

A crusade to defeat the legacy of highways rammed through poor neighborhoods

By [Ashley Halsey III](#) March 29 at 12:01 AM

As a child, Anthony Foxx knew he couldn't ride his bike far from home without being blocked by a freeway. By the time he became U.S. transportation secretary he understood why.

“We now know — overwhelmingly — that our urban freeways were almost always routed through low-income and minority neighborhoods, creating disconnections from opportunity that exist to this day,” Foxx said.

When the expressways that walled off his Charlotte neighborhood were designed, black residents of North Carolina still were denied voting rights. That highways routinely were routed through poor neighborhoods — Robert Moses, a polarizing urban planner of the era, called them “blighted” — is well known to those who suffered the consequences.

That a member of President Obama's Cabinet intends to lob that fact into a larger public discussion about race and opportunity, and encourage steps to rectify it, appears unprecedented.

“I really believe that this is an issue that has been on the shelf collecting dust for a long time,” Foxx said.

Foxx will launch his crusade in a speech Tuesday to the Rotary Club in Charlotte — “It's probably not the speech they're expecting to hear,” he said — and repeat it Wednesday in Washington before the Center for American Progress.

“It became clear to me only later on that those freeways were there to carry people *through* my neighborhood, but never *to* my neighborhood,” said Foxx, who grew up in Lincoln Heights, a neighborhood walled in by three highways. “Businesses didn't invest there. Grocery stores and pharmacies didn't take the risk. I could not even get a pizza delivered to my house.”

Using maps and before-and-after photos, Foxx supports his case that bulldozing highways through where poor people lived was public policy in the mid-20th century.

- Miami: “I-95 cut the heart out of Overtown, a thriving black community.”
- New York City: “They call the Staten Island Expressway the Mason-Dixon Line.”
- Los Angeles: “The Century Expressway was one of seven freeways that led to decay in African American and Latino communities.”
- Seattle: “I-5 was built through the city’s oldest blue-collar community, despite residents’ concerns they’d be isolated from the rest of the city.”
- Baltimore: “Robert Moses wanted to plow through a West Baltimore community known as Harlem Park, a then-thriving middle-class African American neighborhood. Harlem Park was destroyed before the project was stopped.”

Foxx sees this as a moment when some of these wrongs can be righted.

“The country is reaching the end of the useful life of a lot of our infrastructure, and we’re going to have to replace and rebuild a lot, so I want people to be thinking about this,” he said. “We ought to do it better than we did it the last time.”

What’s more, additional infrastructure — roads, transit, cycling and pedestrian — will be needed by 2045 to accommodate a projected population growth of 70 million.

(Only 49 percent of low-income neighborhoods have sidewalks. In high-income areas it is closer to 90 percent, Foxx said.)

The link between transportation and opportunity is a reoccurring lesson. When Washington's Metrorail system shut down this month, thousands of people scrambled or were unable to get to work.

"Transportation for a long time has been seen in the light of something that is connected to opportunity," Foxx said. "If we don't appreciate that and figure out how to do better, I think we're going to constrain our ability to grow our country. Everybody has got to have a shot."

Giving neighborhoods that have been poorly served in the past by transportation dollars has been a priority for the Obama administration. Foxx has used a variety of grant programs to bolster projects that, in the language spelled out in a grant application form, "sought to improve access to reliable, safe, and affordable transportation for disconnected communities."

In the waning months of Obama's term in office, with Congress clearly determined to thwart the administration at every turn, Foxx knows his ability to influence the change he envisions is limited.

But, he points out, the ability of Washington to determine how federal transportation dollars are spent always has been limited.

"We're trying to be more attuned, but it's not a situation where the federal government is solely in control," he said. "We can't tell a state what project to do. They have to make those determinations."

So, Foxx has begun approaching governors and mayors with his message, and he plans to engage more of them after his speeches Tuesday and Wednesday. He defines the mission with three principles: use transportation to further opportunities for and within communities; recognize neighborhoods that have been wronged and work to strengthen them; and build new infrastructure to serve the communities they pass through.

“These principles sound very easy, but they’re really hard and they’re also very necessary if we’re going to make transportation work for everybody,” Foxx said. “It’s going to be the product of a longer conversation. I just think America’s ready for that.”

The notion of an interlocking system of national highways has been around for a century, but the motivation to move forward came when Dwight D. Eisenhower returned from the war in Europe with a vision of Germany’s Reichsautobahn. He saw replicating it as a way to move troops and military supplies rapidly in the face of invasion.

A confluence of events was taking place in the United States as Eisenhower fostered the idea of an interstate highway system. There was a looming fear of conflict with communist powers, a great migration was underway from the South to northern cities, many of those who moved north swelled the urban pockets of poverty, and a federal program of urban renewal was born. (The housing projects that rapidly became synonymous with poverty originally were conceived as short-term housing for veterans returning from the war.)

Between highway construction and urban renewal, “roughly two-thirds of the families displaced were poor and mostly African American,” Foxx said.

Often, as Foxx’s research documents, when an interstate reached a city, urban planners routed highways through the poorest parts of town, presenting their plans as an all-purpose solution that found the expressway a home while renewing blighted neighborhoods by bulldozing through them.

Moses saw expressways as one antidote to “slum areas.” While Foxx describes Harlem Park as a thriving middle-class black neighborhood, Moses called them “slums” and he said that “the more of them that are wiped out the healthier Baltimore will be in the long run.”

Foxx points out that a new highway often provided anything but urban renewal.

“African American communities like mine really suffered,” Foxx said, “and it wasn’t just African American communities. There were blue-collar communities and other ones that felt the brunt of this big movement.”

Sparing the more affluent parts of town may have been smart politics for elected officials, but carving up the poorer sections created highway chasms where once there was community, walling off people from their neighbors and destroying hundreds of homes, stores and churches that were the fabric of the community.

“My frame of reference was a neighborhood that basically had a major thoroughfare right in front of my grandparents’ house and another one just up the street to the right, so there was literally one way in and one way out of my neighborhood,” said Foxx, who was raised by his mother and grandparents in a brick home with red shutters on Crestdale Drive. “I remember my grandparents’ driving across town to go the grocery store, to go to the pharmacy, to go to the doctor, to do just about anything some of us take for granted.”

Lacking much political influence, most middle- and lower-class neighborhoods accepted their fate. But a few fought back.

In Philadelphia, a largely black middle- and lower-class neighborhood called Germantown fought off a plan for a four-lane roadway that would bypass its core commercial area.

But the court fight took almost a decade, and amid that uncertainty, according to a report by Temple University’s Center for Public Policy, “One by one, stores left — the major department stores such as Rowell’s, Sears, [and] J.C. Penney all ceasing operations. With vacant retail properties lining the formerly bustling Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues, lower-end retailers took up in their place.”

Washington, D.C., has fewer highway miles than any city on the East Coast because residents rose up against plans to build two circular highways, and connecting links, inside the current Capitol Beltway. Activist Reginald H. Booker, who died last year at age 74, made the movement's mantra: "White men's roads through black men's homes."

Ashley Halsey reports on national and local transportation.

The Post Recommends

4-year-old girl's decapitation in Taiwan sparks outrage and death penalty debate

Crowds gathered at the site of the killing to leave flowers and toys in honor of the girl, nicknamed "Little Lightbulb."

Which of the 11 American nations do you live in?

A fascinating new look at the cultural differences between the 11 nations that make up North America.

Patty Duke: The original survivor of dysfunctional child stardom

Though many people didn't know it in the 1960s, Duke – who won an Oscar as a teenager – had a horrific home life.
