The Road to Humanomics

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Abstract: This paper argues that the standard neoclassical model of infrastructure provision, the benevolent social planner maximizing net social benefits, fails both as a description of and a normative guide for infrastructure investment. Using urban highway construction in postwar America as its case study, the paper argues that humanomics offers more insightful tools by focusing on the motives of the actors involved in the construction of urban highways. Highway boosters were motivated by objectionable visions of urban order, while freeway opponents frequently acted from praiseworthy concerns. Humanomics helps distinguish legitimate opposition from NIMBYism, and points toward a human-flourishing framework for evaluating infrastructure investment.

Keywords: humanomics, urban highways, social planner, moral sentiments

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1. INTRODUCTION

How can we understand the historical provision of public goods? How much should be spent on public goods? Neoclassical economics has given answers to both of these questions in the form of a benevolent planner who seeks to maximize the social benefits generated by the provision of public goods, subject to the costs incurred in their provision. Such a model has been used to describe historical levels of spending, or to examine the efficiency of current levels of expenditures to provide recommendations to policymakers.

But this approach comes with its shortcomings. Using it as a descriptive explanation requires ignoring a lot of evidence on what actually drives infrastructure spending. And its recommendations are limited by the normative assumptions of utilitarianism, which economists are loath to explore. In this paper, I examine the strengths and limits of this model of public goods in the context of infrastructure provision, and more specifically the construction of urban highways in the second half of the 20th century.

I argue in the following that there are two main ways in which humanomics can contribute to our understanding of infrastructure spending, both positively (as a way to describe and understand historical levels of spending) and normatively (as a way to say what would be an optimal level of spending). First, humanomics helps to explain why some projects are taken up and why others are abandoned. It does this by giving a place to the humanities and other social sciences which have explored the narratives and motives that guided investments in urban highways, and those that guided the resistance to these high-

ways. These narratives and motives are important because they guide our judgment of the propriety or impropriety of the actions of others, and these judgments in turn guide our actions.

The second insight given by humanomics is connected to the failures of utilitarian models to explain deviations from optimal levels of spending. Explanations rooted in political economy, particularly in the idea of interest groups which concentrate benefits and are thus incentivized to mobilize, provide a handy tool to explain these deviations. These are valuable contributions. But these contributions also put economics in a bind, by characterizing any opposition to a project where social benefits seem to outweigh costs as shortsighted and self-interested. But can we really lump together the routine opposition to a new apartment building in a residential neighborhood with the revolts against urban freeways which destroyed entire neighborhoods and displaced hundreds of thousands of people? Intuitively, these seem like different types of oppositions. Neoclassical economics is unable to establish a useful distinction between the two.

Another way to put this is in the framework of the "bootleggers and baptists" model (Yandle 1983; Simmons et al. 2020). In the famous alliance between "baptists," who are driven by their own conception of the public interest, and "bootleggers" who are driven by their self-interest, neoclassical economics, political economy and public choice are generally limited to explaining the motives and behavior of the "bootleggers." Humanomics, drawing on Adam Smith's insights, provides a framework beyond standard economic models by considering moral sentiments and socially constructed norms. Its explanatory power is on the motives and conduct of the "baptists." This gives us the tools to separate NIMBYism from objections which are rooted in the human character of economic agents, and a way to evaluate infrastructure investment.

2. MAX-U MODELS OF PUBLIC GOODS, INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT AND ROAD BUILDING

The modern neoclassical literature on public good provision conventionally begins with Samuelson (1954), who provided the foundational definition of a public good as non-excludable and non-rival. In this framework, a social planner trying to provide goods at socially optimal levels would choose a level of provision such that the marginal cost of producing the public good is equal to the sum of individuals' marginal benefits derived from the consumption of the good.

This model has been used by transportation economists to study the provision of roads and other transportation infrastructures (Glaeser and Poterba 2021a, 2021b). The problem of the social planner is a simple maximization problem in which highways must provide some capacity and durability to carry travel by cars and trucks, under the constraints generated by maintenance costs and congestion costs, in addition to the initial capital expenditures (Winston 2021, p. 153).

What use is this model of a benevolent social planner providing public goods? One could think perhaps that it is a good description of the way that infrastructure spending *is* decided. Or one could argue that it is a useful guide to deciding how infrastructure spending *should* be decided. I address both claims in turn.

