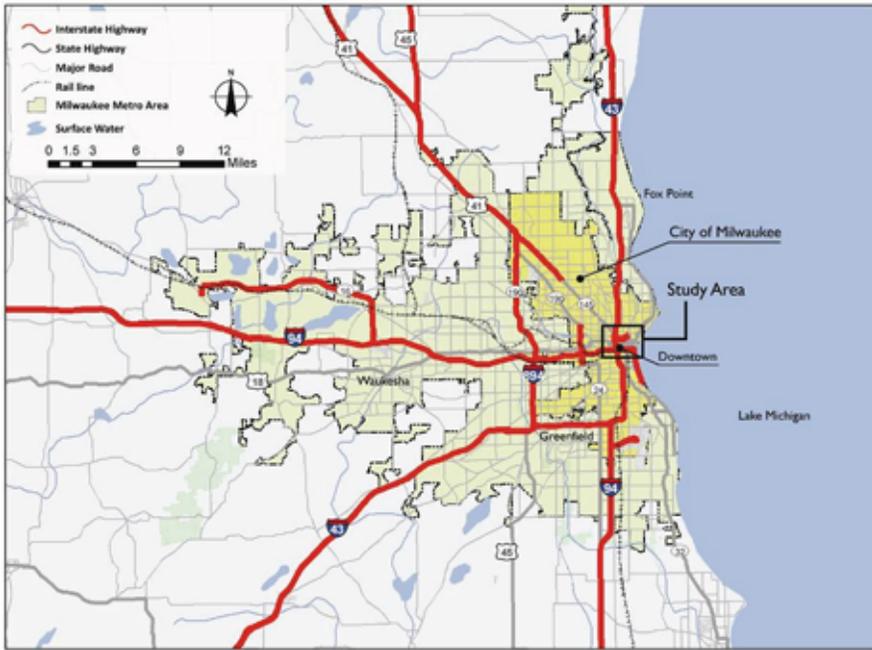


Park East Freeway

	Park East Freeway	I-81
Project Type	removal of an elevated highway	existing elevated highway - TBD
Interstate Highway?	no	yes
Through Traffic?	no-spur highway to downtown	yes
Vehicles /day	40,000	100,000
Project Length	1 mile	1.4 mi.
Context	downtown: Milwaukee River waterfront	downtown
City	Milwaukee, WI	Syracuse, NY
Population	597,000 (at time of project)	140,658
Timeline	planning and design 1996-2002; construction 2002-2003	unknown
Cost/Cost per mile	\$25 million/\$25 million per mile	unknown

Regional Context



Project Location



The Park East Freeway was a one-mile spur connection between I-43 and downtown Milwaukee. It was originally intended to continue through downtown, but was never completed. The impacts of this freeway spurred a great deal of controversy such that the extension plans were abandoned, and eventually the old right-of-way intended for this highway’s continuation became the East Pointe mixed use development. In 1972, Mayor Henry Maier vetoed funding to continue the freeway, saying: "America is the only nation in the world to let her cities ride to bankruptcy on a freeway . . .



The Flatiron Building, City of Milwaukee

My city has discovered that the freeway is not free." Because of its short length, the Park East Freeway was never heavily used, and its peak hour traffic volumes were always well below its capacity.

The success of the East Pointe redevelopment in the 1990s led to consideration of removing the remaining underutilized and deteriorating Park East Freeway when it was slated for reconstruction. The funding to eventually remove the freeway came from a combination of Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) federal highway funds and Tax Increment Financing through the City of Milwaukee. The total construction cost was estimated to be \$25 million, which included demolishing the freeway and reconnecting the surface streets to absorb the freeway traffic. The freeway removal made 26 acres of downtown land, much of it on the Milwaukee Riverfront, available for redevelopment. After the freeway removal, land uses changed and values increased substantially. The City of Milwaukee has established the Park East Corridor development area, with a master plan for mixed use urban redevelopment gradually unfolding.

What was the decision-making process?

The process of removing the Park East Freeway was led by then-mayor John Norquist. The idea for removing the freeway was inspired by the combination of successful urban redevelopment in nearby neighborhoods and a Wisconsin DOT-initiated plan, proposed in the mid-1990s, to reconstruct the deteriorating elevated Park East Freeway. With Mayor John Norquist strongly in favor of highway removal, and traffic reports indicating that reconnecting the street network would provide sufficient capacity to replace the freeway, other agencies were encouraged to join in support of the idea of removal. While it was not without controversy, overall community leadership at all levels solidly favored the removal concept. In 1999, the city council agreed on the removal option by a unanimous vote, and the county board of commissioners approved freeway removal by a very large margin. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) required additional traffic studies before agreeing to fund the project, partially because they were concerned about the threat of lawsuits by opponents of the removal. The highway was removed in 2003.

The Park East corridor before and after the freeway removal



Park East Corridor in 2006, with street network re-established.

Source: City of Milwaukee

What were the outcomes?

This project has set the stage for highly successful urban redevelopment, which is ongoing today. Traffic congestion from the removal never materialized. Economic development has been encouraged, vacant property has been redeveloped, and property values and tax revenues have increased substantially since the freeway was removed.

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

The physical presence of the elevated freeway, and the adjacent underdeveloped areas through the downtown are similarities to the I-81 corridor. However, the role

of the Park East Freeway was very different from the role of the I-81 corridor in Syracuse. The Park East Freeway had substantially lower volumes (well under its capacity) and served as only a short spur to access downtown from the regional highway network. It was not an interstate highway or through traffic route.

What can we learn from this project?

Traffic Circulation and Urban Mobility: The street network was easily able to absorb the freeway traffic, despite limited availability of transit alternatives in the city. Traffic congestion did not noticeably increase after the freeway was removed, although some commuters may experience an increase in travel time simply due to the change from a high-speed freeway to a lower-speed local street.

Economic Development/Urban Design: In Milwaukee's case, the benefits of opening up underutilized land in the center of the city and along the Milwaukee River for redevelopment seems to have outweighed any negative effects from the loss of convenient highway access. The removal of the Park East Freeway has been accompanied by a significant increase in investment to downtown Milwaukee, and was tied to an economic revitalization plan for the Milwaukee Riverfront that has been successful.

Political/Public Process: The support for the freeway removal built up in a political process, rather than in a formal planning and public involvement process. Strong political leadership at many levels was necessary for this project to be implemented.

Park East Corridor Redevelopment Projects

Source: City of Milwaukee Economic Development

For More Information:

<http://www.mkedcd.org/parkeast/>