

Freeway Lids: Reconnecting Communities and Creating New Land for Development

By [Archana Pyati](#)

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The Metropolitan Design Center at the University of Minnesota has developed renderings of potential lid projects at key sites along the I-94 corridor between Minneapolis and St. Paul. (Metropolitan Design Center)

During the 1960s, urban freeways were built across the United States to efficiently move traffic through cities and connect downtowns to suburbs. At the time, cities were considered unsafe, unsanitary, and undesirable. Under the banner of urban renewal, many established neighborhoods in cities were cleared and deemed as slums. Highways were built in their place, cutting deep trenches in neighborhoods.

Interstate 94, which connects Minneapolis and St. Paul, had a devastating impact on urban neighborhoods when it was completed in 1968. Fifty years later, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) is coming to terms with the mixed legacy of the state's main urban freeway, and has launched an initiative to redevelop the aging interstate to serve communities as well as cars.

As part of this strategy, MnDOT has proposed building freeway lids—land bridges over freeway trenches—at key sites along the I-94 corridor to reestablish street grids and neighborhood connectivity. The agency sought out the land use expertise of ULI Minnesota to determine whether private-sector investment could offset the cost of constructing the lids.



Pat Mascia, ULI Minnesota chairman and jury cochair.

Rather than merely evaluating their financial feasibility, ULI Minnesota created a more comprehensive vision that leverages the power of freeway lids to accomplish several goals: reconnect communities, create economic opportunities for residents, and make new land available for civic and commercial uses. ULI Minnesota members developed these goals during a Technical Assistance Program (TAP) panel last summer in which they interviewed civic, neighborhood, and business leaders as well as city officials about potential lid projects along and near the I-94 corridor.

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The result is the **Healthy Communities Initiative**, a vision for urban highways that restores the vitality of neighborhoods they once ripped apart. The initiative proposes a corridor-wide strategy for redeveloping I-94 and a leadership structure to oversee an ambitious lid construction program. MnDOT commissioner Charlie Zelle has set up a taskforce of individuals from the public and private sectors to evaluate ULI Minnesota's recommendations.



Ann Marie Woessner-Collins, TAP cochair.

"ULI Minnesota was the perfect partner to stimulate new ideas for how we redevelop our highway infrastructure for the 21st century," Zelle says. "I wanted to hear from private-sector developers and planners who understand the importance of our transportation network, but come to the table with a larger frame of reference and visionary thinking of how our cities can work better for everyone."

Lid- and Development-Ready Infrastructure

Lids not only reestablish neighborhood connectivity but also create new land for development—a scarce commodity in most cities. Not only are lids a potential source of developable land, but also of rights-of-way, embankments, and other excess acreage eaten up by highways. One lid typology shows transit lines running alongside a highway embankment, which, if adopted, could turn I-94 into a truly multimodal corridor.

As MnDOT begins repairing sections of I-94, the key will be rebuilding bridges, embankments, and the road bed so they are "lid- and development-ready," says panelist and ULI member Sarah Harris, managing director of the University of Minnesota Foundation Real Estate Advisors (UMFREA). This means designing and engineering highway infrastructure with lids in mind, rather than having to do costly retrofits in the future.

"Our aim should be to create opportunities where we haven't precluded uses [pedestrian, bike, and transit] beyond the service delivery of cars," Harris says. "One way is to build right-of-way that creates edges for a community and eliminates the void created by freeways."



The recommendations grew out of a ULI Minnesota Technical Assistance Program panel held last summer for the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

In addition, Bill Lively, who secured philanthropic support for Klyde Warren, and Hugh Murphy, former project manager for Millennium Park and now executive vice president at JLL, served on the panel.

Klyde Warren has catalyzed \$1 billion in new development in downtown Dallas, a reflection of the value of park proximity. Millennium Park has become a magnet for development and tourists: in its first six years, the number of visitors to the park

Freeway lids are not a new concept. Cities are increasingly building new parks and public spaces on lids not only as connective tissue, but also as magnets for private investment and sources of tax revenue.

Two of the most successful lid projects are Klyde Warren Park, which covers the Woodall Rogers Freeway in Dallas, and Chicago's Millennium Park, constructed over a railyard, both of which were studied as models by the ULI Minnesota panel. In



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increased by 60 percent, and it now attracts 5 million visitors annually. After it opened, a condo building boom was unleashed, and units with park views now fetch 30 percent premiums over those without.

Each Lid Will Have Its Own Drivers

The development potential of lids—and marquee projects such as Klyde Warren Park—can be considered an economic boom, but the potential negative consequences of lids (rising rents and home prices, gentrification, and resident displacement) need to be considered. ULI Minnesota evaluated potential lid projects at several sites along the I-94 corridor. In certain cases, intensive commercial development on or near the lid that puts pressure on rents would be appropriate. In others, projects that advance social equity and civic goals should take precedence, panelists said.

“When you look at each of these sites, each individual lid project will have its own drivers, and the form each lid takes will respond to those drivers,” says ULI Minnesota chairman Pat Mascia, who served as panel cochair.

