Deconstruction Ahead:
Examining the History and Potential of Highway Removal in Milwaukee

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Morgan Yeager Florsheim

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Advisor: Penn Loh

Reader: Kathryn Davies

Abstract

This thesis examines the potential for highway removal to advance equity, sustainability, and climate resilience goals in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Through an analysis of three case studies—the completed removal of the Park East Freeway and proposed removals of portions of I-794 and WI-175—it explores the complex dynamics surrounding urban highway removal projects. Drawing on 21 interviews, an extensive literature review, and an exploration of government documents, the findings highlight both opportunities and challenges in leveraging highway removal for community benefit without displacing the longtime residents along the freeway corridors. The research culminates in six recommendations for policymakers and planners looking to prioritize social and environmental justice and address climate risk and pervasive inequities through highway removal projects. Centering community voice, planning proactively and intentionally with regard to key issues, and collaborating across silos emerged as essential strategies.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Methods

It is a strange time to be entering the urban planning field. For so long, the focus for those planning cities was on unrestricted growth and prosperity—a focus which overwhelmingly resulted in the concentration of resources in the hands of the wealthiest few in combination with the devastation of the ecosystems and communities from which those resources were extracted. Today, urban planners are finally beginning to come to terms with the fact that in order to right the wrongs of history we may need to focus less on growth and more on redistribution and even subtraction—getting rid of the infrastructures that exacerbate inequality and the climate crisis. Urban highways rise to the top of this list.

At first glance, the question of whether or not we should remove urban freeways—not completely, mind you, the segments on the table today are mostly underutilized "freeways to nowhere"—seems like a transportation problem. To be sure, concerns around traffic and gridlock come up often in these conversations. But the discussion around removing freeways is necessarily far more complicated and interdisciplinary, touching on issues of land use, housing, climate, economic development, and perhaps most significantly equity. The history of highways is a textbook case of the racist roots of urban planning. In addition to attempting to reduce newfound traffic on city streets that resulted from the rapid rise in automobile use, highways were routed through Black communities for the purpose of what many city leaders called "urban renewal" or "slum clearance"—coded language which made clear who they believed cities were for and who was not welcome. In other instances, highways acted as barriers between Black and white communities, reinforcing segregation and walling off opportunities. These choices around highway construction cemented the inequality that we see in cities across the country and left a lasting legacy of economic disinvestment and pollution-related health problems in Black and brown neighborhoods.

Given this history, cities everywhere are getting excited about the idea of reversing the harms of highways by turning them into boulevards and reclaiming extra land for other uses. Milwaukee, Wisconsin is one of them. In fact, the City of Milwaukee is far ahead of the curve: it became one of the first cities in the United States to remove a highway with the demolition of the Park East freeway in 2003.

More than twenty years later, in 2024, there are two more highway segments in Milwaukee being discussed for removal: WI-175 and I-794 (Figure 1.1). These two proposed highway removal projects have major differences. Removal of I-794 would reconnect Downtown and the Historic Third Ward, two largely commercial areas on the east side of Milwaukee. Removal of WI-175, on the other hand, would reconnect segregated residential neighborhoods in the western part of the city.

Figure 1.1: Locations of the three case studies in Milwaukee. (Basemap by GISGeography, *Milwaukee Road Map,* November 26, 2023, https://gisgeography.com/milwaukee-map-wisconsin/#RoadMap).

These projects raise a fundamental question: can redesigning a road make a neighborhood better for everyone? Ultimately, offering a recommendation about whether or not these freeways should be revisioned is beyond the scope of this project. Instead, this thesis explores the complexities, risks, and opportunities associated with highway removal in Milwaukee. The potential for reclaimed freeway space is immense. Removal could be a major catalyst spurring cities to move away from car-centric city planning towards more climate-friendly modes of transit and living. But one of the key takeaways of this research is that removal is no silver bullet—not from a sustainability and climate resilience standpoint and certainly not from an equity standpoint. Without careful attention to these issues, it is likely that highway

removals will replicate the same problems that their highway predecessors caused. This may be especially true in a city like Milwaukee, which tops the list for many indicators of racial inequality and is one of the most segregated cities in the country. If city leadership is serious about addressing these disparities, racial and environmental justice must be prioritized at every step of any major project—highway removal included (Teron 2022; Archer 2020). Through a rigorous literature review, exploration of government documents, and in-depth interviews with nearly two dozen stakeholders, this thesis looks closely at what it will require for highway removal to be a tool for making Milwaukee a more equitable, sustainable, and climate resilient city. The research culminates in a set of six recommendations, explored in more depth in the case study chapters:

1. Continue and expand engagement, moving towards community control.
2. Be accountable to the community.
3. Meaningfully collaborate across government bodies and maintain consistent commitments.
4. Get ahead of gentrification.
5. Ensure expanded (not reduced) access to key goods and services.
6. Strategically leverage "free" land for the public good.

The narratives that follow hit close to home for me—I grew up in a suburb just north of Milwaukee—but the lessons learned can be applied far beyond Southeastern Wisconsin, in any city where there are people who want to use freeway removal to advance public good outcomes. There is far more that needs dismantling in cities than just a few on- and off-ramps. But if planners and leaders can truly listen to their residents, particularly those who have been left out of decision-making processes over and over again, highway removal can offer something unique and powerful: a fresh plot of land in which to sow the seeds of change.

1.1 Methods

The story of highway removal in Milwaukee is complex and ongoing. I took a journalistic approach to untangling the threads—undertaking an extensive literature review, speaking with a wide variety of stakeholders, and gathering information from government documents and news sources in order to craft a narrative. I chose this approach because I wanted to understand the removal proposals and projects from multiple perspectives, through people intimately involved in the projects at the government

level as well as leaders from communities that were likely to be impacted by highway removal. Community leaders may not be privy to as many of the details of the projects but have unique knowledge through their lived experience. Because I was not sure where the research would take me, I drew from ethnographic methods, which ask researchers to come to a study with a set of questions, not hypotheses, and allow for "research plans to shift as they encounter the vicissitudes of the fieldwork environment" (Gusterson 2008, 94). I was also inspired by the work of feminist geographers like Gillian Rose and Donna Haraway, who leaned into the messy, contradictory, uncertain knowledges that result from social science research (Rose 1997; Haraway 1988) . As Haraway put it, navigating such a research project centers on "interpretation, translation, stuttering, and the partly understood" (Haraway 1988, 589). In undertaking this research, I followed the leads provided to me by interviewees, but I also came to the project with my own set of curiosities and interests around the climate resilience and equity implications of highway removal which shaped the questions I asked. Moreover, my positionality as a white woman from a wealthy Milwaukee suburb undoubtedly had an effect on the research.

Through the literature review and case studies, I strove to answer the following overarching question: **How could highway removal be used as a tool to make Milwaukee a more equitable, sustainable, and climate resilient city?**

In addition to the overarching question, sub-questions included the following:

- What became of the highway visions of the mid-20th century in Milwaukee? What is the legacy of Milwaukee's freeway system?
- Who are the stakeholders in freeway removal projects and proposals (Park East, I-794, and WI-175) in Milwaukee and what are their goals and visions for the freeway corridors? How are they pursuing freeway removal?
- How are community members engaging with freeway removal projects and proposals in Milwaukee? What are the barriers to engagement?
- What are the equity implications of highway removal projects in Milwaukee?

- How do highways and highway removal projects interact with climate impacts in Milwaukee? How do they interact with Milwaukee's sustainability goals?

The literature review laid the groundwork for answering these questions. It provides a history of highways both in the United States broadly and more specifically in Milwaukee. It then explores how highway removal has proceeded around the world and makes connections between highway removal projects and climate resilience. Finally, it takes a deep dive into the literature published on the removal of Milwaukee's own Park East. The literature review helped to shape the questions asked in the interview portion of this project. Relevant literature was collected using Google Scholar and JumboSearch using search terms such as "highway removal", "freeway removal", "expressway removal", "highway deconstruction", "Park East highway removal", "Milwaukee freeways", and "Milwaukee highways." I focused on literature that looked at highway removal holistically or through the lens of equity, justice, and/or climate resilience and sustainability.

Following the literature review, I closely explored the case studies of Park East, I-794 and WI-175 primarily through interviews with current and former government staff as well as highway removal movement leaders and other stakeholders. I chose these cases for both personal and practical reasons. I am from Shorewood, Wisconsin, the first suburb on the north side of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I wanted to learn more about the area I grew up in and how urban planning decisions shaped the region into the segregated, inequitable place it is today—a city that has been called "one of the worst places in the country for African Americans to reside" (Downs 2015, para. 2). I also was intrigued by Milwaukee's role as one of the first cities to remove a highway, particularly once I learned that there were two active highway removal proposals within the city's borders in the fall of 2023 when I began this research. More interesting still was the reality that these two proposals discussed highways in starkly different environments—I-794 runs through Downtown and is surrounded by luxury high rises and office buildings in a commercial district, while WI-175 divides segregated residential areas on the near west side of the city. I chose to study these two proposals, I-794 and WI-175, as well as the historic Park East removal to add context.

Interviewees for each case study were initially selected because they were referenced in reporting or government documents about the highway removals. I was particularly interested in people in government or other leadership roles in the impacted communities. Additional interviewees were selected via the snowball method. In addition to the interviews, I drew from plans and documents published by stakeholders as well as some local reporting on the three case studies. Interviewees were contacted via email or LinkedIn and interviews were conducted remotely via the platform Zoom and were semi-structured, featuring a number of open-ended questions. Questions varied depending on what type of stakeholder was being interviewed (i.e. government, nonprofit), but they generally touched on the interviewee's knowledge and involvement with highway removal projects/proposals, the role of community engagement in said projects/proposals, and connections between freeway removal and equity, climate resilience, and sustainability. The interview portion of this research was approved by the Tufts Social, Behavioral & Educational Research Institutional Review Board, and participants gave permission to be identified and quoted by name in the research. In total, I conducted 21 interviews as outlined in Table 1.1 below:

Name	**Title**	**Organization/Agency**	**Role**
David Boucher	Owner / Board Member	Amaranth Bakery / Washington Park Neighborhood Improvement District	Community leader
Lamont Davis	Executive Director / Board Member	Milwaukee Community Land Trust / Washington Park Neighborhood Improvement District	Community leader
Pam Fendt	(Former) Executive Director	Good Jobs and Livable Neighborhoods Coalitions	Community leader
Deja Garner	Community Programs Manager	Groundwork Milwaukee	Community leader and climate resilience professional
Carl Glasemeyer	Transportation Policy Director	1000 Friends of Wisconsin / Rethink794	Community leader
Evan Goyke	State Representative for the 18th Assembly	Wisconsin State Assembly	Government representative

	District		
Dennis Grzezinksi	Civil and Environmental Lawyer	Law Office of Dennis M Grzezinski	Community leader
Marcos Guevara	Vice President, Strategy & Operations for Community Engagement	Urban Ecology Center	Community leader and climate resilience professional
Sam Leichtling	City Planning Director	City of Milwaukee	Government employee
Lauren Mayer	Communications Manager	Congress for New Urbanism	Employee of national nonprofit focused on highway removal
Kevin Muhs	City Engineer	City of Milwaukee	Government employee
Melissa Muller	President	Washington Park Neighbors	Community leader
Michael Murphy	(Former) District 10 Alderman	Milwaukee Common Council	Government representative
David Nguyen	Project Manager	WisDOT	Government employee
Peter Park	(Former) City Planning Director	City of Milwaukee	Government employee
Jim Plaisted	Executive Director	Historic Third Ward Association	Community leader
Alyssa Remington	Economic Development Specialist	City of Milwaukee	Government employee
Adrian Spencer	Director of Neighborhood Engagement	Rooted and Rising Washington Park	Community leader
Tracy Staedter	Executive Director	Uptown Crossing Business Improvement District	Community leader
Lindsey St. Arnold Bell	Executive Director	Near West Side Partners	Community leader
Greg Walthers	Coalition Member	Rethink794	Community leader

Table 1.1: List of interviewees

Raw data from the interviews was organized by case study and topic, with data on climate resilience and sustainability separated because of the similarity across case studies. Each case study was then woven into a narrative that included background details and context, arguments for and against freeway removal, and an exploration of the equity considerations for that particular removal project. A

separate chapter was written about the climate resilience and sustainability considerations across all three case studies. The three case studies were then analyzed together to pull out overarching recommendations for advancing equity, climate resilience, and sustainability of highway removal projects in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

1.2 Chapter Overview

Chapter 2 of this thesis consists of the literature review, outlining highway history in Milwaukee and the broader United States, providing a portrait of highway removal thus far (including the removal of Milwaukee's own Park East), and exploring the potential for highway removal as a climate resilience intervention. Chapter 3 focuses on the Park East case study, with an emphasis on missed opportunities for equitable development and the use of a community benefits agreement. Chapter 4 focuses on the I-794 case study, the location of which brings economic development questions to the forefront. Chapter 5 outlines the WI-175 case study, which circles questions of equitable access, community engagement, and gentrification. Chapter 6[1] explores the climate resilience and sustainability considerations across all three case studies. Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes the key findings of the research and presents a set of recommendations for more equitable, sustainable, and climate resilient highway removal.

[1] A brief note on Chapter 6: though my academic expertise is in the area of climate resilience and sustainability it was perhaps the hardest thread to weave into this story. I wanted to explore this angle, and I did, but it was not at the forefront of people's minds. I included this exploration because my studies and experience have led me to believe that climate impacts (and the flipside: climate resilience) are an underlying current that should be considered in any large infrastructure decisions, with highway removal as no exception.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 "Freeways Became Moats": A Brief History of Highways in the United States

Though highways have come to be associated with American ideals like freedom and growth, the first roads to resemble freeways were built in Europe—Italy built its first autostrada in the 1920s and Germany developed a system of autobahns in the 1920s and 30s (Khalaj et al. 2020; Dickenson 2015). These early high-speed roads were designed to connect cities rather than routed through them. Not to be outdone by the Europeans, the United States began discussions around a national system of highways in the mid-to-late 1930s (Dickenson 2015). The Federal-Aid Highway Acts of 1938 and 1944 solidified the plans for such a system, with the latter calling for 40,000 miles of Interstate highways, though neither act provided dedicated funding (Dickenson 2015). A federal funding source would not appear until more than 10 years later, when President Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 and the Highway Revenue Act (Dickenson 2015; Kraft-Klehm 2015). This legislation slightly expanded the size of the system it hoped to construct and established the Highway Trust Fund which pulled financing from a gasoline tax and other federal sources (Kraft-Klehm 2015). It also ensured that the federal government would contribute 90% of the funding for construction of interstate highways, while states only had to cover 10% (Kraft-Klehm 2015). This made the construction of highways a much more attractive prospect to local governments everywhere, and between 1950 and 1970 around 22,000 miles of freeways were built in the United States alone (Iskandar 2014).

The intent of early highway construction in the United States was to make it easier to move both goods and people between cities and across state lines—they were not originally planned to go through city centers (Dickenson 2015). The buildout was in part motivated by national defense and the need for a means of rapid evacuation if cities became targets of foreign attack (Archer 2020; Dickenson 2015). However, once funding became readily available, urban planners began to see freeways as "an effective and permanent answer to all manner of transportation woes," particularly the build up of traffic brought about by the increasing numbers of personal automobiles on the road (Khalaj et al. 2020, 558). Highways were high speed and high volume and many were grade separated, which meant fewer interactions

between pedestrians and vehicles (Khalaj et al. 2020). Though freeways are by design "limited access," at the time they were heralded as providing people with an easy and efficient way to get to where they needed to go (Khalaj et al. 2020).

Mobility, however, was not the only goal of freeway construction. Planners in the mid-20th century saw a second reason to route highways through the city: the clearance of what they called "slum" or "blighted" neighborhoods (Kraft-Klehm 2015; Archer 2020; Stehlin 2023; Dickenson 2015). These neighborhoods were overwhelmingly home to Black and brown residents (Patterson and Harley 2019). Many were low-income communities, but others were thriving middle class business districts. As Archer poignantly describes, "highways tore through once-vibrant communities, ripping the social fabric and inflicting psychological wounds on those who were forced to leave their homes and those who were left behind" (Archer 2020, 1267). Black-owned businesses and centers of culture were bulldozed, degrading social capital. Decisions about freeway routes were made with "little to no citizen oversight" and planners often chose communities that had minimal power to fight back (Patterson and Harley 2019, 1). In many instances entire neighborhoods were destroyed and displaced residents were not offered assistance with relocation (Archer 2020). This strained the already limited housing that was available to Black residents, leading to overcrowding and substandard living conditions (Archer 2020). In other cases freeways were erected as permanent barriers between white and Black neighborhoods, concretizing the legacy of pre-Civil Rights era segregation (Patterson and Harley 2019; Archer 2020). A Charlotte-based historian, Tom Hanchett, said it best: "freeways became moats" (Fulwood 2016, para. 17). By 1977, more than 470,000 households had been displaced by freeway construction (Stehlin 2023).

Highways also facilitated "white flight" to the suburbs, in particular in northern cities that saw an influx of Black residents from the South in the years after World War II, by making it easier for suburbanites to get to jobs in urban centers (Patterson and Harley 2019). Meanwhile, difficulty obtaining loans, racial covenants—clauses in home deeds which prohibited the sale of the homes to people of certain races—and exclusionary zoning kept people of color from taking advantage of new suburban communities (Patterson and Harley 2019). This further reinforced segregation and made it difficult for

Black and brown urban residents, who were less likely to own cars, to access economic opportunities, as many jobs moved to the suburbs as well (Archer 2020). In short, freeways became infrastructures of white supremacy.

In part because of their devastating impacts on communities across the United States, resistance to freeways grew in the 1960s and 70s. Vehicle congestion was not being reduced in the ways people had hoped, and there was more air and noise pollution than ever (Khalaj et al. 2020). The vitality of urban cores, too, suffered as city populations sprawled out into the suburbs (Khalaj et al. 2020). People who had been displaced or whose neighborhoods were in the routes of planned freeways began to push back, arguing that the negative effects of freeways outweighed their benefits (Cervero, Kang, and Shively 2009). Even at the time, residents were able to see the racialized planning of freeway corridors. Maryland politician Sammie Abbott famously campaigned against highways using the slogan “no white men's roads through Black men's bedrooms” (Feavor 1978). These and other concerns led to a grassroots movement known today as the Freeway Revolts, beginning in San Francisco, that had success in stopping the construction of additional highways in many cities by getting high level officials to retract their support for the freeways (Khalaj et al. 2020; Mohl 2014; Napolitan and Zegras 2008). Coalitions, consisting of local organizations and neighborhood groups, residents, environmental activists, and historic preservationists, formed across class and racial lines to fight freeway—although the protests often saw more success in blocking construction when the communities slated for demolition were home to white and/or wealthier residents (Stehlin 2023). New legislation, in particular the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, allowed the freeway protesters to take their fight to the courtroom where they often won (Snyder 2016). Other legal protections resulting from the Freeway Revolts included the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962, which required a de-siloing of highway planning from more general urban planning, and the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1968, which guarded certain areas of the cities, including parks and historic sites, from freeway construction and required relocation assistance for displaced residents (Kraft-Klehm 2015).

Despite the hard work of the freeway fighters, the 1970s did not bring about the end of the road for highway construction. Though entirely new highways are rare today, federal and state governments continue to expand freeways in the name of reduced congestion and increased mobility (Stehlin 2023). Many freeways now are reaching the end of their life spans, requiring extensive repairs or rebuilds. It is estimated that the highway system in the United States costs $105 billion a year to maintain and between 2007 and 2019 spending on highways exceeded 60% of all transportation spending across the local, state, and federal levels (Steiner 2019; Stehlin 2023). This begs the question: is there a better way to spend taxpayer money? As individual cities explore their own unique highway histories, many are beginning to ponder the future of their transportation systems.

2.2 Milwaukee's Highway History

Milwaukee's highway planning and construction followed a similar pattern to many other United States cities outlined in the previous section. Planning for the system began in the 1940s and carried through to the 1970s (J. Casey 1995). During that time period, Milwaukee also experienced immense demographic change from a city that was largely white and middle class to a much more diverse community (Connell 2017). The Black population grew from a mere 1.6% in 1945 to nearly 40% today (Iskandar 2014; Connell 2017). The large influx of Black residents came from the American South and when they arrived in Milwaukee they did not find a welcoming environment. Historian Tula Connell writes that "migrants faced a combination of racial discrimination and class-based bias built on perceptions that all Black migrants were lower skilled, low-income workers who did not fit into the city's 'culture,' a euphemism frequently employed to reference 'class'" (Connell 2017, 27). Barriers to housing and employment, which Milwaukee's existing Black residents had long endured, intensified. Many of the largest employers in Milwaukee did not hire Black workers, with nearly 25% of businesses rejecting applicants on the basis of race as late as 1952 (Connell 2017). And as the city diversified, many Milwaukee suburbs adopted racist laws, zoning practices, and restrictive covenants to keep Black residents out (Connell 2017). Some were even "sundown towns," where it was illegal for Black people to be seen after 10pm (Connell 2017). These and other factors led to stark segregation, crowding, and poor

housing conditions as 55% of the Black population resided in less than 2% of census tracts in 1950 and Black residents occupied the city's supply of substandard housing at disproportionate rates (Connell 2017).

Restricted both economically and legally, many Black migrants sought a home in the community-oriented neighborhood known as Bronzeville, a seventy-five block area on the near north side of downtown Milwaukee (Connell 2017). The population of Bronzeville was largely Black, with a smattering of German, Jewish, and Eastern European immigrants (Connell 2017). Along one of the main corridors of Bronzeville, Walnut Street (Figure 2.1), were at least 210 Black-owned establishments including jazz and blues music venues, hotels, and other small businesses (Connell 2017). A strong self-employed middle class was the lifeblood of Bronzeville's neighborhood culture. One survey in 1957 found that Milwaukee had the most Black-owned businesses per capita of any large city in the United States (Connell 2017). Scholar Bernard Apeku called it "a self-sustaining community with mutual support networks and collective ethos" (Apeku 2022, 9). In many ways, despite the plethora of challenges that faced the Black population in Milwaukee and the neighborhood's racially-charged reputation of being home to "brothels, liquor joints, and gambling dens," Bronzeville was thriving (Jones 2009, 19).

Figure 2.1: Bronzeville at 12th and Walnut in 1958. (Photograph by unknown photographer, *Businesses on 12th and Walnut,* 1958, Milwaukee Public Library, https://content.mpl.org/digital/collection/HstoricPho/id/7618).

Just as Bronzeville's population grew, however, Milwaukee began the process of implementing a freeway system, taking advantage of newly available federal funding for freeways (Casey 1995). The first proposals for urban freeways resulted from the 1946 Origin-Destination Study (Figure 2.2), which looked at the routes people traveled by car and identified locations that had the most traffic congestion (Dickenson 2015). This early ideation was under the City of Milwaukee's purview, but responsibility was handed over to the Milwaukee County Expressway Commission in 1953, a body which placed more emphasis on the needs of suburban commuters (Dickenson 2015). The necessity of freeways was heavily debated. Many residents were concerned about the increasing quantity of cars on the roads, but others feared the number of people that would need to be displaced to build the expressways (Dickenson 2015). Some of Milwaukee's top officials during this period, including Mayors Daniel Hoan and Frank Zeidler, were skeptical and believed public transit should play a larger role in the city's transportation planning than proposed freeways (Dickenson 2015). Still, a 1955 General Plan called for the creation of seven highway routes: the East-West Expressway (now I-94), the North-South Expressway (now I-43), the 44th Street Expressway and Northwest Expressways (portions of these plans became today's Stadium Freeway), the North Avenue Expressway (proposed to loop around the downtown, never constructed), the Howard Avenue Expressway (moved south to become the Airport Freeway), and the West Expressway (now the Zoo Freeway) (Dickenson 2015; Casey 1995). In 1963 an additional freeway was proposed along the lakefront which included a bridge over the harbor, a section of highway that became shortened as the Lake Freeway and which today meets I-794 at the Daniel Hoan Memorial Bridge (Dickenson 2015). The Lake Freeway was the final freeway built in the City of Milwaukee and it opened in 1999 (Snyder 2016).

Figure 2.2: One of Milwaukee's first expressway maps from 1946. (Map by the State Highway Commission as part of the Origin-Destination Traffic Survey, *Recommended Expressway System,* 1946, Wisconsin Highways, https://wisconsinhighways.org/milwaukee/index.html).

As was true in many cities, consultants on freeway plans touted their ability to kill two birds with one stone: lessen congestion and facilitate urban renewal through slum clearance (Dickenson 2015). National defense was also cited by several officials as a reason to move forward on freeways, calling it "planned decentralization" that would make it easier to evacuate in the event of an atomic bomb threat (Dickenson 2015, 76). As funding rolled in and construction began on planned routes, expansion happened fast. In the 1960s Milwaukee built nearly 10 miles of freeways each year (Snyder 2016). Over the course of little more than ten years the construction of the system changed the landscape of Milwaukee and displaced more than 20,000 people (Snyder 2016). More than half the residents of the homes demolished at the height of highway construction were Black despite their small share of the overall population at that time (Connell 2017). One neighborhood in particular saw perhaps the most

destruction: Bronzeville. The North-South freeway, now known as Interstate 43, was originally routed along 16th Street but faced opposition. It was ultimately moved to 7th Street and 8th Street where it would also, as a member of then-Mayor Zeidler's team put it, "demolish a significant quantity of slum housing" (Dickenson 2015; Apeku 2022, 9). The new plan meant that I-43 tore through the heart of Bronzeville, wiping out whatever was in its path including Black-owned businesses and places of worship and some of the only housing that was economically and socially available to Black residents (Snyder 2016; Dickenson 2015; Apeku 2022; Connell 2017). The oldest Black church in Milwaukee, St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in 1869, was among the buildings cleared for construction (Alexander, n.d.; Dickenson 2015). The residents of Bronzeville and other impacted neighborhoods got very little notice before they were displaced, which reduced their capacity to push back, and little to no support in finding new homes (Apeku 2022; Dickenson 2015).

In part because of the displacement the highways caused, opinion on them began to sour in the mid 1960s and 70s. Milwaukee saw a version of the Freeway Revolts as political and legal pushback picked up steam, particularly in opposition to the downtown loop and the Lake Freeway (Dickenson 2015; Iskandar 2014). Down the road in Madison, several state legislators came out against the growing freeway system, including John Norquist who would later become the mayor of Milwaukee (Dickenson 2015). The growing discontent prompted action: in 1971, Milwaukee's then-Mayor Henry Maier, County Executive John Doyne, and Wisconsin Governor Patrick Lucey jointly declared a moratorium on freeway construction in Milwaukee County (Casey 1995). However, the anti-freeway movement faced a setback in 1974 when a City of Milwaukee referendum approved construction of five freeway sections that remained on the planning books (Casey 1995). Of these five, only the Airport Spur saw daylight while the rest, including Park West, were eventually scrapped in the late 70s and 80s (Casey 1995). For some of these planned freeways land had already been cleared, meaning that people had been displaced for freeways which never materialized (Casey 1995). Meanwhile, Norquist and others continued to campaign against further expansion of the freeways and ultimately were some of the first leaders in the country to bring up the idea of reversing the damage through freeway removal.

