

Inner Loop Expressway

Rochester, NY

Description

Rochester's Inner Loop Expressway is a 12-lane, depressed expressway that cuts through downtown and connects with Interstate 490. Completed in 1965, and designed for high traffic volumes, the highway has experienced a decrease in traffic over the last few decades. At the beginning of the 21st Century, Rochester's Inner Loop had become under-utilized and in need of attention. Construction on the first phase of the right-sizing project to remove the highway and direct traffic to revitalized surface streets began in 2014. The project filled in over a half a mile of the below-grade highway to grade-level, making six acres of both city- and State-owned land available for development. Concurrently, the city of Rochester made improvements to the adjacent Union Street, including street parking, sidewalks, greenspace, and bicycle accommodations. This recently completed right-sizing project connected neighborhoods and leveraged public-private partnerships to redevelop the land made available by removing the highway.



This is a view looking south along Union Street and the parcels that occupy the former right-of-way of the southeast section of the Inner Loop Expressway. (Source: Stantec)

Making the Decision

Decades after opening, it became clear that the Inner Loop was not living up to its potential, as it was carrying far fewer cars than it was designed for. This was due in part to the fact that the planned connection to Interstate 390 was never built, due to local opposition. In addition, Rochester's population had decreased significantly in the latter half of the 20th Century, from 332,000 in 1950 down to 232,000 in 1990. In 1990, 25 years after opening, the city council and the residents of Rochester officially expressed their desire to remove the Inner Loop facility in a plan entitled "Vision 2000: A Plan for Downtown."

With the support of the public behind the idea of removing the Inner Loop, the city of Rochester advanced the project. The city completed the Inner Loop Improvement Study in September 2001. This study made the case for removing the highway and proposed six alternatives to do so. The alternative

that the city ultimately chose was a three-phase approach, deconstructing and redeveloping one-third of the Inner Loop at a time. Phase 1 involves the removal of the portion of the Inner Loop between Monroe Avenue to Charlotte Street.

In 2003, the city of Rochester published its Center City Master Plan, establishing the vision for downtown Rochester as expressed by the community. Many of the challenges and opportunities listed in the Master Plan address the need to attract tourists, retail businesses, and cultural attractions by emphasizing the natural features of the city like the Genesee River waterfront and changing the built environment to incentivize economic development. The Master Plan called for a reduction of the "barrier effect" of the Inner Loop by creating an at-grade boulevard on the eastern portion of the Inner Loop and redeveloping the land made available.



This map shows the project area of phase 1 of the Inner Loop redevelopment project. (Source: Stantec)

Following the release of the Master Plan, the city continued to engage stakeholders, inform the public about the project, and solicit public input. The public remained enthusiastic about the project, in part because the city had involved the public in the process from the very beginning. Residents were more concerned with the details of the new construction, such as sidewalk widths, parking availability, and bicycle infrastructure. The little opposition that did arise came more from those interested in the technical aspects of the project. Detractors were correct when they pointed out that there was some design life left in the facility. As far as public perception went, though, the benefits of filling in the depressed expressway far outweighed the benefits of maintaining the aging infrastructure.

Funding

In 2013, the City received a \$16.7 million TIGER from the U.S. Department of Transportation. Construction of the Inner Loop project was also funded with \$4.1 million from the State of New York and over \$1 million from the city of Rochester.

The city did not need to acquire any right-of-way to complete the first phase of the Inner Loop project, which provided a cost savings. This is because the New York State DOT and the city of Rochester own the entire width of the project area for the entire length of the first phase of the project. While there were no costs related to right-of-way acquisition itself, there may be ongoing costs pertaining to a shift

in maintenance responsibilities. The city and the State reestablished property ownership and maintenance jurisdictions throughout the project area.

Design

In addition to eliminating over half a mile of the Inner Loop Expressway, the right-sizing project included myriad improvements to Union Street, the main thoroughfare connecting the newly created parcels.

The city of Rochester officially established its commitment to

Complete Streets by pledging to “create an interconnected network of transportation facilities which accommodate all modes of travel.” To that end, the city has redesigned Union Street with a Complete Streets philosophy in mind. The reconstructed Union Street features a wide sidewalk and a bi-directional, grade-separated cycle track with trees and plantings separating cyclists from the parking lane. Cars travel the corridor southbound in one travel lane with a left-turn lane at intersections, and northbound in two travel lanes; both directions of travel offer on-street parking. Both pedestrians and bicyclists will be able to cross the street at well-marked crossings which include flexible posts to increase visibility to drivers.

The reconstruction of Union Street helps to reconnect the adjacent neighborhoods with downtown Rochester. Pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers crossing into downtown from neighborhoods to the east no longer have to cross a bridge over a recessed highway. Traveling downtown will soon be a much more welcoming experience, passing by improved landscaping, expanded housing, and new businesses. Moreover, Charlotte Street, once divided in two by the sunken highway now runs continuously for its full quarter-mile length.

Economic Impacts

As predicted in the 2003 Center City Master Plan, right-sizing the Inner Loop Expressway is expected to stimulate economic development in downtown Rochester. The removal of the Inner Loop Expressway resulted in the availability of six acres of developable land, divided into seven parcels. The development of this land will provide the city of Rochester an opportunity to spur economic growth by attracting businesses, residents, and patrons into the downtown area from elsewhere in the city, region, and out of state. While the deconstruction of the transportation facility was completed in 2018, three of the seven parcels are already under construction, three are in the pre-construction phase, and one is not yet under development.



A view of East Avenue and Union Street after construction. (Source: Stantec)

One of the biggest stakeholders in the area, The Strong Museum of Play, is adjacent to the former expressway. The museum is taking advantage of the Inner Loop right-sizing project by expanding its footprint to allow for additional programming. A 100,000 square-foot addition to the museum, part of which will be built on one of the newly available parcels, will feature a new visitor center, additional exhibits, and an outdoor play area, attracting local residents



A view of the intersection of East Broad Street and Union Street after construction. (Source: Stantec)

and tourists to downtown Rochester. Two of the other parcels will be developed into housing units, one of which will contain 240 units, the other of which will contain over 260, for a total addition of over 500 housing units. The area is zoned for mixed use, so commercial and retail space will occupy the ground floor of most residential development. Additionally, Trillium Health plans to develop one of the new parcels to provide housing units for specific populations in need of specialized housing.

In addition to the direct economic development spurred by the new parcels, additional development is occurring nearby, due in part to the removal of the Inner Loop. On Charlotte Street between Scio and Pitkin Streets, developers have already built luxury apartments and condos. These homes now occupy what was a gravel parking lot adjacent to the project area.

Looking Ahead

While 25 years may have passed between the time the community expressed its desire for this project and its ultimate realization, the short-term effects of the project are already coming to fruition. The 2003 Center City Master Plan expressed the goals of the community to revitalize their downtown, and 15 years later, just as construction on the project is finishing, it appears that the Inner Loop right-sizing project is accomplishing that goal. This portion of the complete removal of the Inner Loop is just the first of three phases. The immediate injection of development into downtown Rochester is a positive sign for the next two phases of the project.

For More Information

For more information about the Inner Loop project, visit www.cityofrochester.gov/InnerLoopEast.