

## Uprooting a Neighborhood: The History of I-280 through the Excelsior District

### Historical Context: I-280 and the “Freeway Wars”

The Excelsior segment of San Francisco’s I-280, previously called the Southern Freeway, dramatically altered the residential configuration of the surrounding area, resulting in a multitude of environmental burdens that infringe on the community to this day. Built amidst the political turmoil of the “Freeway Revolt” of the early 1950s, in which other planned freeways were not constructed due to public opposition, the I-280 displaced hundreds of families and imposed on those remaining families the burdens of increased noise, air pollution, and dangerous levels of traffic moving to and from the freeway along residential streets. The placement of the freeway raises interesting questions regarding the ability of communities to resist city planning that they deem unnecessary and harmful to their well being. This paper explores why the I-280 was routed through the Excelsior, and why residents, despite loudly and visibly voicing their opposition, were unsuccessful in preventing the construction of the freeway through their neighborhood.

The I-280 was originally conceived of as part of the Trafficways Plan adopted by the City Planning Commission in 1951.<sup>1</sup> Intended to resolve traffic congestion on city streets, the Trafficways Plan proposed nine freeways that would be constructed in a 49-square mile area of San Francisco. Following the construction of the Bayshore Freeway, the remainder of the Trafficways Plan met intense opposition from city residents, who fought to protect the aesthetics of San Francisco from the construction of more “unsightly” freeways that would leave “visual scars” across the city.<sup>2</sup> The “Freeway Revolt” continued through the 1950s and early 1960s, successfully convincing the Board of Supervisors to withdraw its support from six of the nine proposed freeways, and contributing to the eventual

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<sup>1</sup> Dinyar Patel, “Saving America’s ‘Last Lovely City’ The San Francisco Freeway Revolt,” <http://surj.stanford.edu/2004/pdfs/patel.pdf> accessed 21 September 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

demolition of the Embarcadero Freeway that began in 1991. While some freeway construction has been seen in San Francisco, such as that of the I-280, public sentiment has remained widely committed to protecting the beauty of the city at the cost of increased traffic congestion on surface streets.

### **Public Opposition to I-280**

Although the I-280 represents one of the few freeways successfully constructed in San Francisco, its planning and approval was not without significant opposition from affected communities. Throughout 1956, San Francisco's print media highlighted massive public objections to the construction of the freeway through the Mission and Excelsior Districts. Three public hearings were held in total to discuss the freeway segment to be built in the Excelsior, occurring on 31 January 1956, 3 March 1956, and 6 April 1956. Opposition was voiced primarily from those homeowners whose land would be purchased to make way for the freeway. The city planned to purchase 603 homes, claiming that it would pay fair market value for the homes.<sup>3</sup>

In the public hearings, city officials faced harsh criticism from community members, who argued that the freeway was unnecessary and would displace people who neither wanted to leave nor had anywhere else to go. At the first meeting, held on 31 January 1956 at Balboa High School, George P. Tomasello, of 77 Badger Street, declared, "You're taking our homes...to build freeways for people to come into the city—and these people are living down in the Peninsula by choice!"<sup>4</sup> Such arguments that the freeway would benefit outsiders instead of local residents coupled with homeowners' protest against being forced out of their homes: "We are being forced to move...to inconvenience ourselves...You're going to chase us out of San Francisco!"<sup>5</sup>

Protest did not subside in future hearings, as demonstrated by newspaper coverage of the second and third meetings. Reporting on the second meeting held on 28 March 1956, the San Francisco News wrote that the hearing became a "verbal free-for-all," with more than 350 property owners assembled to

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<sup>3</sup> "Southern Freeway Route Hit at Protest Meeting," The Examiner, 29 March 1956.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Elmont Waite, "Residents Voice Freeway Protests," The San Francisco Chronicle, 1 February 1956.

<sup>5</sup> Resident, L.F. Hubbard of 37 Badger Street, quoted in "Southern Freeway Route Hit at Protest Meeting," The Examiner, 29 March 1956.

question whether they would be paid sufficiently for their property. Even when asked to write their questions on cards, the residents demanded that they be allowed to speak directly to city officials using the microphone.<sup>6</sup> The headline for an Examiner article on 7 April 1956 portrays the magnitude of community protest at the third meeting: “S.F. Freeway Route Blasted at Hearing.” Once the meeting was opened to public statements, the “peppery comments came thick and fast,” as demonstrated by Rosalie Ayala, of 482 Trumbull Avenue: “I bought my home to die in. Now they want me to get out... You gotta get a bulldozer to throw me out.”<sup>7</sup> By the conclusion of the third meeting, at which the city estimated that the freeway would be completed in four years, no print evidence suggests that homeowners had had their concerns alleviated by city officials.<sup>8</sup>

