AMERICA WALKS



COMMUNITIES OVER HIGHWAYS

ORGANIZING PLAYBOOK



A HIGHWAY HARMS YOUR COMMUNITY. NOW WHAT?

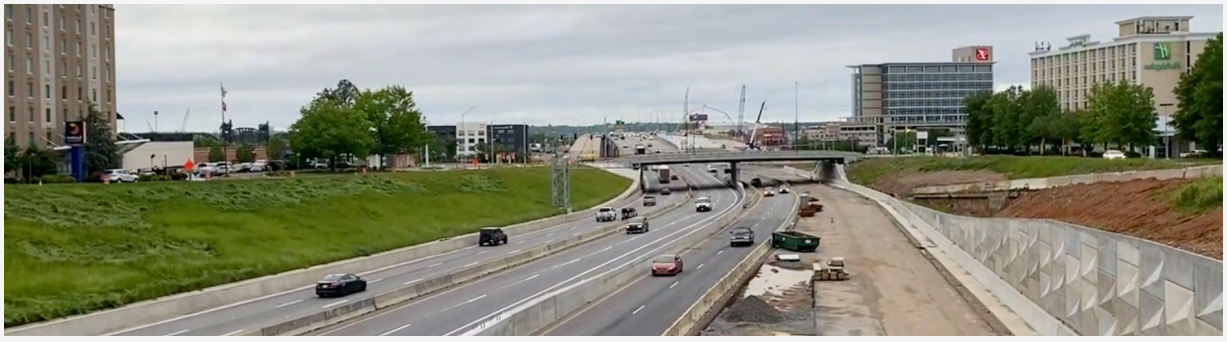
Numberless communities across the United States are split in half by highways. Highways become barriers when built through communities, dividing and polluting cities, towns, and neighborhoods.

Many people become freeway fighters when they decide their community is better off without a big road. Maybe a plan to expand or extend a highway spurs them to action. Maybe an existing highway has reached the end of its life and there's the opportunity to reexamine whether it is needed.

This toolkit is intended for early-stage community organizers seeking to protect their communities from highway expansion, or to reconnect communities divided by highways. The toolkit provides a starting point for understanding the general bureaucratic and legal process that guides highway building and the organizing strategies that can shape freeway fights. It will introduce the reader to general concepts and offer case studies from freeway fights in both urban and rural settings. It is not a comprehensive guide to the varied political contexts and laws of each and every state.

Some of the material in this toolkit will be more relevant when it comes to fighting highway expansion, some more relevant when it comes to reconnecting communities. The toolkit will point out when something is more applicable to one of the two, although oftentimes there is significant overlap.

This toolkit will help you make a case presenting a positive vision that motivates fellow community members and decision makers to engage. That's not to say negativity doesn't have its place; highways have many deleterious effects you'll want to emphasize. But at the end of the day, a positive vision that leaves your community stronger is more likely to win hearts and minds.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ARE YOU AN ORGANIZER?

If you have ever rallied everyone to get out of the house to school or an event, you are an organizer. If you have ever gotten a group to agree on a restaurant or what's for dinner, you are an organizer. The reality is that we are all called upon at one time or another to organize others to action.

Can you organize to stop or remove a highway? We're not going to sugarcoat this: this will be hard. But it has been done before by people like you.

We start with organizing because it is the asymmetric strategy that can overcome the monetary and institutional power historically behind highway expansion. Departments of Transportation have access to hundreds of millions of dollars to push and develop projects. You need to find another way to counter these resources.



So what is organizing? It has been defined as "using what you have to get what you want." Working with others to identify messaging, strategy and tactics that tap into the latent power in the community to move toward a common vision.

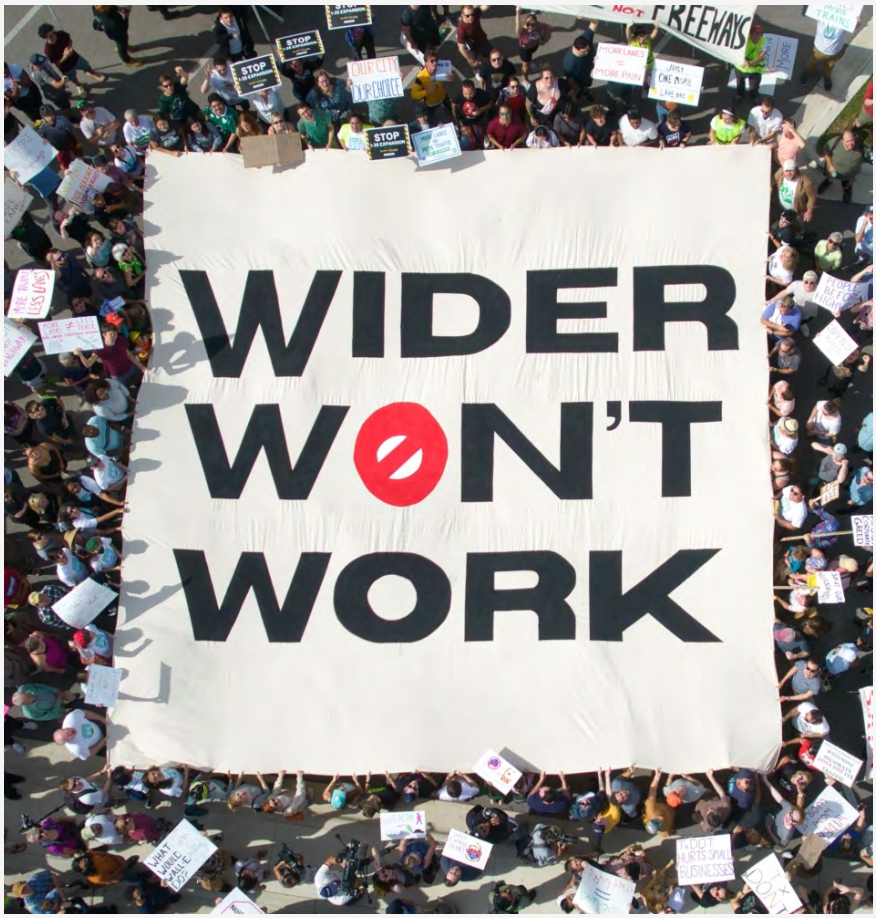
Organizing is about helping people to realize their own agency in the community. To help move them from head ("I know what is right") to heart ("I want to change this") to hands ("I will take these actions to create the changes that my community needs").

