

The SE Expressway: Asphalt roadblock to the sea

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It may seem far-fetched, particularly when the federal and state governments will have spent a staggering \$22 billion in costs and interest on the Big Dig when all is said and done, but demolishing highways to build parks and foster development is a burgeoning fad in the new green world.

When the Southeast Expressway was built, it created an effective wall between Dorchester and the sea, turning many coastal neighborhoods into inland neighborhoods overnight, and thus preventing the kind of waterfront development boom that has characterized the modern city, and even a number of other neighborhoods in Boston.

Tenean Beach was twice its current size before the highway was built and completed in 1957, and others, like Colter's beach, which sat near the Dorchester Yacht Club on Freeport Street (near Old Colony Parkway, now Morrissey Boulevard) are completely gone. To make way for the highway, the Yacht Club was floated on a raft over to its current location opposite Malibu Beach, smack up against the highway and very much cut off from the neighborhood. And that area under that part of the highway, once industrial docks and warehouses along Freeport Street, might have become a waterfront community instead of the path of I-93.

"It was different. The yacht club was more neighborhood friendly and neighborhood oriented back then. We had weddings, we had outings, it was a nice life," said Ernie Santosuosso, 87, a Braintree resident who "left his heart" on Mill Street, just a block away from the old DYC location in Clam Point. "The expressway in 1957 ended that aspect."

Of course, living in Braintree, Santosuosso still thinks the expressway was a good thing, needed to create faster commutes for South Shore communities. But in some cities, mayors are starting to boldly reverse some of the decisions made in the 'age of the automobile.'

All the way back in 1974, the city of Portland, Ore. tore down its under-used 1950s-era Harbor Drive, an six-lane highway along the Willamette River. In 1978 and 1999, the city completed two phases of an over 70-acre waterfront park and an at-grade parkway in place of the former highway.

Millions were spent on developments like 'Yards at Union Square' and 'RiverPlace' as a direct result of the new park, more people returned to downtown Portland to live. Plans for further investment are underway at the Portland Development Commission.

Seoul, Korea, has an even more inspiring story. In 1999, according to reporting by the Guardian UK, the city was forced to close down one of three tunnels in the city, and much to the surprise of city engineers, car volumes dropped in the area.

That advent sparked an idea to take down a six-lane highway and another roadway that sat atop of the former Cheonggyecheon river. Despite resistance from urban planners, local merchants and some residents, the city's Mayor Lee Myung Bak hatched a plan to create a five-mile long, 800-yard wide, 1,000-acre park in its place, complete with a revived Cheonggyecheon running through it.

After it was completed in 2005, many drivers switched to beefed-up public transit options, and the temperatures around the renewed river dropped an average of 3.6 degrees in the summer months, making the park a popular destination for tens of thousands of city residents every weekend. Now, the nearby city of Shanghai, China is looking into a similar scheme and a new mayor in Seoul is eyeing another road over an former riverbed.

Of course, both of the highways mentioned above were less traveled than I-93, so it's a far sight less likely here in Dorchester, as green as the idea might be.

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