

## Megan Kimble on Urban Freeways

Welcome back to the **Abundance Podcast!** In this episode, M. Nolan Gray and Ned Resnikoff chat with Megan Kimble. Megan is an investigative journalist and the author of *Unprocessed*. A former executive editor at The Texas Observer, Kimble has written about housing, transportation, and urban development for The New York Times, Texas Monthly, The Guardian, and Bloomberg CityLab. She lives in Austin, Texas. In this episode, they discuss her new book, [\*City Limits: Infrastructure, Inequality, and the Future of America's Highways\*](#).

Nolan Gray:

I think Ned and I both finished your book over the weekend. I was reading it on a work trip in Tucson, and it's the type of book that makes you mad and inspires you, page to page. It's so chock-full of little moments where you're like, "How could this be happening?" So yeah, big picture, when you're confronting something like urban freeway removal, how do you keep your sanity in this policy space where it just seems totally insane?

Megan Kimble:

I'm always motivated, as a journalist, by big intractable problems, which is really interesting and motivating to me. My first book was about the food system. So I don't know, I'm interested in problems that no one thinks about. In a lot of Texas and for a lot of Texas history, no one bothered to fight TxDOT. No one bothered to challenge their authority or say, "Hey, we want something different." There are so many enormous costs to the way that we are building transportation in the state of Texas, and so that animates me like that. I couldn't live in Texas if I wasn't animated by doing things against all evidence and reason. I would also say that the activists who I spent four years profiling give me a lot of energy because they are making change. I can see it and it's a big problem. So it's going to take a long time to really change the course, but I've seen changes happen in the four years that I've been reporting this book.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, so I think one way to understand the craziness of the status quo that you do effectively is the first few chapters of the book are really explaining how we got here, right? I grew up in Lexington, Kentucky, blocks away from I-75. So when you're interviewing people and they're talking about, you just get used to the hum of the freeway, I totally sympathize with that. It's almost like ocean waves in the background to me now, which knowing what I do now about air pollution and respiratory health, I'm a little bit more concerned. But something that I think you capture is just the sheer scale of the removals that were associated with some of these initial urban freeways, many thousands of homes being built. I'm reading that and I'm thinking, "There's no way, how could that ever happen today?" Of course, the rest of your book is about, hey, yeah, it's still happening today, but help me understand that mindset that folks were in when we were first really just building all of this urban infrastructure.

Megan Kimble:

Yeah, these highways were sold as progress. In the book, I really tried to have empathy for the planners and people of the 1940s and '50s, when cars were becoming ascendant and the origins of the Interstate Highway Program started. And so the book begins in *Highways and Horizons*, which is this somewhat famous exhibit, at the 1939 World's Fair, sponsored by General Motors as a way to sell more cars. But the way they did that was to sell the future, a car-centric future where everyone could get where they wanted, whenever they wanted to go there. They would have autonomy and independence, they could get outside of these crowded disease-ridden cities, and prosper, and spread out on their own acre of land, which is a vision that Frank Lloyd Wright published. And so it's totally understandable that people flocked to buy these cars and that planners flocked to accommodate them because the car was this offer, this vision, of a technological future.

The vision of *Highways and Horizons* is these broad highways, clean concrete, gleaming skyscrapers. It was a vision of technological progress and the people who rallied behind that were in part people who stood to profit from it. So car companies, and cement companies, and all the people who were going to... Oil companies. There was a massive profit machine behind it. But I do empathize with those planners of the 1940s and '50s who saw the car as this great promise for the American city.

So Eisenhower passed the Interstate Highway Act in 1956, and the promise of that act was actually to connect the country. So he really conceived of it as a National Defense Act, and it's called the National Defense Highway Act. But in implementing that, planners started routing highways right through the middle of cities, very much against Eisenhower's wishes, and I can tell that story if you want later, but planners saw all these people moving to the suburbs. There were cars just flooding city streets, and so there was this urgency to do something about traffic congestion. In Dallas, I found this video that's like, it was so not subtle. It says something to the effect of, traffic is the lifeblood of our city, slow that lifeblood and our city dies. These are really strong words about how we have to accommodate the free flow of cars. And that belief persists today, this idea that car travel and enabling seamless car travel will create economic prosperity. The origins of that idea are the 1940s and '50s.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, it's remarkable. I read this concurrently with starting *Fallout* on Amazon Prime, which if you haven't already, you should check it out, but a minor spoiler, a premise of the show is that a vault company had a financial interest in perpetuating nuclear war. And I'm watching it and then reading your book about, oh, we have to build this national freeway system in light of this existential threat of nuclear annihilation, and all of this lost history of we need to build the freeway so we can evacuate our cities if and when we get nuked. And it's almost like reading sci-fi within our own past, this completely different mindset and set of concerns that folks had.

Megan Kimble:

Yeah, but I will say, the book very intentionally does not target interstate highways in the sense that we think of them, like connecting Austin to Houston or connecting LA to Houston. Those highways really, truly did open up the country. They enabled the great migration of black people from the

south to the north. They enabled people to move across the country. We became a much more mobile society as a result of these highways, and we also had a lot more economic trade. So in California, lots of produce comes from there, you can ship it to Minnesota all of a sudden, and those strawberries will still arrive fresh.

So that's, I think, a little bit of a different story of the story of these interstate highways spread across our country. What I wanted to focus on in the book is these massive highways that went right through the middle of our cities, demolishing neighborhoods, and creating air pollution right where people live. And even at the time, even in 1956 and 1960, Eisenhower and this guy John Bragdon, who he appointed to oversee the implementation of the Interstate Highway Program, were like, "This is a bad idea. We do not want these highways to go through the middle of cities." Building highways in the middle of cities will not fix the problem they're promising to solve, which is urban congestion. It was already a bad idea at the time, and yet here we are, 70 years later, spending billions of dollars to double and triple down on that bad idea.

Ned Resnikoff:

The story about Eisenhower was one of a few truly jaw-dropping moments in the book. I'm a former journalist, so I'm going to ask some craft questions that hopefully won't be too tedious to listeners who are just here for the housing and transportation policy. But I was wondering if you could tell the story, a bit of how you unearthed that memo that demonstrated that this was all happening against the express wishes of the Eisenhower administration and the intent of the legislation.

Megan Kimble:

Yeah, I love talking about reporting, so I can go on about this, but yeah, I had seen a memo. It's somewhat famous in the transit highway advocate community. So an urban planner in Dallas named Patrick Kennedy, who's profiled in the book, shared this memo with me. It's Eisenhower's response to a presentation that he received in the spring of 1960, saying that the manner of running the interstate routes through the congested part of his cities was against his wishes. And that's all I had. It's two paragraphs in this memo, but it hints at a larger story, which is, okay, Eisenhower didn't want freeways to be built through the middle of cities, and yet here we are with freeways through every American city. And so I actually went to the Eisenhower Presidential Library, which is in Abilene, Kansas. So I drove 10 hours from Austin where I live, really kind of on a fishing expedition. I had no idea what I would find.

I requested a bunch of records in advance of my visit, but I showed up the first morning and there were two giant carts full of archives, and I just started leafing through them. And what I found was this incredible story of this guy John Bragdon. So he served in the army with Eisenhower, there were, old friends and he's an engineer. He had supervised construction for the army during World War I and II, and Eisenhower appointed him to oversee the implementation of the Interstate Highway Program. So the Bureau of Public Roads is the agency responsible for distributing the \$25 billion enabled by this program. Eisenhower was like, "Hey, now we need someone to oversee this implementation." By 1960, the Interstate Highway Program is running significantly over budget. It's a \$25 billion program,

and Bragdon finds when he looks into it that it's running \$11 billion over budget. And he's like, "Why?" And the reason is that cities are taking this liberal federal funding.

So the federal government had agreed to pay 90% of the cost of construction of highways, which before they had only paid up to 50%. So there's lots of federal money going to states and cities, and almost no strings attached. And so what cities are doing is they are taking that money, again, like we talked about, cars are flooding city streets. There's paralyzing congestion on these old roads, and so states are just planning and building massive urban highways. Urban highways are much more expensive to build than rural highways. You have to buy the right of way, it's a much trickier engineering challenge because there are existing buildings there. And so as a result, the program is running significantly over budget. And so Bragdon asked Congress to... Or he asked the Department of Commerce to look into the intent of Congress in passing the Interstate Highway Program. Did Congress intend for federal money to be spent building routes through urban areas? And Congress produces this... Or I'm sorry, the Department of Commerce produces this report called the Legislative Intent with Respect to Designating Interstate Highways and Urban Areas.

