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By Mark Lamster

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How to fix Dallas: Cut the noose of Interstate 345 and let it breathe

“Can we solve our traffic problem?” This was the central question posed in *Report to Dallas*, a short film produced in 1955 by the public relations arm of the Dallas Citizens Traffic Commission. In Dallas, always a city of optimism, the answer was naturally in the affirmative.

As with the contemporary peril of atomic annihilation, the threat was perceived as existential, “a problem of Dallas progress.” A voice of authority, speaking over images of bustling crowds dodging streetcars, offered the solutions to the ills of urban congestion: a one-way street system, straightened avenues to accelerate traffic, the removal of that obsolete streetcar system, an expressway loop around the central business district.

Be careful what you wish for. Those scenes of Dallasites rushing through the city are now a fantasy for city planners, and the solutions proposed by postwar traffic engineers have been repudiated. As the historian and critic Lewis Mumford wrote just three years after that film’s release, the “city exists not for the constant passage of motorcars, but for the care and culture of men.” Today we would broaden that definition, but the point is the same.

There is also an acknowledgment that traffic is not in itself undesirable, but a sign of a healthy city attractive to an ambitious population. This was obvious to no less a figure than legendary Dallas mayor R. L. “Bob” Thornton, who diagnosed the situation in his customary homespun manner. “All these people complainin’ about traffic downtown. Hell, it’s easy — you got big business, you got traffic,” he said. “If you don’t want a problem, you go to Forney, Texas.”

In recent years, Dallas has taken steps to undo some of the damage it inflicted upon itself in the name of progress. Main Street runs in two directions, and trolley service is expanding, supplementing the expansive if flawed DART network.

Audaciously good

An audacious new proposal, put forward by a pair of local urban planners, Patrick Kennedy and Brandon Hancock, would aggressively expand on these efforts. Their plan calls for tearing down Interstate 345, the decrepit stretch of elevated highway that links Interstate 30 with the Woodall Rodgers Freeway, forming a barrier along the eastern side of downtown, cutting it off from Deep Ellum and East Dallas. To

most drivers, it appears as an extension of Central Expressway running south to Interstate 45. (To avoid confusion about the road, it is not labeled Interstate 345.)

The highway, planned in the 1950s but not completed until the early '70s, closes the expressway loop around downtown. Envisioned as a means of keeping through traffic out of the central business district, it instead acts as a noose that segregates the urban core from the rest of the city, suppressing its vitality and economic prospects.

The road's effects on its immediate surroundings have been brutal. Where there was once an active streetscape, there is now a wind-swept terrain of empty lots, twisted streets and orphaned buildings, a blighted zone familiar to anyone who has driven by or, in a fit of brazen defiance, attempted to traverse it by foot.

Removal of the highway, according to Kennedy and Hancock, would leave the city with 245 acres of cleared land to be transformed into a privately financed, pedestrian-friendly, and predominantly residential neighborhood modeled on Dallas' West Village. That's the kind of lively, out-at-night environment that is attracting people to cities the world over and propelling the housing market in neighboring Uptown.

Tear down a highway in Dallas? Yes, it sounds like apostasy, but it's not quite so radical a concept as it may at first appear. In 2001, after decades of debate, Fort Worth demolished the much-maligned Lancaster Elevated stretch of I-30 in what has been a largely successful effort to restore its center.

In fact, Dallas entertained the idea of tearing down I-345 in the 1998 Center City Transportation System Management Study. The proposal was rejected then because of concerns about congestion, but circumstances, and ideas about traffic planning, have changed in the ensuing years.

For one thing, the highway can't stand for much longer, at least in its current condition. Now 40 years old, it is a moldering, obsolete behemoth, and the Texas Department of Transportation is mulling the results of a feasibility study with options for its repair or replacement. Removing the roadway altogether, however, is not among the choices under consideration.

"The current effort is focused strictly on rehabilitation of the existing structure, which requires ongoing maintenance," says TxDOT spokesman Tony Hartzel. "The magnitude of a bridge removal project is a substantial effort that could result in a multibillion dollar project to accommodate existing interstate highway connections. That type of project has no funding."

The prospect of environmental review and the challenges of "coordination with federal, regional and local partners" also preclude consideration of a teardown, Hartzel says.

The fact that review might be complicated should not place it beyond consideration. As it is, results of TxDOT's study, promised this summer, have now been delayed for a year, until summer 2014.

