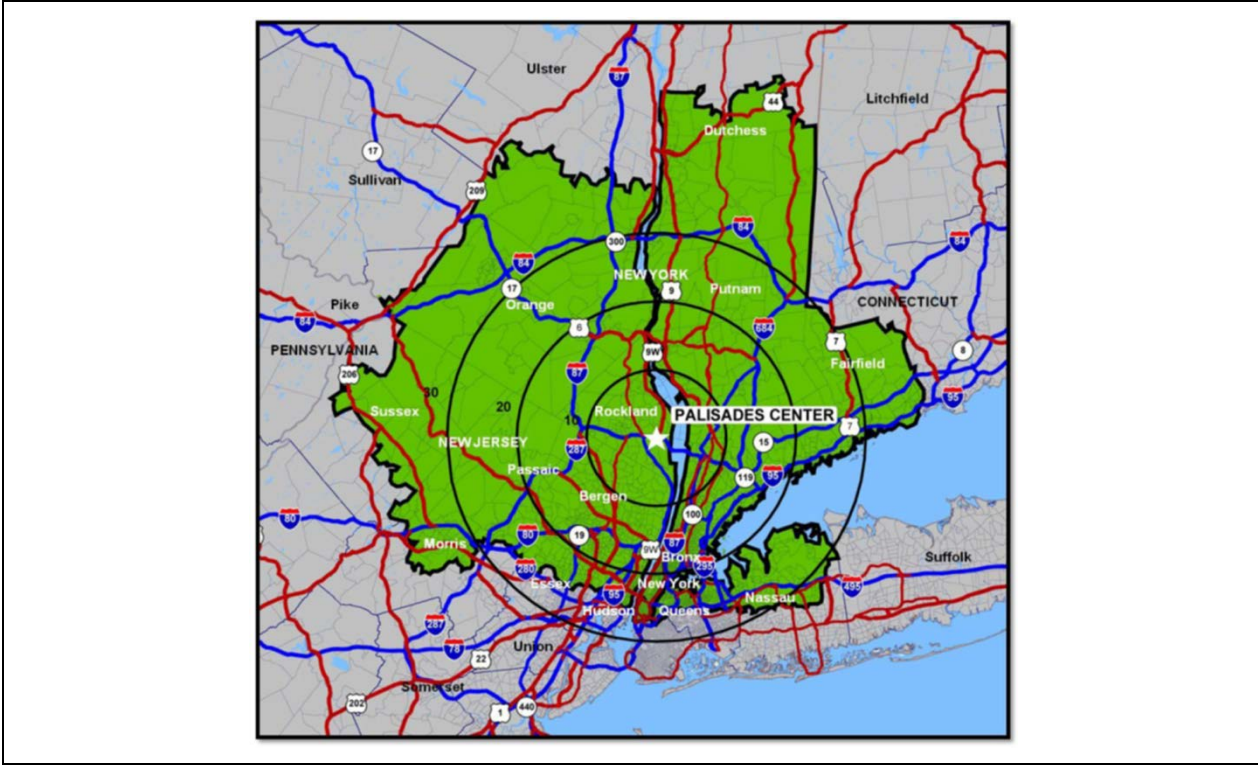
**Figure 3.** Palisades Center Mall, with direct access to I-87/287, the New York State Thruway.<sup>36</sup>

### The “Towne Centre” and the Urban Expressway

Importantly, the story of Crossgates Mall, with its dedicated Interstate highway service ramps, was not an isolated one.<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere in New York State, the Palisades Center Mall (2.2 million square feet, 22 million annual visits) featured direct ramp service to Palisades Center Drive, offering the same stop-light-free, expressway access. Such development was, moreover, not confined to metropolitan New York. As one Charlotte, North Carolina–based, retail specialist explains, mall construction follows the “outer beltway. . . . As more interchanges are finished, more development appears, including neighborhood centers and power centers.” In 1999, another Charlotte-based developer explained that “the most exciting development” was Concord Mills, a regional mall situated on an I-85 exit that handled 20 million cars annually. At 1.8 million square feet, “it’s a monster”: over four times the size of shopping malls built in Charlotte during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>33</sup> Starting in 2011, the North Carolina DOT began widening the interstate and adding a second turning lane to ease mall access. [See Figure 3]

