

**Westside Highway**

	Westside Highway	I-81
<b>Project Type</b>	removal of an elevated highway	existing elevated highway - TBD
<b>Interstate Highway?</b>	no	yes
<b>Through Traffic?</b>	yes	yes
<b>Vehicles /day</b>	140,000	100,000
<b>Project Length</b>	4.7 miles	1.4 mi.
<b>Context</b>	urban core: Hudson River waterfront	downtown
<b>City</b>	Manhattan, New York City, NY	Syracuse, NY
<b>Population</b>	7,895,000	140,658
<b>Timeline</b>	freeway collapsed 1973; planning and design 1985-1993; Construction of Boulevard 1996-2001	unknown
<b>Cost/Cost per mile</b>	\$380 million/\$81 million per mile	unknown

The West Side Highway was the first elevated highway constructed in the U.S. in the 1920s. It ran along the Hudson River shoreline from 72<sup>nd</sup> Street to the southern tip of Manhattan. It was not designed to modern highway standards, with very narrow lanes and sharp turns at exit ramps. On December 15, 1973, the northbound lanes between 12th and Gansevoort Streets collapsed under the weight of a dump truck, which was ironically carrying asphalt for highway repairs. An interview with Sam Schwartz, former Chief Engineer of NYCDOT, provided some history on how the collapse affected the area’s traffic conditions:

One of my first assignments was racing out to the West Side Highway when it collapsed. This was an elevated platform that fell to the ground. We were hired to measure the impact on traffic. I put traffic counters all across the avenues and traced the diversion; it went to the FDR Drive and to the West Side avenues. But over time, we didn't see any increase in traffic: the other avenues absorbed it and we weren't able to trace it.

**Project Location**



**What was the decision-making process?**

Even though the highway had been closed for years, alternatives for upgrading the corridor to the “Westway” were studied in the late-1980s. These included:

1. a “no build” that would have reconstructed the collapsed highway under the prior configuration,
2. a collection of related alternatives that included an at-grade boulevard with some improvements to access points, and
3. a fully grade-separated expressway.

These alternatives all included parallel bicycle and pedestrian facilities. After seven years of review and discussion, a variation of Alternative Two, which community board members called the "Lessway," was approved in May 1993. Construction began in 1996, and the Joe DiMaggio Boulevard was opened in 2001 to replace the West Side Highway.

The failure of the West Side Highway presented a unique environment for decision-making. As has been the case in several other freeway collapse situations, traffic was able to adapt to the street network. The longer people lived without the highway, the more they became convinced that they didn't need to replace it. This made it easier to reach consensus on alternatives. A variety of alternatives were

considered in the official decision-making process, with ample involvement of community stakeholders. Cost, as well as lack of support for reconstruction of an elevated freeway, was a factor in the final decision. Tunnel options were found to be excessively costly and were eliminated.

*Westside Highway: Before and After*



*Credit: FHWA (above), Charles Spiegel (below)*

### What were the outcomes?

The Joe DiMaggio Boulevard is a popular corridor for bicyclists, walkers, and joggers. Redevelopment has occurred along the length of the corridor since the freeway was removed. Although some people feel that the design solution does not provide enough capacity, formal studies by the New York City Department of

Transportation (NYCDOT) have found that the highway closure has not resulted in undue congestion.

### Are there parallels to *The I-81 Challenge*?

Traffic on the highway ranged from 90,000 to 140,000, similar to the volumes on the I-81 viaduct. It is located in the dense urban street network of Manhattan, which was able to successfully absorb the traffic once the freeway closed.

### What can we learn from this project?

*Traffic Circulation and Urban Mobility:* This case shows how traffic is able to adapt to new conditions in ways that may not be entirely predictable by conventional traffic models. New York City has a robust street network that can be congested at times, but was seemingly able to carry the diverted traffic volumes without a noticeable increase in congestion. The new boulevard provides a bicycle and walking path, accommodating additional modes.

*Economic Development/Urban Design:* There has been some redevelopment alongside the corridor where the highway had been, which may have been unlikely, or of lower value, if the highway existed.

*Political/Public Process:* The decision-making process took place after the freeway had closed, which greatly altered public perception on the need for a replacement highway. Since so much time (over 20 years) elapsed between the freeway closure and the opening of the boulevard, people became used to not having the freeway and the boulevard essentially offered a new facility to the public.

### For More Information:

<http://www.nycroads.com/roads/west-side/>