At the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st, deindustrialization across the United States led to a shrinking population in Milwaukee while job-growth was largely confined to the whiter, wealthier suburbs (Zupan 2011). Today, statistics suggest that Milwaukee is "one of the worst places in the country for African Americans to reside" as Kenya Downs wrote in a piece for NPR titled, "Why is Milwaukee So Bad for Black People?" (2015, para. 2). Milwaukee is consistently ranked as one of the most segregated cities in the country and has one of the highest gaps in income between white and African American residents (Connell 2017). Rates of Black poverty and incarceration are high and the gap in high school attainment between white and Black students is almost twice the national average (Connell 2017). As we now know, these statistics did not appear in a vacuum. "Construction of the interstate highway system played a key role in creating the spatial and economic conditions prevalent in urban centers today," Archer writes, "conditions that influence interracial interactions, economic mobility, and community stability" (Archer 2020, 1264). In Milwaukee, highway infrastructure exacerbated the struggles faced by Black residents and undermined neighborhoods, like Bronzeville, where the Black middle class was flourishing. The freeway buildout, along with a long history of racial discrimination particularly in the realms of housing and employment, set Milwaukee on a path to become what it is today: "a profoundly unequal city" (Zupan 2011, 1048). Milwaukee will have to grapple with the reality of this inequality as it evaluates the possibility of deconstructing some of its freeway system in coming years.

2.3 Breaking Ground: the Advent of Highway Removal

Out of the Freeway Revolts and a growing recognition of freeway construction's legacy of racism and displacement in cities like Milwaukee, a movement calling for the removal of freeways from urban centers was born. It is still in its infancy: as of 2020, only 50km of freeways had been torn down in the United States and only 30km in other countries (Khalaj et al. 2020). But this small dent in the freeway system has led to a larger change in perspective. Transportation planners, scholars, and even the public have begun to see urban highways as relics of the past that continue to haunt current residents with a heavy fog of vehicle pollution and a dearth of non-vehicle transit options (Khalaj et al. 2020). During the

decades since their construction, it has become increasingly clear to many that the downsides of highways outweigh the shorter commute times they may or may not provide (Khalaj et al. 2020). Research has actually shown that wider, faster roads lead to more people driving and don't necessarily reduce overall travel time (Khalaj et al. 2020). Moreover, residents who live along freeway corridors experience severe health impacts including asthma and other respiratory issues, cardiovascular problems, and "impacts on fertility and birth outcomes" (Patterson and Harley 2019, 4073).

Portland, Oregon was the first city in the United States to remove a freeway (Napolitan and Zegras 2008). In 1974 they replaced the Harbor Drive freeway with a park along the Willamette River (Mohl 2012). A handful of cities have since joined in on the trend including San Francisco, Oakland, Rochester, New York City, and Milwaukee itself (Napolitan and Zegras 2008; Khalaj et al. 2020). International examples include removals in Seoul, Madrid, and Toronto (Cervero 2006; Napolitan and Zegras 2008). Reasons cited for removal are diverse and evolving (see Table 2.1), but highway removal's recent increase in popularity can be at least partly attributed to rising maintenance costs (Napolitan and Zegras 2008; Khalaj et al. 2020). Many of the highways originally built in the 1950s and 60s are deteriorating, in some cases to the point of being unsafe. They now require large additional injections of funds to keep them in use, funds that cities and states are reluctant to invest (Napolitan and Zegras 2008; Khalaj et al. 2020).

Reason for Removing Highways	**Description**	**Mentions in the Literature**
Improving Air Quality and Health	Removing freeways has public health impacts. Proximity to freeways is associated with higher rates of asthma, respiratory and cardiovascular disease, and fertility and birth related problems (Patterson and Harley 2019).	Patterson and Harley 2019; Steiner 2019; Hughes 2022
Existing Infrastructure is Damaged or Aging	Oftentimes, freeway removal is only considered because freeways reach the end of their lifetime or are damaged by natural disasters (Khalaj et al. 2020). In some cases, when drivers were forced to reroute because a damaged freeway was out of commission, city officials realized they didn't need the freeway after all. This was the case for Oakland's Central Freeway and San Francisco's Embarcadero Freeway (Napolitan and Zegras 2008).	Khalaj et al. 2020; Napolitan and Zegras 2008
Anti-Freeway Sentiments	Removal is more likely to be considered when high-level public officials have anti-freeway sentiments or believe that urban	Khalaj et al. 2020; Napolitan and Zegras

	freeways have more downsides than benefits (Khalaj et al. 2020; Napolitan and Zegras 2008). These public officials may weigh the importance of aesthetics, other forms of mobility, and sustainability over more efficient car travel (Cervero 2006). This was the case in Milwaukee, where then Mayor John Norquist famously said, "the Park East Freeway creates congestion by encouraging people to travel further and further between increasingly insignificant places" (Cervero 2006, 2). Anti-freeway sentiments from the public or community groups also contribute to lifting up removal as a real option.	2008; Cervero 2006; Cervero, Kang, and Shively 2009; Mohl 2012
Economic Redevelopment	The desire for economic redevelopment has been a major consideration in many removal projects. By design, freeway removal involves the creation of newly-developable land (Cervero 2006; Mohl 2012). Advocates, including business leaders and developers, often cite the value of this land and the jobs that redevelopment may provide in their campaigns for removal, as was the case in Rochester, NY (Steiner 2019). Moreover, because living near a highway is viewed as a "disamenity," removing the freeway often boosts nearby property values whether or not that was an intended purpose of a removal (Cervero, Kang, and Shively 2009).	Cervero 2006; Cervero, Kang, and Shively 2009; Mohl 2012; Kraft-Klehm 2015; Steiner 2019; Stehlin 2023
Equity, Justice, and Reparations	Increasingly, highway removal is seen as a way to repair the damage of freeway construction, particularly in neighborhoods where the impacted population was overwhelmingly people of color (Steiner 2019). It is also seen as a way to increase mobility between communities, thus reducing segregation (Steiner 2019; Iskander 2014). It is yet unclear whether highway removal will deliver on these goals, and even today few people "view highway redevelopment as an opportunity to affirmatively advance racial justice" (Archer 2020, 1300).	Steiner 2019; Hughes 2022; Stehlin 2023; Iskander 2014; Archer 2020
Financial Concerns	Particularly in the United States, the large cost of maintaining highways and rebuilding them when they reach the end of their life has elevated the idea of removal (Khalaj et al. 2020).	Khalaj et al. 2020; Stehlin 2023
Increasing Mobility and Access	Though it might seem counterintuitive, some advocates view highway removal as a way to increase mobility and access in cities. They see removal as a push for less car-centric cities with better transit and improved conditions for cyclists and pedestrians (Mohl 2012).	Mohl 2012; Steiner 2019
Placemaking and Restoring Urban Vitality	Freeway removal is seen as a way to make cities more beautiful, livable, and human-scale (Khalaj et al. 2020; Epting 2017). An excellent example of this took place in Seoul, with a project known as Cheonggyecheon which turned a freeway into a linear park with a stream running through (Cervero 2006). The mayor at the time, Lee Mung-bak, explained the need for the change by saying "we want to make a city where people come first, not cars" (Cervero 2006, 1).	Khalaj et al. 2020; Epting 2017; Cervero 2006; Steiner 2019
Improving Safety	Streets nearby to freeways often see dangerous driving by cars getting on or off the highway (Hughes 2022). This may be especially true in low-income neighborhoods, where pedestrians are more likely to be killed by drivers (Hughes 2022).	Hughes 2022

Table 2.1: Reasons for Removing Highways

Even more recently, environmental and racial justice motivations have spurred interest in removal as a possibility (Boccon-Gibod 2023). Though not explicitly referred to as reparations, highway removal projects in some instances are working to rectify the physical and social damage suffered by communities of color, in particular Black communities, that were targeted for highway construction (Archer 2020; Steiner 2019). Projects motivated by racial equity also recognize that highways typically provide the least amount of benefits to people of color and low income people, who are much less likely to own cars (Hughes 2022). These objectives have inspired federal funding through the Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Grant Program which provides grants to projects that attempt to redress some of the harms of highway creation by "removing, retrofitting, or mitigating highways or other transportation facilities that create barriers to community connectivity, including to mobility, access, or economic development" ("Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Grant Program," n.d., para. 2). Even still, scholars like Deborah Archer caution against seeing highway removal as a panacea for systemic racism in urban environments. Archer emphasizes that "simply removing the highways" is not enough and that there is a risk that removal projects "will repeat the sins of the past at the expense of communities of color" (Archer 2020, 1260, 1301).

Counter-campaigns against highway removal projects, for their part, have highlighted the potential issues that reimagining freeways can bring about. Concerns about the impacts of highway removal projects explored by the literature are mainly related to three areas: traffic, safety, and gentrification. Traffic is perhaps the most-often cited worry. Opponents to removal point out that replacements like boulevards do not have the same capacity as freeways and thus, they hypothesize, will result in increased congestion, longer commutes, and more trucks and other commercial vehicles on local roads (Khalaj et al. 2020; Cervero 2006). A counterpoint to traffic concerns is that there has yet to be a highway removal project that resulted in the catastrophic congestion opponents feared (Cervero, Kang, and Shively 2009; Cervero 2006). In fact, while highway expansion often leads to induced demand, whereby more users drive on expanded roads, highway removal seems to result in reduced demand or "evaporated traffic" as people who previously drove choose other routes and/or modes of transit (Cervero

2006; Mohl 2012; Hughes 2022). Highway removal opponents, not unlike highway removal advocates, also raise concerns over safety. From their point of view, freeways protect pedestrians and cyclists by separating high speed vehicles (Cervero 2006). When the freeway comes down, they worry that the increased number of cars on the road will lead to more points of conflict between users and potentially more danger (Cervero 2006).

The contingent of community members with concerns over gentrification have data to back up this darker side of economic revitalization. Studies have shown post-freeway removal gentrification manifests in many ways including increases in property values, median rent, median household income, percentage of college education residents, and the percentage of white residents (Patterson and Harley 2019; Boccon-Gibod 2023; Cervero, Kang, and Shively 2009). These increases are paired with decreases in the percentage of Black residents, the percentage of residents living in poverty, and the percentage of renter-occupied units (Patterson and Harley 2019; Boccon-Gibod 2023; Cervero, Kang, and Shively 2009). This effect may be amplified if highways are replaced with other amenities, such as green space or higher end commercial development (Stehlin 2023; Steiner 2019). In addition to pointing to data from existing highway removal projects, concerned individuals cite other examples of "green gentrification" such as the development of the High Line in New York City (Hughes 2022). In response to this concern, scholars emphasize the importance of bundling highway removal with anti-displacement measures, reducing parking minimums, and the production and preservation of affordable housing (Patterson and Harley 2019; Cervero, Kang, and Shively 2009; Stehlin 2023; Hughes 2022).

It is important to note, too, that even if these concerns are sidestepped, highway removal does not automatically result in a radical transformation of the urban environment. The reality is, as Stehlin notes, highway removal campaigns thus far have largely remained "compatible with overall highway system persistence or even expansion" (Stehlin 2023, 11). Moreover, replacements can be nearly as car-centric as the original highway infrastructure. In the United States, the most common replacement is a surface boulevard that, even if it does dedicate some space for public transit, cycling, and walking, still prioritizes vehicular traffic (Khalaj et al. 2020). And while there are many potential uses for additional reclaimed

land, including parks or green space and affordable housing, sale of parcels to commercial and real estate developers has been a common approach (Napolitan and Zegras 2008; Khalaj et al. 2020).

Scholarship on highway removal has also explored what makes a highway removal campaign successful and what barriers beyond citizen concerns can get in the way of removal. Different papers have come up with their own lists of "ingredients" for success. One commonly shared trait by a number of articles is what Khalaj et al. call "power structure support" (2020). In sum, people with decision-making power must get behind removal as their preferred option and must "value other benefits more than they value the benefits associated with freeway infrastructure" (Napolitan and Zegras 2008, 68). Other scholars emphasize the importance of a coalition of supporters across multiple sectors, perhaps with the most important being the business sector (Steiner 2019; Snyder 2016). Additionally, successful campaigns also seem to crop up around a window of opportunity (i.e. a need for repairs)—a reason that the highway itself or removal as an alternative gains attention within the community (Napolitan and Zegras 2008; Steiner 2019; Snyder 2016). Efforts by officials to mitigate any costs associated with removal—whether those be financial costs, costs to mobility, or other negatively perceived community impacts—can also contribute to campaign success (Steiner 2019; Snyder 2016; Kraft-Klehm 2015).

On the other hand, barriers to implementing freeway removal include the need for cross-jurisdiction collaboration and the persistence of an "entrenched pro-freeway" stance from politicians and high-level officials (Napolitan and Zegras 2008; Kraft-Klehm 2015, 228). In many cases, freeway removal needs the support of city, county, state, and even federal bodies which can be difficult in cities where local politics differ significantly from state politics. Moreover, there is inertia around the freeway system. Freeway removal is a change and therefore "rebuild in kind" alternatives can be the path of least resistance when it comes to freeway projects (Kraft-Klehm 2015). This seems to be especially true for high-traffic freeway segments. Indeed, the highway removal projects we have seen thus far have hardly impacted the overall capacity of the local or regional highway system and some have even been negotiated in return for expansions or additions elsewhere (Mohl 2012; Stehlin 2023). As Mohl puts it,

"realistically, no one expects that main-line expressways that carry heavy auto and truck traffic through metropolitan areas will get torn down" (Mohl 2012, 97).

Despite these barriers, the movement for highway removal has gained momentum and so too has the federal funding available. Predating the Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Grant Program, which emerged as part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in 2021, was the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) program (Kraft-Klehm 2015). The program ran from 2009 to 2018 when the Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) program replaced it, and it partially funded at least four highway removal projects, including one in Rochester, NY (Kraft-Klehm 2015). Today, in addition to the $1 billion allocated to the Reconnecting Communities program, cities looking to take down highways can seek funds through the $3.4 billion Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant Program created by the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (Stehlin 2023). None of these programs exclusively fund removal projects, but the expansion of funding at the federal level does make it much more feasible to begin a campaign.

2.4 Removal of Milwaukee's Own Park East

Alongside cities like New York and San Francisco, Milwaukee was an early arrival to the highway removal scene and a fair amount of academic literature has been dedicated to its removal project. In 2002 Milwaukee began the removal of the Park East Freeway, an elevated, four-lane section of road a little under a mile long that was built between 1969 and 1971 (Napolitan and Zegras 2008). At roughly thirty years old, the freeway was by no means at the end of its life span. In fact, it had been resurfaced just a few years before its removal (Snyder 2016). Still, it was an underutilized, aging, highway "stub" that was built as part of the downtown loop mapped out in early freeway plans but never completed (Snyder 2016). Surrounding land use consisted largely of former industrial parcels and parking lots (Napolitan and Zegras 2008; Kraft-Klehm 2015). The road carried just over 50,000 vehicles per day, many fewer than had initially been expected (Napolitan and Zegras 2008). Where the Park East terminated, homes had been cleared for the planned Park West freeway that was never built (Snyder 2016).

This was the state of the Park East when John Norquist came into the mayoral office in 1988 (Napolitan and Zegras 2008; Snyder 2016). He began to explore the idea of removing highways shortly thereafter, looking at both I-794 and Park East as potential targets (Kraft-Klehm 2015). Norquist had never been a fan of freeways, as he was one of the state legislators pushing back against freeway construction in the 1970s (Kraft-Klehm 2015). He saw the two freeways as unnecessary barriers to a thriving urban environment. From his perspective, they occupied large swaths of valuable land that could otherwise be developed and contribute property taxes to the city (Iskandar 2014). Between the two, Park East was an easier sell than I-794, as I-794 was connected to the newly built Lake Freeway that serviced the Bay View neighborhood of Milwaukee and suburbs south of the city (Kraft-Klehm 2015). Still, some residents raised concerns over potential congestion that would increase commute times. Momentum for the removal of Park East seemed to catch hold in 1998 with the release of the Downtown Master Plan (Napolitan and Zegras 2008). The Master Plan, which was the result of a lengthy public process, included the removal of Park East as "a 'catalytic element' for downtown revitalization" (Napolitan and Zegras 2008, 71). Following the release of the plan, the removal campaign landed another major success when the motorcycle company Harley Davidson signaled in 1999 that they would be interested in building a museum on land cast in shadow by Park East if the freeway was removed (Snyder 2016). The support from Harley convinced key officials, including then-Governor Tommy Thompson, to get on board (Kraft-Klehm 2015; Snyder 2016). Norquist gained more support still by touting the financial reasons for removing the highway, as it would cost far less to remove the highway than rebuild it and new development would spur economic activity in the area (Khalaj et al. 2020).

Before any bulldozers could roll in, however, came a push from anti-removal advocate George Watts who owned multiple downtown businesses (Snyder 2016). He ran against Norquist in the 2000 mayoral election, campaigning mainly on the issue of Park East (Napolitan and Zegras 2008; Snyder 2016). Instead of taking Park East down, Watts posited that the city should complete the construction of the long abandoned downtown loop as a way to ease commutes for suburbanites (Napolitan and Zegras 2008). Watts lost the election and the subsequent lawsuit he filed to try to stop the Park East removal was

thrown out by a judge (Napolitan and Zegras 2008). Shortly after the failed attempt by Watts to upend the project, it gained approval of the Milwaukee City Council and the Milwaukee County Board of Commissioners (Kraft-Klehm 2015). Also in 2000, the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) eased community members' concerns about traffic by adjusting their estimated increases in congestion to account for the building of an additional bridge over the Milwaukee River (Snyder 2016). With the support of stakeholders across jurisdictions, Norquist secured funding through an Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) grant that was split among several projects across the State of Wisconsin including the expansion and reconfiguring of the Marquette Interchange, a large freeway interchange west of Downtown (Kraft-Klehm 2015; Snyder 2016). This funding package receives some amount of critique from the literature. The "Park East deal included concessions for expanded automobile infrastructure by way of a rebuilt (and expanded) downtown interchange," writes Snyder, and therefore, as Napolitan and Zegras put it, "the question might be asked whether a true change in the value of mobility occurred" (Snyder 2016, 16; Napolitan and Zegras 2008, 73). Regardless, Park East came down. Demolition began in 2002 and was completed by 2004 (Napolitan and Zegras 2008).

2.5 Highway Removal as a Resilience Intervention

When the Park East was removed, highway removal was just beginning to receive attention for its potential to breathe life into cities once cast in shadow by hulking overpasses. However, even two decades later, the conversation has largely overlooked a crucial angle: the possibility that highway removal could contribute to climate resilience and sustainability. This is a significant missed opportunity. By removing these outdated, impervious concrete structures and replacing them with green infrastructure, affordable housing, community-controlled public space, or other land uses that address community needs and climate impacts, cities can gain resilience benefits all while making neighborhoods more livable and connected.

The concept of resilience, which is central to this discussion, is complex and ever-evolving. In describing the resilience impact of highway removal, this thesis will draw from two definitions. Lerch defines *resilience* as "the ability of a system…to cope with short-term disruptions and adapt to long term

changes without losing its essential character" (2017, 1). Aldrich and Meyer describe *community resilience* as "the collective ability of a neighborhood or geographically defined area to deal with stressors and efficiently resume the rhythms of daily life through cooperation following shocks" (2015, 255). As climate change increases the number of shocks and stressors that cities face, resilience-building has emerged as a priority for cities around the world.

Though resilience has yet to be a publicized goal of a completed highway removal project, a strong case can be made for highway removal as a resilience intervention. This is especially true since highways themselves contribute to climate vulnerability, reducing the capacity of urban systems to respond to climate shocks and adapt to long term climate change. Most pavement used on existing highways is impervious, and more impervious surface cover in an urban setting leads to more runoff, increasing flood risk (Sohn et al. 2020)**.** Additionally, highways exacerbate the urban heat island effect as the pavement surfaces most commonly used on highways absorb solar heat and the vehicles driving on the highways emit heat (Mohajerani, Bakaric, and Jeffrey-Bailey 2017). Urban highways also contribute to more car-centric cities, encouraging additional heat-emitting vehicles to be added to the streetscape and discouraging other modes of transportation such as walking, biking, and public transit. (Kolbe 2019). To add to that, the respiratory and cardiovascular health impacts that residents living near highways experience put them at greater health risk during certain climate shocks, such as extreme heat events (Lin et al. 2009). Subtracting highway infrastructure from the urban environment could consequently increase a city's capacity to deal with climate stressors, transforming a liability into a community asset.

Perhaps the most potent resilience opportunity in highway removal, however, lies in the land made available by the teardown. The possibilities for the use of this land, whether it is owned by city, state, or federal authorities, are extensive. Rarely do governments get access to such "wide swaths of central-city space" for transformation (Mohl 2012, 90). One potential use for this land is green infrastructure, a widely recognized strategy for enhancing climate resilience in the urban context (Meerow and Newell 2016). Green infrastructure can be defined broadly as "an interconnected network of natural areas and other open spaces that conserves natural ecosystem values and functions, sustains clean air and

water, and provides a wide array of benefits to people and wildlife" (Benedict and McMahon 2012, 1). This strategy is research backed. Local governments that installed green infrastructure for stormwater retention on vacant parcels, which like highway removal provide an opportunity for a city to gain land for public use, found that it provided resilience benefits (Newman et al. 2019). Replacing waterfront highways with green infrastructure may be a particularly effective method for reducing flood hazards, in the vein of the Dutch Room for the River Programme which allows river water levels to safely swell into adjacent green spaces ("Room for the River Programme" 2019).

In fact, using liberated highway land for green infrastructure has already demonstrated its ability to mitigate climate impacts. Researchers documented a decrease in the urban heat island effect in Madrid when a surface highway was tunneled and the freed land was transformed into a park (Román, Gómez, and de Luxán 2017). The restoration of the Cheonggyecheon stream in Seoul, South Korea, provides another excellent example. The stream, once covered by an elevated highway, was restored when the highway was removed between 2003 and 2005 (Ryu and Kwon 2016). The project also had the effect of revitalizing the surrounding neighborhood because the land around the stream was dedicated as a public, pedestrian-friendly gathering space (Ryu and Kwon 2016). This new linear park resulted in a reduction in temperatures (Rieh and Chang 2018). In the United States, similar efforts are underway. Highways in Portland, Oregon and Oakland, California were replaced at least in part by park land and other removal projects have implemented green elements (i.e. trees and other landscaping) alongside the boulevards that took the place of former highways ((Mohl 2012; Boccon-Gibod 2023; Patterson and Harley 2019).

Highway removal could also have an impact on another important component of climate resilience: social capital, defined by MacGillivray as "a measure of the strength and density of network relations" (MacGillivray 2018, 116; Aldrich and Meyer 2015; Jun and Song 2023). Social capital has been shown to be critical in disaster situations, when monetary aid and other resources need to be flowing into a community, not only to support the immediate disaster response but also to bolster long term recovery (Aldrich and Meyer 2015). Research demonstrates that people and communities who are isolated fare worse when disaster hits, and that those who are well-connected with high levels of trust and

participation in community events do better (Aldrich and Meyer 2015). Social capital can be built in communities through various methods, including hosting social events and volunteer opportunities and investing in "third spaces" or social infrastructure—"the networks of spaces, facilities, institutions, and groups that create affordances for social connection" (Layton and Latham 2022, 758; Aldrich and Meyer 2015).

As this literature review has discussed, highway construction was used as a tool to dismantle social cohesion and destroy social infrastructure in Black communities (Archer 2020). Building highways "blocked pedestrian movement and cut off social interactions. More than just homes were lost: churches, schools, businesses, and parks were demolished" (Archer 2020, 1295). Residents were left on their own to scatter across the city or find a new one which further broke down social connections and thus damaged community resilience (Archer 2020). Today, highways remain infrastructures of division. Even the moniker "Reconnecting Communities" used by the federal government carries with it the implicit suggestion that highways cause social separation and isolation. They make building social capital difficult as they are most often used by single-occupant vehicles and provide no safe space for social encounters (Prytherch 2022). Highways also support the development of "bedroom communities" of suburban residents who do not live near to where they work (Hartell 2008, 14).

Conversely, pedestrian and public transit infrastructure, which is often implemented after highway removal, has been shown to support the development of social capital (Rashidfarokhi and Danivska 2023; Leyden 2003; Shekhar, Schmidt, and Wehling 2019). Other post-highway alternatives in the form of parks, green space, and waterfront revitalization provide venues for social interaction and community programming (Bentley 2023; Layton and Latham 2022). Social resilience benefits can be further emphasized if communities are meaningfully involved in the creation of these new public spaces. (Bentley 2023). However, reversing the weakening of social resilience that highways brought about will not be easy. Planners will have to go beyond considering how to repair the damage a highway has imparted to the environment and the physical resilience of a city. They must also envision how to reverse the harm it inflicted on a city's "people and its sidewalks, its economy, its institutions of learning and

culture, its diversity, and its social vitality" (Archer 2020). This might require innovative approaches such as donating or selling land at discounted rates to community or cultural land trusts to preserve and/or create new spaces for art and culture (Ross 2020). Once again, the question highway removal asks us is: c*ould we imagine something better?*

As climate change worsens, the potential for the types of physical and social resilience benefits described above may become a tool to bolster calls for removal of highway infrastructure. As mentioned in a previous section, one of the common preconditions for freeway removal outlined by Napolitan and Zegras is "those in power value other benefits more than they value the benefits associated with freeway infrastructure" (Napolitan and Zegras 2008, 68). Here, resilience benefits can be used to the advantage of highway removal advocates, some of whom have already begun to wield this tool. For example, ConnectOakland, which is leading the charge to remove I-980 in Oakland, California, has an express goal to "improve the resiliency of the Bay Area's transportation system" and emphasizes the potential for using the 17 acres of freed-up land to that end (Faulkner et al. 2016, 4). The Congress for the New Urbanism, perhaps the most prominent advocacy organization in the highway removal space, has also made resilience arguments for highway removal as they highlighted the importance of implementing green infrastructure in the call for the teardown of Highway 40 in Baltimore, Maryland (Mayer 2023).

Resilience, however, is not without its pitfalls. Critiques outline how resilience efforts have been undertaken in a haphazard way—overemphasizing protecting built infrastructure without much regard to downstream impacts, the larger picture of community wellbeing, or societal inequities (Meerow, Pajouhesh, and Miller 2019). And simply removing a highway does not guarantee a resilience success. If a highway is replaced entirely with impervious pavement or if removal is negotiated for expansions of highway infrastructure elsewhere, for example, the reductions in flooding and the urban heat island effect will not be realized. Likewise, because of potential gentrifying effects, highway removal projects could become as much agents of displacement as their highway predecessors. A focus on economic development in highway removal may also mean the sale of available parcels to the highest bidders, many of whom may not have resilience or equity in mind with their new developments (Cervero, Kang, and

Shively 2009). Boccon-Gibod captures this duality well: “highway removal projects are unique in their catalytic power to redefine how we plan our cities and who we plan them for. Done well, they can embed sustainability and equity into the built environment. Done poorly, they can reproduce cycles of displace

So what would equitable resilience look like in the context of highway removal? New paradigms of resilience offer an alternative approach which centers local knowledge and the needs of frontline communities. Meerow et al. propose a framework for community resilience work that includes three dimensions of justice: recognitional (“acknowledgement and respect of different groups”), procedural (“equitable participation in decision-making processes”), and distributional (“equitable distribution of goods, services, and amenities”) (Meerow, Pajouhesh, and Miller 2019, 796). In the context of highway removal, recognitional justice could entail investigating the history of the impact of a particular highway on the community and working to repair that harm in the removal process by issuing an apology, inviting impacted community members to participate in post-removal planning, and/or finding a way to include impacted community members in the new use of the space. Procedural justice, the next crucial step, demands a robust and inclusive public engagement process throughout the planning and implementation phases. This can be a difficult feat given that the residents who bear the brunt of climate impacts and inequities may not be able or willing to attend more traditional public meetings (Meerow, Pajouhesh, and Miller 2019). To overcome this, governing bodies for highway removal would need to get creative and work closely with community members and community-based organizations in order to design a truly accessible and meaningful engagement process. Finally, distributional justice, the third pillar, calls for ensuring communities living alongside the highway have access to any newfound amenities and resilience infrastructure that replace the highway. Perhaps the most critical aspect of distributional justice in this context is maintaining housing affordability for current residents post-removal. A range of tools can be employed to realize this objective including affordable housing mandates, renter protections, inclusionary zoning, affordable housing deed restrictions, and/or donating land to a community land trust (Patterson and Harley 2019; Boccon-Gibod 2023; Cervero, Kang, and Shively 2009).