Organizing therefore is about relationships. In the words of Marshall Ganz: "Organizing is about equipping people with the power they need to change their world. It is about relationships... It is not about marketing, it is not about sales, it is not about crowds. It is about commitment to one another."

This Communities Over Highways Organizing Playbook will introduce you to campaign planning and organizing in the context of freeway fighting. It is not the last word, but it will include resources so that you can go deeper into any topic.

This playbook guides you through developing a movement and campaign strategy, understanding the typical key moments in fighting a highway project, and useful tactics that people similar to you have employed.

America Walks is also the steward of the Freeway Fighters Network, which exists to exchange information and support freeway fighters across the country. You can join the network here.



MAKING THE CASE FOR YOUR MOVEMENT

One of the most important first steps is to define the vision and values of your movement, center it in community values, and explain the choice confronting the community. This is called public narrative, which we will explore below.

Public narrative has three elements. First is the story of self - why you are engaged. Next is the story of us - how the community has confronted similar challenges and why it must confront this one. Finally, there is the story of now - that the community working together can build a better future for itself. That story of now will reference your strategy (the campaign plan we will discuss below) and have a call to action (how an individual can have agency within the broader movement). We owe a debt here to Marshall Ganz, and encourage you to learn more about him and public narrative here.



But let's start with you. Why are you engaged in freeway fighting and why should others join you? Answering this question, sharing it with others, and learning about their vision and values is the starting point for building a team, building a movement and building coalitions.

Story of Self

As you begin talking to others about a freeway fighting movement, it's useful first to define your motivations and what calls you to speak up for your community. This is often called a "Story of Self."

A "Story of Self" is a personal narrative that communicates who you are, the values that drive you, and the choices that shaped your identity. It centers on "choice points"—moments of challenge, decision, and outcome—that explain your motivations to others, often used to build empathy and trust in organizing and relationship-building settings.

In developing your Story of Self, reflect on these questions:

1. Why am I called to this movement?
2. Why did I decide to tackle this specific injustice or problem and work on this organizing effort?
3. What values move me to act? Have these values always been important to me? If not, when did that change?
4. How might these values inspire others to similar action? What stories can I tell from my own life about specific people or events that would show, rather than tell, how I learned or acted on those values?

A key portion of the story of self, indeed all messaging, is that it includes appeals to the heart as well as appeals to the head. It is common to include the many analytical and data-driven reasons that highways are bad for health, safety, the environment and the economy. But politics runs on emotion not logic. So include the personal reasons that motivate you. It may have the effect of a highway on family, friends, or community members who you saw harmed by past choices.

Now that you have a story of self, try it out. Set up meetings with other community members, draw out their story of self (everyone has one) and share your own. This type of one-on-one meeting is crucial to your journey as an advocate. Without others, you are a gadfly. With others, you are part of a movement.

The Story of Us - Establishing a Vision and Shared Values

Next up: what is the shared vision for your community if the movement is successful? This vision can describe physical changes to the neighborhood (e.g. no expansion of I-35, or I-81 through the city is replaced by a boulevard), but ideally it is outcomes-based as well.

Let's look at the visions for two contemporary freeway fighting movements, Stop TxDOT I-45 in Houston, Texas and Oklahomans for Responsible Transportation in Norman, Oklahoma.

Stop TxDOT I-45:

> "Our Mission: To challenge the status quo of transportation policy and to fight for all people in Houston to be able to participate in the decisions that affect health, safety, and mobility in their communities.
>
> Our Vision: We envision a future where transportation serves as a joyful connective tissue that moves all people safely and freely through a healthy, healing environment."

Oklahomans for Responsible Transportation:

> "Our mission is more than just protecting our homes; it's about looking out for what is best for Oklahoma, our state we love so much. We look to ensure future generations do not fall victim to the mistakes of the past...
>
> We stand for individual property rights free of government overreach. When roads are properly planned and financed, we not only protect and preserve our agriculture, public and private lands, water, and wildlife, but we also trust we are passing on a fiscally responsible government to our children and future generations."

