

2011  
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## San Francisco replaces Central Freeway with a boulevard

Posted by *Jason Deshaies* under *Archive, Case studies* | *No Comments*



This blog post is part of a series that highlights stories from other cities and regions that have faced challenges comparable to that of the Syracuse region and the I-81 corridor. To read other blog posts in the series, [click here](#).

San Francisco's Central Freeway was intended to eventually cross the city as a through route, but the movement that arose in opposition to urban freeways prevented its completion. The Central Freeway ultimately functioned as a spur, carrying a significant traffic volume—more than 90,000 cars per day.

Damage from the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake 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.

Between 1994 and 1999 there were two attempts at ballot initiatives brought by the "San Francisco Neighbors Association" calling to tear down the highway. 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 the multi-way Octavia Boulevard. The freeway was demolished in 2002, and Octavia Boulevard opened in 2005 as a replacement for the Central Freeway. The boulevard now carries 45,000 cars per day, about half the volume of the freeway.

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.

This project offers an 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 Center concluded that most freeway drivers switched to other driving routes, and very few switched to public

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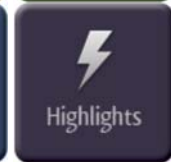


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transit. The project also shows that a multi-way boulevard is worthy of consideration as a design option that can carry significant traffic volumes and still provide a friendly edge for urban, pedestrian-oriented development.

To read more about San Francisco replacing the Central Freeway with Octavia Boulevard and how it compares with *The I-81 Challenge* process, check out a full version of the Case Study Report.

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