



by Cullison Cady ✓  
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# Design, Road-Action Factors Highways Are for People Roads-Value

**Francis C. Turner, U. S. Bureau of Public Roads  
top engineer, outlines how a new way of look-  
ing at tomorrow's city freeways can create a  
better environment for people.**

*Turner, Francis C.*

THERE is a fable around that has too long been given credence—and that is that all highway people want to do is build highways. Just push 'em through, and to the devil with the consequences." Frank Turner looked meditatively out of his window high over downtown Washington's busy streets and said, "I don't know how much longer we're going to be saddled with this nonsense."

Francis C. Turner, chief engineer for the U. S. Bureau of Public Roads, is a medium sized, soft spoken Texan who has been with the BPR since 1929, and has risen to be its top career man. He is a graduate of Texas A and M, and it is not for nothing that his desk is adorned with bluebonnets and yellow roses. It would be a rare individual, indeed, who would be more qualified to speak on today's problems of highway construction and location.

People. Mr. Turner picked up the conversation, "We know how to build highways and when to build them to service the traffic they must bear. We know where to build them. We know of course that you can't build them without inconvenience—and that's the mildest of words. What we are trying to learn now is how to build them without hurting people.

"Highways, you know, are for people. There is no reason for highways

apart from people. Very simply highways are people. Those who think they are a broom to sweep people aside simply don't know highways or how we think about them.

"We have come to the point—really we have been there for quite some time—where—particularly with the Interstate System—the highway has met the city. I don't mean the beltways, which go around the cities and link the suburbs—I mean the radials, the spokes of the wheel, if you like, into and out of the central city. It is here primarily where we meet the people and it is here where our big highways must become one with the people."

"Mr. Turner," we asked, "doesn't everyone realize we must have these highways to feed life into the downtown areas? And don't the French have a saying about not being able to make an omelet without breaking eggs?"

"Sure," he answered, "of course we must have them to move people in and out, and to siphon traffic off local streets, but it's that part about breaking eggs—that's what we've been thinking so hard about."

**The City Problem.** Again he gazed out of the window at the urban complex just a stone's throw from the White House. "You see the problem is here, in the cities. It goes back

many years—to the 30's, but as you know everything has been growing and in the coming decades will continue to grow—people, cars, all those suburbs which increasingly blanket us. The growth has been simply phenomenal. But the land, the available downtown land remains the same.

"As our population increases and as our society becomes more complex, there is a keener competition for the uses of that land. A city isn't just merely highways and schools and industries and parks. It is all of these and much more. And they all have to work together."

"I see," we agreed, "and as you have more and more of these things you still have to fit it all in the same land area you have always had?"

"Precisely. And this is why in the case of highways you cannot just ram a highway through a city area and say to the people, 'Oops, sorry! You'll just have to take yourselves and your businesses somewhere else, you know how it is—there's always some poor guy in the way.' . . . Even with recompense and moving money and a nice public relations program to sweeten the pill that doesn't solve the problem."

Mr. Turner was very intent on this point: "You see, those people are there because the city is there. For the most part they are there because they want to be there. Lives and

locations are very closely intertwined in our urban areas. People don't want to be swept aside—not only because of the bother, but because of this: where can they go and still function in the way they are accustomed to functioning?

"Let me tell you something else that we unfeeling highway people know, and some of us have discovered it the hard way. These people won't sit still for it. They'll fight. I imagine you would resist, too, and you'd get pretty emotional yourself, if you had to get up and leave."

"I guess I would. But haven't you had this problem for some time now? After all, a lot of highway has been built these past several years."