Although the two movements are opposing highway expansion, both their visions encompass more than a decision about transportation. They provide reasons to stand up against the road; for Stop TxDOT I-45 it's about striving for a safer, healthier, more joyful community, for Oklahomans for Responsible Transportation, it's about protecting homes and nature and stewardship for future generations.

The vision your movement develops does not need to be static. A vision may be developed initially by an individual or a core group of members in your movement, but make sure to establish early a dialogue with the broader community and incorporate the concerns and dreams you hear into your vision. That way you can set a common goal, without prescribing exact solutions. A broad vision helps people see themselves as part of the movement.



Like Stop TxDOT I-45 and Oklahomans for Responsible Transportation, your movement's vision should be rooted in a set of shared values. These values help your movement relate to the public and attract new members. Think of them as your movement's business card. They should convey in a single word or two who you are and what you stand for. Ideally they are incorporated into your movement's name.

The Story of Now

You know why you are engaged, and you are now working with others. What is the plan? When you ask people to join the campaign, what is the specific ask you are making of them?

People have to make choices with their time. Even if they share your values and goals, they need to know that there is a strategy reasonably calculated to win the desired outcomes.

At the start, your ask may be as simple as "can we work together on this?" But when you have a core group of committed individuals, it is time to sit together and write up a campaign plan. And remember - if it isn't written down, it isn't a plan.

That takes us to campaign planning.

WRITING A CAMPAIGN PLAN

Campaigns can take many forms, but a simple definition is that campaigns are a series of linked tactics to achieve an objective. If one phone call or letter could solve the problems you see, you would not be here. If the logic of our positions has not alone swayed decision makers or the public, then a campaign is required.

And while campaigns may start with one theory of change or set of tactics, campaigns are also about developing the collective capacity to adapt to changed circumstances, and find a new path to the objectives.

A key concept here is that a campaign may also be a series of nested campaigns. Consider the civil rights movement of the 1960s. The overriding objective was establishing civil rights in federal law. Actions such as the Selma march and the Montgomery bus boycott were nested campaigns that won real change but also built power and momentum toward the ultimate goal.

In a freeway fight where the ultimate decision rests with the legislature, nested campaigns might include driving comments toward an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), attracting a city council to your position, or even just winning a legal pause. Each of these nested campaigns is an opportunity to build power by winning more supporters and will require their own campaign plan.

When putting together a plan, consider the following elements:

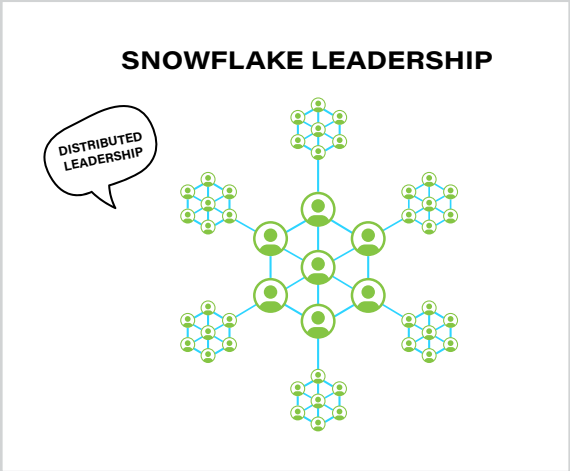
1. Who are your people, and what do they want?

Who are your people means who are the people in your community that you are committed to working with? The second question is: What are the challenges they face, and what kind of change do they need? It's based not on some academic study, but on talking to people about their lived experience. Ultimately, it is all about "How can I enable them to use their resources in new ways to develop the power and the capacity they need to accomplish their goals?" By asking yourselves these questions, you can start the outreach to understand the concerns in your community and work already under way, and find people to work with on your plan.

2. What are the goals of the plan?

Once you have done the work of finding your people and understanding community needs, you can start to pick out specific goals. The goals of the plan should speak both to a longer term vision (e.g., replace the highway with a true community vision), and a specific measurable outcome. Here is where the team can identify interim goals and longer term goals, and consider nested campaigns within the broader campaign.

We also recommend including goals relating to organizational and personal growth. Whether or not your plan succeeds, you should be building a base for further action. You and your fellow campaigners should be stronger after the conclusion of the plan, regardless of success. Personal goals might include new relationships or new skills. Organizational goals might include new volunteers, more diverse leadership, or new coalition partners. Understanding these goals will influence the tactics you choose to accomplish your plans.



We urge your core group to adopt the "snowflake model" of organizing. A hierarchical structure can lead to burnout and low engagement. The Snowflake Model does not rely on a single leader. Instead, leadership is distributed among multiple individuals, who are each empowered to take action in their respective areas. Areas may be defined geographically (i.e. by neighborhood, region, etc.), thematically (i.e. people working on outreach, digital communications, technical assistance, etc.), or some other way. The core objective is not just to recruit followers to do work, but to develop leaders who can then develop further leaders, expanding outward like the crystalline growth of a snowflake.

3. Who has the power to give you what you want?

Are there specific people in the community who must act in order to achieve your goals? Who are they, and what must they do? Be specific. Know the relevant decision makers for your plan, and target your work toward getting them to make the right

decision. Note the distinction between those that influence policy and those that actually have decision making authority. You want the first as allies, but the decision makers are your ultimate target.

