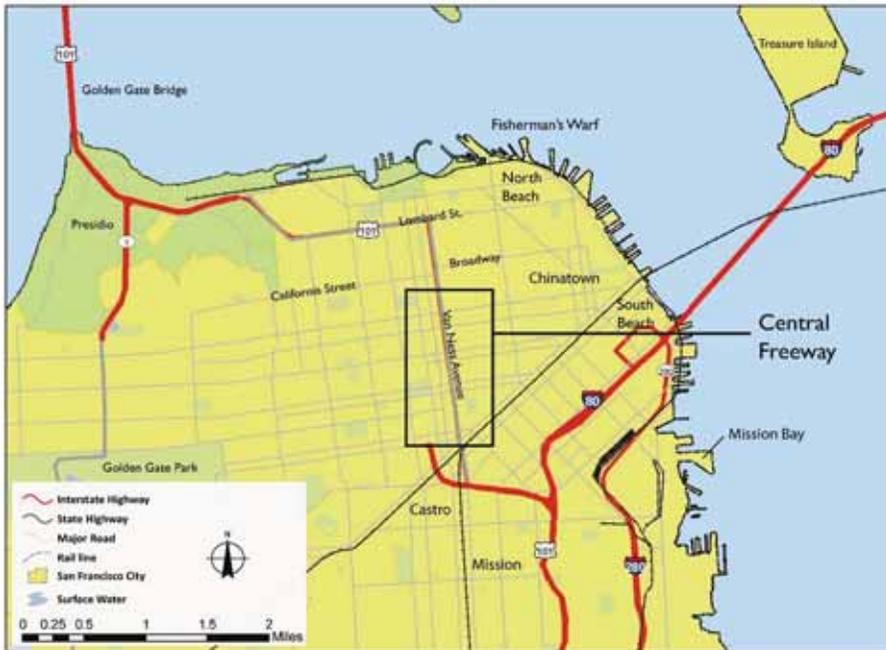


Central Freeway

	Central Freeway	I-81
Project Type	replace an elevated highway and with a boulevard	existing elevated highway - TBD
Interstate Highway?	no	yes
Through Traffic?	no: spur highway to downtown	yes
Vehicles /day	93,000	100,000
Project Length	0.6 miles	1.4 mi.
Context	downtown	downtown
City	San Francisco, CA	Syracuse, NY
Population	739,000	140,658
Timeline	earthquake causes closure 1989; planning and design 1989-2001; construction 2003- 2005	unknown
Cost/Cost per mile	\$50 million/ \$83 million per mile	unknown

Similar to the Embarcadero Freeway, the Central Freeway was intended to eventually cross the City of San Francisco as a through route, but the movement that arose in opposition to urban freeways prevented its completion. Therefore, the Central Freeway functioned as a spur, but it carried significant traffic volume--over 90,000 cars per day. Damage from the Loma Prieta earthquake also forced this highway to close, and support to demolish rather than rebuild the freeway gradually took hold. As time passed, drivers adapted to the loss of the freeway and it became apparent that the freeway closure had many positive effects on the neighborhood, such as lower noise levels and less traffic. However, after the earthquake, the California Department of Transportation (CalTrans) proceeded with plans to repair the elevated freeway, which was re-opened with a single deck serving two directions (rather than the previous double-deck design) in 1996.

Project Location



Octavia Boulevard - Credit: Bill Lieberman

There were two attempts at ballot initiatives brought by the “San Francisco Neighbors Association” calling to tear down the highway between 1994 and 1999. There was also a competing measure introduced by organizations representing neighborhoods to the west, which feared that the freeway removal would cause

unbearable congestion. During this time, a proposal by Alan Jacobs and Elizabeth MacDonald of UC Berkeley to replace the freeway with a multi-way boulevard gained support. Finally, there was a vote with conclusive results in 1999, when two separate measures were approved: one to tear down the freeway, and the second to build Octavia Boulevard. The freeway was demolished in 2002, and Octavia Boulevard opened in 2005 as a replacement for the Central Freeway. It now carries 45,000 cars per day, about half the volume of the freeway.

What were the outcomes?

The project has successfully addressed the need for traffic capacity, with nearly half of the prior traffic volume finding other routes or changing modes. The city has conducted counts of neighborhood streets surrounding the boulevard, and has not found any significant increases from the diversion. The neighborhood around the new boulevard has seen increased residential and commercial investment. The multi-way boulevard is largely considered successful, although some design issues at the intersections, particularly conflicts between the side access roads and cross street traffic, continue to require refinement.

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

The traffic volumes served by the Central Freeway are comparable to those on I-81, although this freeway only provided downtown access, did not carry through traffic, and was not an Interstate facility. There are limited parallels in terms of metropolitan area characteristics; San Francisco has a significant transit system and dense, urban grid of local streets that can offer travelers alternate routes. The Central Freeway decision-making process also occurred under unique circumstances, prompted by an earthquake that forced the freeway to be closed.

What can we learn from this project?

Traffic Circulation and Urban Mobility: This project offers one more example of the ability of traffic to re-route itself in an urban network and find routes that result in the least delay. A study conducted by the University of California Transportation Center⁶ concluded that most freeway drivers switched to other driving routes, and

very few switched to public transit. The project also shows that a multi-way boulevard is worthy of consideration as a design option that can carry significant traffic volumes and still provide a friendly edge for urban, pedestrian-oriented development.

Economic Development/Urban Design: The urban environment in the neighborhood adjacent to this freeway was dramatically improved by the project, through the reduction in noise and traffic, and improvement for other modes in the corridor. Even though there are still over 40,000 cars per day traveling on Octavia Boulevard, they do so at a slower speed. Redevelopment of newly available property will bring additional revenue to the city.

Political/Public Process: The process was highly politicized, with three different votes, and conflicting views from different neighborhoods. The planning process did not result in a consensus decision.

For More Information:

<http://www.sfcta.org/content/view/309/156/>

http://www.sfgov.org/site/sfdpw_page.asp?id=32258



Credit: Bill Lieberman