### Defense of I-280

Throughout the meetings, city officials remained consistent in their justifications for the freeway’s route, claiming that the I-280 would benefit primarily local residents, that landowners would be well compensated for their homes, and that the freeway would alleviate traffic congestion along Alemany Boulevard. Assistant State Highway Engineer B. W. Booker maintained that of the 1,250,000 car trips made in San Francisco per day in 1956, 1,000,000 began and ended within city limits, therefore supporting the argument that the freeway was being built for local residents and not outsiders.<sup>9</sup> Despite homeowners’ protests that the fair market value they would be paid for their homes was unjust, city officials assured them that 92 percent of those dispossessed in the past had been satisfied by highway division payments for their property.<sup>10</sup>

The greatest justification for the freeway came in the form of traffic congestion on Alemany Boulevard, which the extension of the I-280 was specifically designed to alleviate. Throughout the public

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<sup>6</sup> Steve Warshaw, “Householders hit ‘Grab’ by So. Freeway,” San Francisco News, 29 March 1956.

<sup>7</sup> “S.F. Freeway Route Blasted at Hearing,” The Examiner, 7 April 1956.

<sup>8</sup> Assistant State Highway Engineer B. W. Booker estimated that construction would begin in two years’ time, and the freeway would be completed within four years. See “Hearings on Southern Freeway End,” The San Francisco Chronicle, 7 April 1956.

<sup>9</sup> Elmont Waite, “Residents Voice Freeway Protests,” The San Francisco Chronicle, 1 February 1956.

<sup>10</sup> As discussed at the second public hearing held on 3/28/1956. See “Fair Price on Freeway Land Pledged,” The Examiner, 29 March 1956.

meetings, city officials repeatedly stressed the unsafe conditions for drivers on Alemany, where the accident rate was four times that of the average freeway.<sup>11</sup> Booker stated that the freeway would lessen the traffic on Alemany, which had grown to 24,000 to 42,000 cars a day, making the boulevard “glutted” with cars.<sup>12</sup> The I-280 was therefore designed to increase driver safety and convenience by redirecting drivers on city streets to faster moving, less congested freeway lanes.

### **Conclusions: Property Value and Lack of Community Power**

While our research exposed significant protest of the freeway from Excelsior residents, the key question remains: *Why was community opposition unsuccessful in preventing the Southern Freeway from being built through the Excelsior?* One possible explanation rests in the property value of the area. At the third public meeting, City Works Director Sherman P. Duckel explained, “The route chosen is the most economical and the cheapest property will be taken.”<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, residents of the Excelsior were targeted because their property represented the cheapest and therefore most appealing route for city planners. Land acquisition based on pure financial efficiency highlights a common injustice in land-use planning—the disproportionate displacement of low-income families simply because their property is the easiest to acquire.

While the cost of land undoubtedly contributed to the final decision to route the I-280 through the Excelsior District, we cannot conclude that it was the only, or even primary factor influencing city planners. Of the estimated \$33,000,000 of the project’s budget, only \$2,000,000 was reserved for the necessary property purchases.<sup>14</sup> Land acquisition therefore represented only about 6 percent of the entire freeway cost, making it appear doubtful that minor differences in land cost could have led to this community being disproportionately affected by the freeway. It seems that decision makers focused on the Excelsior because of a pre-existing traffic crisis on Alemany Boulevard, as stated numerous times by city officials in the three public meetings.

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<sup>11</sup> “Southern Freeway Route Hit at Protest Meeting,” The Examiner, 29 March 1956.

<sup>12</sup> Steve Warshaw, “Householders hit ‘Grab’ by So. Freeway,” San Francisco News, 29 March 1956.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in “S.F. Freeway Route Blasted at Hearing,” The Examiner, 7 April 1956.

<sup>14</sup> George P. Tomasello, “Why Home-Owners Oppose Freeway,” The San Francisco Call, 20 April 1956.

Finally, it is possible that residents were unsuccessful in preventing the construction of the freeway through their neighborhood due to public weariness at being so often ignored by the city. Public attendance decreased significantly at each subsequent meeting, from around 1000 residents on January 31 to about 300 residents on March 3, and only 100 at the final meeting on April 6.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps residents tired of hearing the same justifications and assurances from city officials, and thus chose to remain at home rather than attend further meetings. The apparent decrease in numbers of the opposition might have been perceived by city officials as public apathy or even support for their project, therefore leading them to believe that routing the Southern Freeway through the 603 homes in the Excelsior District was not only an economical but publicly accepted choice.

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<sup>15</sup> See the following three articles: Steven Warshaw, "Residents in Line of Freeway Don't Like It," San Francisco News, 1 February 1956; "Fair Price on Freeway Land Pledged," The Examiner, 29 March 1956; "S.F. Freeway Route Blasted at Hearing," The Examiner, 7 April 1956.