The decision makers vary by state, given state laws. Also recognize that while there are formal processes, there are also informal processes that determine who has the authority to give you what you want. Check out the section below on "How Do Highway Plans Get Made?" for more information.

4. What are the values driving your plan?

As discussed above, clearly identifying your values will help shape your campaign message and how you do your work. Being solidly rooted in values also helps build a bridge to the next stage of your work. Specific issues and opportunities will change, values endure.

5. What is your theory of change?

Campaigns are about using what you have to win the goals you seek. Having a clear theory about how to get from here to there will make it easier to attract others to join your cause. E.g. "By demonstrating broad local opposition we will win local elected officials and influencers to our cause, ultimately convincing the legislature to abandon the project."

6. Campaign Narrative

What is the story you will tell to others about the plan? What are the key talking points? Is there a memorable slogan?

Think about how the story can illustrate your vision, values, and theory of change, as well as describing the outcome. Think about how the story might be told to a reporter, or on social media, or to a potential partner or volunteer. Is it a story that can be easily remembered or repeated? Will it strike an emotional chord with the listener?

Your story should be no longer than a few paragraphs. This is where developing the story of us and now, described above, is key.

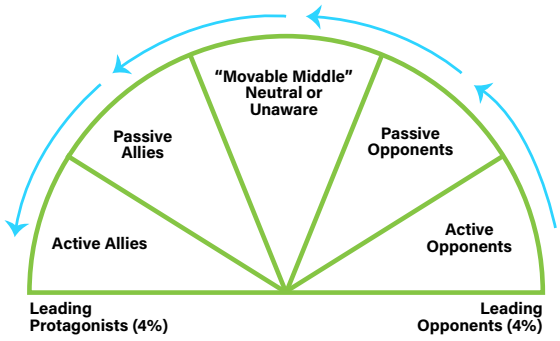
7. Allies and Opponents

Who might actively partner with you? Are there influencers in your community who would support your cause? Is there a particular demographic that you can reach out to, or should reach out to?

Will there be an active opponent? Or those who might have reservations or objections to your plan? Can you shape your message to win them over, soften their opposition or concerns, or make them less persuasive to those that start in a neutral position?

Recognize that you probably cannot win everybody to your vision. You want to activate your supporters and be persuasive to the undecideds, such that opponents will understand that the community wants a different course.

You occupy the far left in the graphic to the right - the protagonists. You probably won't change the minds of your committed opponents. But how do you move everyone else closer to you?



THE SPECTRUM OF ALLIES

Broad coalitions are more effective when it comes to convincing decision makers and relationships are key to building broad coalitions. Find out who in your community is aligned with your efforts and see who else they might be able to bring onboard. What groups or institutions will be directly affected? Are there state or regional organizations that might also support your efforts? When you first reach out, set up a conversation first and get to know each other before asking them to join your coalition.

Here are some reasons that others have opposed highway expansion or supported reconnecting communities: protect the environment, racial justice, responsible government spending, public health/air quality, protect farmland, preserve and/or build new homes, protect private property, promote travel by walking, biking, and transit, community development, local business support, preserving parks and green spaces.

8. Tactics and timeline

Identify the specific actions you will take to achieve the plan, and when you expect to take those actions.

It can be hard to write out tactics further than 3-6 months in advance. Plus experience may show you need to adopt new tactics. Or your first goal of the plan may be to pull together like minded community members to put together a set of tactics. In which case, identify some potential tactics in the plan you submit, recognizing that it is a living document.

Remember your personal and organizational goals in the tactics. Win or lose, you want to create new leaders and community will to make change.

And think of tactics that will engage others, and perhaps even be fun. Definitely include the thank you party for everybody who joined in the campaign, no matter the outcome.

See examples below for ideas about tactics.

9. Budget

Do you need a budget? If so, how much, and what are your ideas to raise it?

10. Volunteer Recruitment and Stewardship

Do you need volunteers to help you? How will you recruit and engage them?

We can't emphasize this enough. People come for the issue, but they stay for the people. What is your campaign doing to make the campaign sticky for people, to make the tactics meaningful, to demonstrate effectiveness, and to find some time for fun and celebration?

Further resources:

The Sierra Club Grassroots Organizing Training Manual
The Sierra Club Movement Organizing Manual

HOW DO HIGHWAY PLANS GET MADE?

Who decides whether a highway gets built, expanded or removed?

Highway plans are typically formulated well in advance of receiving public scrutiny. Indeed, many highways being built today were the gleam in the eye of a transportation planner decades ago. Since then Departments of Transportation, state legislators, state transportation commissions, local elected officials, Metropolitan Planning Organizations, highway building contractors, affected businesses, and construction trade unions have been building support for the project.

Despite the flood of money for highway expansion, the major reason that one project has not been built yet is that other projects are in line ahead of it. But the proponents know that if they can raise enough money, they can get further down the wish list. In fact, most road building debates in the halls of power center on what project comes next, not on whether the project makes sense in the first place.



This process creates a challenge for identifying who has the power to give you what you want. To make it more confounding, the states differ both legally and practically in how the final decisions are made. You may rightly wonder if the bureaucratic maze is intentional in order to shield projects from real public scrutiny. But remember, regardless of the specific state legal processes, there are elected officials at the top with the formal or informal power to direct the agencies to reverse their decisions. The subsidiary agency processes below should be addressed on their own terms, but you should also consider them power-building opportunities to influence the ultimate political decisionmakers.