It's a super wonky title, but I found that and I was like, "Oh, this is it." Right, this is the story. In this report, the Department of Commerce makes clear that Congress's intent was not to build highways through urban areas. So Bragdon takes that and he, himself, makes his own report that he gives to President Eisenhower, basically looking at the state of the Interstate Highway Program. And I found the text of his presentation to Eisenhower. They're like note cards with his handwritten notes on them, like cursive. And it's a remarkable presentation. In it, Bragdon just lays out arguments that will be familiar to any transit advocate today, where he says, "Cities are using all of this money to build massive roads through their centers. They're destroying housing and they're making car-centric sprawl. And all of the urban planners say, 'The way to fix urban congestion is to build transit,' but what cities are doing are tearing up that transit and replacing it with roads." And he gives all these examples of cities across the country where that is happening.

He tells Eisenhower, "What you should do is direct the Bureau of Public Roads to create more stringent guidance on what states are allowed to do with this money." The intent of the program is, the federal interest is, to connect the country, connect cities. States are using this money to try to solve this "newly created problem" of traffic congestion. And so he gives this, I think, really compelling case of the way to solve urban congestion is to build transit, to build and expand transit. And that cities should not just grow and develop around a highway plan, which is what they're doing now. Cities should undertake proper urban planning before they get all of these billions of dollars of money to build highways. And that's what led to Eisenhower's response, which is, and it's captured in this memorandum the manner of building interstate routes through the middle of cities was against his wishes, and those who had implemented the program in such a way had done so against his desires.

That's what I had, and then I was in the library and I was like, "I still don't really understand why Eisenhower didn't do something." If it was against his wishes, why didn't he direct the Bureau of Public Roads to change course? And I found a note, his secretary who wrote daily diaries based on the happenings of the president, and she wrote this note that says, "General Parsons," who was a high up in the Eisenhower administration, "Were in for a hearing on the roads program, and Bragdon

thinks that the guidance should change, but General Parsons and others think it would be murder to move in an election year." And then I found this article by an engineering trade publication that corroborates that, which is it's an election year. The states would rise up in arms, is what Eisenhower says, if he changed the course of the program because funding had already been committed, and states had been making their plans. He didn't want to agitate swing states, and so he didn't change course. And here we are in 2024 with massive highways right through the middle of every city.

Ned Resnikoff:

It's such an amazing story, and I like the story because it reminds me a lot of Robert K. Rowe digging through the archives of the LBJ Library and, yeah, doing original reporting on things that happened 50, 60, 70 years ago. But I was wondering if we could focus for a second on the local jurisdiction and the state side of things in this back-and-forth between Eisenhower and the locals. Presumably, they would've gotten some benefit from using those highway funds as they were originally intended to. And so I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about why some of these cities and states were bucking the wishes of the president of the United States. Some of them are also probably from the same party as Eisenhower. Why were they going against his wishes? Was it just that they didn't understand induced demand and thought that this would relieve congestion, or were there other motives at play too?

Megan Kimble:

I think the first thing is a lot of cities didn't know they were going against Eisenhower's wishes. This meeting was not made public, and Bragdon's interim report was not released. You had to be paying very close attention to D.C. politics to know. I don't know how widely publicized this was in the '60s, but I don't think that it was commonly reported that Eisenhower didn't want this. The growth of highways parallels the growth of the suburbs because of federal housing policy. So people, white families specifically, were moving out of the city. They needed to get back to their jobs downtown and so there was a demand of "we need to accommodate more car travel." Downtowns were withering, and there was this promise that was sold on, "bringing cars back to our city centers is going to reinvigorate them." It's like a downtown revitalization program.

So cities saw it as an economic benefit. I think lots of evidence shows that didn't work out very well for cities, but at the time, the way these were sold... I spent a lot of time also just in local newspaper archives trying to understand how reporters, for example, at the Dallas Morning News were covering highway building in the '40s and '50s. And a lot of how these projects were sold was, yeah, economic development, we're going to bring people from these growing suburbs north of Dallas, back downtown, and that's going to reinvigorate our business district. Of course, there was a huge profit motive behind all of this, of car companies agitating to have more roads built because they would fit more cars and sell more gasoline, and so oil companies lined up too. So they're cohered in the 1940s by the massive American Road Builders Association -- it became one of the biggest lobbies in the country. So there certainly was a huge political lobby advocating for this, but I think planners were selling this as a way for economic development.

Nolan Gray:

Something I'd be curious to hear you discuss a little bit more is, that you talk a little bit about some of the protests against this and then some of the early movements to get rid of freeways, the Embarcadero in San Francisco. I'm curious if you have thoughts on freeways being built everywhere and sometimes they were stopped, as an extreme alternative to I think what you spend most of the book talking about, which is the Texas context. Why did that happen? Why in some places did urban freeways not successfully get installed?

Megan Kimble:

There were popular revolts. So in San Francisco, Baltimore, and Seattle, thousands or sometimes tens of thousands of people revolted. They showed up in San Francisco, they protested in Golden Gate Park. In Seattle, they crowded city council chambers. There was this biracial coalition in Baltimore called Movement Against Destruction. So people organized, and I think where people effectively organized and mobilized tens of thousands of people or just thousands, and particularly combinations of white and black people together, I think you see there was effective resistance, and freeway fighters erased lines from maps before they could be built.

Nolan Gray:

I'm surprised by why that emerges in some places but not others? Why San Francisco, Baltimore, Portland? Yeah, I think it's probably an issue that deserves a little bit more investigation.

Megan Kimble:

Yeah, I don't know. That's a great question, why some places were able to stop freeways. I think one reason, then and now, is political leaders began to oppose them. So in San Francisco, you had the political leadership oppose highway plans, and they didn't buy the narrative that these highways are going to bring progress to your city. I think too, in the first cities where highways were built, they shocked people. They're polluting, they're loud. They're so disruptive to the urban environment, and so I think early on, the cities where highways were built, you saw much more opposition because they were just so shocking to communities and people effectively organized. But the highways that were built later and later on, they just were, there was an inertia behind highway building that I think was harder for people to organize against.

Ned Resnikoff:

Thinking about the resistance to installing urban freeways, especially in the '50s, '60s, and '70s, one thing that came to my mind while I was reading your book was it felt like there's a very tangled, causal history between the fight over freeways and the current housing crisis. And so obviously the installation of these freeways, and obliterating entire neighborhoods to make room for them, was I think a pivotal moment in laying the groundwork for the current housing crisis. And yet at the same time, the resistance to freeways as laudable as it was, does seem like it innovated a lot of the techniques that would then later be used to block housing that's intended to relieve the housing crisis. And there's a, I think, a complicated relationship there too, between I think some of the early activists who were fighting freeway expansion, which is something that I think most pro-housing

people would vociferously support. But at the same time how that transitioned into an anti-apartment building, like anti-high-rise politics down the road.

I was just wondering if you could reflect on that relationship a little bit and maybe bring it up to the present day, what you saw among anti-freeway fighters in terms of how they think about housing now in these cities.

Megan Kimble:

Yeah, that's a great question. I think, today for sure, the tactics of anti-freeway people, of freeway fighters, are similar to the tactics of NIMBYs, which is oppose and delay. So in Texas, I've reported on several projects, including I-35 in Austin, that were sued under NEPA or somehow stopped under a procedural question around the National Environmental Policy Act, which is also used to stop affordable housing developments and other pro-density work, transit included.

So absolutely, and I don't know that I've reconciled the philosophical question behind that, which is the tactics of these two groups, which are, I think YIMBYs and anti-freeway people have, the Venn diagram is almost a circle, and yet freeway fighters have to oppose. That is basically their single directive is oppose, stop, resist. This group in Houston which I profile, they're literally called Stop TxDOT I-45. And I think one reason for that is simply today, state DOTs have so many resources, and that was true in the '60s, is these state DOTs could just wear people out. They could wait them out, they could wear them down. If you didn't want this highway today, well, they'll just come back in seven years and build it when you've moved on. And there are examples of that time and again, across the country. So I think oppositional, it's very hard to have a proactive vision or affirmative vision in that case, that freeway fighters are just absolutely outnumbered and outmanned and out-resourced.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, it was such a funny book for me because... Well, I'll say this, look, my very principled stand on this is I support delays in the process for things I don't want to happen, and I oppose them for things that I do want to happen. Maybe that's the philosophical stance that we could settle on. It was just so funny reading your book and I'm rooting like, yes, they discovered a NEPA delay. I think it was for the I-45 expansion with Houston, where they tried to segment it out, which is a big no-no in environmental review. And I'm like, "Yes." Oh, and he said on the record that it's one project, and it's just so funny. I think that what he's getting at here is that in the housing sphere, right, these things are just a big giant headache and a nightmare, but with freeways where it's actually, this probably really is where you want to do a really, really robust environmental review. But it is a funny, I think, situation for somebody who spends all day talking about the need for environmental reform on housing to be feeling.