In the first half of the 20th century, the Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul was a thriving, working-class African American neighborhood whose main commercial artery, Rondo Avenue, was demolished to make way for I-94. An estimated 600 homes and 300 businesses were lost and thousands of residents were displaced. Neighborhood advocates kicked off the ULI panel by presenting their efforts to preserve Rondo’s rich history.



ULI Minnesota panelists met with Rondo residents to discuss potential lid projects that would repair a neighborhood destroyed by I-94.

The panel agreed that any potential lid project needs to capture Rondo’s history, reflect the community’s value, and return wealth to the neighborhood. This could come in the form of civic spaces and opportunities for small business creation. A freeway lid in Rondo needs to serve a greater social purpose, rather than a strictly commercial one—in part to correct a past wrong, the panel concluded.

“Freeway lids aren’t just an opportunity for new development, but [also] a chance to reknit communities and reestablish all the elements—housing, public spaces, a thriving main street—that made these places so special to begin with,” says panelist Harris.



Another rendering of a freeway lid, this time with more intensive development. (Metropolitan Design Center)

The Farview Park area in north Minneapolis is another example of a place that could benefit from a freeway lid serving as a healing mechanism. Here, I-94 forms a barrier between the working-class neighborhoods to the west and the Mississippi River to the east. Land uses between the freeway and the river have been heavy industrial—a major source of pollution and health problems for residents. One lid proposal would expand an existing park all the way to the river, covering over I-94 and giving waterfront access to these communities. While such a project may provide recreation spaces and a healthy alternative to heavy industry, resident skepticism of government initiatives remains high. Further community engagement and consensus building in Farview Park must come first, the panel said.

By contrast, a site ripe for intensive commercial development is a section of I-35 West—another freeway that feeds into I-94—that separates the Minneapolis central business district (CBD) from the University of Minnesota. This area is already experiencing a wave of new construction, with surface parking lots being redeveloped into office towers, market-rate condos and apartments, and signature projects such as the U.S. Bank Stadium, home of the National Football League’s Minnesota Vikings. While a lid project could support projected population growth and housing density in the CBD, stakeholders expressed concerns about housing affordability, particularly for residents of nearby Cedar-Riverside, where immigrant communities are growing.

One solution could be an affordable housing provision attached to a special taxing district created to pay for lid construction, says panel cochair and ULI member Ann Marie Woessner-Collins, JLL managing director based in Minneapolis. “Freeway lids could be one answer to the social equity question by removing barriers to starting businesses and not making income a barrier to living in the central business district,” she says. “How cool would that be?”

Learn more about the [ULI Minnesota TAP for the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the council’s Healthy Communities Initiative](#).

Archana Pyati is a member of the ULI marketing and communications team.

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In Brief: Multifamily Market Springs to Life with Solid Gains

By [Brett Widness](#)

April 7, 2017

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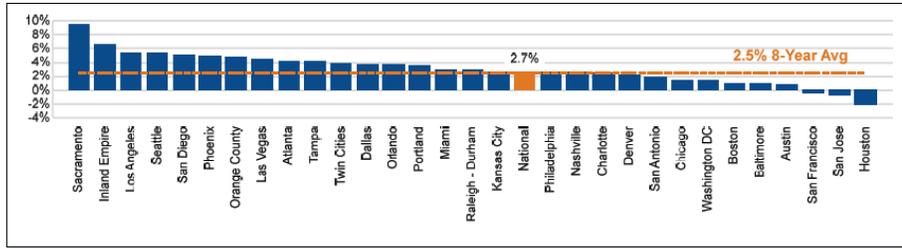
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After a lackluster winter, U.S. rents posted solid gains in March, according to [Yardi Matrix’s](#) monthly survey of 121 markets, although the rate of growth continued to decelerate. Average monthly rents rose \$6 to \$1,312, with the largest rent growth seen in California’s Sacramento, Inland Empire, and Los Angeles markets. On a year-over-year basis, rents were up 2.7 percent nationwide in March, down 10 basis points from February and exactly half the 5.4 percent growth rate of a year ago.

March’s performance marked the first monthly increase in five months and the most significant gain since June, when rents also rose 0.5 percent month-over-month. Rents overall were flat in the seven months between July and February. To some degree that is seasonal, since spring typically ushers in higher rents because tenants tend to move

more as the weather improves, but the slowdown also reflected the effect in some markets of the growing supply pipeline and issues of affordability.

Year-Over-Year Rent Growth—All Asset Classes



National averages include 121 markets tracked by Matrix, not just the 32 metros featured in the report. All data provided by YardiMatrix.

Image courtesy of Yardi Matrix. [Click to enlarge.](#)

But March’s numbers do not change Yardi’s basic view of the U.S. apartment market. Rents are forecasted to moderate from the unsustainably high levels they reached at times in 2015 and 2016, but at the same time supply/demand fundamentals are healthy in most markets, and rents should rise in the 3 percent range for the year.

Among the issues the multifamily market will face this year is how demand reacts to changes in the economy. The Federal Reserve raised short-term interest rates in March, as the economy continues to produce 200,000-plus jobs per month, while the Consumer Price Index is topping the 2 percent target rate after an extended period of weak growth. Further healthy economic expansion could lead to more rate increases in 2017, which would raise borrowing rates and put pressure on historically low property yields.

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