Start at the Top

Highway projects are usually undertaken by a state Department of Transportation. While staff and administrators make lower-level decisions, authority ultimately rests with the Secretary of Transportation (who in certain states sometimes goes by another title). The Secretary of Transportation answers to a state's Governor, and the State Legislature controls funding decisions. Some state legislatures directly fund specific projects with line item appropriations leaving no discretion to the DOT. Other legislatures delegate decisions to the DOT director, or to a Transportation Commission composed of appointed members. Note, some state transportation commissions actually set budgets and priorities (e.g., Texas, Colorado, New Mexico). Other states have independent commissions that focus on long-range planning, policy advisory, or tolling authority rather than day-to-day agency operations (e.g., Washington).

The big takeaway? You will have to spend some time to understand how decisions are made in your state. Who actually pulls the trigger on funding, who creates the project prioritization list, and who has the power to give you what you want. It also means there are many decision points along the way you can influence.

UNDERSTANDING THE HIGHWAY BUILDING PROCESS IN THE UNITED STATES

Building a highway in the United States is a long, multi-stage process involving government agencies, engineers, environmental specialists, contractors, and local communities. Although the exact process varies by state and project, major highway projects generally follow several common steps. For people seeking to stop or change a highway project, the most important point is that opportunities to influence it occur throughout the process—and generally become narrower as the project moves toward construction.

1. Planning and Funding — Start Organizing Early

The process begins when transportation agencies identify a need, such as reducing congestion or improving transportation capacity.

In most parts of the United States, metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) develop regional plans, which feed into statewide long-range transportation plans. These plans outline specific projects that the MPO and state Department of Transportation would like to build. Making it onto the MPO list is required to obtain federal funding. Projects may also appear in the state's State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). These documents identify projects that are being considered or funded through federal, state, or local transportation programs.



In the more near term, an MPO's annual Transportation Improvement Program and state's State Transportation Improvement Program allocate federal funds to projects for at least the next four years. Highway projects that appear in these plans should be considered imminent and will likely be moving to a study phase (described below) for approval.

Both long-range plans and Transportation Improvement Program plans can help you forecast future highway projects in your neighborhood and region. It is possible to amend and change these plans and stop projects while they are still nascent and have yet to build momentum.

Note, while the decision is made at the state level, local decision makers coming out against a highway expansion or for a reconnecting communities project is still incredibly useful. Mayors, county officials, and city councilors on your side can use their platforms and power to help convince decision makers at the state or MPO level.

When to act: This is one of the earliest and potentially most important opportunities for opposition. Start organizing as soon as a project appears in a regional or state plan—before major funding commitments are made. Residents can attend MPO and transportation-agency meetings, submit public comments, contact elected officials, and advocate for funding to be redirected toward alternatives.

Funding decisions are not necessarily irreversible. In some cases, advocates can argue that money allocated to a highway should instead support transit, road maintenance, pedestrian infrastructure, or other transportation needs.

2. The Environmental Review Process — Influence What Gets Studied

Once a project receives federal funding (as most highway projects do), its approval becomes governed by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA requires the agency undertaking the project to consider the project's impact on the environment, including the human environment.

Your state probably also has a state equivalent to NEPA. The agency will combine the federal and state environmental review, but it is worth researching whether state requirements are more favorable to your goals than NEPA.

It is important to note that agencies are legally required to follow the NEPA process, but NEPA does not require that a project with impact be abandoned. As long as the agency has checked NEPA's boxes it can proceed with a project. Highway agencies have become quite adept at using the process to compel the result they want, so attention early is essential.

The NEPA process provides one of the main avenues for legal challenge. Usually the challenge is procedural (i.e. the agency did not follow the NEPA process correctly). Incorrect project designations (described below) of Categorical Exclusions and Environmental Assessments can also be challenged.

Purpose and Need

Environmental and engineering studies generally begin with a Purpose and Need statement defining what the project is supposed to accomplish. If this statement is narrowly focused—for example, solely on increasing highway capacity—it can limit the alternatives considered later.

When to act: Get involved when the Purpose and Need is being developed. Advocates can push agencies to consider broader goals such as reducing vehicle dependence, improving transit, increasing safety, protecting neighborhoods, or supporting economic vitality. A broader definition can require the agency to evaluate alternatives other than highway expansion. Getting the agency to consider removal as one of the alternatives would be a major win. If not studied, the agency will argue later it cannot consider removal without restarting the entire environmental review. While you might think it rational to consider the full range of alternatives, the agency itself has an interest in narrowing the alternatives to projects it wants to build.

Environmental Review Documents

Once the project's scope is defined, the agency begins preparing its environmental review documents. Depending on the project's potential impacts, it may receive a Categorical Exclusion (CE), undergo an Environmental Assessment (EA), or require a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).



A Categorical Exclusion essentially exempts a project from environmental review, because the agency proposing the project does not believe it will have impact. An Environmental Assessment is a shorter environmental review process and assigned to projects that an agency does not believe will have a significant impact.

When to act: Pay close attention to the type of environmental review. If a project receives a Categorical Exclusion or an Environmental Assessment status when advocates believe a more extensive review is required, there may be administrative or legal avenues for challenging that decision.