Megan Kimble:

Totally, and that's also true with transit, right, is transit is very hard and expensive to build. And I've read lots of really excellent reporting about how we should make transit cheaper and quicker to build. I'm seeing that in Austin right now with Project Connect, which is in the book, this massive

transit referendum we passed in 2020. It keeps getting delayed. The costs keep going up, and I feel frustrations like, let's build this quicker, and yet parallel to that there are-

Megan Kimble:

... was like, "Let's build this quicker," and yet parallel to that, there are lots of groups who are just trying to gum up the works on the I-35 Project. But again, I do think the difference is TxDOT has, its 10-year budget, its last 10-year budget plan was \$110 billion. So I do think there is a little bit of a difference in the sense that, probably, multi-billion-dollar projects deserve more scrutiny, just as a rule. I think I'm okay standing behind that.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah, and I was about to say, it's not just that it's a multi-billion-dollar project, but there's just fundamentally a difference between... I mean in the actual qualitatively and quantitatively ways, the environmental impacts between, "We are going to build a ten-unit apartment building in your single-family neighborhood on a lot that is currently not utilized," versus, "Actually, we are going to wipe out every single home in this neighborhood regardless of whether it is currently occupied or not." I can understand the need for additional community input if the question is not, should this neighborhood stay the same forever or not, but just fundamentally should this neighborhood be inhabitable?

Megan Kimble:

Yeah. There are also values embedded in what deserves more scrutiny. The three of us might agree upon a certain set of values of what deserves more scrutiny, but I think that a lot of leaders in Texas would disagree with that. And so that's just, again, I haven't reconciled what is the correct policy and legislative fix for that, but TxDOT is selling these highways to people who live in the suburbs as a way to get back to their jobs and school. A lot of these people have been pushed to the suburbs because of housing policy -- because they cannot afford to live in Austin or Houston or Dallas, and they need access. They need access back to where they live and go to school and where their kids have childcare.

And so that is a real need, and they're selling this as a solution. And the argument of the book is, rather than build bigger and bigger highways to carry people farther and farther away from the center of the city it's like, let's start to bring that closer. Let's build more densely, let's build transit. But the way that the built environment currently exists in Texas is like we need those big highways to get people to their jobs.

Nolan Gray:

Sure. So I mean, one of the things that I think is challenging, especially in the Texas context is that housing affordability in Texas is premised on endlessly building out wider and wider freeways into Virgin land that we then build new subdivisions on. And I think one of the nuances that you get at in the book is that, well, hey, if we just scrap this paradigm and don't transition over to something new, how are people going to be able to afford to live? Do you want to unpack that trade-off a little bit?



Megan Kimble:

Yeah. I mean, a lot of people in Texas, and it's not just in Texas, it's true across the country, but a lot of people where I've reported have moved to the suburbs not because they want to be there, but because that's the only place they can afford a house. So people are moving farther and farther from the center of Austin, in large part because of our zoning that makes it illegal to build anything more dense than a single-family home on most land in the city. That's true in Dallas, they're in the middle of their own zoning fight. So indeed how we've developed in most Texas cities is that people have sprawled and they rely on these highways to get back to school, to work, to their childcare, and whatever they need. And so that's what TxDOT is selling is, "We have developed this way in part because of highways," but it's the self-reinforcing cycle that we have these big highways, so the most affordable place for people to move is to Round Rock, to suburbs outside of Austin.

But as I was reporting this, I found this study that shows that when you combine housing and transportation costs in a city like Houston, where the median household spends about 20% of their disposable income on transportation, so when you combine housing and transportation in Houston, it's just as expensive to live in as New York City. And I think that doesn't get factored into the housing affordability conversation. People look at their mortgage payments, they look at their property taxes and they think, "Oh, it's cheaper to live in the suburbs." But they don't factor in how much it's going to cost for them to get back to work or back to their kid's school or wherever else they're going in the city.

And so indeed, the promise that we've been sold in Texas and the way that TxDOT sells these highways is that they help affordability. Our mayor, Kirk Watson, basically said that about the I-35 expansion. He said, "This will help affordability." And what he means by that is, it will help the people who have moved because there's no affordable housing in Austin get back to the things they need. But there are so many other costs to that form of development, which of course we can talk about, but I'm sure your listeners are familiar with, but it's not just a financial cost.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I mean, on the subject of where local officials fall into this, I would love to talk about, what was his name, J. Robert Bugg. Is that-

Megan Kimble:

J. Bruce Bugg.

Ned Resnikoff:

J. Bruce Bugg, which is just such an amazing Texas villain name. I mean, it sounds like the name of a corrupt sheriff. But you mentioned a couple of times in the book that he has this extremely tight relationship with Governor Greg Abbott. And it seems like at certain parts of the book, while you don't say this explicitly, it certainly seems like he's doing things at the beck and call of Abbott. It made me think that one of the differences here between something like TxDOT and the Texas Transportation Commission and the way this works in blue states, where blue states still do a lot of

highway expansions too, but I think the difference is that Abbott seems genuinely very engaged on the transportation issue.

And so he's personally trying to expand these freeways, whereas in blue states, the impression I get, I mean certainly with Caltrans, but I would say also ODOT, which you talk a little bit about in the book, the Oregon Department of Transportation, you have these blue state governors who are nominally committed to combating climate change and reducing transportation emissions, but they're not actually that engaged on transportation. And so the highway, whatever department has jurisdiction over highways continues to operate on default and to continue to expand these highways. And I mean, is that something that was reflected in your reporting, that in Texas, transportation is something that state officials have their eyes on?

Megan Kimble:

Yeah, absolutely. So Governor Abbott ran for office in 2014 promising to fix traffic in Texas cities, and there's, I think it's a famous ad, maybe not --lots of people haven't seen it, but there's a campaign ad of him in his wheelchair rolling along the shoulder of a Dallas Highway and he says, "A guy in a wheelchair can get around faster than traffic in Texas cities. I'm going to run for office..." I can't do the Texas accent. I'm not going to do it. He ran for office promising to get Texans where they were going. And since then, he has said in various venues, "Everything we're doing in transportation infrastructure keeps Texas number one in the nation in economic development." So he really believes, or his political stance is that enabling more transportation, which is to say highways, helps bring businesses and people to Texas. And so he's very involved.

He started this program after he got elected called Texas Clear Lanes, which is the engine behind a lot of these highway-widenings. Its current budget is like \$65 billion over the next decade will be spent to widen highways in Texas cities, and all of that is Abbott's doing. He believes that this will create more business development and bring the population to Texas. And the state legislature is similarly involved and road-centric.

The Associated General Contractors represent highway builders in Texas, and they are a very powerful lobby. They donate, through various packs, millions of dollars to people in state-wide offices, including Abbott. So I think that's a factor, absolutely, and it's a basic political corruption story, but I also think there's a stronger, deeper belief that driving creates prosperity. And I try to get at that in the book of the central question of 70 years of evidence showing adding lanes to urban highways doesn't fix traffic. Why are we still spending so much public money to do that? I think it comes down to this ideological belief that driving creates freedom and prosperity, and if people can't choose their form of transportation, it's freedom of choice somehow, then this will make us all less prosperous and our economy will collapse.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, I mean, this is an interesting challenge, I think, for this policy space, because there's this folk theory around. I think it's pretty intuitive. Okay, traffic's bad, add another lane of traffic. That'll address the issue. Of course, I think you do a really good job of explaining induced demand and all the evidence for that. I'm curious, having been working on this issue for a while, have you found a way

where the light bulb goes off, where people are like, "Oh, okay, maybe the extra lanes don't work"? I'm sitting here in Los Angeles at the intersection of two major freeways, so again, this work is extremely relevant to me, but of course, there was a -- folks familiar with LA will know that they widened the 405, I-405, through the Sepulveda Pass, and then the day it opens, congestion on the 405 is worse.

That's been helpful to explain this issue, but in your work on this, what makes it click for people, other than just... The people who live near the freeway, I think they're concerned with the freeway widening, and the existence of a freeway makes sense, but how do you help it make sense for folks who are like, "Yeah, I commute on the freeway and I want the traffic to go away. Why wouldn't I want to widen it?"