The substantial land freed up by highway removal provides, as Boccon-Gibod put it, a "unique opportunity to create a unified, effective plan" that pairs resilience efforts with anti-displacement measures and development that meets community needs (Boccon-Gibod 2023, 13). If stakeholders involved in highway removal are committed to applying a justice lens to both planning and implementation, it could become a model for transformational climate resilience which prioritizes "actions designed to simultaneously account for multiple inequities and associated compounding and overlapping vulnerabilities," and disrupts the "processes that have continued to generate deep climate vulnerabilities in cities" (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022, 2). In this way, highway removals can become more than simple road redesign projects, setting the standard for cities looking to seize every opportunity to address the twin challenges of climate change and inequality.

Chapter 3: Digging Deeper on Park East's Removal

"We didn't need that freeway, and we did need the land that it occupied" - Dennis Grzezinski

When asked why highway removal has garnered so much interest in Milwaukee in the past few years, interviewees overwhelmingly had one answer: Park East. Not many freeway removal advocates are able to point to a practical example in their own city of removing a freeway and replacing it with a booming mixed-use district. For Peter Park, the former Planning Director at the City of Milwaukee and one of the key players on the Park East project, the impact of such a case study cannot be understated. "Milwaukee is one of the first American cities to take a freeway out and show that you take the freeway out and the city gets better," said Park.

In many ways, Park deserves credit for the initial idea to take Park East down. He recalls driving into Milwaukee for the first time when he moved to the city for graduate school on a nearly empty stretch of I-794. He followed the Hoan Bridge along the lake before dropping down onto city roads around Downtown. Park was struck by the beauty of Lake Michigan to his east and was dumbfounded at the city's choice to use such obviously valuable land near downtown and the lake for such a narrow purpose—a limited access highway above and surface parking lots below. "And I'm just like…why is this a good idea?"

Shortly after beginning teaching classes at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in the early 1990s, Park put his curiosity to good use. He asked his students to explore another version of Milwaukee, one where freeways didn't dominate. Park insisted the project wasn't about being anti-car or even opposed to freeways. "It's not about what we are against," he said. "It's about, what are we for? And what could you do with all of this land that today is encumbered significantly by these highways?" In his Urban Design studios he assigned students to look at replacing freeways with boulevards—first focusing in on I-794 and then on Park East. For one of the presentations he invited then-Mayor John Norquist to sit in, aware of his history of fighting freeways. It wasn't long after that that Park got a call from Michael

Morgan, the Commissioner of the Milwaukee Department of City Development at the time. Morgan asked if he would be interested in being the Planning Director for the city. Park, of course, said yes.

The duo of Park and Norquist, alongside their colleagues, quickly got to work on Park East. By 1999, just three years after Park took on the role of Planning Director, the city was rolling out the new Downtown Plan, which identified Park East redevelopment as a Catalytic Project with a stated goal to "remove the Park East Freeway and replace it with a mixed-use district that reinstates the traditional street grid" (City of Milwaukee 1999). The planning process for the Downtown Plan was robust and community engaged, in part because through it the Norquist administration hoped to gain support for their ambitious vision for downtown revitalization. The plan played an important role in setting the agenda for the city's transformation. Just like he had with his students, Park worked with community members to "consider that the freeways aren't going to be downtown," he said. Through a series of public workshops residents were asked to imagine what the highway system in the downtown area might look like in 2040 (City of Milwaukee 1999). During this exercise, all of the workshop groups removed Park East and all but two removed I-794. More broadly, Park explained, the Downtown Plan, "signaled that the City of Milwaukee was really bullish on the idea of more housing in Downtown, of improving the public realm, and making downtown more walkable."

3.1 The Park East Comes Down

The push for Park East to come down did not stop with the Downtown Plan. As Alyssa Remington, Economic Development Specialist at the City of Milwaukee Department of City Development, explained, Norquist became fixated on the highway as a literal and figurative barrier to downtown success:

> "You've got a fiscally conservative, socialist mayor that comes into office in the late eighties, and he's all about urbanism and how are we going to grow the downtown?...You've got businesses that are being hampered by [Park East]. You've got residential neighborhoods that are also being hampered by it. There's blight underneath. If the highest and best use for this land is a surface parking lot…I think we can do better, right? You have a leader who's championing that change."

Norquist used his leverage from his time as a State Senator and the growing business support from the likes of Harley Davidson and developers like Gary Grunau, who was involved with Manpower Group (a

large workforce solutions company) and Spectrum News (formerly Time Warner Cable), to move the project ahead and acquire funding through the State of Wisconsin's ISTEA grant. David Nguyen, who was the Project Manager at Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) assigned to Park East removal, explained that key to the state's support was the agreement that if the cost of the project ran over the $25 million in ISTEA funding, the city would pick up the bill. The available funding helped to bring WisDOT, Milwaukee County, and the City of Milwaukee to the table, Nguyen said, and each entity took on a different role in the project. Milwaukee County spearheaded the required National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, an evaluation of the environmental impacts of removal which resulted in a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

The signing of the 1999 Interstate Construction Estimate Agreement along with resolutions approved by the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors and the City of Milwaukee Common Council set in stone the end of the Park East freeway and greenlighted a redevelopment planning process (Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission 2001; Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee 2003). The land underneath the former Park East freeway reverted to Milwaukee County ownership when the spur came down and WisDOT's easement was lifted (Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee 2003). In addition to the land owned by the county, the city owned 3.7 acres within the 60 acres defined as the redevelopment area and the Department of City Development managed these assets (Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee 2003). The remaining land was privately owned. Despite controlling much less land than the county, the city led the planning process for the area. The planning team engaged the public through a website, newsletters, and a number of meetings, some of which were open to all Milwaukee residents and others of which involved key stakeholders (Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee 2003). Comments and concerns that were expressed during these meetings were then incorporated into the final three part redevelopment plan (Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee 2003).

The Park East Redevelopment Plan set the zoning and development code and laid out the city's vision for the redevelopment area. In addition to the six lane boulevard that was set to replace the spur,

the city called for a “mixed-use district that reinstates the traditional street-grid system” and would “enhance pedestrian connections across and around the river” (Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee 2003, 5). The plan did not mince words when describing why the Park East had been slated for removal. Among the reasons enumerated were the lowering of property values adjacent to the spur, the overbuilt nature of the structure relative to traffic levels, and the barrier it created between the downtown and other parts of the city, including two affordable housing developments (Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee 2003). The plan further described how the subsequent development in place of the spur would “increase downtown employment, business opportunities, and urban open space while significantly adding to the city and county property-tax bases” (Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee 2003, 5). Though pushback against the Park East removal had largely revolved around where the traffic would go and concerns over decreased access for downtown businesses, the plan framed the removal as a way to increase access for all users of the downtown area, including those in cars, on bikes, and on foot. Park, who was heavily involved in the planning process, reiterated this in his interview:

> “It's not about removing a highway and reducing access. It's about replacing a highway with greater accessibility. When we took out Park East people were like, ‘where are the cars going to go?’ Well, there were only three ways on and three ways off Park East in downtown. And because of that it actually created congestion because everyone is hurrying up to wait to get on…The old thinking was that a highway system moves cars faster, but limited access design induces more VMT, more miles will be traveled—more greenhouse gas, more emissions. The elevated highway actually created more traffic by having limited access design.”

In addition to adopting the Park East Redevelopment Plan, the City of Milwaukee also created a Tax Incremental District (TID) for the area, a tool which allowed the city to borrow against future increases in property tax revenue in order to fund the infrastructure projects necessary for development.

3.2 Good Jobs and Livable Neighborhoods

The redevelopment was not without its controversies, perhaps the most famous of which centered on the organizing of a group called the Good Jobs and Livable Neighborhoods coalition (GJLN). Pam Fendt, who was the Executive Director of the coalition between 2007 and 2009, described its origins: shortly after the removal of Park East was approved, John Goldstein, then-president of the Milwaukee

Area Labor Council, was watching the news and heard of the project for the first time. He was concerned that the city and county were trying to rush the Redevelopment Plan through without sufficient community engagement because they were looking to pass it in December—a month which has notoriously low public turnout for government meetings. More broadly, he had experience with the redevelopment machine in Milwaukee in the form of downtown's Grand Avenue mall and had learned that development did not necessarily lead to lasting employment opportunities for residents of Milwaukee. "The mantra became 'downtown redevelopment for whom?'" Fendt explained. "That was the backdrop: knowing these major investments don't always yield results for the actual taxpayers of the city."

Goldstein pulled strings to hold off the approval of the Redevelopment Plan and called on his contacts to form GJLN. At the time, community benefits agreements (CBAs) had just emerged as a new tool for ensuring that some of the benefits of development accrue to existing residents. They do so through a contract between two parties, typically a developer or municipality and a coalition like GJLN, that outlines a set of legally enforceable commitments to the community. The leaders at GJLN, including Fendt, decided that enacting a CBA would be the goal of the coalition. The group came up with a vision statement for what they hoped to see in the area formerly occupied by the Park East freeway. They included in their vision community assets like a school and daycare, a park, a grocery store with fresh, healthy options, and a variety of housing aimed at different income levels. "We had a lot of ideas about really making it sort of a blended, mixed-income community open to not just empty nesters or young people without kids, but that it could be a place for families," Fendt said. Beyond this imaginative vision, they wanted to move forward concrete stipulations related to local hiring and small businesses, affordable housing, and a prevailing wage (a wage and benefit floor based on the going rate for a locality) for workers hired in any jobs related to redevelopment.

GJLN initially wanted to get a CBA attached to the Park East Redevelopment Plan that was adopted by the city's Redevelopment Authority. When this failed, they went to the Common Council of Milwaukee in the hopes that the city would sign onto a CBA that applied to their portion of

redevelopment. This too failed, and GJLN started to feel the strain of the uphill battle. But before they lost hope completely, GJLN received word from a few County Supervisors. The Supervisors weren't sure why the city was pushing back against a CBA and expressed their interest in bringing it to the county. What resulted was the Park East Redevelopment Compact, a first of its kind agreement between a coalition of organizers (GJLN) and a governing body (the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors). The Park East Redevelopment Compact applied to all of the land within the redevelopment area that was owned by the county. The language of the Compact explicitly stated that post-freeway development "should provide a longer-term and sustainable benefit to the community" and "the redevelopment of the Park East land, by itself, using private development, would not take advantage of unique opportunities to provide sustainable community benefits especially to those in most need of jobs" (*Park East Redevelopment Compact* 2004, 1). In other words, it recognized that taking down the freeway was the beginning, not the end, of creating a more livable neighborhood. Among other provisions, the Compact required that Milwaukee County "not just sell the land for the highest price offered but rather should seek development proposals which will provide the greatest future benefit in jobs, tax base and image for the community" (*Park East Redevelopment Compact* 2004, 2). Furthermore, it required the county and any developers to contract with "Disadvantaged Business Enterprises" (DBE) at a rate established by the county's DBE policy, make a good faith effort at having their workforce reflect the demographics of the county, and pay a prevailing wage to workers involved in the redevelopment (*Park East Redevelopment Compact* 2004). It also committed Milwaukee County to financing new affordable housing equivalent to 20% of Park East's housing stock—though that housing did not need to be located in the redevelopment area (*Park East Redevelopment Compact* 2004).

The Park East Redevelopment Compact has had a lasting impact on the city, not only in the redevelopment area but also more widely. After succeeding in getting the county to sign onto a CBA, GJLN scaled up their efforts, pursuing and ultimately passing in 2009 an ordinance called Milwaukee Opportunities for Restoring Employment (MORE). The ordinance essentially took what they wanted for the Park East redevelopment area and applied it to any projects throughout Milwaukee that received more

than $1 million in TID funding from the city (Milwaukee, Wis. Municipal Code § 080218). The ordinance just barely squeaked through the Common Council, Fendt said: “most [policies] in Milwaukee are passed thirteen to two or fifteen to zero. It's not a contentious thing. It was a two year battle to get that ordinance passed eight to seven.” MORE, which is still on the books today, includes requirements for developers to employ “unemployed or underemployed residents” and contract with small and local businesses (Milwaukee, Wis. Municipal Code § 080218). It also included a prevailing wage requirement, which was rendered obsolete (along with the prevailing wage requirement in the Park East Redevelopment Compact) when the Wisconsin Legislature took away municipalities' ability to require workers be paid a prevailing wage on public projects or publicly funded private projects per Wis. Stat. § 66.0903.

3.3 Slow but Sure: Park East Redevelopment

It took nearly twenty years for the Park East redevelopment area to fill in. For a long time, people pointed to the empty lots that remained in the former Park East corridor and called the project a failure. “The sentiment was ‘why did you spend all this money to take this down?’ This is Milwaukee. We can't support this kind of development,” said Remington, who came on board with the Department of City Development after the highway was already down. According to Remington, the TID for the area was set up in 2002 to fund construction of McKinley Boulevard and the Knapp Street bridge over the Milwaukee River, the direct replacements of the freeway. On the east side of the river, the North End, a private five phase development intended to create a new neighborhood, started with a bang but moved slowly after the 2008 housing crisis. For a long time, many of the parcels on the west side remained vacant. Privately owned land in the area was bought up most quickly followed by development on city-owned land. County land moved the slowest. Park believes that this was not because of the Community Benefits Agreement that applied to the land, but rather because getting development to move forward on county-owned land was a more complicated political process. Because the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors needed to approve the sale of their land through a competitive process, developers had to navigate getting enough votes—an added barrier to entry in an already slow market. Park would have preferred if the county

handed over control of the parcels to the city, or even retained ownership but had the city control the development. Still, he doesn't see the slow development as necessarily a bad thing: "I didn't expect it to happen overnight. I mean, there's a lot of land in downtown Milwaukee, the market is moderate…It takes time. And I actually don't mind that things happen over some years, because I think it makes it much more authentic."

The Park East redevelopment had an unlikely hero that reversed its public perception from a waste of money to a boon for the city: a professional basketball team. The Milwaukee Bucks decided to locate their new stadium, Fiserv Forum, which was funded through a public-private partnership, in the redevelopment area. The county sold them several large parcels for $1—parcels which might have been otherwise difficult for the county to sell because of their size—and development sprung up in and around them in the area now known as the Deer District (Quirmbach 2015). Since the opening of Fiserv, the fate of the TID turned around and suddenly the city was raking in tax dollars. Despite early stumbles, Remington shared, "[The city has] $320 million of added value to that area. We've generated over $75 million in taxes. That's 1% of our tax base. Just the Park East is 1% of the city's tax base which is pretty significant." Fendt, too, sees the arrival of Fiserv as a signal of success particularly for the work of GJLN. "The Bucks arena went on Park East land, and it was guided by the [Park East Redevelopment Compact] and they exceeded all the requirements," Fendt said. "These things that key developers in the history of Milwaukee had said would kill development. [The Bucks] embraced them, and they surpassed them."

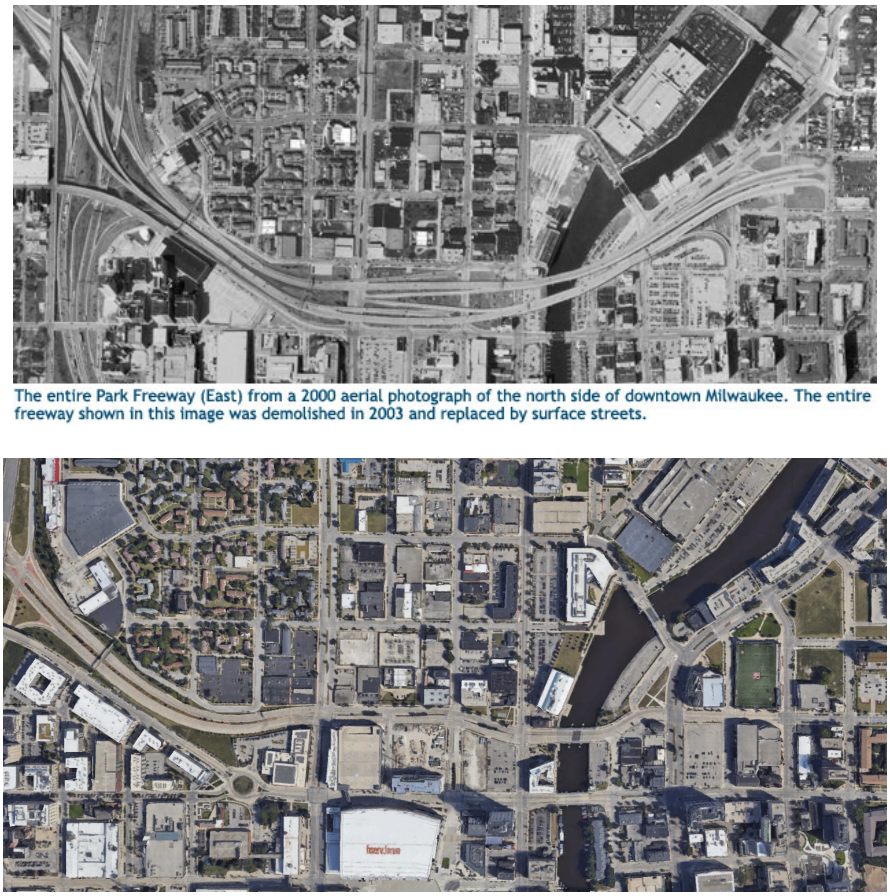

Figure 3.1: Park East redevelopment before and after. (Top: Aerial photograph by unknown photographer, *2000 aerial photograph,* 2000, Wisconsin Highways, https://www.wisconsinhighways.org/milwaukee/park.html). (Bottom: Google Earth capture, *McKinley Avenue in Milwaukee,* accessed May 17, 2024).

Even after Park and many of his colleagues no longer worked for the City of Milwaukee, Remington and others at the DCD have closely followed the Redevelopment Plan. “We've been willing to wait so that we get the right development,” Remington said. Many of the buildings in the Park East redevelopment area are mixed-use with ground floor activation in the form of commercial spaces or common areas in residential buildings. The RiverWalk, a path along the Milwaukee River, was expanded. With the arrival of Fiserv and the bars and hotels that came with it, the city’s idea of an entertainment district came to fruition (Figure 3.1). In places that were difficult to build because of the shape of the parcels or the number of utilities traversing underground, the city got creative with public space such as with the newly created Denim Park. Many new housing opportunities were created, and while many of them were at market rate or above, the city did push for affordable housing in keeping with the plan’s

goal to “promote a full range of housing options” (Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee 2003, 5). Convent Hill, an affordable housing project for elderly individuals, was built by the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee on land owned by the city. Several other projects received funding from the TID in exchange for a percentage of their units being affordable.

Remington commented that the Convent Hill project was built early on in the redevelopment and that “where there was city land available, we were able to move that fairly quickly and get some action on it.” This echoes Park’s refrain that direct local control of land freed up by freeway removal is advantageous because it allows for more public good outcomes, like affordable housing, that might otherwise be difficult to build because of the cost of land. In the case of Park East, as Park explained:

> “the county came into 25 acres of land with no cost basis. In an American city, where do you get free land like that?” …That value capture opportunity is a significant one. And so if you want to do public good, whether it's environmental, whether it's securing deed restricted affordable housing, whether it's underwriting for small businesses…There's all kinds of things that could happen, because there's very little basis in the land.”

3.4 Advancing Equity

At the time when the Park East came down planners weren’t using the words equity, sustainability, or climate resilience with the same frequency we see today. Still, equity was on the minds of many involved in the project including Park. “We didn't lead with the word equity,” he said. “But the purpose was, how do we provide more opportunity for residents of Hillside? And how do we better connect MLK Drive to the rest of downtown? Because right now that freeway is this kind of nasty barrier that just needs to come down.” Hillside, a majority Black neighborhood with high rates of poverty, sits just north and west of the former Park East freeway’s path. MLK Drive intersected with the former Park East and ran north through the historic Bronzeville community which was devastated by freeway construction and the long period of disinvestment that followed.

Remington seconded that the Park East removal was intended to inject energy into neighborhoods that had been cut off from jobs and other resources. Since the freeway came down, however, the city has begun to think about equity through the lens of gentrification. “That's also now been part of the conversation,” Remington said. “In terms of equity, what are we doing to these neighborhoods? Are we

creating displacement by increasing the value right here? [Home value] is also increasing and are we making it an impossible situation for these homeowners?" Remington herself has observed changes in the neighborhoods in and around the redevelopment area—particularly in Haymarket Square, Brewer's Hill, and Bronzeville itself. These observations provide a personal account of what highway removal literature tells us—that removing freeways more often than not changes the demographics of the neighborhoods around them (Patterson and Harley 2019; Boccon-Gibod 2023; Cervero, Kang, and Shively 2009). Kevin Muhs, who is the current City Engineer for Milwaukee, sees this gentrification as a negative externality of highway removal that the city should work to avoid in the future. In his interview, Muhs said:

> "I think the biggest thing that we learned from the Park East was that there wasn't enough of a lens of equity, and in particular, making sure that there was adequate mixed income housing opportunities…When the Park East came down I think it was too late that people realized 'oh, this is gentrifying things.'"

While there were some efforts to include affordable housing in redevelopment, such as through the construction of Convent Hill, many now see these attempts as inadequate when faced with the steady influx of wealthier residents and businesses attracted to the area. "It could have been more," Muhs said. This oversight is particularly dismaying because of the immense need for affordable housing stock in the city. More than 40% of households in Milwaukee are currently housing-cost-burdened, meaning they spend 30% or more of their income on housing, a statistic that is partly a result of the severe shortage in units affordable to households earning less than $25,000 per year (City of Milwaukee DCD 2023). There are more than 47,000 households in this category competing for fewer than 18,500 units (City of Milwaukee DCD 2023).

Remington sees gentrification as a challenge that the city is continuing to try to address. In 2018, the DCD released an Anti-Displacement Plan for neighborhoods near Downtown, which recognized Milwaukee's stark segregation and history of systemic racism. It called for anti-displacement policies to be written with "the goals of reducing racial disparities and fostering equitable growth" and pushed for innovative changes such as a residence preference policy for affordable housing or utilizing community land trusts to permanently preserve affordability (City of Milwaukee 2018, 4). The plan also

acknowledged the challenge of being in a state like Wisconsin which precludes municipalities from implementing certain strategies to maintain affordability, such as inclusionary zoning ordinances (City of Milwaukee 2018). While not all of the recommendations from the plan have come to fruition in the last six years, at least one has: the creation of a fund that supports low income homeowners in paying their rising property taxes. The MKE United Anti-Displacement Fund was created in 2019 with a goal to "help ensure that long-time, income eligible homeowners living in near downtown neighborhoods are not displaced due to increasing property taxes associated with rising property values and new development" ("Anti-Displacement Fund" 2023, para. 2). Remington explained that the DCD helped to launch the fund, but because in Wisconsin no public dollars can go to tax assistance it is entirely privately funded. Two of the neighborhoods eligible for the funding are Halyard Park and Brewer's Hill directly adjacent to the former Park East (MKE United 2021). A third neighborhood, Harambee, is just north of Halyard Park and Brewer's Hill (MKE United 2021). These neighborhoods were selected because they are already experiencing signs of gentrification as home values increased more than 10% above the average city-wide increase between 2015 and 2019 (MKE United 2021). Homeowners in identified neighborhoods are eligible if they have been in their home at least since 2015, are current on their taxes, and have an income at or below the city average (MKE United 2021). In the first year of the fund, homeowners received an average of $446 in tax assistance (MKE United 2021).

Remington and former Alderman Michael Murphy also noted that the success of the TID has allowed for contributions to areas of the city that aren't seeing the same influx of development dollars as the Park East corridor. In addition to subsidizing affordable housing within the Park East redevelopment area, surplus from the TID has funded affordable housing in other parts of Milwaukee and helped to pay off other TIDs that were underwater. It has also been used on paving projects in neighborhoods where poor road conditions had long been overlooked and on the construction of protected bike lanes around the city. For Remington, the key to advancing equity for highway removal is having a plan in place ahead of time, a measure which literature on highway removal supports (Boccon-Gibod 2023). This includes having a plan for how to use surplus funding from the TID to support affordability and invest in

communities that have experienced systemic disinvestment. It also includes knowing what to ask of developers—examples Remington referenced included a certain percentage of the incremental value increase going towards affordable housing or small business enterprise preference during and even after construction, stipulations that may sound familiar to those included in the Park East Redevelopment Compact signed by the county. Once again, Park believes that implementing such a plan is much easier if there is local control of the land without the municipality having to pay for it because it allows them to sell at a cost below market rate. As Park said:

> "The thing about affordable housing is that if you're going to compel affordability below market rate….something has to make up the difference, right? So what's it going to be? Where is that money going to come from? If the land cost is brought down, then maybe that could be the thing that subsidizes the long term affordability."

In the case of Park East, the city and county did not have to pay the State of Wisconsin or the federal government back for their initial investment in the highway infrastructure or the land it was on. For Park this was key, because the highway had for a long time been devaluing the land and decreasing the property tax base of the city ("It seems very un-American that we would use taxpayer money in ways that devalues real estate in the most valuable parts of our country, which is city centers," he added). Given this history of the highway bleeding Milwaukee of potential tax dollars, it made sense that the value capture would accrue to the local governments (Milwaukee County and the City of Milwaukee) rather than to the state or federal governments.

3.5 Lessons Learned

Milwaukee learned a lot from the removal of Park East with perhaps the biggest lesson being that highway removal is possible even in a smaller city like Milwaukee. As Dennis Grzezinski, a lawyer who has been involved in fighting highway expansion in Milwaukee, put it:

> "Once the economy got itself sufficiently together almost all of that corridor was redeveloped in ways that are recognizably positive and energetic. And, you know, job-creating and housing-creating and activity-creating. And it hasn't caused any problems with gridlock. We didn't need that freeway, and we did need the land that it occupied."

Park, for his part, is unimpressed with the question of traffic increases in the first place:

> "We should not be deterred by these conventional or very predictable concerns about traffic. And traffic in a downtown! I mean, come on. There's no great city, you know, vibrant place that doesn't have congestion. The thing is, traffic has sort of been framed as a failure, right? And so what I tell people is it's actually a sign of success. You created something so special that so many people want to be there. And, yeah, it's not so easy to get around. But you know, it's like Yogi Berra said: 'Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded.'