Public Comment Periods
For projects requiring an EIS, the review can take several years. Agencies may hold public meetings, publish draft documents, and request public comments.

When to act: This is a major period for organizing. Community groups can review environmental documents, identify shortcomings, provide evidence, organize residents to attend meetings, and submit detailed comments. Comments should focus on specific issues and alternatives that the agency is legally required to consider. **Issues must be raised as comments during the environmental review for the project to be challenged in court later on.**

It is important to understand that an environmental review generally evaluates a project's impacts; completing the review usually does not mean that those impacts must be eliminated. The point of the environmental review is usually to inform decisionmakers, not compel a result. State environmental statutes may differ, so review yours.

3. Selection and Design — Push for Changes Before Plans Are Final
After environmental review, the agency selects a preferred alternative and develops increasingly detailed plans for the roadway, bridges, interchanges, drainage systems, signs, and lighting.

When to act: Continue participating after the preferred alternative is announced. At this stage, advocates can push for the project to be redesigned, scaled back, or replaced with alternatives. Changes may become more difficult once detailed engineering is complete, so early engagement remains important.

4. Right-of-Way Acquisition — Get Legal and Community Support
The government must obtain the land needed for construction. This may involve purchasing property through negotiated agreements or, when legally authorized, using eminent domain.

When to act: If your property or neighborhood is affected, seek qualified legal advice as soon as right-of-way acquisition begins. Community groups can also organize affected property owners and monitor whether required procedures are being followed.

This stage can create additional opportunities to question the project's impacts and advocate for changes, although stopping the entire project may become more difficult once land acquisition is substantially underway.



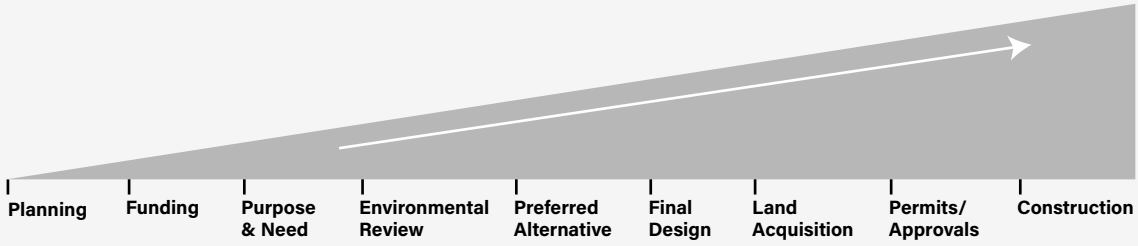
5. Permits, Approvals, and Contracting — Last Major Opportunities Before Construction
Before construction begins, the project must receive required approvals and permits. Transportation agencies generally put construction work out for competitive bidding and select a contractor according to applicable procurement rules.

When to act: Monitor these approvals and deadlines closely. If there are unresolved legal, environmental, permitting, or procedural issues, this can be an important point to seek administrative or judicial review. Once a construction contract has been awarded, however, changing or canceling the project can become substantially more difficult.

6. Construction — Monitor Compliance
Construction usually begins with clearing land, relocating utilities, and preparing the site. Crews then perform excavation and grading, construct drainage systems and bridges, and build the road's foundation before laying pavement.

When to act: At this point, the primary opportunity may shift from stopping the project to monitoring whether construction follows the approved plans, permits, environmental requirements, and other applicable rules. Report potential violations through the appropriate government or regulatory channels and document concerns carefully.

Summary — Understanding The Timeline for Highway Opposition
A highway project becomes increasingly difficult to change as it progresses:



The earlier stages are generally the most important for people who want to stop or substantially change a highway. The strongest strategy is usually to begin organizing before major decisions are finalized, identify every formal opportunity for public participation, and continue monitoring the project through environmental review, funding, approvals, and construction.

Because specific deadlines and legal rights vary by state and project, people considering a formal challenge should verify the applicable procedures and deadlines with the relevant transportation agency or a qualified attorney.

Every step in the process should also be viewed as an organizing opportunity to build public awareness and convey the level of public opposition to the ultimate decisionmakers - the governor and legislature - that it would be politically wise to pull the plug on funding or construction. Agencies can be quite impervious to criticism. Elected officials that face the voters might view the project differently with enough public opposition.

Remember, it is never too late to stop a highway project!

Proponents of highway projects push that they're inevitable, but that is far from the case. There are many well-documented examples of highway projects withdrawn and even abandoned mid-construction.

Further resources:

A Citizen's Guide to the National Environmental Policy Act
Building Roads to a Just and Equitable Future (New York University School of Law)
Litigation: An Underused Tool in Transportation Advocacy (The Funders Network)

TACTICS FOR FREEWAY FIGHTING

So now that you have an understanding of organizing and campaigns and the major events in the highway building timeline, what actions can you take? Compiled below are some tactics that contemporary freeway fighting groups across the country have used to advance their goals. They can provide inspiration for the tactics you may want to incorporate into your campaign.

Action Alert/Petition (example: Rethink35)
Categories: Influence Decisionmakers, Community Outreach

A digital action alert can help spread awareness of your movement, identify supporters, and show decisionmakers what public sentiment looks like. Rethink35 in Austin, TX has launched an action alert that's garnered over 10,000 signatures. They used the online platform Action Network, which has a free version available. In addition to showing the strength of your movement, action alerts have the benefit of collecting supporters' email addresses, allowing you to build a mailing list and stay in touch with supporters. Collecting signatures can also be done in-person, although it's useful to still ask for an email address when doing so.