There is some evidence that economists believe that infrastructure is provided because a social planner is trying to maximize social welfare. A representative example from a Richmond Fed economist goes like this: "When Eisenhower pitched the interstate system to Congress, he justified the cost of the project as a national security measure, but *he knew the real value of the investment was the effect it would have on the U.S. economy in the short and long run*" (Phelps 2021). An entire macroeconomic literature is thus dedicated to producing evidence linking the provision of public goods and especially road infrastructure with increases in productivity (Aschauer 1989; Munnell 1990) and with multiplier effects (Ramey 2021), that justify the actions of "social planners" who build roads.

There is also some evidence that technocrats working within the relevant agencies use this model to determine optimal investment policies (see Sunstein [2024] for an extreme form of this argument). In the context of highways, within the Federal Highway Administration, the Highway Economic Requirements

System (HERS) operationalizes the key concepts of cost and benefit analysis to decide investment projects (FHWA 2020, Appendix A, "Highway Investment Analysis Methodology").

However, most transportation economists seem to agree today that infrastructure spending is far from the theoretical optimum (Winston 2021, p. 151; for a different perspective, see Duranton et al. 2021). As a consequence, the model of a benevolent social planner is more often used as a benchmark with which to compare actual policies of infrastructure spending, a fiction that provides a goal economists can recommend to policy makers for what infrastructure spending *should* be. One clear result and recommendation that stems from this type of analysis, and which bears keeping in mind through our subsequent discussion, is that there can be no efficient investment without efficient pricing; simply put, if roads are provided without any effort to manage the subsequent demand, the investment will not solve the congestion problem that lies at the heart of road provision (Downs 1962; Duranton and Turner 2011).

But neoclassical economics is then faced with a new problem: "[d]espite the accumulating evidence, policy makers continue to eschew efficient pricing and investment" (Winston 2021, p. 151). Such failures of the model to convince policymakers that they should change their ways has spurred a large literature in public choice and political economy that seeks to explain why the gap remains between actual and optimal investment policies, by extending the utilitarian model to the determinants of policy choices.

For instance, in the case of transportation projects, Knight (2004) estimated large effects of common-pool incentives on lawmakers support for projects that benefit their districts, and a consequent large deadweight loss coming from the misallocation of resources to politically connected districts and the underprovision of public goods in other districts. Glaeser and Poterba (2021a, citing Brooks and Liscow 2023) have argued more recently that much of the inefficiency in infrastructure spending comes from the rise of infrastructure costs in the US, which can in turn be attributed largely to the "increasing cost of accommodating citizen's complaints about the downsides of new highways" (Glaeser and Poterba 2021a, p. 212). They relate these costs to the "freeway revolts" which exploded in the 1960s and led, for instance, to an increase of costly "wiggles" in interstate trajectories (Brooks and Liscow 2023).

Recent research in urban economics has convincingly shown that freeways do create measurable costs for those communities which they dislocate (Brinkman and Lin 2024; Weiwu 2025). Within the max-U model, the reaction of those affected creates a typical political economy problem of dispersed costs and concentrated benefits:

> neighborhood activists exert sway because new infrastructure really does create tangible and significant costs to them. Consequently, they bother to fight … At the same time, the dispersed thousand or millions who will benefit a small amount from the project pay far less attention. The taxpayers who cover the added cost of abatement are even less attentive (Glaeser and Poterba 2021b, p. 225).

The max-U model, in its political economy flavor, here joins the evaluation of freeway revolts by urban planner Robert Moses, who argued that the main obstacle standing in the way of highway builders was "selfish and shortsighted opposition" (Moses cited in Mohl 2002, p. 19). In general, this is the evaluation of economists and planners who see themselves as representative of the public interest, defenders of the social benefits of infrastructure spending having to fight off shortsighted opposition, or in other words NIMBYs who refuse to bear the cost of necessary—implied, socially beneficial—change. Thus Phelps (2021) argued that "oftentimes, these revolts pitted city residents, who cared about the local quality of life, against city planners, who saw interstates as a key to growth."

