

RECONNECTING COMMUNITIES

A necessary reality for successful IJIA interstate highway projects



BY JIM KENT AND KEVIN PREISTER

There has been enthusiastic support for the potential of successful projects from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) as expressed in several of the recent stories in the Right of Way Magazine since passage of this act. This column adds another critical dimension to the discussion — that of the necessity to plan for reconnecting communities disrupted as a result of implementing the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 (popularly known as the National Interstate and Defense Act (NIDA)).

In those days, there were no environmental laws, such as the National Environmental Policy Act (passed in 1969), to focus attention on the physical, social, cultural and economic impacts of federal highway projects. They were built at the convenience of the governments and the developers. Environmental issues and community concerns were not part of the equation. The result was that many of the impacted communities, inhabited by working-class, low-income and minority people, had no means or pathways to interact with the highway projects.

While the building of 44,000 miles of interstate highway was an engineering achievement unparalleled in our history, at the same time, the social and environmental costs were enormous. Projects in many settings broke apart thousands of functioning, productive and resourceful neighborhoods. These effects have persisted, and they remain to this day, even to the current generation of affected residents.

In a revealing article in the New York Times recently, Adam Paul Susaneck reviewed the ways that urban highway development in the 1960s created negative effects in neighborhoods that perpetuated inequalities. He points out how the IIJA projects can easily produce the same results, listing projects in several states already approved that will worsen existing conditions, to the detriment of local neighborhoods. But he also points to stories of hope and transformation as well, such as in Rochester, N.Y. where an enormous highway loop was taken out to create affordable housing. In nearby Syracuse, there are plans to tear down Interstate 81, which displaced roughly 1,300 Black residents in the 1960s.

In today's world, for the projects under the IIJA banner, it will be imperative for communities of impact to be asked for input. We have written in other columns in Right of Way Magazine about "geographic democracy," the strong trend in which local people claim their own geography and insist on shaping development projects in a way that



fits and contributes to the community (“Geographic Democracy: A Widespread Power Shift” Sept/Oct 2016; “Beyond the Permitting” Nov/Dec 2016) In today’s environment, projects can go from emerging to disruptive before you get home for dinner, requiring the ROW professional to be proactive and enmeshed within impacted communities in order to be successful. They need to be given the time to do a good job, develop relationships and figure out how the project can optimize benefits to the impacted communities.

The new legislation has provisions for communities whose residents suffered bifurcation and other disruption some 60+ years ago. It focuses on “reconnecting and restoring communities.” The new program, called Reconnecting Communities, will provide support to “reconnect neighborhoods cut off by historic investments and ensure new projects increase opportunity and advance racial equity and environmental justice.”

This new program is a result of long-term community action for those affected by the original highway construction. The people who were dislocated or disrupted through these earlier projects did not just go away. That did not happen. Strange as it may seem to those unfamiliar with community resilience, many of those neighborhoods that remained on either side of bifurcating freeways persisted over the last 60 years. Those families are now in the third generation, and they still carry the resentment of what happened to their parents and grandparents these many years later. However this generation is not powerless and is politically aware. From New Orleans (Clayborne Expressway), Denver (Globeville), Atlanta (Interstate 20), Pittsburgh (Hill District), Miami (Overtown Neighborhood), Montgomery, Alabama (Centennial Hill) and hundreds of other large and small communities, people have organized to ensure that current projects “heal communities,” not destroy them.

An excellent book by Mindy Fullilove gives background on the history and current situation concerning the last 60 years. She tells the stories of how impacted people responded and adapted to the change wrought by the earlier generation of infrastructure. She demonstrates how infrastructure projects in several American cities severely impacted local communities in the path of interstate highway siting. The patterns of movement and communication that characterized these neighborhood areas could not be sustained with the physical barriers that accompanied these projects. Therefore, the people self-organized to survive and keep their communities alive as best they could, which has led to the current situation today.