Coalition Letter/Press Release
(example: NJ Turnpike Trap)
Categories: Influence Decisionmakers, Media Outreach

A coalition letter brings together allied organizations in your community to make a specific ask of decisionmakers. Like an action alert, this is an opportunity to show strength in numbers and leverage the relationships that each of the coalition members has. Just before Governor-Elect Mikie Sherrill of New Jersey took office in 2026, the NJ Turnpike Trap coalition wrote a coalition letter to request the Governor-Elect cancel plans for a New Jersey Turnpike expansion. Governor Sherrill canceled the project upon taking office. Coalition letters are often paired with a press release to help gain exposure.

Local Press Interviews
(example: Coalition for Transit and Sustainable Development)
Categories: Influence Decisionmakers, Media Outreach

Get to know your local reporters as soon as possible so they regularly come to you for their stories about the highway. As you're starting out, look up who locally covers relevant topics and send them a message introducing yourself and your movement. Newsworthy stories often rely on tension, so use that tension as part of your pitch. Once you're in their contact list, be prepared to respond to interview requests as quickly as possible and connect them with other residents who feel similarly to you. See the Coalition for Transit and Sustainable Development's (Cincinnati, OH) top tips for working with the media.

Town Hall (example: No More Freeways)
Categories: Community Outreach, Influence Decisionmakers

A town hall provides the opportunity to gather community members to voice their opinions on a project. An agency may host public meetings, which you should encourage supporters to attend, but these can be highly controlled with limited ability to voice public sentiment. Holding your own town hall allows you to shape the agenda and make sure community members have the time to speak. No More Freeways in Portland, OR hosted their own People's Public Hearing in 2023 after it became apparent that the Oregon Department of Transportation was not going to host an in-person public hearing on the proposed Rose Quarter I-5 expansion. They recorded public testimony and shared it through social media channels.

Rally (example: Rethink35)
Categories: Community Outreach, Influence Decisionmakers, Media Outreach

Rallies are highly visible events that bring together hundreds of community members to support the movement, hear inspiring speakers, and have fun. Rethink35 in Austin, TX hosted their Wider Won't Work rally in 2023 in response to the state's proposal to widen I-35. The event featured US Representative Greg Casar and several City of Austin council members. Hundreds of people came out to the festival-like atmosphere and the event received significant local media coverage. Do note that rallies are typically very resource intensive and have the most impact after you've built up a substantial base of supporters.

Block Party (example: EVOAK!)
Categories: Community Outreach

A block party emphasizes fun and a sense of community and has less of a political component than a rally. Block parties are a great way to help members of the general public get familiar with your movement in a way that doesn't involve a specific ask or action. They're best held near the site of the project and can be combined with temporary demonstrations (see below) to help neighbors imagine alternatives. EVOAK! in Oakland, CA held the inaugural 980 Block Party in 2025 to bring neighbors together to reimagine the I-980 corridor through art, storytelling, and participatory design.



Temporary Demonstration (example: Hinge Neighbors)
Categories: Community Outreach

Temporary demonstrations show community members what's possible for a highway corridor through a temporary redesign. Hinge Neighbors in Rochester, NY hosted Live on the Loop in 2022, where they closed the Scio Street Bridge over the Inner Loop and hosted a day full of music, games, activities, and food trucks. The event helped neighbors imagine what the area could look like with the removal of the Inner Loop.

Doorknocking (example: Our Streets Minnesota)
Categories: Community Outreach

Doorknocking meets neighbors where they live, unlike events that ask community members to come to you. It's an opportunity to talk to neighbors in a 1:1 setting and reach people who may not know about your events or online presence. Our Streets

Minnesota leads regular doorknocking campaigns to inform neighbors about highway plans for their neighborhoods. Over the years they've spoken with thousands of neighbors. Doorknocking can also be resource intensive, but provides you with a pipeline of supporters and helps you better understand public sentiment.

Billboard Campaign (example: I-475 Neighborhoods Coalition)
Categories: Community Outreach

Billboards provide another approach to reaching a broad segment of the public. The I-475 Neighborhoods Coalition in Toledo, OH has taken out advertising on billboards that explains the costs of the I-475 expansion and damage it will cause to neighborhoods. The I-475 Neighborhoods Coalition coupled the unveiling of their billboards with a press release and rally.

Poster/Sticker Campaign (example: Claiborne Avenue Alliance)
Categories: Community Outreach

A poster or sticker campaign is similar to a billboard campaign, except on a smaller, more dispersed scale. Posters or stickers containing your message and branding can be affixed to pylons and poles around the highway corridor. The Claiborne Avenue Alliance in New Orleans, LA created a series of posters to raise awareness around the history of the Claiborne Expressway and the opportunities for restoring Claiborne Avenue. Posters and stickers should include links or QR that direct to your digital presence. Volunteers can also hand out stickers at community events.