This model of infrastructure provision is problematic in at least two ways. First, new strands of research in environmental economics or in the distributional costs of urban highways have given the tools to measure environmental and social costs that were not considered during the construction period, even though they already existed. In a context of unstable costs and benefits, something else must guide the infrastructure choices of policymakers. Second, lumping all opposition to a project as shortsighted and

opposed to "growth" can be misleading. The motivations, both of planners and of opponents, are worth examining in detail. This is precisely where humanomics can be helpful: by furnishing a way to distinguish between good (praiseworthy) and bad (blameworthy) motivations, it can help us decide which projects are worth building, and which opposition is worth heeding.

3. A HUMANOMIC APPROACH TO URBAN HIGHWAY CONSTRUCTION

There is a large social science literature showing that highway planners were not motivated merely by expected social benefits when they chose their investment strategy, but by a desire to reshape cities according to a certain vision of urban order, which often overlapped with racist views. On the other hand, the motives of freeway fighters were often much wider than simple shortsighted opposition. Examining these motives is necessary to inform public policy, and the institutions that accompany it. After a brief summary of the humanomics framework, this section examines the role played by narratives and visions of the city in shaping the motives behind urban highways construction and the opposition to them.

3.1 The Humanomics Framework

A key observation of humanomics is that in the world of personal exchanges, the mapping between actions, outcomes and utility is sensitive to the particular context (Smith and Wilson 2019, p. 159). This observation came from experimental evidence at odds with the "max-U" model of choice, particularly in the case of "trust games" and "dictator games." In both cases, participants strayed away from behaving "rationally," either by trusting more or by punishing antisocial behaviors even at a cost to them.

Smith and Wilson have argued that Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* can explain such results, because these actions "emerge naturally out of mutual fellow-feeling, thinking, and knowing" (Smith and Wilson 2019, p. 158). The key driver of this emergence is the "impartial spectator" who helps us judge the actions of others and of ourselves and lead us to reward or punish good and bad behaviors when they are properly or improperly motivated (Smith and Wilson 2019, p. 105). The context that influences our actions is the current set of judgments that we have learned through our social interactions, and that helps us construct an impartial spectator (Smith and Wilson 2019, pp. 98-102). Recent applications of this model to diverse questions of public policy include Paganelli and Simon (2022) and Yonk et al. (2024). Thomas and Thomas (2024) have also pointed out that our understanding of collective action through public choice could benefit from the insights of humanomics.

In other words, humanomics argues that the actions we observe can be praiseworthy or blameworthy according to whether they generate sentiments of approbation or disapprobation. These sentiments are adopted within a particular set of shared norms and narratives about propriety, which lead to our own actions of rewarding or punishing others. This means that we can illuminate some actions, such as infrastructure choices, by examining the insights from other social sciences into the motives that frame those choices (McCloskey 2021). Going beyond the benevolent social planner means engaging actively with other fields of study who have eschewed this fiction to look at the messy reality of actual motivations.

3.2 Highways as a Source of Order in the City of Tomorrow

Proponents of an urban system of limited-access highways, or 'highway boosters,' emerged almost concurrently with the invention of the car. As the urban historian Raymond Mohl has noted, the most common imagery they used was that of reconstructing central cities and "revitalizing" them (Mohl 2002, p. 41). From the 1920s, these dreams found their expression in feverish visions of futuristic cities where cars would fly unimpeded through the air amidst futuristic buildings.

A pioneer in this new genre was the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, who described in his 1929 book, *The City of To-morrow and its Planning*, how disorderly traffic in the city should be rationalized:

heavy goods traffic would be sent below ground, deliveries would be made at the ground floor of buildings, and the rest of the traffic would be sent on great arterial roads "built on immense reinforced concrete bridges 120 to 180 yards in width and approached every half-mile or so by subsidiary roads from ground level" (Le Corbusier 1987, p. 168). The approach of the city was a rhapsodic celebration of a newfound order, opposed to the congestion that was beginning to plague major cities: "Suppose we are entering the city by way of the Great Park. Our fast car takes the special elevated motor track between the majestic skyscrapers," etc. (Le Corbusier 1987, p. 177).

Such a vision for cities found many proponents in the U.S. in the ensuing two decades. American planners, big-city mayors, public works officials and downtown businessmen dreamed of solving congestion woes, "reviving" the urban core, and ridding it of "slums." The 1939 New York World Fair introduced this concept to the public with an interactive exhibit called "Futurama" where spectators were taken through a model city twenty years in the future, replete with elevated highways and suburban utopia (Fotsch 2001).

