

UNDOING DIVIDES

Racism drove highway through our neighborhoods. We're fighting back.

Your Turn

Keith Baker and Glenn Isaac Smith
Guest columnists

Let's take a journey back in time to look at two of the vibrant Black enclaves scattered across the country in the early to mid-20th century, one on the East Coast and the other in the Midwest. Each of them thrived until the birth of the interstate highway system.

Rondo, in Minnesota, was home to nearly 80% of St. Paul's Black population, making it one of the largest Black communities in the Midwest. Residents produced Black newspapers, worked as educators and doctors, and ran barber shops, restaurants and grocery stores. Businesses prospered; neighborhood streets bustled with activity.

In the 1950s, the Rondo community was devastated by the construction of Interstate 94, resulting in the destruction of 700 homes and 300 businesses and decimating the social, cultural, economic and spiritual fabric of a once-thriving Black neighborhood.

Around the same time in West Baltimore, a vibrant Black community was torn apart to construct the U.S. 40/Franklin-Mulberry Expressway. The purpose of this highway? To connect white suburbs to downtown Baltimore.

For those who lived there, the neighborhood was idyllic. But the government labeled it a ghetto and razed nearly a thousand predominantly middle-class Black homes and 62 businesses to make way for the expressway.

After most of the highway project was canceled, residents were left with the 1.39-mile stretch now referred to as the "Highway to Nowhere." It stands as a monument to the destruction of a community and the strong ties residents had to support one another.

Highways were routed through Black and low-income neighborhoods

St. Paul and Baltimore represent just a fraction of the estimated 1 million people and businesses displaced by the buildout of the interstate highway system, casualties of a racist policy that promoted new highways along routes with low land costs and weak political resistance.

In other words, the highways were built predominantly through low-income and Black neighborhoods.

Our communities have never been the same. Families lost generational wealth as homes were destroyed, lost value or were taken away through foreclosure. Many people left close-knit, life-sustaining communities never to

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return. The effect on local families, economies and cultures, not to mention air quality, was devastating.

More than 50 years later, we are working to stitch our communities back together.

Baltimore and Rondo each have received a \$2 million grant from the first-ever national program created to reconnect communities divided by highways.

Biden's infrastructure bill is helping neighborhoods reconnect

In late 2021, Congress passed President Joe Biden's bipartisan infrastructure bill, including \$1 billion to reconnect divided neighborhoods. Nine months later, Biden signed into law the Inflation Reduction Act, providing an additional \$3.2 billion to remove old transportation infrastructure that cut off neighborhoods from business districts and living wage jobs, with at least \$1.3 billion set aside for economically disadvantaged communities.

Together, these programs form the Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods program.

Ours were among the first of 45 communities to receive grants, out of 435 communities in nearly every state that applied, illustrating the wide-reaching destructive effects of federal highway policy.

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West Baltimore residents are still in the beginning stages of planning, having met for the first time last month with city transportation officials.

The program is just one initiative among many funded by the legislation. Together, the laws invested a historic \$126 billion in more than 28 federal programs that aim to help low-income and

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GETTY IMAGES



An estimated 1 million people and businesses were displaced by the buildout of the nation's interstate highway system. DORAL CHENOWETH/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

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Black communities, and other communities of color, reclaim their economic and cultural vibrancy, lower household energy bills and reduce the disproportionate amounts of pollution and climate risk they bear.

As the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

said, the long arc of history seems to be bending toward justice. But as we also know, in Dr. King's words, "Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men."

And that work is far from over.

After years of being let down by government promises, our communities are weary of projects that never came to fruition.

This time, though, we have hope that

our communities will see progress.

City, state and federal agencies must work with residents to maximize the potential for these investments, and the administration's Justice40 Initiative, guaranteeing that 40% of the overall benefits of federal climate, clean energy, pollution cleanup and other investments flow to disadvantaged communities, should be codified into law.

Problems centuries in the making cannot be overcome in a few years or

even decades.

But we are certain that through genuine intentions and tireless efforts we can – and must – make Dr. King's vision for a beloved community a reality.

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