Similarly, in 2011 the Wisconsin DOT financed the construction of a \$12-million interchange off I-94, thirty miles west of Milwaukee, to serve an upscale “Town Centre” mall, designed to capture city and suburban residents over an area of 2,800 square miles.<sup>34</sup> And, since 2006, real estate developers in Altoona, Pennsylvania, have sought tenants for Logan Towne Center, an 850,000-square-foot mall with its own dedicated, newly constructed interchange off I-99. Retail destination sites like these often employed cartoon architecture and faux-archaic language: “towne” with an “e” and the Olde English “centre” with an “re.” This spelling change served to cover, with a thin veneer of history, contemporary efforts to reverse center and periphery, and to mask the larger failure to see the inherited city as a unique and thus irreplaceable resource.<sup>35</sup> The inherited city was unique, of course, in that it promised a historical and place-based identity, as distinct from the ordered, homogenized, and endlessly interchangeable environs of the private mall. But, perhaps more importantly, the historical city was unique in that, unlike the “Towne Centre” on the urban fringe, the inherited city was truly central. Even as suburban population growth skyrocketed during the late twentieth century, the city retained the potential to provide all the things that proponents of livability policy described as vital to new development: walkability, multiplicity of purpose, social heterogeneity, and opportunities for locally oriented commerce and multimodal transportation.





**Figure 4.** The Palisades Center Mall boasts a thirty-mile radius from which it draws consumers.<sup>38</sup>

This connection between interregional highways and regional shopping centers—and the struggle to direct what Interstate promoter and BPR Chief MacDonald had once called the “purchasing power of Americans awheel”—is not particularly new. Malls and expressways evolved together, and were cut from the same public policy cloth that sought to privilege mobility (especially automobility) and travel “efficiency” above all else. The same 1950s real estate transactions that allowed officials at the New York State Thruway Authority to purchase acreage in Westchester for a new expressway also entailed the sale of land to the developers of the Cross County Center, one of the nation’s first open-air shopping malls. Westchester County officials worried then that the mall would be like an “atom bomb” attack on local merchants. Echoing this imagery a half century later, the Palisades Center Mall’s map depicted a bull’s eye over the mall, with ever-widening rings describing the thirty-plus-mile radius from which it draws its customers. Such imagery bears an eerie resemblance to Cold War maps, plotting the circumferential reach of nuclear fallout. The construction of the Oak Street Connector in New Haven in the late 1950s prompted similar reversals of urban and suburban fortunes. And the list goes on. The only contemporary difference is that now super-regional malls draw commerce away not just from downtowns but from an older generation of “dead malls” as well.<sup>37</sup> [See Figure 4]

The thrust of this essay is surely indicative of the way that I too am using livability as a normative vision of what the “good city” looks like. Yet, if the modern pursuit of “livability” is to be truly meaningful, it must be composed of more than a series of best practices, such as the innovative interchange redesigned for the town center at Daniel Island, in Charleston, South Carolina. Engineers in the South Carolina DOT proposed a traditional cloverleaf; the town’s planning team instead suggested bending the access roads through the town center to integrate traffic flow. At first, state highway officials resisted the design change because they were accustomed to self-contained (and thus completely state-controlled) interchanges. They yielded only when they realized the less conventional plan was also significantly more economical. Still, the Daniel Island interchange was an exceptional case, while more costly, “patchwork” livability initiatives face resistance and are often the first to fall to budget cuts.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, between 2009 and 2013, Federal Highway Administration funding for “shovel-ready” projects, such as the widening of Interstates, continued to promote the dominance of highway-driven economies.

It is precisely these more widely adopted models of Interstate highway development that are most alarming: edge city flyover ramps feeding directly into retail supercenters adjacent to massive warehouses, such as the one built in Woburn, Massachusetts, on I-93. Constructed in the late 1990s, at a time when almost all of Massachusetts’s federal

transportation dollars were siphoned off by Boston's Central Artery/Tunnel project, this particular interchange was built as part of a Superfund cleanup, featured in the book and film *A Civil Action*.<sup>40</sup> It included a transportation hub as well as a regional shopping center. While the rail facility extended North Shore transit opportunities, the new highway interchange fed directly into the Commerce Way shopping district, anchored by a Target discount retailer and a Lowe's home improvement store. Store owners capitalized on this ease of access to expand their consumer base, and by 2005 the Lowe's store had become the most profitable in the state. Similarly, engineers at the Alabama Department of Transportation coordinated construction of a new I-459 flyover leading to the 1.6-million-square-foot, upmarket Riverchase Galleria in a Birmingham suburb. When the ramp opened in 2002, judges for the *Birmingham Business Journal* voted it the "New Construction Deal of the Year." They praised the \$28.7-million interchange—funded by the city, state, FHWA and the mall owner—for "dropping southbound traffic off at the Galleria's back door."<sup>41</sup>

