



What's Better Than Turning an Urban Highway Into a Park?

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On Friday, a group of officials including new transportation secretary Anthony Foxx broke ground on a park being built over Interstate 70 in St. Louis — an effort not surprisingly called "Park over the Highway." The project's purpose is to overcome half a century of poor planning and reconnect the downtown area with the iconic Gateway Arch and the Mississippi River. If the completed job even partly approaches the beauty of the design renderings, it may well have been worth the wait:





Before and after the "Park over the Highway" project, via CityArchRiver 2015

The "Park over the Highway" plan is just one part of a broad effort to reduce the barriers between the Arch grounds and downtown St. Louis by late 2015 [PDF]. Other phases involve re-routing roads, laying an extensive groundwork of pedestrian and bike paths, and generally upgrading the landscape. The entire \$380-million renovation is being funded by a mixture of public money (federal grants and a voter-approved local sales tax) and private contributions (via the CityArchRiver foundation).

For these reasons, officials are looking at St. Louis as a model for cities around the country to emulate. For starters, the "Park over the Highway" approach (known locally as "the lid") offers a possible approach for reducing the impact of urban interstates that have severed downtowns from their waterfronts. More broadly, the combined funding structure may offer a way to improve urban parks in an era of diminishing public money.

But not everyone agrees that St. Louis is making clear progress. On the contrary, some local observers see the "the lid" as a bandage for the urban interstate, when what's really needed is

reconstructive surgery. Rather than toss a green carpet over I-70, they would prefer to knock down the highway completely and construct grade-level boulevards in its place — truly integrating city and riverfront. And, to be fair, their renderings are pretty impressive, too:



A rendering of the City to River effort via NextSTL

The push to remove I-70 has been growing for years. The state transportation department found that re-routing this portion of the interstate was very possible, since most vehicles on the highway go *around* the city. Writing at *Next City* in April, city alderman Scott Ogilvie pointed out that nearly every public comment about the current "Park over the Highway" project supported further study of the I-70 demolition.

That study was indeed set in motion in mid-2012, but the results never appeared as scheduled last December. This June, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that officials no longer believe there's enough planning money to give the idea full consideration. Boulevard proponent Alex Ihnen, writing at the blog *Next STL*, appeared resigned to the fact that the chance for any real conversation about tearing down the highway might have passed — at least for the moment, if not longer.

Down the road, as it were, those plans could be revived. The Missouri Department of Transportation says the current "Park over the Highway" project does not preclude the removal of I-70, should local officials choose to reconsider that vision in the future. For its part, MDOT argues the lid project not only satisfies the city's primary aim — "to ease both pedestrian and bike flow from downtown into the Arch grounds" — but does so with widespread support.

For sure, it's hard to call it a loss when a city builds a lush and inviting park over an urban interstate, but that's not the same as calling it a total win. Instead, what's happening in St. Louis may be better described as progress with a stumble. That doesn't mean other cities shouldn't see St. Louis as a model for addressing the problems of an urban interstate, but it does mean they also shouldn't forget to see it as a caution.



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