For Fendt, the major lesson learned was the power of coalition building and the importance of sticking to your guns—not being swayed by developers calling you a deal killer. She and other members of GJLN were repeatedly told that their work was going to be the nail in the coffin for Park East redevelopment. But lo and behold, development came. Now the conversations around Park East have changed from concerns over fallow land that nobody wants to worries about gentrification and skyrocketing property values pushing out long term residents. A problem, to be sure, but a different problem than the naysayers originally anticipated. Fendt hopes that new coalitions will be formed in response to other infrastructure projects to prioritize the needs of community members around jobs and affordability. Milwaukee faces some of the same issues it always has, and new ones too. New players on the scene, including Mayor Cavalier Johnson, may support initiatives that past politicians did not. And new proposals for removals of portions of I-794 and WI-175 provide "an opportunity," Fendt said, "to revisit this conversation and make it relevant for this era of Milwaukee."

Chapter 4: Proposal One: I-794 in Downtown Milwaukee

"What's the Downtown that our kids and grandkids will inherit?" - Mayor Cavalier Johnson

More than twenty years after the Park East fell, a proposal to remove a portion of I-794 is on the table again. Head into Milwaukee and you can't miss I-794, the elevated freeway drives a wedge between the stately pale yellow Cream City bricks of the Third Ward and the shiny new towers of Downtown. Not that you could really see either neighborhood from the other, as the highway thoroughly blocks the view. The road feels out of place above the thriving commercial activity at the Milwaukee Public Market, just steps from the pedestrian-friendly RiverWalk that winds its way between expensive condos and the water. Though technically you can walk underneath the overpass through the parking lots it covers, it's the type of place you might get back in your car just to drive to the other side.

I-794 like Park East is a remnant of Milwaukee's original freeway vision, planned as the southern leg of the aforementioned "downtown loop". If the loop had been completed, I-794 would have connected the Park East to a never built freeway that extended north of the Lakefront Interchange, where today I-794 meets the Daniel W. Hoan Memorial Bridge and heads south towards Bayview and suburbs like St. Francis and Cudahy. According to Muhs, the freeway does ultimately serve something close to its original purpose as a connector to the regional interstate system. Unlike Park East, I-794 is not a stub that ends abruptly in a neighborhood. "It's a very big feeder, both in and out of the downtown area, serving a lot of businesses and communities," said former Alderman Micheal Murphy. Muhs caveats that I-794 is not the most heavily used stretch of freeway in Milwaukee but it is well used, seeing over 70,000 vehicles each day (WisDOT 2023d). However, most of these vehicles are using I-794 to access Downtown or the Third Ward. Only around 26,600 per day travel all the way through, a more manageable number which makes tearing it down and replacing it with a boulevard more feasible (WisDOT 2023d). "It's really just a series of spread out ramps that are kind of a web heading out from the Marquette Interchange, dropping people into downtown at different points as you head closer to the lakefront," Muhs said. The freeway also serves Port Milwaukee, an international seaport and regional distribution center on Lake Michigan (WisDOT 2023d).

The freeway has narrowly avoided being dismantled twice now—once in the 1990s, when it was on Norquist's chopping block, and again in the late 2000s when WisDOT considered removal (Snyder 2016). While the Park East removal proposal surged ahead, Norquist's I-794 idea faltered, facing an uproar of concerns from state officials and suburbanites (Snyder 2016). In a 1992 study, WisDOT contended that a boulevard replacing I-794 would not be feasible given the amount of traffic it carried (Snyder 2016). Officials representing the suburbs just south of the city came out as strongly against the removal, saying that it would cut off their access to Downtown and Milwaukee's interstates, access they had marketed to attract economic development (Iskandar 2014; Kraft-Klehm 2015; Snyder 2016). Their claims were bolstered by the 1999 opening of the Lake Parkway which extended I-794 south of the Hoan Bridge and ended the Hoan's tenure as Milwaukee's "bridge to nowhere." Anti-removal advocates asserted that the investment in the Lake Parkway would be wasted if the downtown section of I-794 was torn down (Snyder 2016; Kraft-Klehm 2015). As Alex Snyder noted in his Master's thesis "the building of Lake Parkway created the suburban stakeholder group that would later rally to defeat both I-794 teardown proposals" (2016, 31). On top of that, although business leadership in the Third Ward showed strong interest in the removal, the proposal lacked a corporate champion that Park East had in Harley Davidson. Both potential freeway removals were mentioned in the 1999 Downtown Plan, but the Park East ended up in the spotlight as a "Catalytic Project". Ultimately, city leadership chose to focus their energy on Park East, which seemed more likely to move forward, setting the I-794 idea aside for later consideration.

In 2008, another window of opportunity to take down a portion of I-794 opened. Parts of the freeway's structure needed to be repaired or replaced, and the price tag was high (Snyder 2016). Considering this, transportation officials wanted to take another look at the freeway's usefulness and WisDOT contracted with the consulting firm HNTB to examine the possibilities, including the potential removal of the Hoan Bridge (Snyder 2016). The study found that while a boulevard option would be initially more expensive, over its lifespan it would pay off because of the need for additional rebuilds to sections of freeway over the next fifty years (HNTB 2008). HNTB concluded the following:

> "Not only does a reconfiguration of the roadway make sense from a long-term maintenance perspective, it makes even more sense for Milwaukee and the state from an economic standpoint. The increased land values and possible tax base, as well as the public amenities that could be introduced, will certainly accomplish more public objectives than the reconstruction of the Hoan Bridge and I-794 in their existing forms" (HNTB 2008, 40).

Despite this assertion, the proposal never really gathered steam. Timing may have had something to do with this. The 2008 housing crisis had slowed Park East redevelopment, making officials and residents wary of pursuing another removal (Snyder 2016). Then-Governor Scott Walker put the nail in the coffin when he opted to move ahead with repairs on the Hoan Bridge and ramps along the lakefront, and the window for removal closed once again.

For a while, it seemed the matter was settled such that I-794 would remain a part of Milwaukee's downtown fabric. Then, in 2021, WisDOT announced its intentions to once again rebuild some of the elevated freeway structure, replacing sections that had been in place since 1974 for a cost they estimated to be around $300 million (Ryan 2023). Unlike in 2008, WisDOT did not initially seem interested in exploring alternatives to a rebuild-in-kind approach. Gregg May, then the Transportation Policy Director at the advocacy organization 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, had other ideas. To him, the rebuild was an opportunity too good to pass up. Carl Glasemeyer who took over May's role after May left the organization in 2023, explained: "[May] decided to roll out this campaign to say, hey, the city has talked about removing 794 for decades. There's going to be $300 million worth of work estimated. Why don't we, instead of putting all that money into keeping it as is, push the state to look at removing it?" From this idea, a campaign was born that has garnered interest from people all over Milwaukee and beyond. The campaign has succeeded in convincing WisDOT to examine the possibility of removal. Today the question remains: will the third time be the charm?

4.1 Rethink 794 and the Lake Interchange Study

The latest campaign to remove I-794 has at least three things that the 2008 push didn't have: a name (Rethink794), a website (rethink794.com), and a coalition of organizations and individuals working together to advance their agenda. Though May and 1000 Friends of Wisconsin were the ones who launched the campaign and continue to coordinate it, Rethink794 has grown well beyond the bounds of

the organization. Peter Park, who has been loosely involved with Rethink794 and came to speak at one of their events in summer 2023, credits this bottom-up work with bringing removal to the table. “The city had not been bringing it up. They had been kind of accepting what the state's gonna do, right?” Park said, “I think it's really been the efforts of a few—grassroots efforts, young people. If not for their efforts, I don't think this conversation would be going on.” Their initial aim was to get WisDOT to study removal as an alternative to a rebuild-in-kind approach by applying public pressure, convincing key stakeholders, showcasing the potential for removal through renderings (Figure 4.1), and mobilizing residents to contact their elected officials. As part of this effort, Rethink794.com details a long list of reasons the coalition believes the highway should be removed including its effect on the pedestrian environment and the health of people living and working nearby as well as the development potential of the land encumbered by the freeway (“Our Vision” 2023). The website expounds:

> “The land beneath I-794 is some of the most valuable in Wisconsin. Based on the assessed value of nearby new construction, the 32.5 acres of land between 6th and Chicago Street is worth over a billion dollars. Boulevard conversion could generate $30 million in annual property tax revenue for the City of Milwaukee and deliver much needed new housing in a high demand area” (“Our Vision” 2023, para. 1).

Figure 4.1: Side-by-side rendering of what I-794 removal could look like (Left photograph by Jason Carter, right rendering by Taylor Korslin, *Our Vision,* 2023, Rethink794, https://www.rethink794.com/priorities#:~:text=City%20Development&text=The%20land%20beneath%20I%2D794,worth%20over%20a%20billion%20dollars).

As a result of the campaign, WisDOT launched the Lake Interchange Study, which pledged to investigate a broader range of alternatives for an approximately one mile stretch of I-794 between the

Milwaukee River and the Hoan Bridge, although the Hoan Bridge itself is not a part of the study. Among the factors that prompted the study, WisDOT described the 28 bridge units which need to be replaced, the need for greater connectivity in Downtown and the Third Ward, access needs to the larger freeway system, and concerns for bike, pedestrian, and traffic safety in the area (WisDOT, n.d.-a). The Lake Interchange Study began the public involvement phase in August of 2023, showcasing nine design concepts including two that completely remove the section (Figure 4.2), one replace-in kind option, and five "freeway improvement" concepts which maintain the freeway with a reduced footprint, opening up some land for development (WisDOT 2023c). After this first round of engagement, WisDOT will narrow the number of concepts, including at least one replace-in-kind, freeway improvement, and removal option for further analysis (WisDOT, n.d.-a). Improvement scenarios would free up between 3.6 and 6.3 acres for development, while removal would free up between 15.4 and 18.3 acres for development (WisDOT 2023c). The second phase of public engagement will result in a recommended alternative which will advance to environmental review through the NEPA process (WisDOT, n.d.-a). By the time all of this is done it is expected to be 2025 with construction starting in 2027 based on whatever final decision is made.

Figure 4.2: One of two removal design concepts from the Lakefront Interchange Study (Design concept by WisDOT, *Freeway Removal Concept #2,* 2023, I-794 Lake Interchange Study, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1svI5uXSk19WuLP3dprKq15hoZAaUnUbq/view).

4.2 The City Considers Removal

Though WisDOT has been leading the Lakefront Interchange Study, the City of Milwaukee has been an important partner. They have been present at all of the public and stakeholder engagement and have been working closely with WisDOT staff. Sam Leichtling, who is the Director of City Planning at the City of Milwaukee, believes that WisDOT "wants to come up with something that gains local support at the end of the day." The city's main ask has been that WisDOT evaluate all the alternatives fairly, though city leaders have shown signs of being increasingly supportive of removal. In April 2024, after a long period of silence on the issue, Mayor Cavalier Johnson appeared to back boulevardization. In a press conference, he spoke about the potential for removal, saying, "We should be thinking about the city we want in the future, 30 years from now. What's the Downtown that our kids and grandkids will inherit? That's the sort of mind frame I have when I think about what will happen with 794" (Jannene 2024, para. 4). Even before this announcement, city leadership had been doing some of its own gathering of feedback on the proposal.

Around the same time that Rethink794 emerged, the city was at work on a new Downtown Plan, Connec+ing MKE, which was ultimately adopted by the Common Council in summer 2023. During the planning process, Leichtling and his team heard many comments about how I-794 should come down—more than they heard about any other part of the plan. It seemed community members were energized by the Rethink794 campaign, and the city listened. History repeated itself, and this time I-794 removal was included as a Catalytic Project. The plan's text reads:

> "The location and design of this freeway spur is in conflict with the overarching goal of a connected Downtown and should be reimagined. Connec+ing MKE calls for exploring the eventual removal of the I-794 Lake Interchange and replacing it with a traditional connected grid of comfortable multi-modal streets, public spaces, and high-density mixed-use development" (City of Milwaukee 2023b, 15).

It goes on to say that "if full removal is not feasible via this current project, any interim alternative should prioritize modernization of the infrastructure to reduce the footprint, activation of the public spaces and streets under the bridges, improvements to the ramp connections, and increased safety for pedestrian crossings" (City of Milwaukee 2023b, 15).

For the city, the issue of removal of I-794 requires consideration of more than just the space it takes up and the opportunity cost of alternative land uses. The maintenance required for freeways is also a gargantuan expense in the state's budget—over $380 million was budgeted for the 2023-25 biennium (WisDOT 2023a). Leichtling said it was both the high value of the land and the continued financial investment in the freeway that led them to believe that a conversation around removal was worth having:

> "Knowing that there's this multiple hundred million dollar investment on the horizon, and that we just completed a downtown plan that made significant recommendations around reconnecting neighborhoods, prioritizing safe streets, prioritizing people who are walking, bicycling, and taking transit…creating new gathering spaces. Given all of those factors, we shouldn't assume the status quo is where we want to go. We should take a fresh look at that stretch of 794 and really ask, and even in some ways demand, that we study a wider variety of options so that we can have an informed discussion about which of those potential alternatives best achieve all of our shared goals for that area."

The question of whether or not these goals could be effectively achieved through removal remains unanswered. It is not yet clear who would take ownership of the land directly beneath and adjacent to I-794 upon removal. Current title holders include the State of Wisconsin, WisDOT, Milwaukee County, and the City of Milwaukee. WisDOT's Nguyen said he is sure that "the three entities would have to be back at the table and try to work out some sort of agreement." Negotiations over land control have yet to take place and no matter who ends up owning it a Tax Incremental District is likely to be created for the area to fund necessary infrastructure updates. Like his DCD predecessor Park, Leichtling hopes that there will be a greater degree of local control over development of the land. "That will allow the entities who are closest to the public, closest to the issues to be able to best identify and implement strategies so that the reuse there can best achieve local goals," he said. This is especially important because, as Nguyen reported, Wis. Stat. § 84.09(5) requires WisDOT to sell any land it disposes of in a public sale at or above market value unless another government body (i.e. Milwaukee County, the City of Milwaukee, or the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District) wants it for a public or transportation use, in which case they can proceed with a private sale. Even in private sales, the statute stipulates that governmental agencies are required to pay fair market value for WisDOT land unless they are acquiring it for "public use related to transportation or infrastructure." Given the high price of land in

the area, this may make it more difficult to be creative with land use that prioritizes community benefit over profit. Muhs added that some local government employees believe a similar dynamic was at play for the county during Park East removal which "made it more challenging to get the types of developments the city was hoping to get…not because the county did anything wrong, but because the county was going through a lot of fiscal challenges that whole time, and so they were more focused on the sale price of the land than the future use." In contrast, he believes that the city "is more willing to not worry as much about the direct dollar amount that they get for land. The city is much more focused on the long term revenue than the sale price." Whether or not this holds true, of course, is a matter of who holds decision-making power locally. Still, if the city managed to acquire control of the I-794 land at no cost, they could be freed up to pursue local goals outlined in the latest Downtown Plan, such as population growth through large residential buildings, a wide range of housing affordability, and increased livability through "strategic open space and gathering places." Ultimately, the issue of who controls the land and what their priorities are will have significant implications for the redevelopment process if removal moves forward.

4.3 Challenges to Removal

Part of why the state did not initiate the conversation around removal is because of the recent work on I-794 in the 2010s. Though some of the structures that are proposed to be removed are indeed part of the original freeway built in the 1970s, substantial parts of the deck that would be removed were built in the last 20 years, as recently as 2016, Muhs said. "They've already done a significant amount of investment over the past ten to fifteen years," in the form of repairs on the Hoan Bridge and a rebuild of the Marquette Interchange, he explained. It's a sort of manifestation of the 'sunk cost' fallacy, which makes the state hesitant to tear down work that they just completed. Because of this, Muhs is surprised about what WisDOT has brought forward as alternatives, though only time will tell what they choose. "A lot of stuff is on the table, more than I would have expected going in," he said. "Obviously removal is on the table, but also significant rework of infrastructure that is not that old is also on the table, even if the freeway does stay in the area."

There are other reasons why stakeholders are hesitant about removal. For Jim Plaisted, Executive Director of the Historic Third Ward Association (HTWA), the main concern is that bringing all of the cars that use the freeway down to street level could actually make the pedestrian environment worse. “Those cars are still going to come over the Hoan, come off the interchange and find their way into Downtown and the Third Ward. But now they can’t do it on a deck. They're gonna do it on a street level,” he said. As Plaisted sees it, this could mean reduced safety for people walking and make it a less enjoyable place for people to patronize businesses. Plaisted and his colleagues have worked hard to make the Third Ward a nice place to be. One of the last remaining streets in the area that is not very pedestrian friendly is Water Street, and HTWA is getting ready to fix that—widening sidewalks, adding street trees, and doing traffic calming. There’s a concern that if the decision is made to remove I-794 before they have a chance to rebuild Water Street they will lose that opportunity. “The city would say, Water Street's going to remain as is because we need that space to handle the traffic,” Plaisted said. Moreover, Plaisted does not believe that what Milwaukee will replace the highway with will be something better, particularly with the example of the six lane Mckinley Boulevard which replaced the Park East. Instead, he worries “it will be a lot of concrete.”

While the number of cars that might flood the Third Ward concerns him, Plaisted talks about traffic increases more as a detriment to safety and aesthetics than as a cause for concern over commute times. Generally, slow-down caused by traffic does not seem to be as much of an issue for locals, with the exception of a limited discussion surrounding traffic jams due to the Clybourne Street bridge lifting for boat traffic. The traffic factor has primarily been brought up by representatives of suburbs who like the quick access that I-794 provides. Even so, times to traverse the corridor are likely to be only “modestly slower,” according to environmental lawyer Dennis Grzezinski, adding only a few minutes to commute times that are already quite low compared to other parts of the country. Greg Walthers, a member of the Rethink 794 coalition, says he doesn’t take lightly those few minutes added to commute time:

> “I know people that use that stretch of road to commute… if you lose four minutes out of your day now because you’ve got to choose a different route, I hear you, that's a big deal. But if we lose out for the city and the region on billions of dollars of infrastructure that could excite young

> people and allow generations to get together and people to live more healthy lives affordably, I think the benefits outweigh the drawbacks 300 or 400 to one."

For the Third Ward, though, the removal feels like a bit of a gamble. When I-794 was first built, it was viewed negatively by the Italian community that occupied the area, particularly because it involved the destruction of a historic church, Our Lady of Pompeii (Happel 2022). But since then, the Third Ward has become extremely successful as a business district, experiencing rapid population growth—between 2010 and 2020 it grew by around 70%—and a booming economy (Thomas 2021). Plaisted spoke to this:

> "[People] talk about [the freeway] being an albatross, but we are on fire despite the freeway deck. We're not saying we're successful because of [I-794], but…it's not an impediment to economic development activity. Is it the best use of land? Absolutely not. But if you're asking the Third Ward to gamble with the ecosystem that we've built over fifty years, that's our concern."

Plaisted also pushes back against comparisons made between the Park East and I-794. Before removal, the area around Park East was largely composed of surface parking lots and no one would have said that its economy was thriving. From his perspective, the two freeways are only similar in their respective locations near Downtown—the actual environments surrounding them differ dramatically. Speaking of Park East, Plaisted remarked, "There was just nothing in there. There was no Fiserv. There was no other private development. It was a wasteland because of the freeway. This isn't a wasteland. There's a vibrant ecosystem here." Even if I-794 removal were to be successful from an economic standpoint, the construction would likely inconvenience some Third Ward businesses, including small businesses like the ones housed in the Milwaukee Public Market in the shadow of the freeway.

Another business with concerns over the removal of I-794 is Port Milwaukee. There has been a lot of press coverage of the potential impact on the port, in particular because I-794 would lose its interstate designation if the section between the Hoan and the Milwaukee River were removed and the port would no longer be directly connected to I-43 and I-94 via I-794 (Jannene 2023a). Trucks carrying cargo could still get to the port using other roads (namely the Becher Street ramps 1.5 miles west), but routes would take slightly more time and port officials are worried they will lose business over it (Jannene 2023a). There might also be an increase in truck traffic on residential roads in the Near South Side neighborhood of Milwaukee, a majority Latino area, which Leichtling pointed out could pose equity

issues related to air and noise pollution. To Peter Park, however, the port-related concerns are further examples of highway removal being a political, not technical problem, as he believes these challenges could be relatively easily solved.

4.4 Imaginative Ideas for a Revitalized Downtown

Mayor Johnson has publicized his ambitious goal of getting the population of Milwaukee over 1 million, up from just over 570,000 in 2020 (Casey 2023). In a city that has been shrinking for decades, it will be an uphill battle to get there (Casey 2023). Many see the potential removal of I-794 as a key catalyst for achieving this vision and attracting young talent back to the city. Glasemeyer pointed out that removal would open up space for additional housing in Downtown and the Third Ward. He also believes the project would bring new life to the area through additional amenities such as grocery stores and parks. This could make Downtown more "truly mixed use" and a more attractive place to live, Glasemeyer said, drawing in people who might not otherwise have considered Milwaukee as a place to set up their life.

Additional housing and commercial means more than just more people, it also means adding to the city's property tax base. Milwaukee is extremely reliant on property taxes to fund its budget—a study by the Wisconsin Public Policy Forum showed that almost 90% of local tax revenue came from property taxes in 2015 (Wisconsin Public Policy Forum 2018). Property taxes have particular relevance in the case of I-794 because it runs through what Grzezinski calls "the most valuable real estate in the state." In an interview with local journalist Dan Shafer, Lafayette Crump, commissioner of the Department of City Development, emphasized this aspect of removal, saying:

> "We need to increase our tax base and this is an incredible opportunity to have more land available that increases the tax base, adds population to the city, creates more space for more of the kinds of incredible development we've seen in the city. So, residential, office, hotel are all strong components for what we would (like to) see in that area" (Shafer 2023, para. 33).

Crump and Johnson have both signaled that it is for this reason that the city would like to see either removal or a substantially scaled down version of the freeway result from WisDOT's study (Shafer 2023).

Even those who are hesitant about the I-794 removal acknowledge that a freeway does not feel like the best use of land in the area. As Glasemeyer said, "the fantastic thing, and a really perverse thing,

is that the amount of space highways take up is immense." Walthers of Rethink794 echoed this sentiment: "There's so many things you can do with the land… when people realize just how much land is devoted to the automobile, it's a head scratcher." This recognition has inspired a broader conversation about the future of Milwaukee's transportation system, as removal could be an important step away from car-centric city design towards a transit network that encourages alternative modes of transportation. As is, the Milwaukee Intermodal Station, which provides regional connections via trains and buses, is separated from Downtown by the highway. A boulevardization of I-794 could improve access to it. Moreover, Walthers believes removal could help create "coherent infrastructure that's not just made for one mode of transit." Mayor Johnson has demonstrated interest in this possibility, as has the wider public according to Muhs. Rethink794's renderings illustrate what this more coherent infrastructure could look like, featuring large swaths of the road dedicated to public transit, pedestrian, and bike infrastructure.

Though there are a lot of great ideas, a comprehensive picture of what could fill the space the freeway takes up is a long way off. If I-794 were to come down, the city would lead the development of an area plan similar to the one they did for Park East. There are a lot of folks who would need to be involved in developing such a plan. "I'm not going to say that we speak for the communities that need to have a voice at the table," Glasemeyer said. Even neighborhoods with relatively similar demographics, such as the Third Ward and Downtown, have different perspectives on what they would like to see. Beyond the immediate neighborhoods in the freeway corridor, Glasemeyer thinks it is important to look beyond, to what the more diverse, lower-income communities in the Near North and Near South Side neighborhoods want in the freeway's place and to ensure that whatever goes in includes enhanced transit connections. Right now, because it is WisDOT's project, they are the ones leading the community engagement. So far, WisDOT's engagement has included one public meeting, which was widely attended, meetings of the Stakeholder Advisory Committee and Business Advisory Committee, a number of individual stakeholder meetings, and the collection of nearly 1800 comment forms (WisDOT 2023b). The city would take over this role if a decision was made for I-794 to come down—though if WisDOT or the county ended up being the title holder the city might have less power to actualize the community desires

through the sale of the land. If removal is ultimately chosen, Glasemeyer says the coalition would likely continue their involvement, organizing around supporting a plan for the area that is "in line with a diversity of community goals" such as reducing emissions and the number of traffic deaths.

4.5 A More Equitable Removal?

As Milwaukee mulls over the potential removal of I-794, a question on the forefront is whether the lessons learned from the Park East removal can be leveraged to ensure that this project has a lasting positive impact on equity in the city. The potential for a more equitable outcome in the I-794 removal project, if it comes to pass, may well hinge on the effectiveness of community engagement efforts throughout the process—a vitally important element Meerow et al. outline in their work on community resilience (Meerow, Pajouhesh, and Miller 2019). How committed are the agencies involved to procedural justice and participatory planning? So far, WisDOT seems to be doing a better job than they typically do at reaching community members, Glasemeyer and Plaisted both reported. Glasemeyer, who used to work for WisDOT, says their standard approach is to have a couple weekday evening meetings for each round of a study for a bigger project or less if it's a smaller project. In the past, Glasemeyer said he doesn't "think their practices have been the most conducive to engaging people who have multiple jobs or work third shift." Plaisted agreed that the outreach process has been better than normal, praising the involvement of the consulting team at HNTB, who he credits with the improvement. "Especially for DOT reputation, I think it's been strong," Plaisted said.

Still, challenges remain to engaging people throughout the city, not just those who live nearby. People with addresses within a close radius of the project are notified by WisDOT of the existence of a study, others must rely on local news or word of mouth. As far as Glasemeyer knows there isn't any canvassing happening, so WisDOT is likely to be missing a lot of people with their engagement because they aren't going directly into communities. Moreover, most of WisDOT's meetings are held in the downtown area, where there currently isn't as much of a residential base or active resident-led community organizations. Glasemeyer and Plaisted both noted that WisDOT did hold a meeting in the suburb of St. Francis in an attempt to get the perspectives of people living outside of the city, but they have not done

the same in the Near North Side or Near South Side neighborhoods of Milwaukee. Even once community members make it to a public meeting, it can be difficult for them to understand the more technical aspects of the project if they aren't communicated clearly and relevantly. This reality is underlined by best practice literature for transportation planning, which places emphasis on accessibility not only with regard to meeting times, locations, and services provided, but also when it comes to sharing information in a way that facilitates understanding (Stewart et al. 2018; Casello et al. 2015; Wagner 2013). Glasemeyer said this may be particularly challenging for the state because highway removal is out of their typical wheelhouse—"there's a lack of expertise in the state to then be able to communicate, what are these impacts? What does it mean for someone who lives three miles off the corridor who doesn't own a car?"

Overall, though equity considerations have played a more significant role in the conversations surrounding the I-794 removal than they did in the Park East, some interviewees believe these concerns still aren't receiving the attention they deserve. Plaisted said he sees more of a focus on "aesthetics and real estate development" than inequality. Glasemeyer himself said he struggled to draw equity into the conversation around I-794 because many of the people who would be most directly impacted by removal (such as Third Ward residents or people employed in high-paying Downtown office jobs) are wealthier and whiter on average than Milwaukeeans as a whole. In the engagement Glasemeyer has done around I-794, he hasn't met much resistance to the proposal so much as apathy, which to him speaks louder. "I don't have to convince somebody that it's a good idea," Glasemeyer said. "Instead, they're saying, 'but you're not actually seeing me and my needs right now.'" Understandably, many people have a hard time seeing highway removal as a priority when they are struggling with more urgent problems. As a result, Glasemeyer has begun to see the city's planning process for reclaimed space as having the greatest potential for advancing equity. The literature supports this approach, suggesting that using liberated parcels to meet the needs of underserved populations, particularly through affordable housing, is a key method for furthering distributional justice in highway removal (Patterson and Harley 2019; Boccon-Gibod 2023; Cervero, Kang, and Shively 2009).