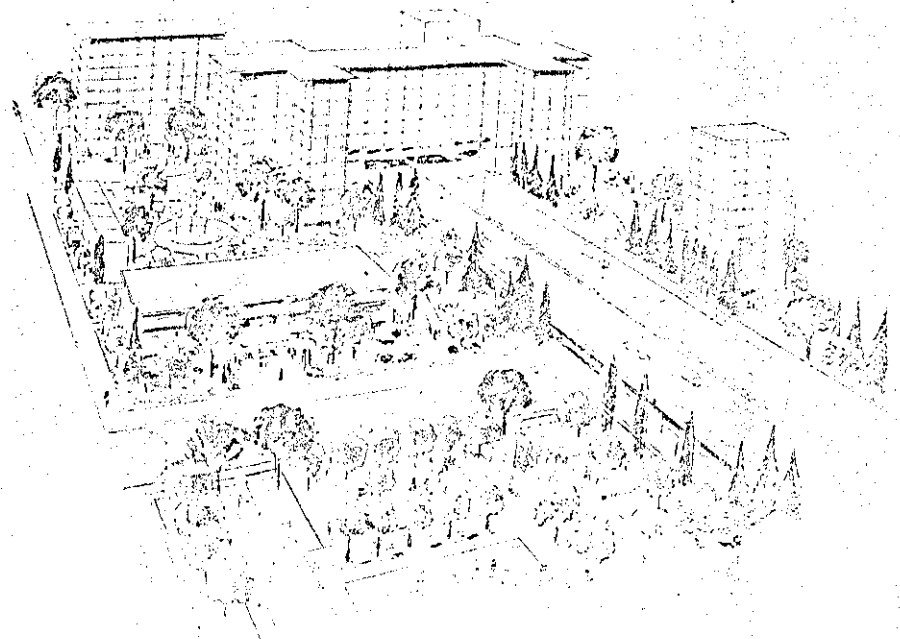
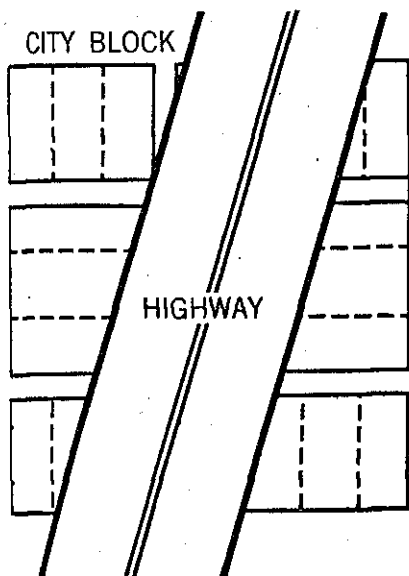
"We haven't had it on anything like the scale we will soon have it. And of course we have displaced some people. But, rural and suburban areas can absorb people. It's not like the city."

"Well, what can you do, Mr. Turner? People can't just stay and pitch tents in an expressway."

**Block by Block.** He smiled, "Sure can't, but what we think we can do is acquire land not just for our highway rights-of-way alone, but to resettle the people living in whole city blocks along the location where the highway is to be built."

"Why do you need all that? Why not just take enough for your roads?"

"I'll tell you. Say for an urban expressway you need a right-of-way of some 160 feet. Suppose this road cuts across a city block and this block is about 350 feet wide. Well the highway is going to take up most of that block anyway. Look at this simple diagram:



This BPR artist's rendering shows how an urban expressway might traverse city blocks acquired *in toto*, and transform them to high rise housing and other structures. Note the employment of air rights both over and under the highway itself and the use of open space, trees and shrubs to achieve a new high level of beautification.

"You see what we probably do is fragment many of the existing properties in such a way that we not only have to recompense some owners entirely but award others what we call 'severance costs,' and these can be very expensive. Thus, it is just about as expensive to acquire the entire block as it would be to acquire the basic highway rights-of-way. For a relatively little bit more the entire block could be acquired—and so on for block after block."

**Added Costs.** "That's interesting, Mr. Turner, but who is going to pay that 'little bit more,' as you put it?"

"Probably an agency of the local government concerned which would be reimbursed by the highway department for its share of the condemnation. You see this agency would have available to it funds under a variety of existing programs: public housing, open space programs, etc. In any case, whether a local agency got the land first or whether the highway department did, the highway department would pay only its usual right-of-way costs plus severance and other normal costs."

"And these funds would come out of the Highway Trust Fund, on the usual matching basis?"

"I would think so. Under existing law we can match only for highway

right-of-way acquisition, of course. But, as I said, this is really most of the cost of the package anyway."

"Would funds for this type of acquisition run more than has been foreseen for acquisition of rights-of-way under the Interstate program?"

"Possibly."

"Possibly to what extent?"

"Maybe \$400 to \$500 million overall. But let me say this. It is not at all certain at this point. Maybe it will not cost the road program anything 'extra' at all. We are not sure. We don't know yet. But we feel pretty sure that other funds—Federal and private will come into this new picture—over and above the road program's share. This is where this program gets to be not just a highway matter, but where it becomes a 'joint' enterprise with other agencies of government."

"I personally feel," Mr. Turner continued, "that even if highway users alone had to pay the difference in land acquisition cost it would be a bargain, because this may be the only way we can get the highways which most of the cities need."

"The key to it is that the cost of land needed for freeways plus severance damages—which is what highway departments must pay—so closely approaches the cost of the total block

taken. We feel that the difference could be largely liquidated out of other public programs or by sale or lease of the marginal areas not used for the highway, or likewise in the case of air space rights for private development."

**How It Works.** "All right, Mr. Turner, supposing this money for this land acquisition becomes available . . . how will it work when it actually comes to building those urban expressways?"