Books such as *Magic Motorways*, by the Futurama designer Norman Bel Geddes (1940), were published to prop up this vision of the future, and boosters found a powerful advocate in Thomas H. MacDonald, the director of the Federal Bureau of Public Roads. In 1947, MacDonald made "the case for urban expressways," dismissing those that opposed them as retrograde, arguing that urban expressways were necessary to solve congestion and "save many cities from stagnation and decay" (MacDonald 1947, p. 92). As for the many urban dwellings that would need to be demolished to make way for the road, "routes selected for expressways, as they approach the center of the city, pass through 'blighted' sections where property values are low, and most of the buildings are of the type that should be torn down in any case, to rid the city of its slums" (ibid.).

Raymond Mohl has described in many works these visions of order, and how they related to the transformation of cities through the demolition of vast swaths of urban land, and the reconstruction of urban land around "'logical areas' such as residential neighborhoods and business districts" (Mohl 2002, p. 40). As highways were built, this vision remained central; the architect Lawrence Halprin mused in the mid-1960s that "...because of elevated freeways, vast panoramic views are disclosed which were never seen before …. We are in a brilliant kaleidoscope of motion which has enriched our lives and opened up whole new vistas of experience" (cited in DiMento and Ellis 2013, p. 2).

Echoes of this vision came to many cities, including Omaha, when the interstates were built downtown, south and west of the Creighton University campus. In 1961, the *Creightonian* reported the university president's claims that the interstate would help the university, first by preventing "neighborhood deterioration which was occurring to the south of the university" (i.e., downtown) and second by putting the university in "an advantageous focal position in the middle of a high-speed highway in four directions" (Unsigned 1961). When construction began a few years later, the student newspaper argued that "when the highway is completed, Creighton's campus will be nestled in a curve" (Cannon 1966).

The imagery mobilized by highway enthusiasts from the 1930s to the 1960s to boost the building of highways in the middle of cities did not rely much on the expected benefits to economic growth through productivity increases that are so central to the mainstream model of the beneficent social planner. It relied on a certain aesthetic and normative adherence to geometric order, as a solution to the modern ills of cities. Anything that did not fit that conception of order was fit for the federal bulldozer, and this included many poor neighborhoods quickly depicted as slums, more often on the basis of racial considerations than actual decay (Karas 2015, p. 14; Rothstein 2017). When we say that planners were on the side of "progress" we should be careful to qualify that what they meant by progress was not the benefits calculated *post hoc* in the neoclassical literature, but a futuristic view of the city that did not accommodate people's plans to remain in their homes.

A humanomic approach, by pointing to the actual motives of highway boosters, helps us understand the development of highways and where they went wrong. The idea that urban highways would bring order and vitality to cities proved wrong, and the folklore of "majestic skyscrapers" was quickly replaced by a new vision of the ills brought by urban freeways: "the problem was that the freeway visions of the highway

technocrats and urban elites never fully accommodated the widespread negative popular reaction to the massive demolition of the physical city" (Mohl 2002, p. 41).

3.3 Defending Neighborhoods and Communities

We have already remarked that proponents of highways depicted their opponents as short-sighted, in the same way that the max-U model depicts them as reacting in a mechanical manner to the disamenities imposed on them. I will not deny that people who bear the cost of a new policy are going to be incentivized to fight against it. Yet at the same time I venture that most people would be inclined to see the "freeway revolts" which began in the 1960s as praiseworthy, or at least more praiseworthy than the NIMBYs fighting today against any new development in their neighborhoods.

Why this different judgment on our part? When we evaluate the actual motives of opponents to urban highways, we are struck more by their praiseworthiness than their selfishness. On the other hand, the motives of highway boosters seem at best to have been misguided, at worst to have been the instrument of spatial racial segregation.

Construction of the interstate system began in earnest with the passage of the Federal Aid-Highway Act of 1956. After years of lobbying, highway boosters had obtained what they wanted: a gigantic program of investment in the road infrastructure, not merely connecting cities but going through them, financed at 90% by the federal government through the proceeds of excise taxes on fuel and tires that would feed into the Highway Trust Fund (the remaining 10% was financed by the states). Federal and state highway officials had free rein to determine the location of highways and set to work quickly. While connecting cities with high-speed roads is unobjectionable, opponents arose as soon as they started digging through urban land.