Affordable housing has in fact emerged as a priority, especially since apartments in the Third Ward and Downtown currently go for higher than the city's average (Reid 2023). "It'd be a good opportunity right in the core of downtown to have some subsidized housing," said Muhs, while Leichtling noted that when the city controls the sale of land in high-demand areas they "have been generally prioritizing affordable housing." With the example of the gentrification around Park East, Muhs hopes the city will do better this time, incorporating units affordable at a range of income levels from the beginning. However, Glasemeyer and Leichtling both acknowledge what Leichtling calls the "challenging context" of the area around I-794, where high land values might attract developments like luxury apartment complexes which have sizable construction costs and rarely align with federal funding for affordability. Leichtling also remembers the heated debate during Park East removal that so frustrated Pam Fendt and the Good Jobs and Livable Neighborhoods coalition, over what requirements the city and county might be able to put on development and still manage to get responses to their Requests for Proposals (RFPs). "Things like percentage of required affordable housing or percentage of required open space or rules about wages and union status of the contractors," Leichtling said. "All those are equity considerations that would have to be thought through. Of those various things, which are the highest priority and which can you achieve? And then how do you design policies to achieve those public goals?" Even given these challenges, additional housing at any price point could help to reduce the strain on housing resources elsewhere, and property taxes charged on new development could support the city's services more broadly, Park said. In addition to affordable housing, Glasemeyer also sees potential for affordable commercial spaces that give local entrepreneurs a chance to get into the downtown market and communal spaces that feel welcoming to all—so called "public" spaces do not always feel inclusive in as segregated a city as Milwaukee.

In addition to pursuing equitable redevelopment of the area, Glasemeyer doesn't want the state to gloss over the fact that this change would affect people all over the city. The removal would change traffic patterns with the potential that the "diversion will occur on freeway ramps and streets that go through areas that are less wealthy and have more people of color than Downtown and the Third Ward,"

Muhs said, a possibility Leichtling also mentioned in regards to Port Milwaukee traffic. Muhs also said that he has heard concerns over the diversion of development dollars away from other parts of the city "that are just finally seeing some private investment" towards Downtown and the Third Ward, which already have a consistent flow of funds. This, Muhs said, assumes a "zero sum game" but is worth investigating nonetheless.

The new jobs created by the redevelopment are another way the highway's removal could potentially impact people who are not currently spending much time downtown, one interviewee said. That is, if development creates a wide variety of well-paying employment opportunities, including those accessible to people without college degrees. The mantra behind the Good Jobs and Livable Neighborhood Coalition—'downtown redevelopment for whom?'—once again resonates as many downtown office jobs require advanced degrees that don't necessarily align with the educational profile of unemployed Milwaukeeans and those that do often have low pay and no benefits (Dresser, Achiles-Sanchez, and Kanter 2022). The Common Council has been working to address some of this problem through the Community-Oriented, Responsible and Equitable (CORE) Development Zone resolution passed in 2019, which encourages developers to enter into community development agreements like the one negotiated between the Milwaukee Bucks and the Alliance for Good Jobs that set baselines for the wages of service-sector workers (Milwaukee, Wis. Common Council File #190592). Still, there is always more work to be done to create a truly inclusive economic environment, so the players in redevelopment may need to explore strategies to make sure that any new land uses provide well-paying job opportunities to those who need them the most.

For Glasemeyer, the I-794 removal would also be a step forward in the larger conversation about getting the highways that are more harmful from a racial equity standpoint removed or reworked. "If communities actually have a voice and a say and an understanding of what's going on, then we can have truly impactful conversations on what is the future of I-43, what is the future of I-94, right?" Glasemeyer added:

> “I care about I-794. I think we need to have this conversation. I think we need to remove it. There's so much that's pointing to it. But the truly transformative projects for racial equity for the City of Milwaukee are addressing other highways that currently we can't have those conversations about, because there's not the capacity and willingness at the state, and there's not the community capacity to even know that we can demand that.”

Once smaller spurs like I-794 are taken care of, Glasemeyer hopes there might be more capacity for reenvisioning the entire system in a more equitable way.

Chapter 5: Proposal Two: Stadium Freeway (WI-175) on the Near West Side

"The devil is in the details, right?" - Marcos Guevara

The final highway removal proposal this thesis will discuss was not on Norquist's radar, at least not outwardly. WI-175, also known as the Stadium Spur or the Stadium Freeway North, is on Milwaukee's near west side, in a quieter, more residential neighborhood that doesn't garner the type of attention that Downtown or the Third Ward do. The centerpiece of the area is Washington Park: a crown jewel of the Milwaukee County Parks system that was designed by the controversial figure Frederick Law Olmsted in 1895 (Swales, n.d.). Michael Murphy, who in 2024 completed his 35 year tenure as the Alderman representing many of the neighborhoods around the park, said Washington Park was intended to knit together the surrounding neighborhoods of Sherman Park, Uptown, Washington Heights, Washington Park, and Martin Drive. On a nice day, the park is lush and well-used, featuring a plethora of trails, a lagoon, and a band shell that hosts outdoor concerts in the summer. It's a peaceful place where you can almost forget you are in a city—that is, until you near the western edge of the park and the concrete trench that is WI-175 comes into view, a steady rumble of rushing cars accompanying it. If you wander further, you can look down on the thoroughfare through a chain link fence on one of the streets crossing over the highway. Yes, down—the Stadium Spur differs from I-794 and Park East in that it is not an elevated freeway. The six lane wide road traverses from Lisbon Avenue at its north end to Wisconsin Avenue to the south below street grade. According to Muhs, WI-175 was the first freeway built in Milwaukee—paved before the city handed over the freeway reins to the county and then the state. It cut through the edge of Washington Park and cleared out a handful of houses and businesses as Douglas Cain, a Project Manager at WisDOT, noted in an email. Today it is "a freeway stub" which provides quick access to I-94 at the Stadium Interchange (where the Milwaukee Brewers baseball stadium sits) but somewhat awkwardly empties out at its north end in a residential area.

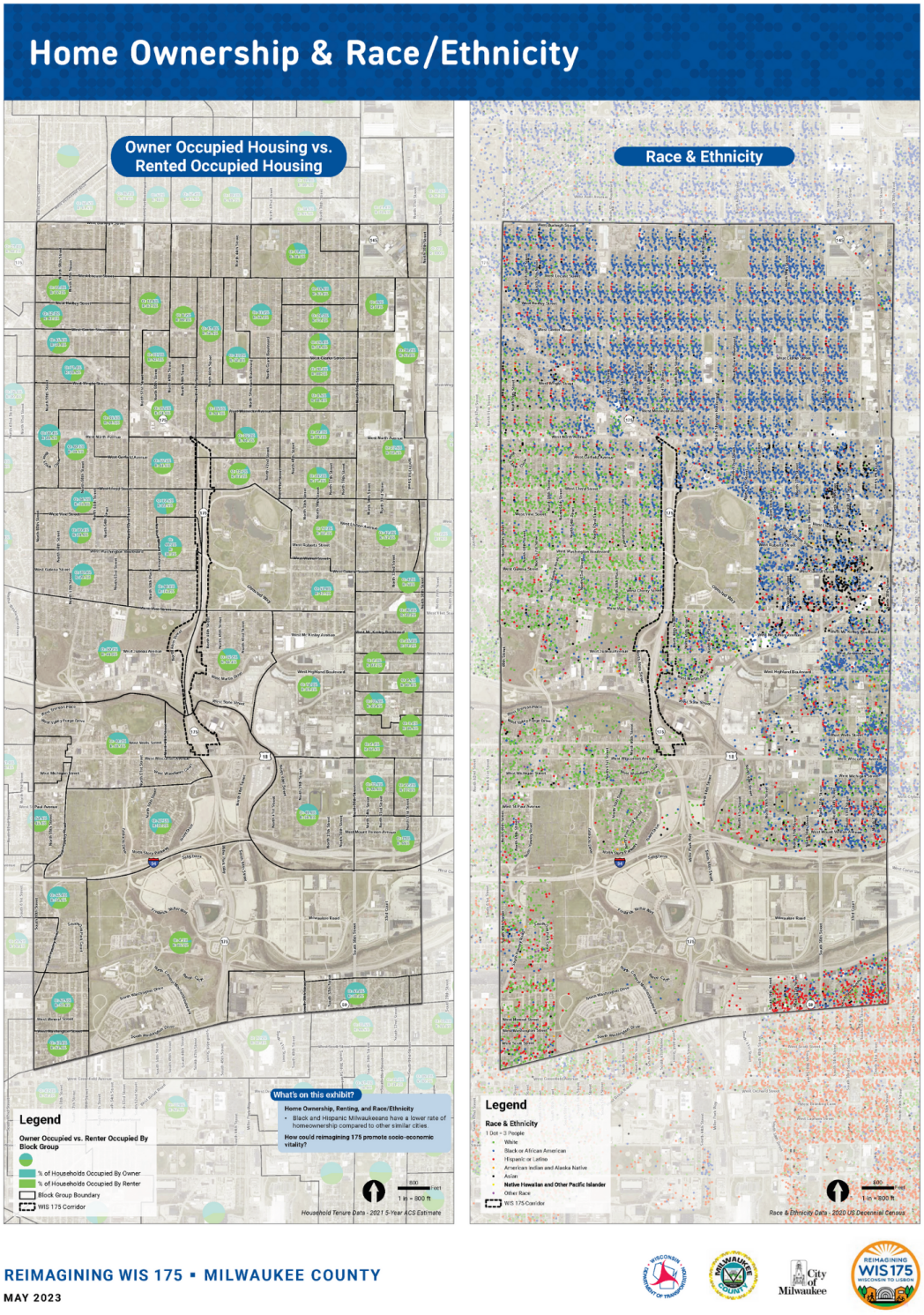

Figure 5.1: Home ownership and race/ethnicity breakdown of WI-175 corridor (Public information meeting presentation board by WisDOT, *Home Ownership Rates & Race/Ethnicity of study area residents,* 2023, Social Pinpoint, https://graef.mysocialpinpoint.com/wisdot175/wisdot-175-pim1).

More striking than the freeway itself is the line it seems to draw in the sand. Nearly every person interviewed described the racial and economic divide between neighborhoods on either side of WI-175—particularly the Washington Heights neighborhood to the west, which is predominantly white (65% in 2020) and affluent, and the Washington Park neighborhood to the east, which is largely Black (77% in 2020) and lower income (Figure 5.1) (Johnson 2022). In the neighborhoods to the east of the freeway, Murphy noted "there's a lot of disenfranchisement" and a more transient community due to a greater portion of the population being renters. Deja Garner, the Community Programs Director at Groundwork Milwaukee who lives just five minutes from WI-175, said the divide is obvious: "you can clearly see with your own eyes without even living in the community the differences." It is not clear how much of that division is due to the freeway. According to local historian John Gurda, the demographic differences predated the highway at least to some degree, as Black residents settled to the east of the highway in the 1950s-70s (City of Milwaukee DCD 2006; Sandler 2022). Even still, Muhs said, it remains a symbol of the divide and segregation that is "present in the community's concept of what the freeway does." Lindsey St. Arnold Bell, the Executive Director of an economic development nonprofit called the Near West Side Partners, said that this use of roads as barriers is a pattern throughout the area. Nearby roads like Vliet Street, Lisbon Avenue, and Sherman Avenue are "really overbuilt and built to sustain a population that was segregated," St. Arnold Bell explained. The divisions have left one interviewee and resident comparing the park itself to the Korean Demilitarized Zone, describing it as an area where the different communities meet but do not mingle.

The area around the highway is also somewhat of a healthy food desert. Many residents actually use WI-175 to get their groceries. Adrian Spencer, who is the Director of Neighborhood Engagement at the beloved community-based organization Rooted and Rising, said they have one Pick 'n Save in the community that is "woefully understocked and woefully understaffed." Outside of that, she reported that residents have to travel "six miles either way," a challenge for time-strapped residents or those who don't have access to a car (around 14% of households in the area) especially since buses do not run on WI-175 (WisDOT 2023f). Recent conversations around the potential for reimagining the freeway are rooted in its

perception as a divider and the unequal division of resources to communities on either side of the road. Removal of the Stadium Spur could be an opportunity to foster connections in a divided city and spark an economic renaissance in neighborhoods that have long lacked investment. However, this case also exemplifies the challenges of effectively using highway removal to deliver benefits to historically marginalized communities. There is a lot at stake. Decision makers and community members alike are circling a question: after all these years, is it time to fill the moat?

5.1 The Wisconsin 175 Visioning Study and the Origins of the Removal Debate

Evan Goyke admits he's willing to take a little credit for the idea to reimagine WI-175. Goyke is Milwaukee's newly elected City Attorney and a State Representative for Wisconsin's 18th Assembly District, one of the districts the freeway spur runs through. The credit is well deserved. Several of the other interviewees offered his name when asked where the conversation around redesigning the road started. Goyke said he has "always hated 175 as a consumer and a neighbor. It's a very poorly designed and overbuilt road." His early advocacy brought the roadway to the attention of Milwaukee's DCD and DPW, prompting them to undertake a small study they called the Wisconsin 175 Visioning Study in partnership with WisDOT. The Visioning Study, completed in 2017, examined possible reconfigurations of the northernmost part of the freeway from Lloyd Street to Lisbon Avenue (City of Milwaukee DCD 2017). In introducing the project, it described the divided context of the area, acknowledging that "while roads have the ability to link communities, they can also create physical and even intangible barriers between different neighborhoods and communities" (City of Milwaukee DCD 2017, 10). Included in the goals for the four alternative concepts the study set out to design were neighborhood cohesion, improved commercial vitality, safety for all users (including pedestrians and cyclists), and maintenance of traffic operations (City of Milwaukee DCD 2017).

The concept that was selected as the best alternative through the process of public and stakeholder engagement transformed the section of the freeway between Lloyd and Lisbon into a "heavily landscaped" at grade boulevard (City of Milwaukee DCD 2017, 20). The study authors explained that removal of the entire Stadium Freeway had been brought up in stakeholder conversations, but that it was

not in the scope of the study—though the concept selected "could potentially serve as a first step toward pulling the freeway back and restoring the urban fabric" (City of Milwaukee DCD 2017, 20). As a part of the study, the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) did a preliminary traffic analysis and determined that none of the alternative concepts would significantly impact traffic patterns (City of Milwaukee DCD 2017). Upon completion of the study, the Common Council approved it as part of Milwaukee's Comprehensive Plan and an amendment to the Washington Park Area Plan. So why is the freeway still in action today?

The study authors made it clear that WisDOT never intended to advance the Visioning Study's selection to completion. The project was squarely in the hands of the City of Milwaukee and never had funding for construction attached to it. Similarly to the current situation involving I-794, WI-175 had undergone some repairs and repaving shortly before the study's start which made WisDOT and SEWRPC less inclined to invest more in the road, and WisDOT explicitly stated that this section of the freeway was not a priority for them. It was also a completely different political context than we see today—at the time, Milwaukee's Mayor was Tom Barrett and Wisconsin's Governor was Republican Scott Walker. Moreover, then-Wisconsin Secretary of Transportation, Dave Ross, was not interested in engaging with the city on the matter, Muhs said. Despite the fact that the Visioning Study did not bring about change to WI-175, David Boucher, a resident, local business owner, and board member of the Washington Park Neighborhood Improvement District, saw it as a "a public acknowledgment that there was a real problem and one that was potentially solvable." The city, for its part, continued to advocate for the change, maintaining hope that they would get another swing at the project and trying to figure out a politically feasible way to move it forward.

5.2 I-94 Expansion Brings New Opportunity

Ironically, it's possible that the second study examining removal as a possibility for WI-175 would not have happened if it weren't for the expansion of I-94. In March of 2024, WisDOT received federal approval for their long planned expansion of 3.5 miles of I-94 on Milwaukee's west side from six to eight lanes (Smith 2024). The expansion, which is expected to cost around $1.2 billion and has faced

an onslaught of criticism from advocacy groups, includes a “right-sizing” of the Stadium Interchange (Smith 2024). Because of the price tag, the project required enumeration by the state legislature. Goyke, a Senior Democrat on the Budget Committee at the time, had a direct vote on the expansion and was one of the legislators who was vocally opposed to adding lanes, citing the environmental justice impacts of the project. Goyke said that in his opposition to the I-94 expansion he often brought up WI-175 because it meets I-94 at the Stadium Interchange. Reworking the interchange was a massive line item on the cost of the expansion. Goyke remembers it as somewhere around $450 million, approaching half the cost of the entire project. Goyke said one of the reasons the cost was so high was because they were trying to avoid reducing the speed of the drivers going through the interchange on WI-175. Seeing an opportunity, Goyke “lasered in on 175 and the massive cost to build up the I-94 infrastructure to accommodate 175,” a highway “that goes nowhere.” He was devastated that advocates against expansion did not seem to be winning on the question of racial and environmental justice, and so he tried to appeal to people concerned with the investment that the highway required.

“So I'm just throwing bombs at I-94, talking about wasting all this money on the 175 interchange,” Goyke explained. Finally, for the first time in his long fight against I-94, it seemed like someone was paying attention. Though I-94 expansion moved forward, and Goyke still counts it as a loss, opponents did get one key change included as a result of his advocacy: the DOT reimagined their initial design of Stadium Interchange. The new preferred configuration for the interchange is what is called a Diverging Diamond design (Figure 5.2), a much cheaper option which involves lowering the ramps for WI-175, adding two stop lights, and decreasing the speed limit for WI-175. Goyke called this change a “critical development” in the proposal to reimagine the Stadium Spur—“after the I-94 project is done [WI-175] will be fundamentally different because you will not be able to move through traffic at 55 miles an hour. And when you stop and regulate traffic at I-94, you really lose the nature of the freeway itself.” Goyke said the design will result in WI-175 no longer being a through highway. Instead, it will be broken into two segments that are both roughly two miles going north and south of I-94, with a speed limit of 35

miles per hour in the vicinity of the interchange. At that point, Goyke said, “why not reimagine the whole thing?”

Figure 5.2: Diverging diamond version of the Stadium Interchange showing WI-175 as the at-grade road (Rendering by WisDOT, *I-94 East-West Corridor Study, Diverging Diamond Interchange flyover,* 2022, The Daily Reporter, https://dailyreporter.com/2022/06/09/diverging-diamond-interchange-on-i-94-near-stadium-would-lower-project-costs/).

Goyke believes that the new interchange design is a part of the impetus behind WisDOT’s dedication of two to three million dollars in funding to a study they dubbed Reimagining WIS 175 which is examining removal as an alternative path forward for the Stadium Freeway North. He also thinks that the interchange will spell the end of WI-175 at some point in time, even if it is not the direct result of this round of planning via the Reimagining 175 study. “They're advancing a preferred option that will make reimagining 175 happen,” Goyke said. “It's going to feel like a totally different road. And if you're already [35 mph] with traffic lights, why not just make it 35 the whole way and make it look beautiful.” He explained that many of the opponents to turning WI-175 into a boulevard use the argument that it is a through highway and that changes will slow down commuters. Now, he has an easy response when opponents make their case: “The status quo is not remaining. You can choose option A or option B, but they're both different.”

5.3 Reimagining WIS 175

Milwaukee County and the City of Milwaukee have long been advocating for a full study considering removal of WI-175, and now it is finally happening. Though WisDOT representatives did not agree to an interview to discuss the ongoing project, WisDOT's Douglas Cain wrote in an email that Reimagining WIS 175 is "developing a broad range of viable alternatives for the future of the highway. These alternatives will be compared to screening criteria developed by the study team with the advisory groups' input before the study is complete in March of 2025." Goyke said the study uses the word "reimagining" for a reason; it is not going to get rid of the road but rather change what it looks like. While WisDOT is leading the study, there is a formalized partnership with Milwaukee County and the City of Milwaukee in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding, which Muhs said committed all three parties to contributing to shared goals and engaging in shared decision making. There have been two public meetings so far related to the study, with the latter presenting the design concepts for the segment of freeway which include a "baseline" existing road concept, concepts which end the freeway at various intersections (Figure 5.3), and concepts which tunnel a portion of the freeway (WisDOT 2024). Following the release of these designs, Goyke said next steps will be to see if there is consensus around a design concept that provides the most benefits to the community, assess costs associated with the design, and figure out how to get funding to make the changes. Importantly, the study would not include a NEPA process as a separate study would have to undertake the environmental impact analysis (WisDOT, n.d.-b). As of now, there is no funding attached to completing the project. Muhs said in that way it is more of a feasibility study, differing from the Lake Interchange Study in that "there is not an urgent infrastructure need from an asset management perspective to sink more money into that freeway" because it is not yet reaching the end of its usable life in the way I-794 is. Muhs added that the project is also different from I-794 and Park East because it is a depressed freeway, not an elevated one, "the actual removal act from an engineering perspective looks quite different and actually has very different impacts." WisDOT applied for a federal Reconnecting Communities grant to further study turning the Stadium Spur into a boulevard, but did not receive the grant (Jannene 2023b). Goyke and Murphy, who are well acquainted with

government decision-making processes in Wisconsin, both agreed that the funding piece of this reimagining may be where the most political controversy arises, with a new cast of characters potentially arriving on the scene to argue the investment is not worth it.

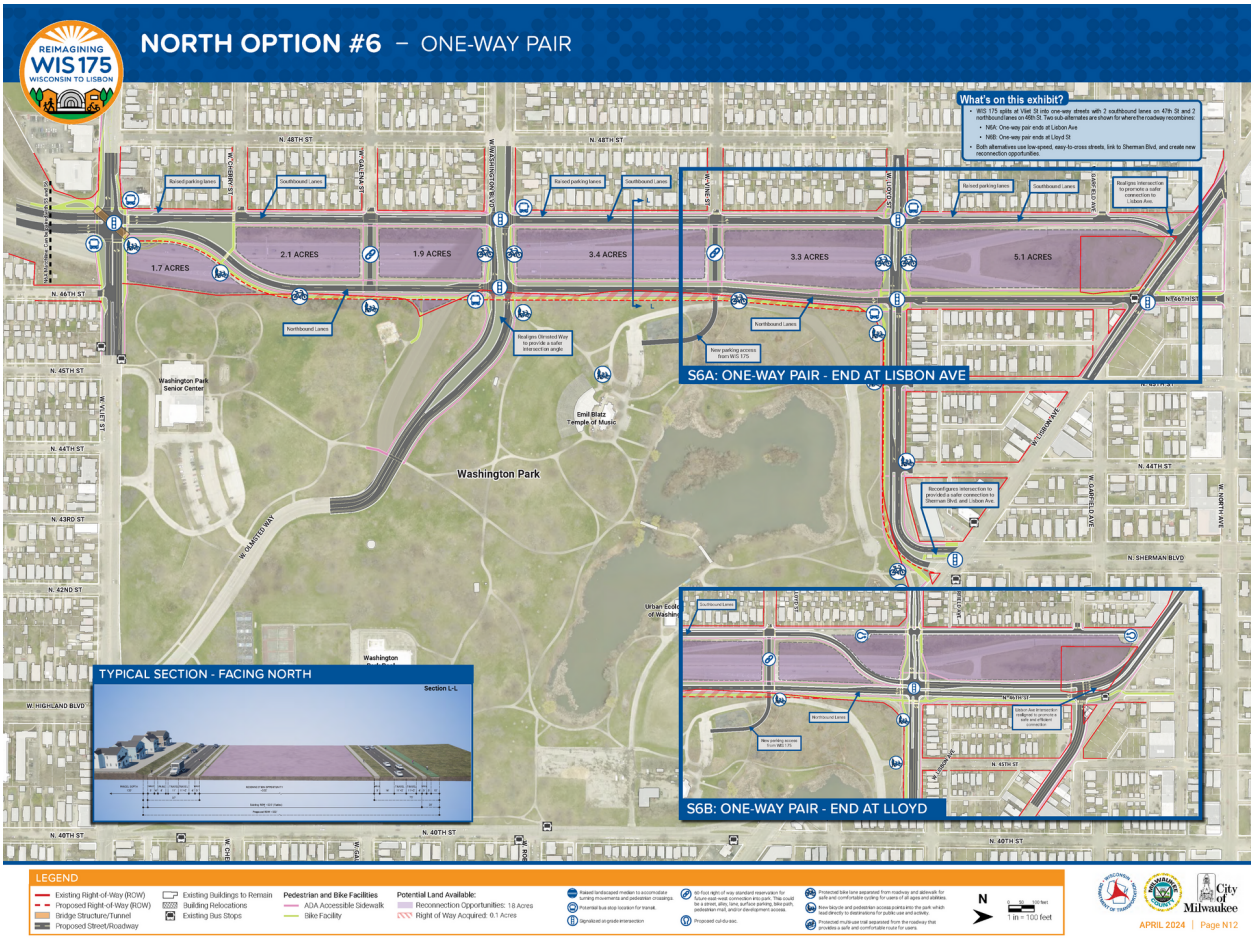

Figure 5.3: One design concept for the northern part of the freeway from the Reimagining WIS 175 study (Design concept by WisDOT, *North Option #6 – One-Way Pair,* 2024, Social Pinpoint, https://graef.mysocialpinpoint.com/wisdot175/wisdot-175-pim2/).

On the study webpage for Reimagining WIS 175, WisDOT itself wrote that the freeway "creates a disconnect between neighborhoods with a lack of pedestrian, bike, and bus access" (WisDOT, n.d.-b, para. 2). The study scope indicates a high level of community engagement, describes a "focus on reconnecting communities," and lists social and economic equity among the goals of reimagining the freeway (WisDOT, n.d.-b, para. 4). In addition to the two public meetings, the first of which was attended by 180 people, WisDOT has been meeting regularly with a Community Advisory Committee and

Technical Advisory Committee, attending and presenting at neighborhood events, and is using the web platform Social Pinpoint to solicit further comments (WisDOT, n.d.-b). They also held an open house in January of 2024. Postcards were sent to residences in the study area notifying them of the study and the initial public meeting as well as including instructions of how to use public transit to get to the Senior Center in Washington Park where the meeting was being held (WisDOT, n.d.-b). The postcards also made residents aware that Spanish speaking and other language interpreters were available on request, though Cain wrote that no such requests were made (WisDOT, n.d.-b). In their first public meeting, WisDOT seemed to probe at some of the bigger issues along the corridor as well as the potential for the future, asking for comments on questions like, "How could reimagining 175 promote socio-economic vitality?," "What opportunities do you see for vacant and publicly-owned land in the study area?", and "What would you improve about the system in your area that would make you more likely to take public transit?" (WisDOT 2023e). Boards placed around the room (Figure 5.4) showed the stark differences on either side of the freeway in metrics such as educational attainment, median income, and homeownership.