Social Media Campaign (example: StopTxDOT I-45)
Categories: Community Outreach, Influence Decisionmakers



Social media is a powerful tool to reach many people quickly and influence decisionmakers. Stop TxDOT I-45 in Houston, TX has used social media to showcase community voices and victories through vibrant photo carousels, short-form videos, and behind-the-scenes moments. Stop TxDOT I-45's social media accounts spread the word about news on the I-45 project and encourage followers to join in for in-person events (known as online to offline organizing). It also emphasizes multi-lingual posts to inform and attract a wider audience. Social media followers can also be mobilized to direct messages toward decisionmakers' accounts.

Fundraiser Dinner (example: Oklahomans for Responsible Transportation)
Categories: Community Outreach

A fundraiser dinner can both raise money for your movement and establish a sense of community amongst your supporters. Every year, Oklahomans for Responsible Transportation in Norman, OK hosts a Chili Cookoff competition where individuals enter their chili to be tasted and judged by the crowd. Hosting an event like this helps build relationships and bring in new people who may not be aware of your movement or what it is about. It offers the element of fun to a campaign that encourages people to volunteer and commit their time.

Lawsuits (example: Fix at Six)
Categories: Influence Decisionmakers, Media Outreach

At some point during your campaign, you may decide to initiate a lawsuit against the agency undertaking the highway project. Lawsuits are typically brought because an agency violates the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), a procedural law that governs the steps an agency must take before undertaking a federally-funded highway project (see section on the process of highway building for more information). The Fix at Six coalition in Milwaukee, WI offers an example of such a lawsuit. When successful, these suits do not cancel a project outright, but require the agency to go back and recomplete its environmental reports. The real power of a lawsuit lies in the publicity it generates, which you can employ to galvanize supporters and bring the issue to decisionmakers. Lawsuits are not inexpensive, however, and will require significant fundraising.

Candidate Questionnaire
(example: Mainers for Smarter Transportation)
Categories: Influence Decisionmakers

Questionnaires for candidates and incumbents help establish publicly who is on your side by making them take a position. They also help elevate the issue during election season when voters are most engaged. Mainers for Smarter Transportation in Gorham, ME provides an example of a candidate questionnaire for Gorham town council elections to inform voters on candidate positions. Questionnaires are particularly effective in local elections, where residents will feel a project's direct impact.

Polling (example: Stop the Mid-State Corridor)
Categories: Influence Decisionmakers

Polling has the power to show where the public stands and can challenge the default assumption that everyone wants and is willing to pay for highways. Polling commissioned by Stop the Mid-States Corridor in Jasper, IN has shown overwhelming opposition (72% of county voters strongly opposed) to the proposed Mid-States Corridor extension. Polling like this is often used by decisionmakers to determine what they do or do not support.

Op-Eds (example: Louisiana 4 Corners Coalition)
Categories: Influence Decisionmakers, Media Outreach

Publishing op-eds in a local newspaper or online news source is one way to reach a wide readership and gain exposure. They offer the opportunity to present a positive vision for the future, identify problems with the status quo, and call upon decisionmakers to take action. Op-eds like this one published by the Louisiana 4 Corners Coalition help set the public narrative about the project and legitimize your viewpoint.

Show the Positive Vision (example: Our Streets Minnesota)
Categories: Community Outreach

A positive vision draws supporters in and helps people think about what alternatives could be to the status quo. Renderings that show this vision have a powerful effect. Our Streets Minnesota commissioned a Reimagining I-94 report that shows what the Twin Cities' I-94 corridor could look like if the highway was converted into a boulevard. In comparison to the grey drab of the highway, the images emphasize vibrancy: people, trees, and new homes and businesses.





FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Here are some answers to the more frequently asked questions you'll have or encounter:

Does adding lanes to highways solve traffic congestion?

No, adding lanes to highways does not solve traffic congestion in the long-term. Research proves that when roads are widened, drivers start to make more trips, make longer trips and choose the car more frequently — and the cycle of traffic continues. For a brief time, congestion is reduced. Eventually more and more people perceive that driving on the road will be easier, attracting more drivers, and the road is just as congested again. Houston's Katy Freeway is an enduring example of this phenomenon, known as induced demand. Shortly after it was widened to 23 lanes, morning commute times on the Katy Freeway increased by 25 minutes and afternoon commute times increased by 23 minutes.

If additional lanes aren't added (or removed in the case of reconnecting communities projects), where will the traffic go?

Alarmists often predict that 'carmageddon' will occur if an expansion project doesn't happen, or if a highway is transformed into a boulevard or city street. This is not true because traffic does not behave like water and highways aren't overflowing rivers. Travelers are rational beings that change their patterns and behavior according to the situations they face. Just as adding lanes induces more travel, studies show that reducing capacity causes traffic to dissipate because people naturally adjust their routines. Drivers may carpool, take alternate routes, shift to public transit, or simply avoid peak driving hours.

How does traffic modeling work to justify highway projects?

At its most basic level, traffic modeling is designed to keep cars moving at the speed limit. This is called level of service. Level of service does not measure things like access to destinations, only that traffic is flowing freely. This means that traffic modeling is primed to present wider roads as the only 'correct' solution for dealing with traffic. When considering level of service, much traffic modeling also does not take into account induced demand.

Historically, traffic modeling has been notoriously inaccurate, consistently overestimating future traffic volumes. Most projection models rely on linear, straight-line projections of past traffic counts, leaving them liable to overestimations and ignorant of behavioral complexities.