Just passing through

Dallas doesn't need I-345. According to statistics compiled by Kennedy and Hancock, only a quarter of the 160,000 vehicles that use the road daily either enter or exit in the downtown area. Those numbers reflect the city's own statistics, which demonstrate that it has become a regional shortcut, with some 80 percent of the 2.2 million motorists who use Dallas freeways each day just passing through.

That's not an acceptable ratio; Dallas should be a destination, not a regional corridor of convenience. "If it's not going to downtown, it should not go through downtown," says Kennedy.

The vast bulk of that traffic could find alternate routes that bypass downtown or take advantage of the plans to overhaul the horseshoe interchanges of I-30 and I-35. Those entering the downtown area could do so on surface roads, which could be vastly improved with I-345 removed. What is now a jury-rigged hornet's nest of on-and-off ramps and rerouted streets could be replaced by a more easily navigable grid of boulevards linking major arterial roads.

This was precisely what Mumford prescribed five decades ago. "Arteries must not be thrust into the delicate tissue of our cities," he wrote. "The blood they circulate must rather be entered through an elaborate network of minor blood vessels and capillaries."

This ad-hoc approach naturally draws opposition from those who might be inconvenienced. "Unless there's a plan to reroute all that traffic, it's going to end up in the already-overburdened I-35 corridor," says Michael Buckley, director of the Center for Metropolitan Density at the University of Texas at Arlington.

Historically, the dire predictions of massive congestion wielded by the opponents of highway teardowns have proven inaccurate. Citing similar projects in Portland, Ore.; Milwaukee, Wis.; Seoul and San Francisco, the urban planner Jeff Speck has written that "road removals have actually been found to reduce overall travel times within their cities." When Los Angeles temporarily shut down I-405 in 2011 and 2012, warnings of "Carmageddon" proved inaccurate. Given time, Angelenos adjusted.

One explanation for this phenomenon is that highways create "induced demand;" that is, their mere presence encourages more people to use them. Once removed, overall traffic has a tendency to decrease, as drivers find other paths, use public transit or carpool. "It'll be all right by Friday" is the traffic engineer's axiom. After a week or two, drivers adjust to the new normal and systems return to equilibrium.

The benefits of this disruption, according to estimates presented by Kennedy and Hancock, would include an influx of 25,000 residents and 10,000 jobs into downtown, creating some \$100 million in annual tax revenue for the city. They place the teardown costs in the \$80 million range, far shy of the billions suggested by TxDOT.

Those economics, if accurate, would be a reasonable justification for their proposal, but profits for the city and for investors would not be its only or even its principal benefits. There is no dollar figure that can effectively measure the value of suturing a city divided, in particular the return of Deep Ellum to the downtown fold.

That reconnection would have civic consequences. Among Dallas' signal problems is the Balkanization of its population, a situation both enabled and exacerbated by its highway system, which creates physical barriers between neighborhoods and allows citizens to whip from place to place without actively engaging with each other. That is a recipe for a toxic combination of dogmatism and indifference that breeds political dysfunction.

In response to the Kennedy-Hancock proposal, the Dallas chapter of the American Institute of Architects has called for "an integrated study" to determine the highway's future, with "input from the primary stakeholders such as City of Dallas elected officials, surrounding land owners, residents and design professionals."

A time for action

Studies may be useful, but too often they are tools for delay, inaction and manipulation. Dallas, a city of action, should not settle for excuses or stopgap repairs that will themselves cost millions and do nothing but propagate the status quo.

The city stands with its future before it. In the coming weeks, the finalists of the Connected Cities Competition will present their visions of a city reintegrated with the Trinity River to the public. Combined with the proposal to tear down I-345, Dallas will have visions for the reinvention of both the west and east sides of downtown.

If Dallas can summon the will to implement them, it will be in a position to recast itself as a home to the kind of walkable, high-density urbanism that is driving city growth around the globe, and it would remake itself as a more democratic home for its citizens. That would be an appropriate message for a sequel to *Report to Dallas*. Call it *The Road Not Taken*.

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Doing without I-345

The highway cuts downtown off from Deep Ellum and East Dallas.

Tearing it down could create 245 acres of vibrant urban space.

Commuters adjust quickly to highway teardowns.

What is: A barren, underutilized landscape

What could be: A vibrant urban center