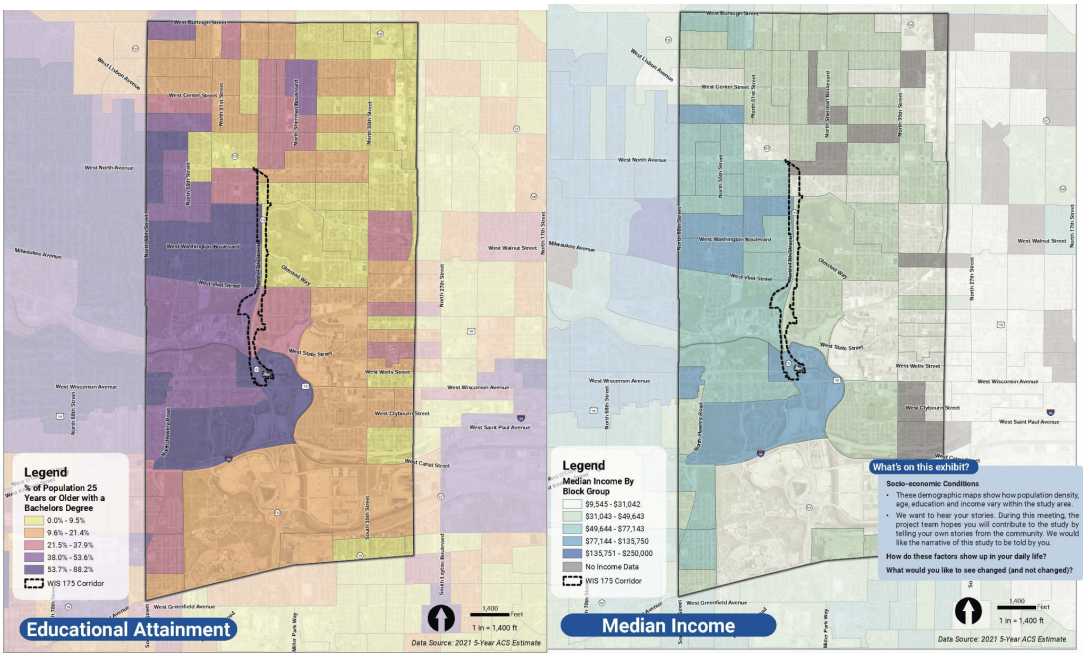

Figure 5.4: Educational attainment (left) and median income (right) along the freeway corridor (Public information meeting presentation board by WisDOT, *Demographic Profile,* 2023, Social Pinpoint, https://graef.mysocialpinpoint.com/wisdot175/wisdot-175-pim1).

Like in the cases of Park East and I-794, the reimagining of WI-175 has already sparked discussion over both potential pitfalls and opportunities. Advocates for boulevardization have rallied around what they see as social, environmental, and economic benefits to scaling down the road. Melissa Muller, a resident and president of the nonprofit Washington Park Neighbors, estimates half to three quarters of impacted neighborhood residents love the idea of taking it out "because it's going to knit together a neighborhood that's had this really divisive line drawn down the middle of it." Moreover, Muller thinks it will make the park a more accessible gathering space for the community. Marcos Guevara, Vice President, Strategy & Operations for Community Engagement at the Urban Ecology Center, agrees—"any effort that's going to increase the amount of natural space accessible to the people in our neighborhoods is a good thing." The park feels inaccessible today not just because of the physical presence of the freeway but also because of reckless driving in the area. Tracy Staedter, Executive Director of the Uptown Crossing Business Improvement District, which sits just north of the freeway's terminus, was shocked by the driving behavior of people getting on and off WI-175 when she moved to the neighborhood. St. Arnold Bell, too, lamented this reality, "Washington Park has two of the coolest playgrounds… to get to one you have to cross a highway off ramp, and to get to the other you have to navigate the most absurd five way intersection. And there is no way I would ever let a child do that...It's almost a joke that we do it that way. It almost says 'don't play here.'" Freeway removal, which sustainable transportation scholar Robert Cervero said functions like "a corridor-scale version of neighborhood traffic calming," could bring about changes in driving behavior and road design throughout the area (Cervero 2006).

For Goyke, reducing speeds is not just about safety, it is also a quality of life issue. Other interviewees agreed, saying that Washington Park is the closest major park for many community members, but that it suffers from air and noise pollution because of the freeway. Redesign into a smaller-scale boulevard could swap this pollution and high maintenance costs for economic opportunity, Goyke said. He called WI-175 "a canyon of cement that not enough people use to justify its existence" or its cost, which he said he has used to find unlikely allies across the aisle that oppose dumping money into an

overbuilt road. While Spencer sees the usefulness of the freeway, she also sees its transformation potential:

> "There's a huge opportunity here, if they listen to the community and provide more affordable housing, different types of housing, and help to transform this into a community that's walkable, that actually has access to fresh food, to restaurants… to shopping opportunities which this community is currently void of. So if the right thing is done with it, it could be amazing."

That said, "if the right thing is done with it" is a big caveat. There are significant concerns that even if developers or newfound owners of the land have good intentions, they will have difficulty building out the area because the market may not be strong enough. Remington (Economic Development Specialist with the DCD) has not done work directly on the project but lives nearby and worries "about the ability to develop the land under… in a way that serves the community for the better. Is it going to be vacant and serve as a blighting influence for twenty years?" The specter of Park East's slow development looms large, especially since, as Murphy said, "there's a lot of empty storefronts existing already right now." The literature on highway removal has yet to provide an answer to this question around developability of freed-up land in smaller cities. However, research on vacant land development strategies in shrinking cities provides some insight and suggests that in order to address developability issues cities (and states) may have to adjust land disposition policies away from a market-driven approach—a strategy which this thesis will circle back to (Hummel 2015; Hackworth 2014). Goyke, for his part, said he doesn't think this would be a problem since landowners would be looking for smaller scale development than they did in Park East (or would in I-794, for that matter) given the location. Still, others reiterated the reality that Deborah Archer wrote about in the Vanderbilt Law Review: that just removing a freeway does not necessarily solve the problems they see in the community (Archer 2020). Even Muller, a vocal advocate for removal, said that "just taking out a freeway is like putting a bandage on a gigantic gaping wound, right?" Garner agreed. "It's not like you remove it and then, now, all of a sudden, we have equity and equality in those neighborhoods. It's now still the same neighborhoods, essentially, but just with [the freeway] removed from it. So alongside removal, there has to also be plans to rectify some of the differences that we've seen between some neighborhoods as well."

Another major concern interviewees voiced was access. The freeway currently serves as the easiest way to get to I-94 and I-43, to Downtown, and to the South Side. Given the fact that many goods and services are not directly available within the neighborhoods around the Stadium Spur, losing that ease of access is meaningful. As Garner noted, “what we don't want to have happen is that we limit or decrease access to certain resources that people really need, without a replacement of those things within the community.” There are corporate entities that may share these concerns about efficient access, though the corporations with the largest presence in the corridor, such as Molson Coors, have not been vocally in support or opposed to reimagining the freeway, Murphy said. Likewise, the police and fire departments located along the corridor want to maintain smooth in and out access to the neighborhoods they need to get to. All of these users will still be able to proceed along the same route if they so choose, but it is likely to take slightly longer as a boulevard than it did as a freeway. For this reason, Murphy explained that some residents also worry that drivers will try to side step increased commute times by cutting through the neighborhoods. Like with I-794, people are concerned that a reimagined freeway won’t reduce reckless driving but will instead put reckless drivers in closer proximity to pedestrians, cyclists, and other community members. “Crossing over a freeway is not a pleasant activity, but it's a safe activity,” Muhs said. “And if we boulevard all this traffic and we don't do it sensitively, it will be much less safe. Which is, I think, a real thing to consider.” Research has yet to confirm or dispel this theory as it relates to highway removal specifically. However, there is some evidence to suggest that the presence of highways actually leads to an increase, not a decrease, in pedestrian fatalities in the surrounding area (Nehiba and Tyndall 2023). This is also a racial equity issue, as the same research found that Black residents were overrepresented in pedestrian deaths linked to highways (Nehiba and Tyndall 2023). Other concerns that were raised by at least one interviewee included cost, environmental impact of filling the freeway to grade, potential issues with maintenance if land is added to Washington Park, and displacement pressures, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Guevara put it best, “The devil is in the details, right? So we want to make sure to engage fully with the planning team and to bring along the communities that we're connected to, to make sure that their voice is part of the process.”

5.4 Community Outreach

Several of the individuals interviewed are members of WisDOT's Community Advisory Committee (CAC), which Cain wrote represents 15 of the 19 neighborhoods and business districts in the study area. Interviewees who are on the CAC include Melissa Muller of Washington Park Neighbors, Adrian Spencer of Rooted and Rising, Lindsey St. Arnold Bell of Near West Side Partners, and Tracy Staedter of the Uptown Crossing Business Improvement District. Muller said the purpose of this committee is to review and offer feedback on WisDOT's plans and inform them how to best reach constituents in impacted neighborhoods. In a way, CAC members serve as liaisons to their respective communities and to the state. Particularly in the early stages of the study, Spencer said she "served as a conduit to voice what the residents were saying, because at that time residents weren't involved in that portion of the study." Now that WisDOT is doing more direct outreach with communities, Spencer explained they "have been asked to help share the information." The organization she works for, Rooted and Rising, was described by multiple interviewees as being integral to community building efforts in Washington Park. Rooted and Rising already does regular neighborhood outreach—door knocking or hosting pop up events at least two times per week in the warmer months—and has been incorporating Reimagining WIS 175 content into that work since the beginning of the study. They receive a stipend for their contributions. Spencer shared:

> "We're just doing what we normally do…This is such an important message that we need folks to know what's happening… this is one of the kind of sticking points that we need people to tap into, and not be caught off guard by it. There's a ton of change that could potentially come with this, and it will affect the residents of this community."

Spencer is deeply committed to ensuring that community members' voices are heard. She, and other members of the CAC, are "working very diligently to try to get folks in the room that otherwise haven't been able to show up or weren't invited."

Similarly to the I-794 WisDOT study, interviewees overall felt that the state has outperformed their reputation when it comes to community engagement. It seems even the consultants agree. Staedter overheard a GRAEF consultant on the study say that this particular WisDOT project has them interacting

with community members far more than they have on others, Marcos Guevara, who is the Vice President, Strategy & Operations for Community Engagement at the Urban Ecology Center, an environmental education nonprofit that has a large physical presence in Washington Park, agreed that the process has been "as accessible as possible" and that the community members that have not been engaged are the "constituent communities that never show up, because they're in subsistence mode." It is those communities that CAC members and other civically engaged residents are concerned are still not being reached by WisDOT's efforts. There are multiple barriers to engagement faced by these hard-to-reach constituents that are difficult to overcome even when project leaders have the best of intentions. Community members who rent tend to be harder to reach, especially because of the high turnover rate in rental units (Einstein, Palmer, and Glick 2019; Yoder 2020). And like Guevara noted, some residents are just focused on meeting their basic needs and don't have time or energy to attend a meeting about a theoretical change happening years down the line—a barrier to participation which appears often in literature on participatory planning (King, Feltey, and Susel 1998). Even if they wanted to, residents working two jobs or third shifts often can't make evening meetings, when public outreach is typically scheduled (King, Feltey, and Susel 1998; Casello et al. 2015; Wagner 2013). "The people that I do see showing up to attend these meetings are more professional…they have a nine to five job that allows them to be off," Spencer said.

Spencer added that she is not sure who on the WisDOT team is doing one-on-one outreach to residents. It seems like a lot of it is falling on the CAC team and that WisDOT is mainly relying on their established communication channels which tend to get the same people in the room again and again. Even Spencer, whose job requires her to be an engaged neighbor, has not encountered WisDOT's study in the places where she gets her news—on TV, on the radio, or on social media sites beyond what Rooted and Rising has been posting. This fact alone suggests WisDOT is missing large swaths of the population. Spencer also remembers showing up to the first public engagement meeting in May of 2023, shortly after being on-boarded to the CAC, and looking around at all the people present, wondering "how did they find out about this? And why doesn't anybody [on the east side of the freeway] know?" Spencer, who is a

Black woman, said she did not see a lot of people of color at that first meeting, and that when she attends events she has continued to feel like “one of one” in the room. “I feel as though I'm speaking for all of us,” Spencer added.

Distrust is the status quo for many community members, and for good reason. Government agencies like WisDOT have not always had the best interests of the communities in mind, particularly communities of color. The history of highways in Milwaukee alone emphasizes this fact—Spencer does not want communities to be blindsided by changes like Bronzeville residents were when bulldozers showed up to clear their homes. “History tells me, pay attention, right?,” Spencer said. And it goes beyond just the agencies themselves, as Lamont Davis, a resident and Executive Director of the Milwaukee Community Land Trust (MCLT), explained :

> “[constituents] don't trust the $1 million firm that [WisDOT] hired, not because of any personal slight but because of feeling like this is a repeat of the same old story. Folks don't come into these communities to ask folks about what they should do, unless there's some real dollars at stake, and then often they disregard what you have to say."

There’s a sense that community input may not be valued or even that the project won’t come to fruition, and the workshops or public meetings will have been a waste of their scarce time. The recent memory of the Wisconsin 175 Visioning Study burns bright in people’s minds and without funding attached to Reimagining WIS 175 it feels like things could stall out in the same fashion. St. Arnold Bell said “residents can start to get really frustrated, like, ‘But why should I participate in this? Because it's not going to happen anyway.’ Or, alternatively, ‘Hey, I participated in this and we made this great plan, why isn't it happening?’” Better communication around timelines could help sustain engagement over the long period it takes to complete a project, St. Arnold Bell added. Only time will tell if decision makers, including WisDOT and the state legislature, will value the voices of the community when it comes to the freeway—whether that means keeping the highway with a better design or turning it into a boulevard. Spencer says that she is optimistic given current city leadership “that the work that we're doing to get people informed and get people to show up will actually pay off in [decision makers] taking those opportunities to listen to folks and implement some components of what folks are saying.” At the very

least, by partnering with WisDOT to do outreach Spencer hopes to take away the ability of decision makers to plead ignorance to community desires. “We want to take those types of excuses away.”

Though many of the interviewees commended WisDOT’s efforts, they also had ideas for how to improve community engagement, some of which they have already passed on to study leaders. Community-based organizations like Rooted and Rising and MCLT provide a model for what works, making an effort to meet people where they are rather than expecting residents to show up to public meetings in settings where they may not feel comfortable—a model that is backed by best practice research on community engagement (Bergstrom et al. 2014; Karner and Marcantonio 2018). Davis said for one of his MCLT projects in Lindsay Heights he or other representatives of the organization attended somewhere in the realm of ten to twelve community meetings just to connect with people. “We were at house and resource fairs.” Davis went on, “We attended resident circles.” This helped them earn trust and develop meaningful and lasting relationships with community members. Guevara, who brings extensive community engagement experience to the table, suggested that they convene smaller groups of people with WisDOT in a more relaxed setting so that they can get their questions answered, a suggestion that he says WisDOT has been open to. Guevara said to bring people into such a gathering the Urban Ecology Center would rely on their partnerships with Rooted and Rising, nearby schools including Washington High School and Transition High School, and another trusted CBO, Fathers Making Progress.

The planning team at WisDOT has also been willing to discuss the subject of compensation to make giving feedback worth people’s time, another strategy that appears in best practice research (Luluquisen and Pettis 2014). For Guevara, compensation is crucial: “because in capitalism time is money and people who live in precarious conditions need to watch their time, right? Because it's the only resource they have any control of.” Spencer agreed that stipends would be useful as would alternative meeting times and childcare provided at the meetings. She has also pushed WisDOT to give them more information that organizers can pass on to the community members they are connected to. “At first they gave us these little door hangers,” which Spencer said wasn’t sufficient. She asked them to instead “give us the information that you shared at the partners meeting, so we can walk through with residents and

answer their questions. Because you all don't have the capability to do that, and we do and we're trusted." One community stakeholder group that Spencer would like to see more of is local businesses, which she said don't seem particularly informed and would be greatly impacted by any changes to the road. Ultimately, given the ambitious commitment to opening up the process he has seen from WisDOT study leaders, Guevara believes that "if [the study's outcome] doesn't respect and center the community's best interest it is a commentary on where we are nationally rather than on the actual process."

5.5 Equity Takes Center Stage

The Stadium Spur project differs from I-794 or Park East because equity has been a key part of the conversation from the beginning—since Goyke first identified the freeway as a problem, through the first Wisconsin 175 Visioning Study, and into today's discussions. "The way that I can identify equity being integrated to this process is that, unlike in years past, conversations are being had with folks from the community upfront," said Spencer. "And we're not, you know, catching up at this point." The blatant disparities between the communities on either side of the highway cannot be ignored and were largely the impetus behind studying boulevardization. WisDOT, the county, and city are acknowledging the "real, stark, dividing lines in the city and trying to figure out if there's some way that physical changes to that road will have positive benefits to the neighborhoods that are on the wrong side of some of those disparities," Leichtling said. He added that during the original Visioning Study residents expressed that they felt like the freeway was routed there because "a decision was made years ago to prioritize commute times for people who are going to the suburbs over the lived day to day experience of people in the actual neighborhoods." To rectify this, Leichtling said, all parties involved in revisioning need to make sure that the needs of residents who have been the most negatively impacted by the presence of the freeway are lifted up. The people for whom, as Goyke put it, "the freeway infrastructure stagnates development and growth and opportunity." St. Arnold Bell added that impacted residents should be part of the process from the beginning to the end: shaping what the new road and the surrounding area looks like, being a part of the development, and getting to participate as an end-user of whatever goes in where the freeway was.

Some have tried to argue that WI-175 does not have an equity problem because its construction did not disproportionately displace Black residents in the way that the construction of I-43, I-94, or the never built Park West did. WI-175, they say, was not the freeway that destroyed Bronzeville. A Milwaukee Magazine article titled "The Debate Over Replacing Highway 175 Is Ignoring a Crucial Piece of History" said that the Stadium Freeway North "doesn't have the racially fraught history of other Milwaukee freeways" (Sandler 2022). Goyke shakes his head at this as an argument against repairing the relationship between neighborhoods, saying it was "weaponized successfully by people that were against the project anyway" and those who like the segregation that WI-175 maintains. He said he recently overheard someone talking about their concerns that bringing the freeway up to grade would advance "the creep of the city." Goyke interpreted this language as thinly-veiled racism, adding, "they like the moat."

Like Glasemeyer with I-794, Goyke thinks the city's post removal planning process for land use could be the most powerful tool for advancing equity. He imagines a future where the freeway corridor serves a similar purpose to the historic Bronzeville community that was destroyed by I-43, as "a thriving predominantly Black-owned, Black-led business corridor that reflects the demographics of the neighborhood." To actualize such a future, Goyke and St. Arnold Bell both suggested that the city should intentionally engage Black and brown developers as part of the visioning process. Such a corridor could help to heal the real division, which Spencer said is due to the attitudes and biases of residents, not the freeway itself. If there are restaurants and shops and cafes added where the freeway stands "folks are going to patronize them. It's going to be people from all the neighborhoods because [commercial space] doesn't currently exist right now. So it's going to become a mixing pot," she said.

Maintaining access to key goods and services in other parts of the city that aren't able to be added through development is another priority for ensuring an equitable outcome, St. Arnold Bell said. Muhs added that while the negative impacts of the freeway, such as the increased health risk associated with added vehicle emissions, are disproportionately borne by communities of color and particularly Black communities in the area, the access the freeway provides is also largely to communities of color. He went on to say that there's a contingent of those communities that are asking of the freeway reimagining, "Is

this the white progressives trying to cut us off?" While Muhs does not think the problem of access is unsolvable, and residents would still be able to use the road to get where they need to go, he does think it is vital that advocates for removal consider this perspective. "It's important for them to understand that this is a straight conduit to Walmart, Target, grocery stores," Muhs said. "Residents absolutely are like 'I don't want it to take five minutes longer to get to the grocery store.'" On the other hand, while some clearly see the freeway revisioning as taking away access, or at least slowing it down, redesign could potentially mean expanded access for residents who don't own a car because it could allow for better public transportation and multimodal facilities like bike lanes. "The way 175 is designed today, you basically cannot run transit on it that effectively," Muhs explained. A boulevard could change that, allowing for a north-south bus route that connects communities to Miller Parkway where those big box stores are located. "For anyone who's willing to ride the bus, you actually could significantly increase access to those resources," he said. That is, of course, if you could get funding for such a bus route.

5.6 Gentrification and The Future of the Land Underneath the Freeway

Even the most well-meaning attempts to improve quality of life for residents, such as removing a highway, can result in inequitable outcomes because they increase desirability of a neighborhood and therefore raise property values. pricing out the most housing-cost-burdened individuals and small businesses in commercial spaces. This process can be amplified when outside development speculation arrives on the scene, a problem Boucher refers to as "Milwaukee's love affair with bright, shiny, new, expensive things." Muller said the fear of gentrification and subsequent displacement is very present. She heard from a community member who lives in the Washington Park neighborhood and felt that turning the freeway into a boulevard "just meant to them that the wealthy folks over on the other side of the freeway, to the west, were now going to come and start buying up properties in Washington Park, and then pushing them out." Staedter, too, recognized this reality and the uphill battle required to address it: "Property values are going to start to skyrocket…how do you prevent people that are living in the neighborhood from being forced out?"

Goyke said that while he thinks the fear of gentrification is valid, it is the polar opposite of the problem the freeway-adjacent neighborhood faces right now. There is currently a lot of vacant land in the area. That said, it would be useful to get ahead of the issue so that it isn't too late by the time decision makers start to think about it. While Milwaukee does not have a city-wide anti-displacement ordinance in place, Goyke referenced the 2018 Anti-Displacement Plan as well as the Anti-Displacement Neighborhood Preference Policy, which "designates 20% of the affordable housing units receiving city assistance within a development to be prioritized for existing residents of the zip code where the development is located" (Milwaukee, Wis. Common Council File #230878). The Preference Policy, which was reauthorized last year to continue through 2026, applies to four zip codes in Milwaukee, including 53208 which encompasses many of the neighborhoods near to the freeway (Milwaukee, Wis. Common Council File #230878). Goyke suggested this policy could be extended to any additional neighborhoods which might be threatened by rising property prices as a result of changes to WI-175 and that the city could go further to enact development priorities and parameters for city-owned land within a certain distance of the former freeway. St. Arnold Bell added that an anti-displacement fund could be created like the one now available to certain homeowners in the vicinity of the former Park East.

Staedter brought up another avenue for preserving affordability. Namely, putting some of the land freed up by the freeway removal into a community land trust: a nonprofit corporation that permanently holds land in trust for the public benefit (Grannis 2021). When community land trusts acquire property, they permanently split the title of the property into two pieces: a legal title and an equitable title. The legal title is held by the land trust and the equitable title is held by the beneficiary. In the case of a community land trust the beneficiary is the wider community. Community land trust leadership is legally responsible for protecting the interests of the public in line with the trust's bylaws which typically focus on preserving land for the purpose of maintaining affordability of homes and commercial spaces, resisting displacement through gentrification, and giving communities control over assets (Grannis 2021). The community land trust owns the land under the affordable housing (or commercial space, etc.), but qualifying individuals are able to own the structures on it and use the property through a long-term "ground lease" (Grannis

2021). Because the deeds for the land and building are separate, the land is not subject to market pressures, though the homeowners are able to accumulate a small amount of equity through the appreciation of a structure's value when and if they sell it (Figure 5.5) (Bourassa 2006; Grannis 2021). Community land trusts typically have a governing board that includes leaseholders of land trust property, community members, and representatives from government bodies, other nonprofits, or foundations (Grannis 2021). This makeup ensures that the governing board will always maintain an interest in keeping the housing affordable and allows for meaningful community control over decisions made about the land held in trust (Bourassa 2006; Grannis 2021; Malsin 2020; "Housing & Community Development Benchmarks & Policy Platform," n.d.). Davis, who runs the Milwaukee Community Land Trust (MCLT), the only community land trust in the Milwaukee area, said this continued investment in the community is one of the key differences between community land trusts and other ownership models—they can be a "developer that doesn't go away." In addition to affordable housing and commercial space, community land trusts have flexibility to use the land for other purposes, such as urban gardens, parks, or community solar (Bourassa 2006; Grannis 2021). Davis described two other ways the land trust homeownership model reduces homeowner expenses: homeowners only pay taxes on the value of the home, not the land itself, and land trusts are able to bring in additional affordability subsidies. Moreover, they are not profit-driven entities and therefore have a more modest "bottom line" than traditional landowners.

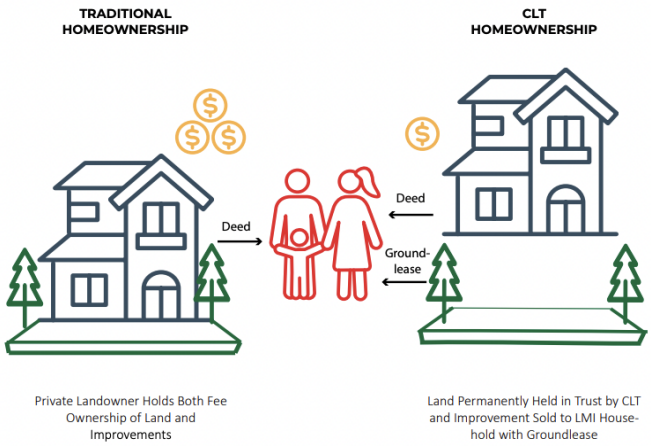

Figure 5.5: Community land trust model (Graphic by Jessica Grannis, *Traditional Homeownership vs. CLT Homeownership,* 2021, Georgetown Climate Center, https://cltweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Community_Land_Trust_Report_2021.pdf).

It appears Staedter was not the only one thinking about the potential for community land trusts to contribute to anti-displacement efforts around the Stadium Spur. WisDOT themselves reached out to Davis for what he called a "productive" conversation around the role MCLT could play in the reimagining of WI-175. Davis is a strong believer that MCLT could be a part of the solution to gentrification if the Stadium Freeway North were turned into a boulevard. Not only could they support ongoing community engagement efforts and act as a convener, MCLT "could really be a partner in this initiative by creating permanently affordable housing," Davis said. This could be in the form of both affordable rentals as well as home ownership units, which they are already building and selling in other parts of the city. MCLT is also prepared to hold land in trust for other community purposes including green space, affordable commercial, or other public spaces. Davis said that other community land trusts are doing this type of work—he referenced one in Anacostia outside of Washington, DC, which he said "had such a great common space that was owned by their land trust. And I want to say it was something like 200 businesses who use this space…I could see us definitely being an owner of a mixed use development." When investing so many public dollars in a project, Davis thinks "there should be some level of community ownership" of land in the former right of way as well as investment in spaces that are intended for community gathering. He would be honored to be a part of bringing that to reality. In doing so, the mission for Davis and MCLT would be to "reverse some of these historical inequities, and particularly things that were caused by freeways going through urban communities, creating this kind of a tale of two cities."

In addition to parcels under community land trust ownership, interviewees offered visions for how land currently encumbered by the freeway could be used. Nearly all interviewees mentioned the need for quality housing across income levels— "a mix of housing options that both add to the tax base and the population, but also serve the needs of the very diverse neighborhoods," Leichtling said. A mixed-use approach with residential and commercial going hand in hand could align well with the neighborhood's needs, particularly the need for better access to fresh, healthy food. Those types of resources are the reason residents feel like they need the freeway now, Spencer said, so bringing them in is important.

Dedicated public transit and/or bike lanes in the right of way could make transportation more truly multi-modal in the area, St. Arnold Bell said. Interviewees were divided over whether or not land should be added to Washington Park, with some advocating for additional green space and others citing that the park is already quite large and Milwaukee County Parks struggles to maintain even its existing footprint. Guevara, who said the Urban Ecology Center would be in support of any plan that would provide "safe places for people to connect with nature," added that there is also serious access work to be done on the east and north side of the park in terms of difficulty of crossing roads. Without the freeway the access on the west side will likely be improved, "so some intentional work needs to happen in the park to make [other access points] equally accessible," Guevara said. Like I-794, ownership of the parcels occupied by the freeway is mixed between Milwaukee County, which holds title to the majority of the land, as well as the City of Milwaukee and WisDOT, each of which have different rules for land disposition. WisDOT has the most restrictive rules—as described in the I-794 case study, WisDOT is required by Wisconsin Statute 84.09 (5) to sell surplus land via public sale at or above the appraised value or to another governing body at fair market value—a reality which may limit the potential public good uses of the land they own. Ultimately, it will need to be a team effort between all three parties, potentially including legislative bodies at both the local and state level, to ensure that post-removal planning and development benefits all community members, not just property owners and investors.

