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OPINION

Columnist Johanna Neumann: Preventing highway boondoggles



Route 9 in Hadley. GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

As construction on Route 9 continues to snarl commutes and add time to grocery runs or kid activity pickups, I find at least some solace that the [Route 9 Corridor Improvement project](#) — with the planned multi-use path on both sides, grass strips to separate people walking and on bike from vehicular traffic and interconnection with the Norwottuck Rail Trail — has the potential to better equip people in our valley to get around safely without a car.

The bipartisan \$1.2 trillion infrastructure deal signed into law in November 2021 has provided an unprecedented opportunity to invest in transportation in America. States across the country, including Massachusetts, can use those federal transportation dollars to fix crumbling infrastructure and create a thoroughly modern transportation network — maybe even including the long-proposed east-west rail from Boston to Springfield.

New money and new opportunities should spur new thinking. While I'm heartened that leaders in Massachusetts are increasingly [directing state funds](#) toward projects that fix existing infrastructure and create safe spaces to walk and bike, it's concerning that other transportation agencies across the country are planning to squander their increased transportation funding on the status quo — highway expansions.

Highway expansions don't solve traffic congestion. To borrow a phrase from "Field of Dreams," if you build it, they will come. [Research shows](#) that building more lanes leads to more drivers, more pollution and more environmental harm. Instead of deepening our destructive dependency on cars, now is the time to develop healthier and cleaner ways to get around.

Unfortunately, highway expansion boondoggles abound. For example, just to our south, Connecticut's governor is promoting a long-dormant idea for a multi-billion-dollar expansion of Interstate 95 as a fix for congestion, despite official studies dating back to 2002 recommending against any highway expansion, saying it would make congestion worse, extend traffic delays and increase pollution. Also in Connecticut, a \$700-plus million proposal to widen Interstate 84 in Danbury is under review.

Connecticut has other pressing transportation priorities. As recently as last year, the [State Transportation Fund](#) had fallen to such low levels that local transit agencies had started to plan for painful service reductions. Connecticut's state commuter rail needs investment. The Nutmeg State also badly needs to invest in road repairs: [62 percent of its roads](#) are in poor or mediocre condition according to a 2021 report from TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit.

Instead of decreasing traffic, expanding I-95 or I-84 will likely set off a chain reaction of societal decisions — often referred to as "induced demand" — where drivers gravitate to new roadways, ultimately leading to [more congestion across more lanes](#).

That additional highway driving contributes to climate change. Transportation is [Massachusetts'](#) and [Connecticut's](#) top source of greenhouse gas emissions. Southern New England is already reeling from the impacts of a warming planet, including this summer's droughts and heat waves. If we want to ensure a livable climate, we cannot afford to keep investing in more highway lanes and more car-dependent infrastructure.

Highways are also bad for our health. More than [40,000](#) people died in traffic accidents last year alone and the 45 million Americans living near busy roads or other traffic-related infrastructure are at increased risk of asthma, coronary heart disease, strokes, and other health impacts of [traffic-related pollution](#).

Once a highway is expanded, it is more expensive to maintain, adding to an already behemoth backlog of roadway repairs. Across the country, [173,000 miles of road](#) are classified as "poor" condition, and more than a third of bridges are in need of major repairs or replacement, with 7% considered "[structurally deficient](#)."

We need to fix the crumbling roads and bridges we already have, and then stop spending so much money on highway infrastructure that locks people into a car-dependent lifestyle. The time is now for states to reimagine how we spend our transportation dollars.

I've written in this paper [before](#) about how we should make it easier for our communities to use healthier, cleaner transportation options, such as electrified public transit, biking and walking. By driving less, we can help people live more, reducing pollution and increasing the livability and safety of our streets.

The Route 9 project, which improves existing infrastructure and invites more people to walk and bike could be a harbinger of the future, but that line of thinking needs to be scaled up to include investments in larger projects. With federal transportation dollars coming down the pike, now is the time to build a transportation system where we drive less and live more.

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