Megan Kimble:

Well, you mentioned the 405, which, I think a lot of people have direct experience with induced demand. So I went door to door with Stop TxDOT I-45 in Houston, and Houston has the most famous example of induced demand in the world, the Katy Freeway, which TxDOT widened to nearly 26 lanes, and within five years, rush hour traffic had gotten significantly worse. A lot of people in Houston drove on that freeway. They know that freeway, they either have heard of it or they just have personal experience with it. So I was struck going door to door, often in low-income, Spanish-speaking neighborhoods of, how many people understand, they don't call it induced demand, but a lot of people just know the rough idea of like, "The highway's always under construction. Traffic isn't getting better."

So there's that. I also think people who've never heard of it, like you... I always talk about it as supply and demand, you make a good cheaper and easier for people to access, more people access it. And when you frame it in that way of just, this is basic supply and demand economic, a lot of people have a pretty good grasp of that. I do think people understand it. I think that the rub that I have found in a place like Texas is, "Well, what do we do instead? We have built these massive sprawling cities where people have to drive to get where they're going. What's the alternative?" And I think a lot of people do understand induced demand, but they throw their hands up, they're like, "I still commute 30 miles to work. Make that highway better. Just make it work better. I don't care how you do it. Make it work better."

Ned Resnikoff:

So we are having this conversation coincidentally on Earth Day, and one of the truly eye-popping things in your book is a statistic that Texas transportation emissions account for one-half of a percent of all CO<sub>2</sub> in the entire planet, which is just absolutely... Or all human-produced CO<sub>2</sub>, which is just a staggering statistic. And you talked a little bit already about this sort of ideology of the car and the supremacy of the car. It does seem that the car does factor into almost Texas's self-mythology in a way that you don't necessarily see in other parts of the country. Although I would say that California, I mean, not to make this a red state versus blue state thing, the mythology of the car in California is also huge. I think you grew up in LA, so you're probably very familiar with it.

And part of what I'm trying to figure out is not just how to get people to understand induced demand, but also, what sort of messages might be effective for trying to help people understand, it doesn't have to be like this. Your car is not the same thing as your freedom. And there are significant ways in which car dependency makes you considerably less free.

Megan Kimble:

Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I think actually, it's not distinct to Texas and California, I think it's pretty uniquely American. There are very few exceptions to the rule, which are like DC, Boston, and New York, the cities where you can feasibly live without a car. In every other place, you have to have a car to get access to work, school, or a grocery store. It is not unique to these massive freeway cities like Houston or LA.

So I think it is an American thing that needs to be contested, and I think a lot of it is, people don't see another way. It's just like you have to build it. And it's easy for me to say, I'm a journalist. I don't have to be in the policy space. But I think it's like until transit is a viable alternative for people, or they see a pathway for it to become a viable alternative, or until living closer to school or work is a viable pathway for people, people are going to continue to demand car infrastructure because it's not... I do think there is a mythos of freedom and individualism, but it's also basic survival.

I talk to people, for example in South Dallas, which is... So in Dallas, the portion of the book that takes place there chronicles this decade-long effort to remove a section of highway called I-345, which is this elevated highway that bounds the eastern edge of downtown Dallas. And all of that land occupies or influences like 250 acres of land. You could build a lot of housing on that land. But I think people in South Dallas are like, "Well, that's neat, but I use that highway to get to work today." Dallas has been segregated, so all of the jobs are in North Dallas. A lot of low-income people live in South Dallas. And so I talked to person after person who's like, "That sounds like a neat idea, but how am I going to get to work that's going to make my job harder today?"

And I think there are lots of good higher level arguments for, how do you move a city away from car dependency? Car dependency is prohibitively expensive for low-income populations. It has a disproportionate burden on low-income populations. But I think it falls to transit systems and the fight to get more money to transit systems so that buses come more frequently so that they're more reliable, and so that it just becomes a thing that people feel like they can use. And that's going to happen somewhat gradually, but I do think it's making the bus work better.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah. I mean, an interesting example of that here in LA was the recent push to try to remove the Marina Freeway. It's this weird stub that extends out from the 405 and was originally supposed to go all the way to Slauson. Right across Slauson, right through South LA to the 110. But part of the pushback was, well, this is part of a connection of roads that gets people from predominantly black and Hispanic parts of the city to the beach, and there's no transit alternative. You only can get there by driving. And I think you're very measured on that in the book, of, this transition is hard, and the answer can't just be, "We'll just remove the freeway and we'll deal with the other stuff down the line."

Megan Kimble:

Totally. I mean, people need to get to work tomorrow. And I think it's easy to talk about urban planning and all this affordable housing we're going to build, but I also encountered people who were like, "I don't believe the city's going to do that." Particularly low-income black populations in Dallas have very rarely been served by their city government, so you get to a much harder problem, which is democracy. They don't feel represented, they don't feel like their elected representatives are trying to help them in their communities. So why would removing this highway help them too? Even if it's sold as this reparative justice action, I think a lot of people feel distrustful that the city will follow through on its promises. And that gets to a deeper problem of, we have just abandoned a lot of low-income black communities across this country for decades, and why would they trust that a highway removal would help them?

Nolan Gray:

I think another thing that you capture effectively in the book is that there are better and worse ways to remove freeways. I also lived in New York City, and famously, the West Side Highway was removed and now it's a giant boulevard that, it's not obvious to me that it's a dramatic improvement over what was there. Of course, it was removed far before I was even born, but now it's just a big, unpleasant, high-speed, six-lane boulevard. And I think you talk about that in the book, and I think you also talk about Rochester, I think, which is maybe a uniquely outstanding example of highway removal. Do you want to maybe think about what principles you think would go into freeway removal to make it more enriching than just, okay, now we just have a thing that's kind of sort of like a freeway, but not actually separated?

Megan Kimble:

Yeah. To me, the biggest, if I had to pick a metric on what makes a highway removal successful, is how much land it frees up. Land is the fundamental factor, the opportunity here. Our highways take up so much space and land, our cars, our car infrastructure, it takes up so much land in our cities, and that land could be used for other things. It could be used for housing, market rate, or affordable. There are so many ways we could deploy that land to benefit cities. It could be a return to property tax rolls in cities that need property tax revenue. So I guess the first thing is if it just takes an elevated highway and makes it a great street with not any kind of land liberty, for lack of a better word, if it doesn't change the land calculation, I think that's not that successful. Because I think the idea is to put it to some other use besides car infrastructure.

And that could be a dedicated bus lane. It absolutely could be pedestrian, a big wide cycling path, whatever. It doesn't necessarily have to be housing. But it's like if you're just replacing one for one and it just looks different, to me, that's not very effective. I also think it gets into this thornier question of public participation. So in Rochester, I chronicle The Inner Loop removal, which is this moat, this trenched highway that circled downtown. And in 2017, the City of Rochester filled it up. It brought it to grade and built a two-lane, city Street in its place, and used the surplus land to build a bike lane and sidewalk, and then three-story apartment buildings. And it's remarkable. It's very cool to see. It's just really good urban planning. It's a really beautiful street, a really beautiful bike lane, and

then these apartment complexes and I think half of them are rented to families earning below the median income. So it genuinely created a lot of affordable housing.

But people in Rochester who I... So I went there and I was like, "Oh my God, this is amazing. This is beautiful. What a cool thing. I'm standing on land that used to be a highway." I interviewed people who live in those apartment complexes, who live in a place that used to be a highway, walking around it is just so cool. But I also talked to a lot of people who were pretty unhappy with that, because they were like, "The city just did what the city wanted to do. No one asked us. It's being sold as this, "We're going to repair the harm done by this urban highway," but no one engaged me, and my community was harmed when this highway went in." And so the city of Rochester is now grappling with, or they're now progressing on removing the Inner Loop North, which is the rest of that Inner Loop.

And that highway cut through a mixed-income, mixed-race neighborhood called Marketview Heights. And there are still people who live in Marketview Heights who remember what that neighborhood was like before the highway was built. They remember the single-family homes that were there, and what it was like to live in that neighborhood. There were stores and markets and laundry shops and all that. And they're like, "We want that back. We want our neighborhood back." And the city of Rochester, I think, to its credit, is trying to authentically grapple with, "How do we do that? How do we build single-family homes that are affordable to a family making 50,000 a year, or 30,000 a year? How do we do that in practice?" But I talked to people there who were like, "I don't buy that this is going to be better." They remember when planners came in and said, "Hey, we're going to build this beautiful highway and it's going to make your life so much better." And now, their parents received that wisdom, and they're just like, now they're the same age and they're like, "Well, how will removing that highway make my life better?"