"In principle something like this would happen. Let us suppose we wanted to route a highway through, say, 10 blocks of high density housing. Say the highway rights-of-way and all the rest of it would cost around \$25 million. Say, we, not 'we' literally but a duly constituted local agency, could condemn the whole 10 blocks at a cost of \$27 million. Say, we went ahead with this . . . then the city in which this happened might set up a public or quasi-public corporation whose function would be not to reimburse the displaced tenants in direct payments, but to replace ownership in kind on the basis of the number of living units involved. You see, on the land area not actually occupied by the highway itself, this corporation could build or cause to be built high rise housing units in which the displaced owners would have a vested right—like a cooperative arrangement or a condominium. And, as I said, the corporation, in this case, would be reimbursed, by the highway agency for its share—the lion's share, to be sure—of the condemnation. Of course, we would hope to attract private investment capital too."

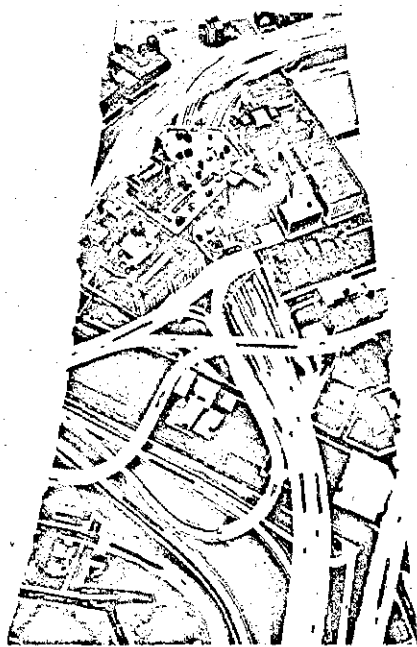
**Again the People.** "Sounds good, but while all this was being done—building the highways and the structures—what would happen to the people in the meantime?"

"In most cities" he said, "temporary housing could be set up to provide for this interim period."

"Well, what if a man, a property owner were to say, 'I don't want to be rehoused. I'll just go elsewhere?'"

"Then he would be compensated and that would be that. We feel, however, that the great majority would want to stay in their neighborhood. After all, they would realize that in the end both their housing and their environment would be bettered and they would not have to go relocate themselves in some less desirable area."

"I can see how this might work for owners, but lots of these people are tenants. What about them?"



Model of highway in downtown Cincinnati, showing interesting use of air rights.

"They would be given first priorities as renters in the new housing facilities."

"Wouldn't all this entail a terrific lot of paper work? Who would do all this administrative work?"

"Normally, I would think the corporation would, with some assistance from appropriate local agencies."

**Other Agencies.** "Of course projects of this nature in our cities would involve the new Department of Urban Housing and Development. That's true, isn't it?"

"Oh yes, I would think that HUD with the appropriate local agencies, would be very definitely involved. In the financing and insuring of the new structures, in the funding for parks and landscaping . . . in many ways. This again is why we refer to this as a 'joint' program."

"Would this entail new legislation?"

"Perhaps, but a lot of the enabling legislation—and the funds—are on the books now."

"Mr. Turner, would you say this concept represents government policy?"

"I would say so, at least to the extent of being committed to finding a way to meet these several objectives and see that it will really work . . . and we in the Bureau think it will."

"You know, I have been thinking, when a highway goes through a city you would not only displace people but you would disrupt businesses, schools and other things?"

**Air Rights.** "Yes, certainly we would. As you know schools and churches can be special problems. But, this is one reason for the importance of air rights. We couldn't depend altogether upon using the fragments of land not utilized by the highway. We would have to make the land serve us vertically. After all, this is city land. In some cases we could locate structures or parts of them above the highways, and others below. For example, if we elevated the highway we could locate shops or other small businesses beneath it. What we did would naturally vary with the problems of the location and with the nature of the zoning."

**The Future.** "Mr. Turner, this is very fascinating, but isn't it pretty much all in the future? Has anything specific been done along these lines?"

"Yes, it is pretty much in the future, as you say, but we think this future has to be made pretty immediate. There will be problems—probably many we don't foresee right now. But, as I say, if we are to get needed urban highways and overcome the enmities that stand in their way today, I think we will have to go ahead somewhat along the lines we have been talking about. As for something specific, here in Washington, the D. C. Highway Department is going ahead with some feasibility studies and with some contracts to analyze legal problems of this concept in certain neighborhoods. As for air rights, these are not new—we have had interesting experiences in Detroit, Cincinnati—and for years in New York of course."

"Mr. Turner, before we close off this interview, what would you say is the essence of this new concept—the nut of the thing, if you will?"

"Well, in none of its parts is there anything spectacularly new. I would say that what is really on the new side about it is that we are no longer looking at the highway purely as a segment. More and more we are looking at it now as part of a neighborhood—as the backbone perhaps of a new and better area. We are here marrying a good many things we have tended before to think of primarily as separate things: highways and urban rebuilding, for example. Whatever the specific problems before us in our cities, I believe these are the guidelines for tomorrow's highways. You see here we have not forgotten the people. The people stay. The environment is bettered—and of course the entire community has an outstanding transportation facility."