In San Francisco, the construction of the Embarcadero Freeway on the waterfront even before interstate money began to be poured in had "enraged aesthetic sensibilities" (Mohl 2004, p. 678). Plans to extend it through the Golden Gate Park led to a movement in opposition that culminated with the withdrawal of the council's support for the interstate, after opponents received the support of several newspapers. During the 1960s, the demolition of entire neighborhoods began to take a new meaning, when it turned out that a disproportionate share of the neighborhoods selected for the freeways were the urban ghettos inhabited by African Americans. These ghettos were not limited to southern cities and were also prevalent in northern cities where the combination of a huge postwar influx of southern African Americans and discriminatory housing practices limited the options of the newcomers (Rothstein 2017). In city after city, the construction of interstates served either to wall off the ghetto from the rest of the city, or destroy it altogether (Archer 2020).

For instance, in Nashville, an infamous "kink" was included in the trajectory of I-40 that made the highway go right through the heart of the black district, displacing 1,400 people, destroying hundreds of homes, churches and businesses, and cutting in half an academic cluster of black universities (Haynes 2020, pp. 40-41). In Miami, a cloverleaf was superimposed on the Overtown neighborhood, reducing an African American community of 40,000 to 8,000 by the end of construction in the mid-1960s (Rothstein 2017, p. 129). In Omaha, an interstate was planned a few blocks west of 24th street, the heart of the black neighborhood (eventually the interstate was demoted to a U.S. highway and its construction stopped at the northern border of the black neighborhood, after destroying hundreds of homes, businesses and churches; see Sasse 2020). In St Paul, even though in the 1960 census only 8,394 inhabitants were classified as African American (2% of the city's population), "the road builders found them" and severed their neighborhood in half with I-94 (Mohl 2002, p. 25).

Even though freeways also affected white neighborhoods, minority neighborhoods were disproportionately affected, and a preponderance of evidence shows that highway planners were racially motivated (in addition to the references above, see the recent econometric research by Mahajan [2024], Weiwu [2024] and Valenzuela-Casasempere [2025]). Many of the freeway revolts that sparked as a consequence in the

1960s were not isolated revolts by NIMBYs but an integral part of the civil rights movement, as Mohl and others have argued convincingly (Mohl 2002, p. 37). For instance, Reginald Booker, who opposed the D.C. freeway that would have destroyed a staggering 200,000 housing units (Mohl 2002, p. 26) was also known for his place in the civil rights movement and his opposition to the Vietnam war (Simpson 2020).

The idea that building larger, faster roads would provide a solution to congestion and revive city centers is also a motive that is doubtful. Anthony Downs published his landmark paper on induced demand as early as 1962 (Downs 1962). There is plenty of evidence that many people were aware of the existence of this problem. City historian and social commentator Lewis Mumford, writing in 1958, had no trouble imagining the consequences of building more urban highways as a solution to the congestion problem: "in order to overcome the fatal stagnation of traffic in and around our cities, our highway engineers have come up with a remedy that actually expands the evil it is meant to overcome" (Mumford 1963, p. 238). There was no need to be Mumford or Downs to figure this out either; comments sent to Omaha's *Evening World Herald* in 1958 also made the point: "the interstate leading downtown is costly and unwise. It will provide easier access to an area where there is not enough parking now. Why make it worse?"; and "In Omaha, somebody wants to run an expressway through the heart of the business section. That's about all they need to kill downtown Omaha."[1]

Given the research which has recently demonstrated i) that without a policy of demand management, more capacity leads to the same level of congestion (Duranton and Turner 2011), and ii) that highways caused a large part of suburbanization and increased the decline of center-city neighborhoods (Baum-Snow 2007), it seems that the opposition to urban freeways was motivated by valid concerns that went beyond the local disamenities brought by freeways.

Thus, when we look at the motives of people who fought back, we are not struck first of all by their selfishness in trying to preserve their homes. On the other hand, the highway boosters, if we take their motives at face value, seem to have been completely unable to meet their objectives of decongesting the city center and reviving the city, in fact the opposite happened: "rather than resuscitating the central cities, the new freeway systems ultimately speeded suburbanization, promoted the decentralization of manufacturing and retailing, and deepened postwar urban decline" (Mohl 2002, p. 41).