So I think you get to this interesting question of, going back to the conversation around, and I think in the housing space, it's like too much public participation is not great. I think to vastly oversimplify, the reliance on public participation has allowed NIMBYism to grow and thrive, that people feel like they have the authority to say, "I don't want this apartment complex down the street from me. And I get to say that." And so I think there's been this move to how do you streamline, how do you get states to pass rezonings? But I think in the transportation space, it's like for so long, communities have just been paved over with basically no input. How do you give them authentic participation in the process, particularly when it comes to removal, when that project is being sold as a way to benefit those populations? They have to be a part of that conversation. And how do you do that? And that's the question. I don't know that anyone has fully figured that out.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah, I mean, it's also, Rochester is an interesting example, because if you compare it to a city like, for example, Houston, my understanding is that the population of Rochester is declining and has declined pretty significantly since the 1970s. And so it seems like when you think about what should replace a highway, it's a very different question because you're not thinking about, "Well, how do we accommodate this influx of new residents?" It's more about how we economically develop this area that is now fairly distressed. But it's like whichever question you're trying to answer, the highway is not the answer, because it's the least efficient way, the least beneficial way you could use that land.

And so in the case of, I had again, one of these funny mixed reactions reading the chapter on Rochester, because at first, I was like, "Wait a minute, they want to replace this with single-family homes? No!" But I mean, that actually, it's not like there's a massive demand for housing in Rochester, so that's fine. And if you have single-family homes interspersed with grocery stores, and I think you were saying this was originally a mixed-use neighborhood, that is still way more environmentally beneficial than even just replacing the freeway with a four-lane or six-lane boulevard.

Megan Kimble:

Reporting in Rochester was interesting for me having... I've reported on housing quite a bit in Austin, and the frenzy and the speculation and the development pressure is so intense that going there, I had to shift my mindset around, it's not clear that this land could be developed profitably. Even with the Inner Loop East removal, there was a lot of concern around that land is just going to sit there vacant because no one lives in Downtown Rochester. No one wants to live in Downtown Rochester. Are developers going to want to buy it? And so I think the calculation is very different, and the project is framed very differently in a city that is declining in population. That project was sold as an urban development project. How do we bring young people back to the center of our city, where they can support local businesses? It's like an economic development project for the center of the city.

A highway removal in a place like Dallas has to answer a very different set of questions, which are namely, how do people get around? How are we going to move all the cars, or specifically... I mean, the question TxDOT asks when they consider highway removal is, "How are we going to move all the cars we need to move?" And how are we going to move all the cars we need to move? The argument I make in the book is, the better question is how do we move all the people we need to move? That is a very different calculation in a place like Rochester. In Dallas, the demand is there. There's no question that if they removed that highway and built 25,000 market-rate units, people would move into them. No question. That just creates a very different conversation, I think.

Nolan Gray:

On the public process piece... Again, I think this is a nice nuance that you capture... I think a few people that you interviewed almost have public process fatigue. There are a few people who are like, "They've been inviting us to hearings and meetings and workshops for 10, 15, 20 years." And this cynicism sets in. I'm wondering if you could just elaborate on that a little bit more.

I think a lot of agencies or lawmakers here are, "Okay, we didn't do public process in the past, let's do more of it." But then it becomes this formalized, mechanistic thing where we're letting you take turns coming up to the mic and speak for two minutes and get mad, and then we're shuffling you off and then we're checking the public process box. Based on the reporting you did, how would you suggest state departments of transportation approach that?

Megan Kimble:

I haven't thought about that question. I've just documented how bad it is in Texas. I think there are two parallel problems. One is, indeed, these projects take so long. And that goes back to NEPA, all of the requirements TxDOT has to follow under NEPA to advance a project of the scale of the North

Houston Highway Improvement Project, this \$10 billion, 28-mile highway expansion. It has been in the works for a very long time. I think being in the works is a loose statement -- it's been in various stages of development, of conception. There has been early public involvement before it was even started, the NEPA process.

I think people engage and then they lose interest. They also engage and feel what I'm saying is not being taken into account. I think part of the way you do authentic public participation is to listen to people and change the project accordingly. Again, this is a very different conversation than the housing space that has happened and the effects have been bad in terms of housing creation.

But on transportation, I think people feel, and I heard from lots of people, that they go and ask for something else and they just are speaking to a blank wall, that there's just actually nothing that changes due to their participation. So, why would you continue giving up your Wednesday evening to go to a public meeting if you feel like your words are not being absorbed, accommodated, or even acknowledged by the people seeking your input? And I saw that a lot at the Texas Transportation Commission. They have monthly meetings, people can go give public comments. And it's just really met by this unflinching silence and very little response.

I chronicle this in the book, but there was a public hearing for the... It's called the UTP, it's the Unified Transportation Program. It's basically how the Transportation Commission sets a budget for TxDOT. And they were considering a \$90 billion tenure budget. About 90 people showed up to testify, mobilized by a lot of these organizers and activists. And the Transportation Commission was like, "Whoa, this is so many people. This is an unprecedented number of people. We're going to have to shorten your public comment from three minutes to one minute."

Some of those people had traveled from El Paso, which if you don't live in Texas, is eight hours from Austin where the Texas Transportation Commission holds its meetings. They don't allow virtual testimony. So, people had driven across the state 600 miles to show up, and been given one minute to speak on what kind of project... And these were like a county commissioner from El Paso, these are not... I mean, these are normal people, but they're also elected representatives who had come to the Transportation Commission to ask for something else.

It was remarkable to just see this barrage of testimony of people asking for something else, buses, bike lanes, safer roads, and basically no response from the commissioners. And then, before the last person got to their seat, they approved the budget. There was no discussion... Even if they were going to approve the budget anyway, they didn't even discuss the public's concerns.

Again, I'm just talking about how Texas is bad. I don't know if I necessarily have a proactive vision of how you do good public engagement. I think smarter people than me, policy people are talking about that. At the very least, acknowledge the input you've received. At the very best, change your projects accordingly.

I guess I will say also that a thing I learned through my reporting is that I think a lot of times activists and ordinary people focus on state DOTs. They go to TxDOT, and they say, "TxDOT is the big, bad wolf who's going to widen this highway through my community, and I don't want that." But the actual source, the political directive that is causing TxDOT to widen this highway is the legislature and the



governor. If people want to get to the root cause of why all these highway widenings are happening, it's the legislature that needs to give a different directive to TxDOT.

I think you've seen in blue states... I just was in Colorado reporting a story about the Colorado DOT. Their governor said, "Hey, we have really strict emission reduction goals. We want to hit them. Every state agency needs to make a plan to reduce their emissions by 90% by 2050." As a result, CDOT canceled two highway widening, because they were given a very strong directive from their political leaders, "You need to do something different."

I don't think that state DOTs are necessarily... Even in a place like California, they answer to their state legislature. And until the state legislature requests and demands something different, the status quo will remain.

Ned Resnikoff:

That moment you talk about with the public comment in the book, again, was just one of those amazing scenes. It made me wonder. I mean, you've spent a lot of time with a lot of these anti-freeway activists, and a lot of them are pretty remarkable individuals. I was, in particular, really struck by Molly Cook, who it seems is just a total machine, just never sleeps, just does this 24/7.

Did you ever ask any of them, especially when they hit a roadblock or when the Texas Transportation Commission just completely ignored reams of public comment, how do they keep going, how do they not get discouraged?

Megan Kimble:

It's funny, I... Someone else asked me that on a podcast. I was in Houston for a book event, and so I was seeing all the activists. I was like, "Hey, can I ask you guys a question? How do you keep going when you keep losing?" So, I've very recently had this conversation. The answer I got, which I love, is, "We make it fun."

The Stop TxDOT I-45 folks, a lot of them are in their late 20s, early 30s. They're friends, they hang out. When they're canvassing, they go get a beer afterward, or they have community picnics in a park, which doubles as an organizing moment to collect signatures or something. And that's true of the group in Austin, Rethink35. Adam Greenfield is the organizer behind that. His ethos all along has been: Make it fun, make it social.

I think that a lot of them recognize one reason people feel frustrated with all these highways is that they have dispersed us and disconnected us from each other, that we live in our suburban homes or even in the city, we don't know our neighbors. The way that, I think, they're keeping people involved is by making people feel connected to something.