The fact that many of the original families are still in those old neighborhoods is tied to a concept called *cultural attachment*. Cultural attachment is the cumulative effect of a collection of traditions, attitudes, practices and stories over time that ties a person to the land, to physical place and to kinship/social networks. Because of intergenerational succession, the people who remained and struggled along with their kin, by definition, have strong cultural attachment. They are prepared to mobilize quickly to protect the quality of their communities. As a result of their “staying,” they developed informal and formal systems to survive, preserve their culture and remain in their geographic areas. They have outlasted the crumbling highways built in the 1960s and are ready to participate and support, or react to and fight, the new IJA projects.

The bottom line is the ROW professionals for these new IJA projects should listen first for the stories embedded in these communities. Stories gathered about how the earlier projects went down, understand where the tender spots are and consciously





endeavor to make the new projects connect with the old in appropriate ways — and the new projects will sail along. However, without deliberate, intentional attention, failure will be common. One thing we've learned over the years is that “embedded issues” such as these are deeply held by people in the culture and despite their history, they still have potency — they will move people to action.

Years ago, we worked with Ft. Bragg in North Carolina to identify local issues related to the presence of the base within the larger social setting. As we talked to people, we kept hearing anger and frustration about Ft. Bragg installing guard posts and eliminating hunting on the grounds of the base. These stories were widespread. When we finally had the good sense to ask when this happened, we were told 1919! Memories are long, but the time to get to citizen resistance is short!

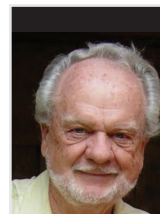
The IJJA projects, if done correctly, can heal the scars present from an earlier generation of work. In this setting, the proper question becomes, “How can we inform and work with impacted residents to foster a better project while addressing the embedded issues buried in this community?” The ROW challenge will be how “to get a seat at the table,” in the words of one ROW agent since many of the projects slated for funding have been in the pipeline for awhile and are ready to go. Most ROW agents are called in too late to affect project design, and they are not given adequate time in the community to build relationships. One antidote in the industry, which ROW leaders and decision-makers could influence, would be to encourage State Departments of Transportation to evaluate IJJA projects in real time from a citizen perspective. How do residents see the transportation priorities in their areas? Are these proposed projects desired by those impacted? What citizen issues need to be resolved in order to build a successful project?

The following is a suggested course of action if your company becomes involved with this aspect of IJJA:

1. Review all news stories from the past that have discussed and reported on the original NIDA project. If there are no accounts of the project, then it is safe to proceed with the design phase. If there are many stories hostile in nature, then you can be assured that the original project created disruption, and there will be organized resistance.
2. If there is organized resistance, it is imperative to have the right field team, which should consist of seasoned and experienced professionals, as well as individuals who can identify ethnically and/or racially with the impacted community(s), to initially gather feedback and stories. Their job is to find the gathering places where local issues are discussed and find the informal and formal leaders who are historically trusted by the rest of the community.

3. Information gleaned from the field experience is then built into strategies on how the project will access the issues that are historically grounded and how they can proceed to address those issues through the current project. This is the difficult step. If a family describes how their interactive patterns with their extended family had to shift because of prior disruptions, that is a rich story. Who was affected? How did they figure out what to do? Who is the family hero of the story? Find ways to celebrate those stories and use them to avoid or resolve issues with the current project.
4. The goal is to not have “issue loading.” That is, do not allow the embedded issues to load onto the current effort. If that happens resources will be spent on managing disruption rather than engaging the people in resolving their current issues.
5. The project design flows from this early citizen engagement, ensuring that residents' issue resolutions are built into the project.

IJJA has the potential to heal old wounds and repair communities that were split apart beginning 60 years ago. The federal Department of Transportation, the Department of Justice, the Environmental Protection Agency and other federal departments as well as State Departments of Transportation will be some of the formal players involved that will require leadership from IRWA to make projects work at the site specific level. The reality is that the highways built in the 1950s and '60s are worn out. What better time to rethink our social and cultural obligations to rebuilding, refurbishing and reconnecting our urban neighborhoods. Right of way professionals can rightfully be excited by this opportunity to rebuild a better future with these communities: *Building a Better World Together.* ✪



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