5.7 Highway or No Highway, Ensuring a Better Future

The future of the Stadium Spur is far from decided. For Spencer, whether or not the highway stays is less important than whether community voices are incorporated into what the area looks like moving forward. "What I would hope for is that [planners] will really take into account what residents put forward, and if folks feel like the freeway itself is the value that they will then think about how to redesign it so that it doesn't flood, so that it holds up, and so that it is safe, so that it still serves this purpose," Spencer said. If the residents believe there is a better way to use the freeway land, she hopes that those land use decisions are controlled by community members. Garner agrees—she would rather have the process "take a little bit longer because we're doing our due diligence when it comes to the

community" than have something rushed through. At the end of the day, Garner said, "you can tell when something is community led, because then it gets utilized by the community." The status quo for the area is deeply inequitable and is defined by division. Highway or no highway, something has to change, and it will require an immense degree of creativity and humility from officials at all levels of government. Garner put it best:

> "There is a way to make the city more vibrant, more livable, more walkable, where our reliance on cars doesn't have to be [what it is today]...This is a huge, huge deal. It's a lot of money we're talking about. We're talking about access. We're talking about transportation. We're talking about some of the top things that are issues within the city…the status quo, and what we may be used to doing, may not be the answer."

Chapter 6: (De)Paving the Way to Climate Resilience and Sustainability in Milwaukee

"It's our job to be thinking about what will make Milwaukee the most sustainable and resilient city"

- Samuel Leichtling

Milwaukee, like the rest of the world, faces serious challenges to becoming a truly sustainable and climate resilient city. In many ways Milwaukee is lucky—its location on the shore of one of the largest freshwater lakes in the world and its relatively temperate climate protect it from some of the most extreme climate concerns. Even still, there are real impacts that Milwaukeeans are beginning to feel as a result of climate change, and the city is necessarily concerned with lowering its own emissions and lessening the strain it places on the planet's resources. The City of Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD) have each published their own respective plans addressing these challenges—MMSD published a Resilience Plan in 2019 and the city published the Milwaukee Climate & Equity Plan in 2023. Both plans discussed the major climate threats the city is facing including extreme storms, flooding, and extreme heat exacerbated by the urban heat island effect (City of Milwaukee 2023a). These types of events have already incurred real costs to Milwaukee, not just financially but also in terms of lives lost. In 2010, flooding in the city resulted in approximately $30 million in damages to structures (City of Milwaukee 2023a). In 1995, a heat wave took a human toll when there were 91 deaths countywide, largely in low income neighborhoods (City of Milwaukee 2023a). Climate models predict events like these occurring with increasing frequency in coming years. For example, what used to be a 100-year-flood in 1961 now has a 1 in 41 chance of striking in any given year (City of Milwaukee 2023a).

The plans also discussed how the unique built and socioeconomic environments in Milwaukee contribute to climate vulnerability. Currently, around 50% of Milwaukee's land cover is impervious, which adds to the risk of flooding and amplifies heat on warm days (City of Milwaukee 2023a). Much of Milwaukee's infrastructure—including its freeways—is aging and there are significant costs of maintenance and repair, even when climate stressors are not factored in (MMSD 2019). These are costs that will overwhelm responsible agencies according to an analysis of expected revenues included in the regional transportation plan (MMSD 2019). Moreover, MMSD noted that Milwaukee is limited in its

ability to expand its property tax base, which it needs to do in order to pay for city services, due to the fact that there is very little land available for new development—a problem which highway removal might be able to address (MMSD 2019). Both MMSD and City of Milwaukee described how inequality and segregation are also expected to worsen outcomes from climate change and amplify the impact for some community members. MMSD outlined the “economic and educational disparities” across the region which “are exacerbated by limited housing and transportation choices that reduce access to opportunities in more affluent outlying communities” (MMSD 2019, 9). The Climate & Equity Plan more specifically called out the racial disparities in “every economic category including employment, income, homeownership, and energy burden” (City of Milwaukee 2023a, 9). It also stated that addressing these disparities is a “co-equal goal” of the plan and is directly related to reaching climate goals (City of Milwaukee 2023a, 21).

6.1 Highway Removal and Climate Planning

Although neither MMSD nor the City of Milwaukee mentioned highway removal as part of their plans for climate resilience, several of the solutions put forth in the plans align with removal. In MMSD’s plan, one of their action strategies is to “Accelerate Local Efforts To Improve Communities By Replacing Grey Impervious Surfaces With Green Spaces" in an effort to reduce runoff, flooding, and extreme heat as well as energy costs associated with air conditioning (MMSD 2019, 21). To do so, they suggest transforming publicly owned impervious space into green infrastructure, a tactic that would be achievable through use of parcels freed up by highway removal (MMSD 2019). Likewise, their goal to “Improve Public Spaces, Community Health And Reduce Crime Through Environmental Design" could be advanced through highway removal. Park East removal includes several examples of added public space and additional public space has been brought up as an important future land use consideration for both the I-794 and WI-175 projects (MMSD 2019, 33). Finally, the plan lists as an action strategy to “Develop and Implement Sustainable Practices Through Bids And Businesses Across The Region” (MMSD 2019, 33). As described by Leichtling and others, owners of post-removal parcels of land have the power to include stipulations as part of their Requests for Proposals. Though Leichtling did not reference them specifically,

requirements for LEED or Passive House certifications or other sustainable practices could be incorporated in RFPs.

In the City of Milwaukee's plan, several of the "10 big ideas" for advancing climate equity in Milwaukee could be applied in the case of highway removal. The first big idea, a Green Jobs Accelerator, aims to "increase the number of people of color employed in family-supporting green jobs" (City of Milwaukee 2023a, 8). One of the pathways suggested to achieve this goal is through "public benefits agreements on government-funded projects," such as the one which applied to the redevelopment of county-owned land in the Park East project (City of Milwaukee 2023a, 8). A second big idea, "New Net Zero Energy Homes" called for the building of new affordable, energy-efficient, multi-family housing stock wherever possible, particularly on vacant publicly-owned land (City of Milwaukee 2023a, 8). The plan outlined that new builds should "(1) Reduce environmental impacts, (2) Be affordable, and (3) Provide added health and social benefits to the residents" (City of Milwaukee 2023a, 54). New housing built in the former right-of-way of I-794 and/or WI-175 could align with these goals. Adding more housing sustainably may also be important if Milwaukee begins to attract so-called "climate migrants" from other areas of the country and world who are looking for a place to live that experiences less extreme climate conditions, a possibility the plan notes (City of Milwaukee 2023a).

The big idea that perhaps aligns most closely with highway removal efforts is "People Centered Transportation and Urban Design," an idea which aims to make it easier for people to get around Milwaukee without a car and to redesign communities so that everything that people need is within walking distance (City of Milwaukee 2023a, 8). Since approximately 21% of Milwaukee's emissions come from transportation and around 71% of the city's commuters drive to work by themselves, this would be an important step for mitigating climate change (City of Milwaukee 2023a). The plan goes as far as to say "the choices we make when allocating funds for transportation and implementing infrastructure improvements can have a positive effect, reducing our impact on the climate while improving the lives of all residents" (City of Milwaukee 2023a, 67). This statement is hard to square with continued investment in Milwaukee's urban freeways, particularly those which are overbuilt for current

usage like I-794 and WI-175. The plan pointedly remarks as much, describing how Wisconsin's $750-1000 per capita yearly investment in roads and highways contributes to inequities and adds harmful pollution (City of Milwaukee 2023a). This spending focus leaves out low-income residents and residents of color, who take the most walking and bike trips of any residents and use public transit at much higher rates (City of Milwaukee 2023a). In place of this investment, the City of Milwaukee directly calls for "redirecting funding that is currently supporting the fossil fuel economy," hoping to instead see government investment (across local, county, and state levels) in walkable, bikeable neighborhoods and public transit (City of Milwaukee 2023a, 117). Their strategic approach would include improving and expanding the frequency, speed, and reliability of public transit, prioritizing adding pedestrian and bike infrastructure, and establishing land use policies that reduce vehicle mile traveled (City of Milwaukee 2023a). That last strategy is made more difficult by state law which "prohibits municipalities from requiring that a portion of units in new residential developments be affordable" including through density bonuses—"situations where a developer may agree to provide affordable housing in exchange for additional development entitlements" (City of Milwaukee 2023a, 76).

Two final big ideas which could be applied to highway removal, depending on the land use of post-removal right of way parcels, include "Greening the Electric Grid" and "Protect and Restore Nature in the City" (City of Milwaukee 2023a, 8). The former idea describes how the city has begun to use publicly-owned land for large solar energy projects through We Energies' Solar Now Program, including one on a former landfill (City of Milwaukee 2023a). Though implementing such a project on former freeway land would require further feasibility analyses and a holistic approach to developing adjacent parcels, it is an idea worth considering. Finally, like MMSD, the city calls for removing excess asphalt and replacing it with green space to address the urban heat island effect, reduce flooding risk, and improve public health (City of Milwaukee 2023a).

6.2 The View from the Ground

In addition to these overarching climate resilience and sustainability planning efforts, there are many Milwaukee community members who are exploring how highway removal fits into the city's

climate goals. When the Park East came down in the early 2000s, the conversation around climate change was nowhere near as comprehensive as it is today. Even then, however, they had an eye towards increasing the density of housing and jobs in a mixed-use environment. As Peter Park said, they "certainly knew that as an alternative to a suburban office park or suburban office building this would be the most sustainable pattern of development or growth in the region." Both Alyssa Remington and Park said that there were missed opportunities with regard to increasing the climate resilience and sustainability of development. Remington pointed out that there might have been a way to "maybe utilize city land for stormwater …keeping specific spaces green for that rather than pushing for development of the entire 60 acres." Park echoed this, saying that while there were components of the plan that "spoke to providing green space and vegetation to filter water before it goes into the river…If we were doing it now there probably would be even more measures built into some of the design." The green spaces they were able to incorporate were intended more for "neighborhood feel" than climate resilience, but despite it not being the primary driver Remington thinks as climate change worsens "we're going to be very grateful that that was worked into the plan, and that it's not hardscape everywhere." Another area where the Park East had success with sustainable land use policy was in the case of parking. There are no parking minimums for development in the Park East and Remington said they are finding that developers aren't building that much parking, a choice which encourages residents and building users to choose modes of transit beyond the car.

Remington looks to future projects to be more ambitious with climate and sustainability goals. She sees potential for highway removals to act almost as pilot projects, large corridors where the city can think more holistically about managing climate risks and building sustainably rather than approaching things on a site-to-site level. Many of the stakeholders in the I-794 and WI-175 are thinking about highway removal through this lens as well, and they have the privilege of having data and climate models on their side. For the most part, the areas around the two freeways face the same set of climate impacts we see across the Milwaukee region. As is often true of climate risk, however, there are some hyper-local factors. Importantly, part of the WI-175 freeway corridor falls in both the 100-year (1% annual chance)

and 500-year (0.2% annual chance) floodplains according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). In contrast, there is only a tiny section along the I-794 right of way which falls in the 500-year floodplain and none in the 100-year floodplain (Figure 6.1).

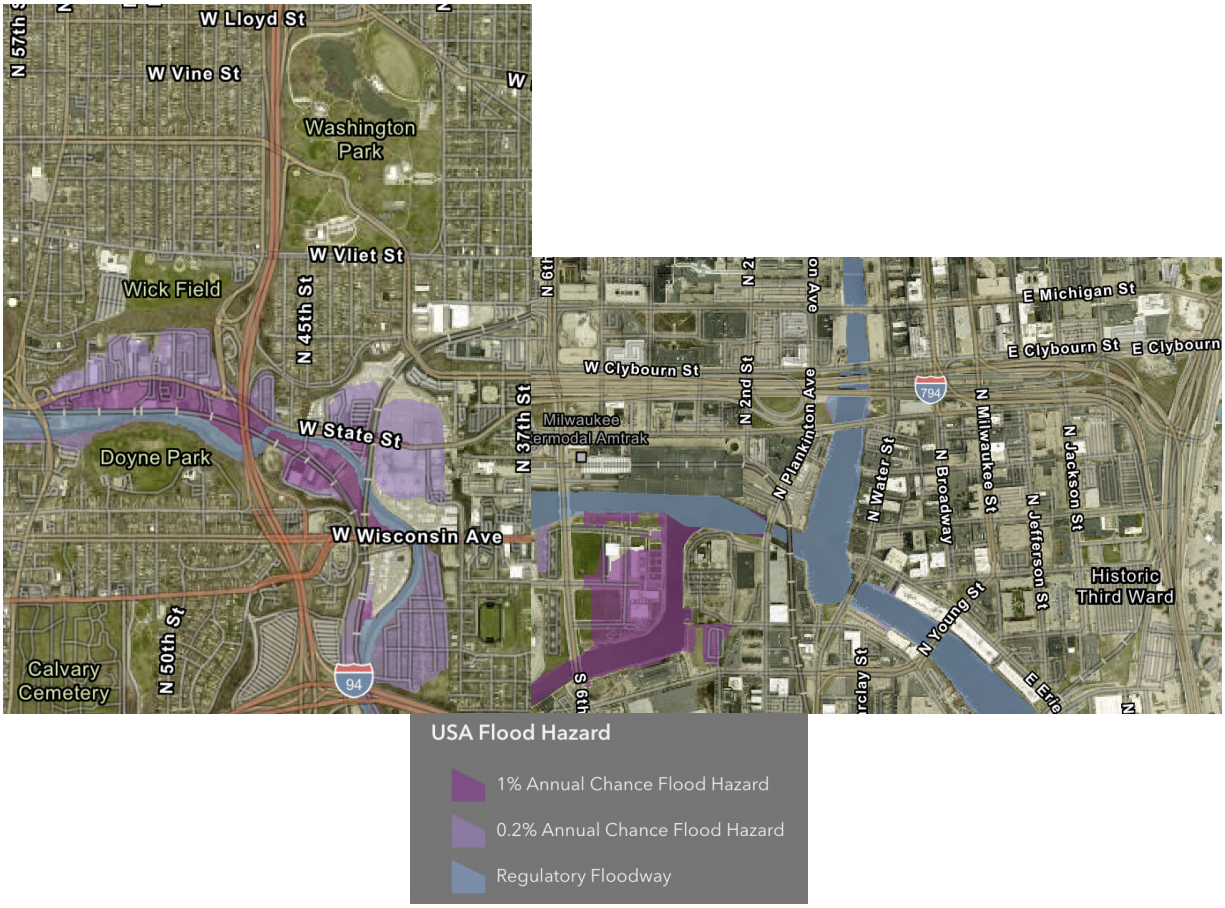

Figure 6.1: Riverine flood risk around WI-175 (left) and I-794 (right). (Maps by FEMA and Esri, *Milwaukee County Flood Risk Map,* accessed June 10, 2024, https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/42231a95c02841cca969c0172d930a68)

FEMA flood maps do not include pluvial flooding (flooding due to extreme precipitation), they only account for coastal and riverine flooding. Significant swaths of the areas around I-794 and WI-175 (Figure 6.2) are expected to experience pluvial flooding from surface runoff in the instance of a 1 hour long 100-year storm, according to a flood health vulnerability assessment completed by Groundwork Milwaukee and The New School's Urban Systems Lab using the CityCAT model (2022).

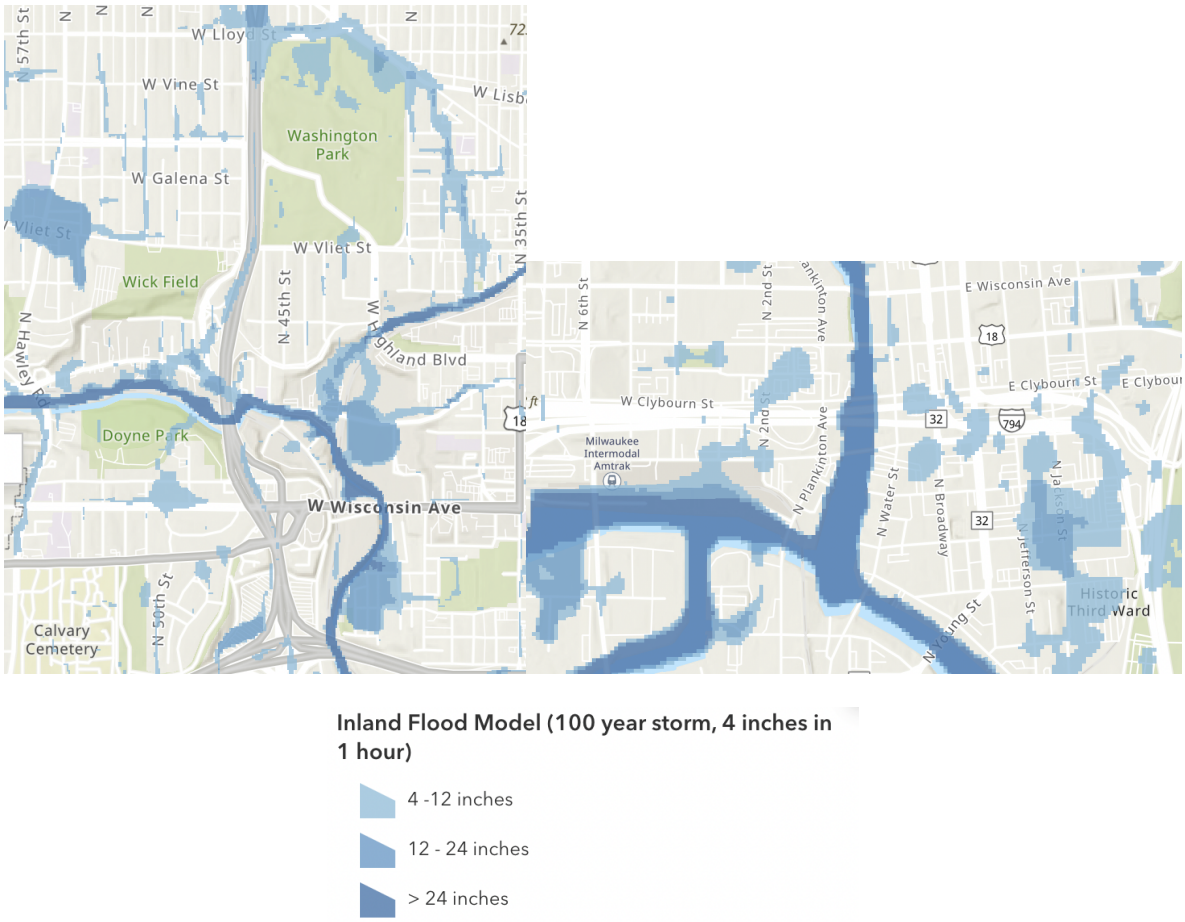

Figure 6.2: Pluvial flood risk around WI-175 (left) and I-794 (right). (Maps by Groundwork Milwaukee and the New School, *Flood Exposure,* July 31, 2023, Milwaukee Flood Health Vulnerability Assessment, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/3e8187206bb542d897bceb8a3694a416)

Likewise, the urban heat island effect varies across the areas around WI-175 and I-794 (Figure 6.3). Both areas show places where heat is concentrated and places where temperatures are slightly cooler during the heat of the day. Anecdotally, heat has started to be more of a problem in Milwaukee the past few summers. St. Arnold Bell described how hot days have begun to wear on the residents of the near west side, particularly those in multi-family housing without access to air conditioning or good air circulation. Spencer said that at Rooted and Rising they have started putting out lists of cooling centers that people can utilize during extreme heat events. There are only a few of them in the Washington Park neighborhood including the library, the senior center, and the Urban Ecology Center's building. For those with comorbidities like respiratory or cardiac problems, cooling centers can be lifesaving. In Milwaukee,

there are many people who experience health issues that can be exacerbated by heat, as former Alderman Murphy reported the city has one of the highest rates of asthma in the country (Shelbourne 2022).

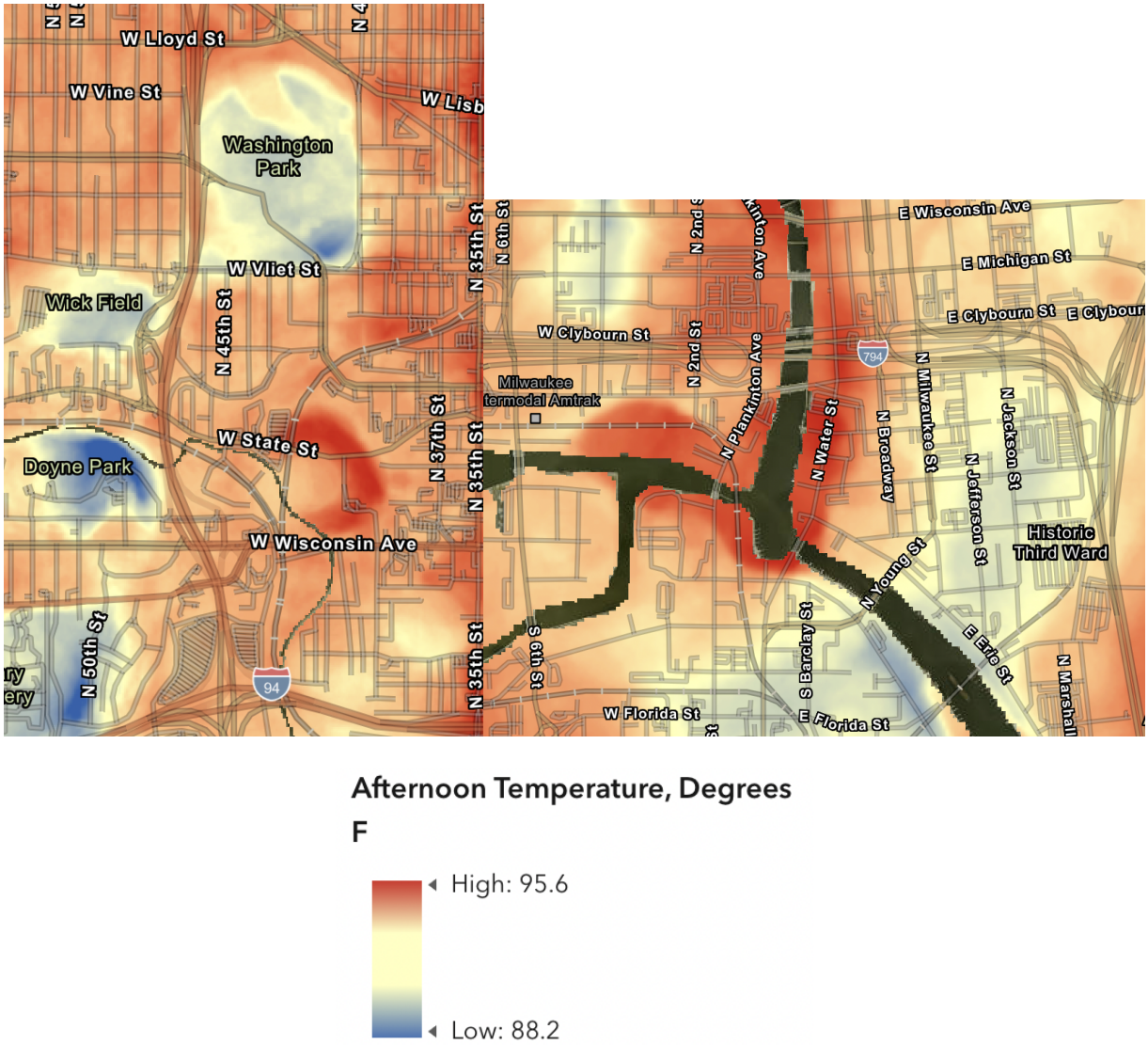

Figure 6.3: Heat map showing afternoon temperatures around WI-175 (left) and I-794 (right). (Maps by Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, *Milwaukee Urban Heat Island Map,* July 21-22, 2022, https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/2d6e905a42e645998d72a29466312af7)

Having a geographically representative set of community leaders can help navigate the block to block variations in climate risk that may inform choices around the use of parcels of land freed up by highway removal or other vacant lots for climate resilience purposes. In addition to variation in climate risk, there is also variation in climate vulnerability, Deja Garner said, “There are some communities that if a flood happens it would devastate the entire community versus other communities where, if a flood

happens, they could quickly rebuild because they have the resources to do so." For both urban heat and flooding, many of these community leaders are thinking about the strategic inclusion of green infrastructure at small and large scales. St. Arnold Bell is one of them—she praised MMSD for their nation-leading efforts at stormwater management and emphasized that they would likely be an important partner in this work. Green infrastructure, and green spaces more broadly, could be used for recreation but also to reduce flooding and "literally bring down the temperature," St. Arnold Bell added. They could also incorporate native Wisconsin species, which Guevara said tend to have a larger capacity to capture stormwater than some of the more commonly used non-native street trees or grasses. Garner said Groundwork Milwaukee, the organization where she works, already does green infrastructure installation and would be excited to partner with the city more to steward added green spaces through their role as a land trust. Since green infrastructure can take a lot of different forms Garner hopes that community voices would be included in designing these solutions. "When it comes to climate resilience, the solutions are, I won't say endless…but there are a ton of them," Garner said. "Groundwork's priority is trying to expose the city to the other possibilities that exist…that aren't just putting up more concrete." In the case of I-794, Muhs said that a green space might have to be quite large to achieve a measurable reduction in stormwater runoff, but that "tearing down the freeway can only reduce the amount of impervious surface" which will absorb some precipitation and "distribute heat better than a solid concrete freeway surface."

In addition to incorporating green space and green infrastructure in the aftermath of removal projects in Milwaukee, stakeholders also discussed the importance of other forms of climate-friendly land use and development. This can be approached both at the scale of a single parcel as well as corridor-wide. From the perspective of the city's planning team, "dense urban living is going to be more sustainable and more attractive and feasible over the long term," Leichtling said. "It's our job to be thinking about what will make Milwaukee the most sustainable and resilient city…urban development patterns matter there, multimodal transit matters there. And those are the priorities that we're going to continue to bring to these decisions." Increased housing density and expanded public transit along the former freeway right of ways

are seen as key approaches to advancing sustainability through highway removal. Muhs shared his perspective:

> "From an emissions perspective I think it's pretty clear that probably a removal would be a net positive. It should allow for more direct trips, those more direct trips would have less VMT, less emissions, generally speaking. It should also encourage more use of walking and biking, and maybe taking transit, which is obviously better from a carbon emissions perspective, and it also will open up more land for very high density development, and of course, on a per capita basement basis high density development is less carbon intensive."

Similarly to the redirection of funds suggested in Milwaukee's Climate & Equity Plan, St. Arnold Bell suggested that highway removal could lead to a powerful reordering of priorities. For her, the question becomes not just what will the redesigned road look like, but "how can we use this opportunity to amplify other modes of transit?" Moving away from a car-centric city is also key when it comes to resilience in the event of disasters as Lauren Mayer, who runs the Congress for New Urbanism's Highways to Boulevards program, explained. A walkable community will fare better if a disaster interferes with the passability of roads because the neighborhood is set up such that "you don't need to get in the car to get help," said Mayer. Like everything in the case of highway removal, nothing is guaranteed with regard to a more sustainable and climate resilient form of development. "We saw that in the Park East," Muhs lamented. "We replaced it with a surface level boulevard. Just a big street. Nothing special about it. So you know, it could be much better, and I think we're all determined to do much better this time."