And that's true, I think, in organizing of any kind, is to make people feel connected to a cause. And that is a much stronger, deeper motivation for action than necessarily winning. People feeling connected to other people fighting for something has driven a lot of social change, even when those fights were long and even when the defeats were big. I think what they're doing is making it

social. And that is hard to do when the thing you're fighting is anti-social, it's the primary disconnecter of cities.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, I think at one point you noted that one of the Stop TxDOT I-45 meetings just turned into a pub crawl, which sounded extremely familiar coming from YIMBY advocacy.

Going back to the role of state DOTs, I think... Of course, the bulk of the book is about freeways and freeway widening, but you briefly discuss a case in San Antonio where there had been what would probably basically feel like a normal street, maybe a strode, an unhappy combination of a street in a road, but it was owned by the state DOT. I don't know if you could expand on that a little bit more.

I think most people don't realize that many streets, roads, and stroads in their community are owned by their state DOT, and there are reasons why they can't change. I know in Kentucky, there was an instance where one of these state highways, which was effectively just a large street through an area of Louisville, was having all of these mature trees cut down because they didn't comply with state highway rules. And folks were discovering, "Why does the state own and manage this street at all? This isn't a local street."

Megan Kimble:

Yeah, I didn't know that either, until I started reporting this book, that a lot of urban-feeling roads, and stroads, are owned by the state. And the reasons are obvious and innocuous. Before Austin was so big, a lot of the roads that led out of town, like Lamar, when it went out of Austin... Lamar is a major street that cuts through the city... it functioned as a highway to get to a rural area. So, it makes sense. But what has happened is that states have held on to ownership, and so cities have tried to do something differently with their city streets, and in response to demand for bike and pedestrian infrastructure or even Vision Zero mandates, they can't, their hands are tied.

The most startling example of this that I've seen is the Texas Transportation Commission turning over. It started a program about a decade ago to turn some of these state highways over to cities, largely for budget reasons. They didn't have enough money to maintain them, and so they were like, "Hey, cities, please take over maintenance." One of those was Broadway. It's a pretty generic, strip-mall-ey, American stroad. The Transportation Commission was like, "We're going to give this over to you, San Antonio."

In 2017, the voters of San Antonio, as part of a road improvement bond, I think 72% of voters approved a bond that would narrow that street from six to four lanes and add pedestrian infrastructure and trees and a bigger sidewalk in its place. Development followed. Developers saw that, oh, this might be more valuable land. They started getting rezonings to build higher-density offices and apartments.

Then one day in early 2022, the agenda for the Texas Transportation Commission meeting was released. It had a minute order to resend ownership of Broadway from the city of San Antonio back to the state. It turned out that the state had never maybe signed the document or whatever, the whole legalese thing, giving San Antonio ownership.

I was at that meeting, it was absolutely remarkable. Leaders from San Antonio came up, they were stunned, they were professionally outraged, and they said, "Can you please reconsider? We have spent years working on this so-called road diet..." You don't say road diet in Texas though, because people don't like that. "... this road improvement, we would like to proceed." The voters of San Antonio approved this measure.

A bunch of people testified, and then J. Bruce Bugg, the villain from earlier, he is like, "I think I should offer some explanation for why we're going to do this." He lays out the fact that Governor Abbott has given the Transportation Commission one directive, and that directive is to fix congestion in Texas cities. So, reducing car capacity in a major thoroughfare in a Texas city would run counter to that directive, and therefore they need to take it back, and the city of San Antonio cannot reduce the lanes on that street.

Which is remarkable. For one, does Governor Abbott not have better things to do with his time? But apparently, I think the speculation was, and no one has ever been able to prove this, that Governor Abbott intervened. He is called Bruce Bugg. My reason to speculate that is, I looked up where Bruce Bugg lives in the property district, and he lives three blocks from Broadway. So, he has been on that street, he has traveled on it, he has seen the cranes going up, the construction. There's no way he was unaware of that. Anyway, he takes back control. It caused a little bit of a scandal in the Texas transportation world.

A few months later, that fall, there was a policy conference in Austin, The Texas Tribune Festival. A reporter at The Texas Tribune asked a higher-up at TxDOT who was there representing the agency, they're like, "Hey, what happened?" He said this thing which burned into my brain because it was so remarkable. Part of the road measure was to make this street safer. People are getting in crashes a lot. It's dangerous for bicyclists and pedestrians. That was part of the effort, let's make this street safer. He said, "We understand the need to make our city streets safer, but not at the expense of vehicular capacity."

Nolan Gray:

That is remarkable, yeah.

Ned Resnikoff:

That is almost like a summary of the entire city transportation planner credo. I mean, that's like their Hippocratic Oath. It's incredible.

Something that this conversation gets to, I think, is something you point out in your book. Which is that there's this ideological undercurrent in the way that it seems people think about this stuff, which

is that planning for public transit is somehow a socialist activity. You're putting a bunch of people together and making them share this common good. You're subsidizing it with public funds.

This story is illustrative of the fact that it seems like nothing in Texas, except for maybe their anti-choice laws, involves more centralized planning and state control over local decision-making than the transportation system. It's remarkable just how much public subsidy and how much top-down, central planning seems to go into the creation and maintenance of the Texas highway system.

Megan Kimble:

Yeah, absolutely. One fun fact about transportation in Texas is that our state constitution requires that 97% of the state highway fund is spent on roads. You would have to change the state constitution to allow the state to fund transit. So as a result, Texas does some very small rural transit programs, but it doesn't spend any money in Texas cities. So, in most sessions, activists try to change that. They filed a bill to say, "Let's open up the state highway trust fund for other modes."

There was a hearing in, I think it was 2021 that I went to. I sat there and listened to person after person... People who were opposed to the venture for opening up the Highway Trust Fund said exactly that, "Highways are good free market capitalism and transit is for socialists", that we are subsidizing transit riders by spending public money on it.

Anyone listening to this podcast probably knows we spend billions and billions of dollars subsidizing car travel every year in the U.S. and have since 1956. So, the idea that it's just a free market, there's no government intervention, is pretty ludicrous. But I think there is some connection, which is when you're in transit, you do have to interact with other people, when you don't in your car, you simply don't. You have total autonomy over where you're going and when you want to go there. The way that it's sold as freedom is that you have autonomy over your own travel, and you don't really... I mean, no one says you don't have to interact with other people, but it gives you this independence. Frankly, I waited for the bus for 35 minutes in Austin. I don't feel very independent when I'm waiting for the bus that long.

Part of it is, it's a self-perpetuating cycle. As our transit systems become worse, driving is just as consistently a freer, better alternative. But the converse to that is, do I feel very free when I'm sitting on I-35 in rush-hour traffic when I rely on my car to get absolutely everywhere I need to go in Austin? I would love to drive less in the city, but it's not practical. I don't know. I don't have a good answer for that, except it drives me nuts.

I have witnessed congressional hearings where I've heard that the talking point of, "transit is for socialists." That goes from the lowest levels of government up to Congress when they were considering the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill of how they allocate funding. You had people in congressional hearings saying, "Transit is for socialists and we don't want to subsidize transit riders." And no one is maybe factoring in how deeply we subsidize car owners.

Nolan Gray:

I feel very free when I'm sitting in traffic on the 10, and it takes me 45 minutes to get across the city.

This is an important point, I think. Yeah, I think people have this idea of, oh, okay, our roads are paid for by user fees, we all pay gas taxes. Of course, you highlight in the book that it doesn't even come close to funding what we spend on roads.

I think a broader issue is that as we transition to EVs, a lot of benefits there, doesn't solve everything, but one cost is that gas tax revenue is falling, and the way we finance roads is, (1.), just getting to be less physically sustainable, and (2.), it's becoming more regressive. There are a lot of conversations about transitioning over to vehicle miles traveled tax. Here in LA, there are big conversations around congestion pricing.

Is there any conversation like that happening in Texas? Whenever somebody proposes to expand a freeway, I'm always like, "Well, did you even try to do congestion pricing before this?" I'm curious if there was any conversation about that in Texas or any of the other states you've reported on.

Megan Kimble:

There's no conversation about congestion pricing in Texas. We operate in a, and I'm quoting the Governor, "anti-toll environment", so tolling is seen as a tax, and we don't add... We don't like taxes in Texas. There's no congestion pricing, even as an option in Texas, particularly on state highways. TxDOT is considering a user fee as a way to replace the gas tax. It's like a pilot program to look at how you may raise transportation money absent the gas tax.