Though Interstate highways are owned and operated by state departments of transportation, 2010 FHWA policy dictated that the construction or redesign of an interchange was a federal decision, subject to federal standards and extensive reporting requirements. The engineers who designed these standards wanted to ensure that proposed interchanges were integrated into statewide transportation improvement plans and respected a "hierarchy of movement" that "supports the role of the Interstate System as a thoroughfare for high-speed, high-volume, and long-haul travel, and not for local access between adjacent areas."<sup>42</sup> FHWA policy thus required agency officials to review new points of Interstate access from a traffic flow standpoint that emphasized geometric design and operational standards rather than economic impact, which, they reasoned, was outside their purview.<sup>43</sup>

When private developers sought new interchange proposals, FHWA policy again focused principally on engineering design, requiring that state DOTs ensure that builders pledged to handle non-interchange improvements essential to the efficient functioning of the interchange itself.<sup>44</sup> Recognizing that "private involvement in transportation improvements . . . [was] increasing," Connecticut DOT officials utilized this "private development" requirement to promote greater public-private coordination of transportation improvements. While insisting that "the intent of this requirement . . . [was] not to try to control developers and their plans through the Department [of Transportation], which have no such direct powers," state transportation officials explained that "when private development is clearly the driving force behind the need for access, it is only reasonable that the Department and the developer work closely together in order to develop the access to achieve mutual benefits with minimal adverse impact on the Interstate travelers." Connecticut state officials speculated that private developers might offer "ride sharing incentives or even assist in providing transit facilities." But state officials admitted that their primary goal was "to accomplish any coordination that might be possible, even if it is only to know what each is doing and when."<sup>45</sup> Given the advantages that accrued to private developers operating at the site of new interchanges, state and federal officials set the cost of cooperation—coordinated construction and adherence to federal engineering standards—remarkably low.

A plan for an interchange redesign in Provo, Utah, revealed how easy it was for ostensibly objective technical analysis to subvert livability goals. In October 2011, as part of his job creation programming, President Obama approved the West Side Connector as one of fourteen federal projects slated for expedited review and permitting. The West Side Connector would link I-15 to Provo's airport, located several miles west of the city. Final route determination hinged in part on an interchange that served the Provo Towne Centre Mall, located on the city's southwest perimeter. FHWA officials supported the development of a direct, expanded interchange between I-15 and the West Side Connector in order to meet "driver expectations" of "system linkage." They dismissed a competing Center Street Alternative that would have enhanced the local road network and directed traffic toward Provo's central business district. In rejecting this pro-downtown alternative, they cited the potential costs to Home Depot, "one of the businesses intended to benefit from the increased system linkage and connectivity of the Proposed Project." At issue was the taking of 0.9 acres of a parking lot via eminent domain and the reduction of "mall visibility" from the Interstate. The report raised concerns about the loss of tax revenue from Home Depot, but failed to consider the tax revenue impact contingent on downtown Provo's economic fortunes.

Downtown supporters had tried in vain to force a reconsideration of the West Side Connector. In a December 2011 memorandum, officials at the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) endorsed the pro-downtown "Center Street Alternative." They based their support on a more comprehensive consideration of Provo's locally adopted "livability standards." In 2011 city officials had passed these standards to minimize the impact of "high-speed" facilities on residential neighborhoods and decrease overall traffic volume. When engineers at the FHWA Utah division issued a Record of Decision on the project in January 2012, they informed USACE engineers that such issues were "secondary."<sup>46</sup> Thus, FHWA decision makers privileged the

high-speed connectivity and interlinked systems that characterized Interstate highway travel, while large-scale, regionally oriented shopping malls situated at interchanges on the city's margins continued to reap economic benefits.

As the Provo case and other examples in this article illustrate, these contemporary highway design and location practices, supported by developers and stubbornly resistant to planning reform, undermined the livable community LaHood envisioned.<sup>47</sup> Thwarted by a continued commitment to policies that worked at cross purposes to the goals of livability, DOT officials failed to “realign” highways *and* highway policy in more congruent ways. Had federal officials been serious about challenging auto dependency and linking transportation, housing, energy, and environmental policy goals, then policy makers and planners would have had to directly confront historic development patterns that the Interstate highway system had long fostered.<sup>48</sup> As part of that confrontation, transportation officials would have to undertake a more careful reckoning of the costs of highway economies to livable communities.

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### Notes

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