4. A WAY FORWARD WITH HUMANOMICS

The max-U model leads to a gross misrepresentation of the development of infrastructure choices, by pitting planners and lawmakers who care about social benefits or even about their district benefits against narrow-minded opponents who care only about the immediate disutility generated by a project that affects them. In fact, decision-makers are motivated by a wide variety of objectives. In the framework of humanomics, some of these objectives are clearly blameworthy (racist motivations come to mind). On the other hand, opponents to freeways are driven by motives which appear sometimes praiseworthy (opposing more congestion or defending a community against discrimination). The contribution of humanomics is to bring in these motives in the evaluation of infrastructure choices by economists.

In this perspective, we can reevaluate the argument that shortsighted opposition is the main driver of today's rising costs and of the difficulty to build more infrastructure, even when clearly beneficial. Following the wave of protests against urban freeways in the 1960s, a number of laws were adopted to institutionalize this opposition and make it more difficult to build infrastructure without consulting different interest groups. This empowered a movement of "not in my backyard" (NIMBYs) who use these laws to protest any development which they see as against their interest. Economists and commentators now argue routinely that this has gone too far, and a YIMBY movement has even recently emerged (Glaeser 2011; Klein and Thompson 2025).[2]

But is the issue really with the opposition itself? Or is the problem that the way in which opposition has been institutionalized is incapable of distinguishing between properly and improperly motivated opposition? Humanomics offers a way to separate them. When we examine the motives of opponents, we

should be able to determine if they are praiseworthy or blameworthy. Someone who opposes a project out of pure self-interest is unlikely to attract much praise. Someone who opposes a project out of praiseworthy concerns should get some heed.

This seems hard to do, especially for economists and technocrats who prefer the surer footing of calculable costs and benefits. And yet, when pushed a little, they recognize that these costs and benefits are not separable from moral values. Glaeser and Poterba thus recognize that the "cost-benefit framework is flexible and can accommodate a wide range of social values," for instance by assigning group-based weights to different social groups before aggregating them into social costs and benefits. The problem is that their model stops short of giving any hint of the way in which we should choose the weights of the gains and losses of different groups: "of course, such group-based weights must reflect moral and political values, not economic estimates" (Glaeser and Poterba 2021a, p. 202). The technocrats who operationalize the cost-benefit model of investment decision find themselves in the exact same position: "How would an analyst value, for example, the loss of aesthetics from a row of trees being cut down to carve out additional lanes?" (FHWA 2020, A-11).

The fact that the loss of aesthetics is difficult to measure is not an argument to ignore this cost. If economics is unable to weigh moral concerns and efficiency concerns together, then it needs other social sciences that are willing to look at the process by which moral preferences are formed and expressed and how they affect an optimal solution. The humanomic approach can bring us out of the conundrums posed by the unassumed normativity of welfare economics, by providing a way to integrate together moral concerns and a desire for efficiency, something which was an integral part of Adam Smith's framework (Buchanan, 1976).

I cannot claim to have figured out this problem, but I believe that humanomics does point to a way forward, one that relies on centering human beings in the analysis. The question that should be asked is: what purpose is served by roads? The answer cannot merely be "economic growth" because growth is itself a means to human flourishing. If we accept that the goal of our economic system and our political organization should be human flourishing, then the construction of infrastructure such as roads should also be geared towards this flourishing. If the answer is that roads bring people closer to jobs and retail, then the question should perhaps be: why are people away from jobs and retail? An examination of zoning regulations may be more useful to solve this problem than the construction of more roads (Gray 2022).

Economists inquiring into moral and political values could also turn to the many writers who have suggested replacing the automobile with the human. Writers from Lewis Mumford (1963) to Jane Jacobs (1961) have indeed suggested as early as the 1950s, when urban interstates were first planned and constructed, that placing the human at the center of our deliberations concerning the optimal level of road provision would lead to very different choices.[3]

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NOTES

1 See the clippings at: https://www.newspapers.com/article/evening-world-herald-ppl-knew-the-effect/164329414/.

2 For an example of NIMBYism, see the Free Press investigation of West Hollywood's NIMBYs, at https://youtu.be/pG8Ccbw_W6k.

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