But I think it's this remarkable opportunity as EVs come into the market to rethink how we finance transportation. The Highway Trust Fund was created in 1956 to pay for the interstate highway program. Indeed, just what you said, Nolan, through user fees. That was Eisenhower's big push, was this should be self-sustaining, which is to say users of the asset will pay for the asset, and that is through the gas tax.

In 1956, when it passed the Interstate Highway Act, Congress created the Highway Trust Fund, which was funded by the gas tax. It was supposed to expire in the 1970s when the interstate highway program was built out. But you might imagine that the road builders and the car companies didn't want that dedicated funding to disappear, and so it remained. And we spend roughly 80% of the Highway Trust Fund on car infrastructure.

The policy argument in my book is that we should get rid of the Highway Trust Fund. I don't know that that's quite in the mainstream yet, but that was one of my hopes for the book, is to bring that idea forward. I quote a senator from the 1970s who says, "This is a transportation financing system designed for a time long past." If that was true in the 1970s, it's absolutely true today.

The Highway Trust Fund was built to facilitate interstate travel. We did it, we built it out, and you can now get from LA to New York on the interstate highway very seamlessly. We should think about how we fund transportation to support the priorities and values of 2024.

Ned Resnikoff:

That's one of the things that I think comes through in your book. But just also looking at any department of transportation, it seems like there is such overpowering institutional and bureaucratic inertia when it comes to expanding freeways and just the way transportation departments operate. I know that you didn't get a whole lot of access to the Texas Transportation Commission when you were working on the book and that you were mostly focused on the people who are affected by the freeway expansion or who were fighting it, but I'm curious if you took anything away from your research about the composition of TxDOT and maybe some of the things that institutionally, other than the top-down political pressure, if other factors within the institution make it very difficult for them to change course.

Because I can tell you that in California, and I think this is probably true in a lot of other transportation departments, part of the issue is just that the transportation departments are staffed by traffic engineers. There are way more traffic engineers than there are transportation planners. When you have an entire staff of traffic engineers, then the mindset is always going to be, how do we reduce congestion? How do we get more lanes on this highway? Could you just talk a little bit maybe about what TxDOT looks like on the inside?

Megan Kimble:

Yeah. I mean, it's the cause of it. If you only have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. That is absolutely how state DOTs work because they're all trained to move cars and accommodate car travel. There's just not that higher-level thinking about, well, is that desirable?

I learned this from Beth Osborne at Transportation for America. She has this wonderful rant that she does about how we've abdicated policy decisions to engineers. If you have a street going through your city, whether or not you want that street to be wider depends on your policy objectives for the city. And yet we have engineers who are saying, "Hey, we're going to fix traffic for this street in your city, this highway, and therefore to accommodate the number of cars, we're going to build it this wide."

But the policy question is, do we want to accommodate the number of cars? Do we want to encourage, through our policy, other modes of travel? And yet, because engineers have all the power, they get to say, "Well, the number says they're going to be this number of cars, so therefore we have to build it that wide." Ignoring the question of whether or not that's desirable. Again, I don't want to take credit for that idea, but I think that's a helpful way to think about it for me. The people who are making the decisions are trained to see this, to answer this problem in only one way. They need a different question to answer.

I will say, I got very little access to TxDOT. The Dallas district was the most open with me, and I appreciate their transparency. They're all in districts and they operate like a fiefdom. They're pretty separate. There's a district engineer in Austin, Houston and Dallas. Houston was under active litigation, because Harris County sued TxDOT over the North Houston Highway Improvement Project, so they didn't talk to me the entire time. Austin didn't talk to me. I did a background interview, but I got no access to them either.

So, I can't speak authoritatively on the composition of TxDOT. I have heard from people that there are people at TxDOT who understand that building wider highways doesn't fix congestion. The former executive director, James Bass, said so in a webinar, "As Texas continues to grow, we're going to need to consider investing in other modes." So he's saying that on the record. People who work there are young people who live in Austin who see I-35 and how poorly it functions and understand the need to invest in other modes, but they just are not empowered. I think that's true at a place like Caltrans with Jeanie Ward-Waller, the whistleblower who talked about Caltrans widening highways using funding that was not supposed to be spent on widening highways.

There are certainly people within DOTs who understand the problem and understand that it requires a different set of solutions than just widening highways, but they're not being empowered, I think. I think it just gets back to these organizations run by engineers. There's a pretty strong inertia in that profession and that discipline of "the number says there are going to be this many cars -- we've got to build for this many cars." So I think you have to begin to staff DOTs differently.

Nolan Gray:

Right. I mean, there's a classic blog post, I can't remember who wrote it in the last few years. Part of it starts in civil engineering school. We don't train transportation engineers, we train highway engineers and everything is optimized around throughput. But I find out if transportation planning is anything like city planning, I suspect there are a lot of people within TxDOT reading your book, cheering you on.

Megan Kimble:

I hope so, Nolan.

Nolan Gray:

A couple of other things from my notes here. One, can your next book be on preschool standards? You tell a story of a preschool that's being displaced by I think I-45 in Houston, was it?

Megan Kimble:

I-35 in Austin.

Nolan Gray:

Excuse me. I-35 in Austin. And they can't find another place just because "preschool?" As somebody increasingly attuned to childcare costs, I was like, "Oh, that's a rabbit hole I almost wish there was a little footnote on." But in all seriousness, I'm curious to hear what you changed your mind on throughout reporting the book. While you chew on that? I'll say while I was reading it, I think I gained a little bit more of an appreciation for other things that have to happen concurrently with freeway removal. Your intuition is correct that I think speaking for Ned and myself, I think we probably both are very freeway-removal.

But I think I didn't fully realize, I think that some of these broader changes that have to... You do have to have it associated with changes in where we build housing. You do have to have it associated with transit investment. I think I knew that on some level, but your book I think really, really reinforced it and helped me to empathize with people who might be in a very different situation concerning their freeway. And that might be their ticket to opportunity or that might be their ticket to affordable housing that I hadn't fully considered.

Megan Kimble:

Yeah, absolutely. I agree with that of late. I mean, I got into writing this book because I was covering housing in Austin and sprawl and our land development code that doesn't allow housing to be built in the city. And then four months later after I published this big story, TxDOT allocated \$4 million to expand I-35. And I was like, those are the same story. Those are absolutely the same story of our housing policy reinforcing bad transportation policy.

But to your question about what I changed my mind on, I mean, I think I touched a little bit about it earlier. I was struck and tried very hard to check my own biases. Talking to a lot of people who didn't want highways to be removed for a very good reason is that people in a place like South Dallas who rely on highways to get everywhere they need to go and just don't see the city doing anything to proactively help their neighborhood build prosperity.

And so I worked hard to incorporate that in the book. I think that perspective deserves its voice unqualified. And lots of urban planners are like, "Well, there's a counterargument." And I'm like, "Well, I really did want to just present that as its own perspective of the people who rely on highways." I interviewed this middle-class family who lives in Kyle, which is a suburb south of Austin, and the wife commutes to Austin every day and she says would love a train, she would love a train to get her there. And the husband is kind of like, "Nah, I'd like another lane on this highway."

What I wanted to do was present a very strong argument for moving away from car dependency and getting rid of these freeways. But I think there are compelling reasons to keep them and I wanted to present the perspective of people who feel that way and not have my voice or my argument be part of their narrative.

Nolan Gray:

There were a few moments in the book where you're reporting somebody saying something and I'm like, "Oh, I totally disagree with what this person is saying. What kind of narrative is Megan pushing here?" And then I step back and I'm like, "Oh, she's just doing good journalism and revealing, I think the range of views that people have on this topic that you kind of have to contend with." So I appreciated that.

Megan Kimble:

Yeah. I didn't want to write an urban planning book. I wanted to write a book about people and people have really... It's like there are lots of different ways to think about car dependency and I wanted to try to at least present some range of those views.



Nolan Gray:

Well, and I think another aspect of the book, I mean, we talk about the policy I think because at least Ned and I are nerds, and I suspect you're a little bit of a nerd as well, but I mean the heart and soul of the book is all of these people who are living normal, fully realized lives. And for the activists removing the freeway is kind of their mission. But the book effectively shows how the freeway is a factor in a lot of people's lives. Like the lady who returns from Iraq and builds her dream home in her hometown, or the family running a daycare center.

This is not their entire lives and it's almost frustrating to see the extent to which they have other cool dreams, ambitions and goals. And these freeway expansion proposals are just kind of coming in and they're like, "I don't want to think about this stuff. I want to continue with what I was doing." And I feel like it is well captured just how take an interest in politics or politics will take an interest in you. People were kind of dragged into these fights that they had no interest in previously.