On a more site-specific basis, Spencer and Lamont Davis both talked about the importance of building for the future, particularly in terms of energy efficiency and resiliency of structures. Currently, Davis said that the Milwaukee Community Land Trust follows the guidelines that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development sets for green building. As they move forward, they are looking to go beyond this scope. "I'm looking at a future where we have solar on the roofs, where we have bioswales in the yard or in the vacant lot that sometimes come next door to the property that we're buying. We really are starting to think about it," Davis said. Remington said she is witnessing more and more developers seeing the added value of this sustainability-minded approach to construction, whether or not they are required by law to meet certain requirements. Still, requirements, or at least incentives, might be useful.

At the end of the day, Davis said, knowing what we know about the climate crisis “we shouldn't be creating new units of housing that consume massive amounts of energy.”

Guevara of the Urban Ecology Center also talked a bit about the social resilience promise of highway removal. He said that Washington Park has the potential to be more of a hub than it is currently, a place where people from all of the surrounding neighborhoods connect. “The more we can build a sense of community, the more resilient those communities will be, right? Particularly if we're successful at supporting and replicating mutual aid groups,” Guevara said. These types of groups can be vital distributors of resources during extreme climate events. As part of their community engagement work, Guevara and his colleagues are thinking about how to advance social resilience through a restorative, trauma-informed framework for moving through conflict—a framework he said was largely inspired by the work around “beloved community” by scholar and writer bell hooks. “Beloved community,” a concept first popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and which hooks expanded upon, describes the necessity of coming together across difference and conflict by committing to a baseline of love and care (Brosi and hooks 2012). hooks’ interpretation of beloved community is that it is not some happy accident, but a practice: “Community comes not only from engagement and struggle but from a willingness to be open” hooks said in a conversation with George Brosi (Brosi and hooks 2012, 79). It is beloved community, hooks said, that helps us survive in times of crisis (Brosi and hooks 2012). Guevara hopes that reenvisioning the Stadium Spur and establishing Washington Park, and perhaps other parcels along the freeway, as a true community gathering space will advance this vision and thus strengthen the resilience of the broader community by allowing people to build stronger relationships both within and across neighborhoods. Staedter also imagined that intentional redevelopment might provide more opportunities for connection. “Let's say they open some restaurants there, or some coffee shops,” Staedter said. “Now people from the east side of the freeway and the west side of the freeway have places to congregate and come together, right?” These types of third spaces—defined by Ray Oldenburg as informal public gathering spaces beyond the home and place of work— “increase opportunities for

communities to interact with each other, which I think is one of the highlights of this that I'm not sure people are talking about enough," she added (Oldenburg 1997).

6.3 Unveiling the Future

Highway removal efforts in Milwaukee could deliver on many of the city and wider metropolitan area climate goals. In place of highways like WI-175 and I-794, Milwaukee could add green infrastructure that cools the community and acts as a sponge, dense affordable housing that allows people to put down roots, and/or multimodal transportation infrastructure that changes the way residents move. But will these visions of a more sustainable future come to fruition? The answer is far from clear. Although both Milwaukee and the State of Wisconsin have put forth climate goals and made commitments around reducing emissions, very few guardrails exist to keep them on the path to achieving these goals. NEPA may not be sufficient. WisDOT's Nguyen said the environmental impact assessment as part of the NEPA process should help the project navigate any potential impact, but lawyer Dennis Grzezinski said it is still an open question whether or not these assessments have to look closely at future impacts from climate change. "There are some district court decisions that say, yes, there's some that say no," he said. It may ultimately fall to the city to ensure that large projects such as highway removal and post-removal development remain in alignment with climate pledges. Muhs and Leichtling's leadership within key city departments suggests a dedication to this work that could shine through removal projects, particularly if control of the land is held locally.

Still, it is important to note that few interviewees brought up the connections between highway removal and climate resilience or sustainability without specific questions prompting them. Despite recent calls for intersectionality, the climate and environmental spheres remain frustratingly siloed even as climate change makes clear that all urban planning decisions require a thorough analysis of impact and potential for systems change. One sustainability expert even declined a request for an interview for this thesis because they said highway removal was not their area—a statement which was hard to comprehend given the ubiquitous reality of climate change impacts and the urgent need to seize every opportunity to move towards a more sustainable future. More collaboration and involvement of experts from many

different fields is needed on a project such as this one. Ultimately, as decisions on I-794 and WI-175 removal proposals inch ever closer, Milwaukee approaches a critical juncture that will bring to light the strength (or lack thereof) of its commitments to equity, sustainability, and climate resilience alike.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions

Milwaukee cemented its legacy as one of the first cities in the United States to replace a highway with a boulevard in 2002 when it began work to knock down the Park East freeway. Though the project was largely viewed as a success by residents of Milwaukee and advocates for highway removal across the country, the Park East redevelopment was far from perfect. Decades later, the legacy grows as the city considers removing two additional freeway segments that are part of I-794 and WI-175—projects that would require leadership to once again navigate the challenges of the political and funding landscapes across federal, state, and local levels. While these three freeways all fall within the political boundaries of the City of Milwaukee, the contexts, stakeholders, and concerns vary widely, as is outlined in Table 7.1 below.

	Park East	**I-794**	**WI-175**
Location	Northwest of Downtown	Between Downtown and the Third Ward	Near west side
Surrounding Neighborhoods	Haymarket, Schlitz Park, Brewer's Hill, Kilbourn Town	Downtown, Third Ward	Uptown, Sherman Park, Washington Heights, Washington Park, Wick Field, Martin Drive, Story Hill, Miller Valley
Year Built	1971	1977	1962
Year Removed	2003	NA, if removal advances demolition expected to begin in 2027	NA, no estimated timeline for removal
Type of Freeway	Elevated viaduct	Elevated viaduct	Depressed
Ownership of Land Under Freeway	Milwaukee County	Milwaukee County (majority), WisDOT, State of Wisconsin, City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee County (majority), WisDOT, City of Milwaukee
Stakeholders	City of Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, WisDOT/State of Wisconsin, Good Jobs and Livable Neighborhoods Coalition, local businesses (i.e. Laacke & Joys, Schlitz, Harley Davidson), nearby residents	City of Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, WisDOT/State of Wisconsin, Downtown and Third Ward businesses and residents, real estate developers, far south side neighborhoods and suburbs (i.e. Bay View, Cudahy, St. Francis, South Milwaukee), Rethink794 Coalition, Business Improvement Districts, Port of Milwaukee, Near North Side and	City of Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, WisDOT/State of Wisconsin, community-based organizations (i.e. Rooted and Rising, Near West Side Partners, etc.) and neighborhood associations/neighborhood improvement districts, residents of surrounding neighborhoods, local businesses and larger corporations (i.e. Molson Coors,

		Near South Side residents	Milwaukee Brewers), Business Improvement Districts, Milwaukee County Transit, police and fire departments, Milwaukee County Parks
Arguments for Removal	Economic development, overbuilt/underutilized road, urban vitality/improving the public realm, improving access, growing residential base	Economic development, reconnecting communities, improving access to the lakefront, expanding multimodal transportation options, walkability, urban vitality/improving the public realm, growing residential base	Reconnecting communities, improving access to Washington Park, overbuilt/underutilized road, traffic safety, walkability, expanding multimodal transportation options, economic development, improving access to goods and services, beautification/improving the public realm
Concerns Around Removal	Traffic, access for downtown businesses	Pedestrian safety, access for Port Milwaukee, traffic, access to downtown, delays on development, impacts to businesses during construction, access to other highways from the suburbs	Lack of developability, gentrification, losing access to goods and services, cost, pedestrian safety, traffic safety
(Proposed) Post-removal Land Use	Six-lane boulevard, dense residential, affordable housing (Convent Hill), commercial/entertainment, hotels, public space	Boulevard, dense residential, affordable housing, commercial (including affordable commercial), green space, public space, bike and pedestrian infrastructure, transit infrastructure	Boulevard, multi-family residential, affordable housing, community land trust ownership, commercial (including affordable commercial), green space, public space, bike and pedestrian infrastructure, transit infrastructure
Climate Considerations	Extreme heat, extreme cold, extreme precipitation, flooding (riverine and pluvial), air quality		

Table 7.1: Summary of the Park East, I-794, and WI-175 case studies

While this thesis refrains from making a specific recommendation around whether I-794 and/or WI-175 should be removed—a step that would require far more extensive stakeholder engagement and a deep commitment to listening to community desires and concerns—it underscores the importance of decision makers prioritizing the perspectives and leadership of those most harmed by these freeways. The people centered in removal decisions should include members of the communities that historically suffered the most from freeway construction. Such a prioritization flies in the face of how political decisions are conventionally made, as they often defer to those with the most power or financial resources. In the case of Milwaukee these tend to be representatives from wealthier suburbs and corporate interests. The organization Community Wealth Partners has a definition of community that may prove

useful to those running engagement: “the people closest to the issues, with an emphasis on those who face the deepest inequities and who are furthest from systemic forms of power” (Community Wealth Partners 2020, 3).

If removal moves forward the extent to which the major players will apply the lessons learned from Park East and view these projects as opportunities to address issues beyond transportation remains to be seen. Should state, county, and city leadership opt for boulevard conversion, the following recommendations provide a blueprint for action. These recommendations could also be applied to cities around the country looking to achieve more equitable, sustainable, and climate resilient outcomes through highway removal projects, adapting them as needed to fit the unique individual contexts of the freeways they hope to reimagine.

7.1 Recommendations

1) Continue and expand engagement, moving towards community control

Contrary to their reputation, many of the interviewees praised WisDOT’s good faith efforts to engage community members in both the Lakefront Interchange and Reimagining WIS 175 studies. WisDOT and partners should continue this dedication throughout the study process and beyond if boulevardization is selected as a preferred alternative and receives funding. Meaningful engagement, especially during the planning and development phase, is absolutely crucial to delivering an equitable outcome. As Garner put it:

> “getting really creative when it comes to community input I think is super important because I'm just one voice, my neighbor is one voice, and the things that people care about—it all looks differently…if I were to say anything about these types of projects, community voice, and just being community-first is just so imperative and so important.”

Continuing to partner with trusted community-based organizations, such as Rooted and Rising in the case of WI-175, and providing these organizations with stipends for their time and energy will be key. Following the suggestions of members of Community Advisory Committees wherever possible will also help extend the reach of study and planning work. Suggestions from interviewees included varying the public meeting times and locations, providing financial compensation and other resources like childcare

for those who participate in meetings, and hosting smaller discussions and events at comfortable locations (i.e. places of worship, community-based organizations, community health centers, libraries, food banks, and other service points) with community members who might not show up to large, intimidating public meetings. As some interviewees outlined, there are serious barriers to communication with the hardest-to-reach sectors of the community, including low-income and language isolated residents, who have more urgent needs and responsibilities holding their attention. There are a plethora of resources available to planners that outline best practices for communication with diverse populations, some of which include partnering with local media (especially media that is produced in the most commonly spoken languages other than English), communicating through the school system, and relating longer term issues to the on-the-ground experiences of community members (Gonzalez 2017; California Environmental Justice Alliance and Placeworks 2017). Though suggestions may be costly and time consuming, planners should remember that the engagement process itself is just as important as any other outcome from the standpoint of equity and community resilience.

> As Dr. Lemir Teron wrote in his analysis of Syracuse highway removal:
>
> "Mere interface with the public via public meetings and hearings is not evidence of a robust and authentic public engagement, nor is it indicative of procedural justice. While the former is a function of bureaucracy that gives deference to federal statutes on meeting requirements, it does not necessarily combat or overturn the racial marginalization and disenfranchisement needed to dismantle systemic discrimination." (Teron 2022, 136)

Not only should community members have their voices heard in the discussions around the future of highways in their neighborhoods and the land underneath them, they should also hold decision-making power wherever possible. Rosa Gonzalez outlines this path towards equity in her Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership pictured below (Figure 7.1) WisDOT, the City of Milwaukee, and Milwaukee County would do well to try to move from consulting and involving community members to collaborating with and deferring to them. Doing so will require a level of creativity and willingness to try things that haven't been done before in order to empower people who aren't usually included in government decision-making processes.

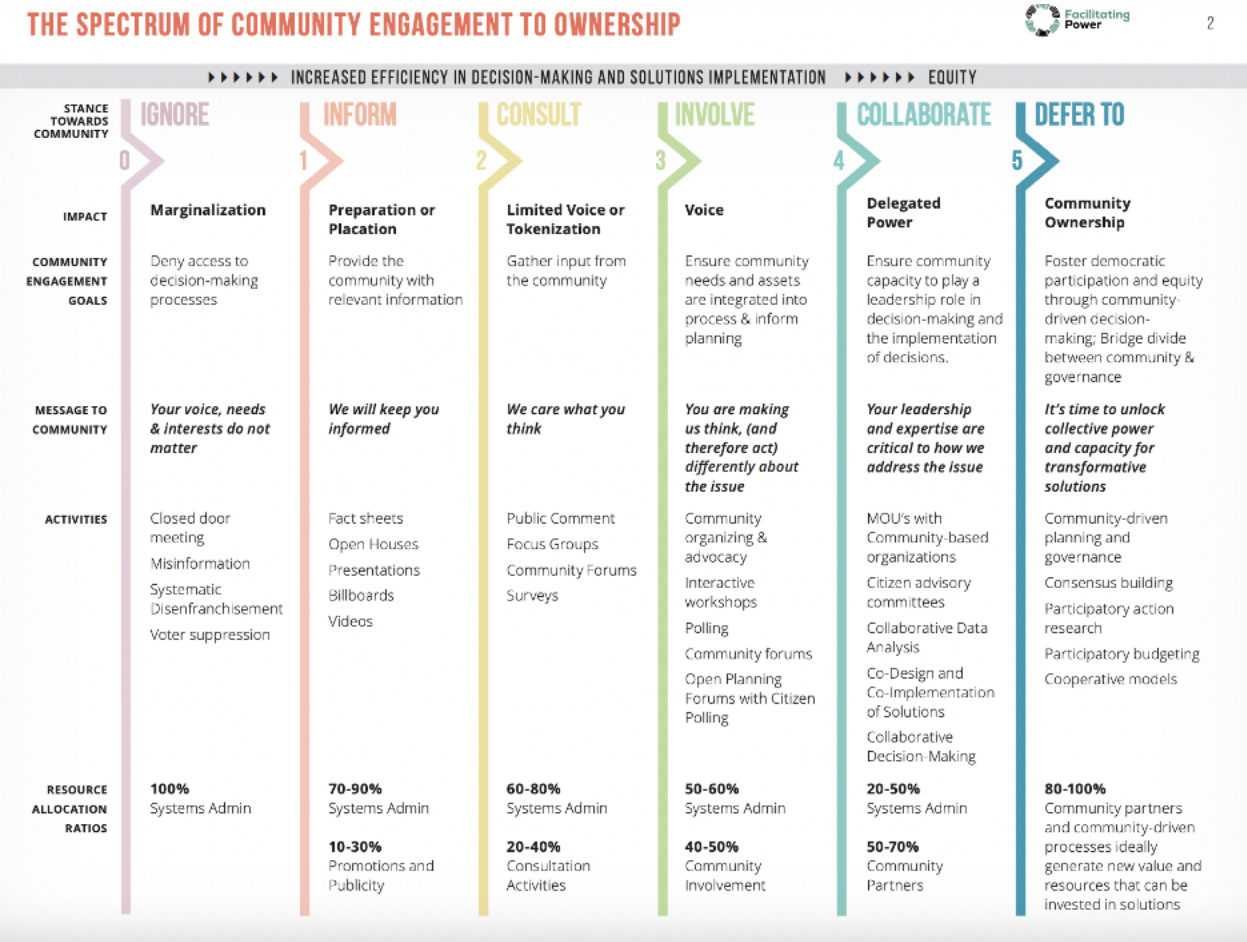

Figure 7.1: Movement Strategy's Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership (Graphic by Rosa González and Movement Strategy Center, *The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership,* 2019, https://movementstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Spectrum-of-Community-Engagement-to-Ownership.pdf)

2) Be accountable to the community

In some communities in Milwaukee there is a high level of distrust of government agencies, which is understandable given the history of urban planning locally and nationwide, particularly when it comes to freeways. To counteract this, involved government entities should lead with transparency about timelines, decision making, and feasibility. From the very beginning of a project, make it clear what is on and off the table, who will be making decisions and how those decisions will be made, and what implementation will look like (Community Wealth Partners 2023). If community members clearly prefer a direction for the project that is ultimately not pursued, trust can be lost, so clarity is key (Community Wealth Partners 2023).

Another part of accountability is data collection and reporting. It is well and good to make sustainability, equity, and climate resilience goals of a project, but it means very little without a way to track and report back on success. Milwaukee's Climate and Equity plan outlined the importance of looking at racial equity indicators, such as poverty rate and household income by race, as part of the set of performance indicators for any climate work (City of Milwaukee 2023a). Whether or not highway removal is considered under the umbrella of climate work, developing a shared set of performance indicators that address the goals of the project and track impact on equity will help build trust with community members.

Finally, accountability might require outside groups or coalitions to stay involved, monitoring and reporting on the work of the involved government entities to ensure that they have the community's best interest in mind. Pam Fendt of the Good Jobs and Livable Neighborhoods Coalition recommended the formation of a similar coalition for any future highway removal work. Though the Park East project was far from perfect from an equity standpoint, without the work of GJLN development of the county-owned land might have proceeded in a way that accrued even fewer benefits to pre-freeway removal residents and businesses in the area.

3) Meaningfully collaborate across government bodies and maintain consistent commitments

Highway removal is inherently cross-jurisdictional and interdisciplinary. In the cases of both I-794 and WI-175, ownership of land underneath the freeway is split between entities at the local, county, and state levels, with the freeway itself under the control of WisDOT. Because of this reality, there can be no choices made around use of the freeway right of way that aren't collaborative. In the case of WI-175, WisDOT and the city have a memorandum of understanding outlining their partnership, but regardless all parties will need to be dedicated to working together to achieve solutions that advance shared goals.

In addition to vertical collaboration, horizontal collaboration will be crucial, as highway removal touches on issues of transportation, housing, environment, economic development, and more. At the local level, the Department of Public Works and Department of City Development are the two departments most involved in discussions around WI-175 and I-794. If removal of either freeway moves forward,

many more parties will be needed at the table, such as the Environmental Collaboration Office, the Office of Equity and Inclusion, MMSD, the Housing Authority of Milwaukee, and Milwaukee County Transit. Bringing in entities with different issue focus areas in planning and development will ensure that Milwaukee stays true to goals outlined in various plans, including the city's Climate & Equity Plan, Anti-Displacement Plan, and Housing and Neighborhood Plan as well as MMSD's Resilience Plan. Inclusion of environmental and climate experts in particular emerged as a priority that may not happen naturally because of existing siloes. With the development of such a large corridor comes potential for unforeseen consequences, including climate impacts and gentrification, which can be mitigated by the inclusion of a wide variety of experts looking at the project from different angles. Without this, development might proceed in a way that is inconsistent with the city's larger commitments. As Lamont Davis pointed out, for example, a project that adds a large number of energy-inefficient units would undermine the city's goal to reduce emissions 45% by 2030 and to reach net zero by 2050 (City of Milwaukee 2023a). Likewise, a plan for development that failed to incorporate a significant percentage of affordable units would defy the commitment to reducing racial disparities and promoting equitable development outlined in the Anti-Displacement Plan (City of Milwaukee 2018).

4) Get ahead of gentrification

One of the laments of observers and participants in the Park East removal process was that anti-gentrification measures came too late—once rising property values and increased desirability had already begun to push people out of their homes. If Milwaukee hopes to achieve more equitable outcomes in future removals, anti-displacement strategies should be embedded from the beginning, long before the freeway actually comes down. As scholars Dan Immergluck and Tharunya Balan write:

> "It is not enough to plan for trickle-down affordable housing development down the road after the project gets up a head of steam. By then, land values will have increased substantially, making the preservation and creation of affordable housing very expensive, and possibly cost-prohibitive. Rather, planners should adopt a mantra of 'affordability first' when planning such large-scale interventions" (Immergluck and Balan 2018, 15).

When and if a freeway is removed, the city should consider the possible gentrification implications of all of the decisions they make with regards to post-removal land use and strive to mitigate

impacts whenever possible, perhaps through a project-specific anti-displacement plan. Strategies explored in the city's Anti-Displacement Plan for neighborhoods around downtown Milwaukee will be useful here including: resident preference for affordable housing and newly created jobs, nonprofit-managed anti-displacement funds to offset rising property taxes, educating renters about tenant's rights, identifying resources available to preserve existing affordable housing, utilizing existing public land for the development of new affordable housing, addressing housing quality issues via support for repairs, and using alternative models, including community land trusts such as MCLT, to create and preserve permanently affordable homeownership and rental units (City of Milwaukee 2018). City leadership is handcuffed in what they are able to do because of state laws which preclude strategies like mandatory inclusionary zoning, which sets aside a certain number of affordable units in new developments. Continuing to advocate and organize for changes in state law that expand the city's options for preserving affordability in neighborhoods threatened by gentrification is worthwhile, especially since the migration of people from higher-risk climate areas to Milwaukee may further strain the city's housing resources.

5) Ensure expanded (not reduced) access to key goods and services

Interviewees were divided over whether removing a freeway would overall improve or reduce access for residents. Peter Park described how the inherently limited-access design of freeways makes it harder for people to get around in urban environments, while others showed concern over how turning a freeway into a boulevard might lengthen the time it takes already time-strapped residents to get the resources they need, including fresh food and healthcare services. The key to ensuring that access is improved lies in a two-pronged approach: expanding multimodal transportation options and prioritizing bringing vital resources closer to the community by repurposing highway land and nearby vacant land to fill gaps in service delivery. Added bike, pedestrian, and transit infrastructure that prioritizes safety and enjoyment will enable people to get where they need to go whether or not they have a car. City officials can also work with Milwaukee County Transit to explore how road redesign might enable additional bus or other transit routes. Where alternative options for transportation fall short in getting people where they need to go, redevelopment should focus on meeting those needs within reasonable walking or biking

distance. Extensive community engagement can help planners to identify what goods and services people want to see in the area. Community needs may include expanded employment opportunities, community services, affordable groceries and retail, health clinics and pharmacies, and cultural amenities. Strategies for targeted reuse of highway land are discussed in more detail in the following recommendation.

6) Strategically leverage "free" land for the public good

Over and over again interviewees emphasized that the most significant potential for public good in highway removal lies in the resulting large swaths of "new" land that become available at no cost to local governments. Since land cost is one of the major barriers to implementing "public good" projects that may not be immediately or highly profitable on their own such as affordable housing, green infrastructure, community solar, and/or community gathering spaces, the power of acquiring new land at no cost cannot be overstated. Decision makers should involve community members in their analysis of how this land can best serve community needs and city-wide goals, including advancing equity, sustainability, and climate resilience. Land that is in or near high risk flood areas or high heat areas, for example, could be strategically used to reduce impacts during extreme events. Likewise, where affordable housing, affordable commercial, or access to fresh food is missing from a community, new parcels of land could add in these key resources. Some parcels could even be stewarded by an entity like MCLT to ensure the land remains in service of community benefit in perpetuity. It's not just former highway land that can be leveraged in this way—vacant land near the freeway corridor can also be put to better use.

However, Wisconsin state law again serves as a limiting force, particularly when it comes to taking advantage of "free" land. Parcels of land underneath the highway that are owned by WisDOT, of which there are several in the case of I-794 and WI-175, are subject to Wis. Stat § 84.09(05), a law which requires land to be sold at or above fair market value. Pursuing a change or negotiating an exception to this law through the state legislature would greatly augment the possibilities for the use of this land outside of what the market deems the most profitable. WisDOT's inclusion of MCLT in conversations around highway removal signals their interest in using some of their land for public good purposes and not just selling it to the highest bidder. In the meantime, Milwaukee County and the City of Milwaukee

have more power to sell or lease land at a low cost to mission-driven organizations like MCLT or others that are committed to public good uses. Beyond land disposition, government entities can use zoning, financing incentives, Requests for Proposals, and other tools to require or reward development that advances sustainability, resilience, and equity. Community coalitions can also advocate for binding agreements, similar to GJLN's Park East Redevelopment Compact, that commit public agencies to projects aligned with community goals.

7.2 Limitations, Directions for Further Research, and Hope for the Future

This research, while rigorous, was limited by a number of factors. First and foremost: time. The studies looking at removal as an option are still in relatively early phases and one can only speculate as to whether or not they will move forward with removal. In the coming months and years, the contexts for these potential removals may change and new information may come to light that shifts stakeholder views. Moreover, time limited the number of people I was able to interview and therefore whose views were incorporated. There are many stakeholders, including some who are fervently against removal, who were not interviewed. Furthermore, the journalistic approach taken here in order to craft a cohesive narrative meant that not every quote from every stakeholder made it into the final product. The questions that I chose to ask interviewees reflected my own interests and positionality and inherently influenced the findings outlined above.

Because what will happen with I-794 and WI-175 has yet to be decided, future research could explore more closely the equity, sustainability, and climate resilience implications of whatever projects stem (or don't stem) from WisDOT's studies. The questions posed by this thesis could also be explored using geospatial data, an approach which could add color and depth to the investigation. Likewise, these questions could also be applied to highway removal projects in other cities—expanding the view beyond the unique context we see in Milwaukee. Highway removal is still a relatively new idea that is receiving historic amounts of funding and so figuring out how to do it right and use it as a tool to address some of the most complex questions our society faces today, including climate change and widening inequality, will be key moving forward. Research can play a vital role in developing this understanding. Finally,

when considering uses for "new" land created by highway removal, particularly in the context of equity, it is hard not to think about the original stewards of the land—Indigenous groups who have resided in the Milwaukee area include the Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Odawa (Ottawa), Fox, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Sauk, and Oneida (Rindfleisch 2016). Milwaukee continues to have a significant Indigenous community as, according to the 2020 Census, the city is home to well over 5000 individuals who identify as American Indian or Alaska Native alone. There is vast potential to explore in the possibility of land freed up by highway removal being returned to Indigenous groups, as the land back movement calls for, both in Milwaukee and beyond. Such an exploration was beyond the scope of this thesis, but I would encourage scholars to give it the time and attention it deserves in a future research project.

When I chose this thesis topic in the fall of 2023 I was not sure what I would discover. In the end, there were no clear answers about what should be done in Milwaukee. Like the city itself, the I-794 and WI-175 projects are rife with contradictions—equal parts hazard and hope. Throughout this research, there were many instances where I felt proud to be from the Milwaukee area. It feels like the little city that could—we removed a highway long before many bigger, wealthier, ostensibly more progressive cities ever dreamed of doing so. At the same time, I encountered realities that made me deeply ashamed of the city for its continued legacy of racism and segregation. There is so much work to be done to make sure it is a place where all residents feel a sense of belonging and have access to the opportunities and resources necessary to thrive. Highway removal alone will not solve the city's problems, and there is a very real possibility that it could make some problems worse, but it may be a piece of the puzzle if it is driven by community consensus and ongoing dialogue. Regardless of what happens, I find hope in the process of asking people to envision a better city. I find hope, too, in the people who shared their time with me during this project, who love Milwaukee and are committed to seizing any opportunity to chip away at the inequities they see before them. Nothing is guaranteed, but so much is possible. I am excited to see what the future holds.

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