Megan Kimble:

Yeah. The preschool, you mentioned it earlier, but that was one of the most moving things for me that I reported. So it's a Spanish immersion preschool, right on the I-35 frontage road. They've already been displaced once from downtown Austin as part of the real estate boom of downtown Austin. They got displaced when their site was turned into a hotel and they found this kind of unassuming limestone brick building on the I-35 frontage road, and they've occupied it for two decades.

Running a childcare center is already hard enough. There's a lot of state regulation that you mentioned. It's a famously low-profit industry. Hundreds of childcare centers closed during the pandemic because they just couldn't make ends meet. And it's like childcare is essential to a family's functioning. Parents can't work without childcare and it's like good childcare where parents feel like their children are getting educated and cared for while learning another language.

So I spent a day literally just sitting on a tiny chair in the back of a classroom and just observing the daily rhythms of four-year-olds and five-year-olds in their classroom. So you get so immersed in this world and it's like all the games they play and the art projects they do. It's such a complete world. And then the parents start arriving and you're just reminded of this rush that exists as grownups.

We all, I'm sure, have experiences like, "I got to get home, I got to get dinner on the table." And that rush is, there's just this highway right there and it's easy to forget it when you're in this little world drawing pictures of school buses and ladybugs. And yet there is this highway that's overhead impacting these kids' lives and the lives of their parents, namely who rely on this place every day, the ease of access to it.

For most of the time, I was reporting a book that people who owned this place didn't know if they could continue. They didn't know if they could find another place to continue their school. That was just very moving to me because it's so far out. It's not anything related to transportation policy. It's just this fundamental question of how we are caring for our kids and what kind of future we are leaving for them.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I have another craft question on that point because one of the things that struck me about your book reading it and made me honestly a little in awe and also a little jealous as a former reporter myself, was just, that it seemed like you found for each different kind of aspect or angle of how freeways were affecting people. It's like you found the best possible source, the best possible personal narrative to track.

I mean the preschool, some of the incredible activists you spoke to Modesty, the woman who returned from Iraq and built her dream home. So my question is how did you find all these people and how did you... I mean, I'm sure you must have talked to hundreds of people, so how did you make decisions about, "this is the person whose story is going to bear this particular angle"?

Megan Kimble:

Thank you for asking that because the hardest part about this book is that I was writing about three freeway projects that exist in PDF documents. Nothing has changed about those highways. There is no action to cover as it relates to those highways. They're just big bureaucratic projects that are moving extremely slowly. I had to create a dynamic narrative out of that. I don't know if I have a good answer except that I talked to an enormous number of people.

I talked to a lot of people that didn't make it into the book. And a lot of why people didn't make it into the book is sometimes people don't think they are impacted by highways. They just don't have that much to say even if they're going to get displaced. I mean, mostly people who got displaced had something to say about it, but sometimes it wasn't that deep. There wasn't that much complexity to their feelings about it. Some people are just like, "I don't like my commute." They're like, "Well, tell me more." And they don't have that much more to say about it.

So I think I did a lot of testing of folks to see who was dynamic and could think critically and bounce off my thoughts around this. But Escuelita, that school I just mentioned, I didn't get access to them until six months before my book deadline. So a lot of it, I spent a lot of the years stressing about finding those people and narratives. Some of them I will say, became more meaningful as things happened, which... So for example, I interviewed this woman, Rebecca Winebar who's a white woman in her 30s who rented an apartment with her boyfriend and a market-rate apartment complex near downtown Houston, and they found out that they got displaced by the expansion.

So they got a pretty generous relocation. They moved. They were able to save that relocation money to potentially use it as a down payment for a house. And so I talked to her and I was like, "Well, it doesn't seem... It seems like they were treated fairly." I don't know if that's interesting, but I did that interview. I stayed in touch with her and then six months after I talked to her and had thrown her story aside, the TxDOT began demolishing her former apartment complex loss at the ballpark, and this was when the project was paused by the federal government.

So FHWA paused the project while they investigated civil rights concerns, and they were very clear that no action should be taken on this project. Well, TxDOT had already bought these buildings, so they already owned them, so it's like a little bit of a gray area. Could they proceed with demolition?

Activists for Stop TxDOT I-45 saw the construction was beginning somewhat unannounced, and they found out that TxDOT intended to tear down all three buildings. So it's like three big, square buildings and only the front one is in the footprint of the expansion.

In the environmental documentation for the project, TxDOT had only accounted for the demolition of housing units of the front one. The volunteer found out just by calling the construction company, the demolition company, that TxDOT intended to tear down all three, which is a violation of its environmental documentation. And so they alerted FHWA. FHWA intervened and they had this big protest. It was this big flash point in the story of this highway expansion. The mayor got involved. It made TxDOT look really bad.

The mayor was kind of like, "Shame on you TxDOT for... We're in the midst of a housing crisis and you're taking more housing than you need." As a result of this Stop TxDOT protest, they were able to save the back two buildings from demolition. And I think now the city is in discussion around turning them into permanent supportive housing. But suddenly then that conversation I had with that woman became a nice narrative thread to follow because there was this protest that happened.

Similarly, I talked to a woman who lived in public housing, and it was only a couple of months after I talked to her that I was like, "Oh, the public housing complex where she's getting displaced from is two blocks from where Rebecca lives." This is a black woman who lives in public housing. Rebecca is a white woman. They're about the same age and they're treated very differently in the process. The woman who lives in public housing is given a Section 8 factor and said basically like, "Good luck." And it takes her a long time to find housing.

She has to move far out from her son and daughter's school. She has to drive everywhere she needs to go. This is a long way of saying that I had this realization. I was like, "Oh, those three could be braided together in a way of, it happens within six blocks of each other in downtown Houston." Thinking about how this woman Jasmine who lives in public housing was treated compared to someone who lives three blocks away who happens to live in market rehousing, both of their units are getting demolished and one is given a lot more resources to rebuild her life.

Then you have a little bit of a narrative. You have changed over time. You have a conflict with the protest. But I will say initially I wanted to write a classic, a few character-focused books, and I quickly realized I had to talk... I had to weave together a lot of different narratives to kind of capture the kaleidoscopic nature of one person's story just doesn't capture. Highways impact people in so many different ways. These highway expansions are also really... Each one is different in a different stage. But that was... Writing the book was really... I had Post-It notes all over my office like a crazy person.

It was really hard to figure out how to weave all of those together in a way that didn't feel chaotic and confusing. So thank you for saying that because it was extremely difficult.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. So how did you approach the writing? And I promise this will be the... For the listeners at home who don't care about this, I promise this will be the last craft question, but I mean, how did you

approach the writing? Because you are weaving not just all these dozens of personal stories, but also the chapters rotate between talking about the three different cities and then sometimes moving to Rochester or DC.

So I imagine that's the kind of thing that you can't just sit down and write it sequentially because it's all different compartments of your notes and different parts of your brain. So I mean, how did you just stay organized around that and decide how to sequence things?

Megan Kimble:

Yeah. This is going to get it for the writing nerds out there. So I use Scrivener, which is, I don't know if you guys are familiar with that. It's a platform for organizing and writing, but it is like... I don't know if I could have done it without Scrivener. I'm like a real Scrivener stand. But it allows you to include your research documents. You have a side pane where you can see different documents.

It makes the whole thing much more visual and it also allows you to pull... What I did was I started writing little sections. So it was like I wrote a section about Modesty. I wrote just chunks of the book, like 2,000-word chunks and I labeled them and I could kind of see them. So I wrote probably half of the book before I had any structure. I was just writing and then it was like, "Oh, I could see how they were in conversation with each other or could they be in the same chapter?"

But I had anecdotes or bits of research that just existed as little documents in my Scrivener file. I'm very much a visual thinker, so it was helpful for me to just see what I had already. And I did decide at some point to split the book into three parts, and that was helpful for me too, like, "Okay, this is going to go on the first third. This is going to go on the second third. This is going to go on to the final third." Just three-act structures, a classic structure. Let's try to do that, beginning, middle, and end.

And that's going to force me to think about how I have some movement over the book that there's narrative tension building throughout, and I just did that by putting files in their buckets. But the way that I handled having all these characters was by just having... I wrote a bunch about Modesty, I wrote a bunch about Jasmine. I had their stories written and then I braided them together into a longer manuscript. But it was very much like... What is the phrase? Ignoring the forest for the trees. Like just building trees and then trying to combine them.

Nolan Gray:

If he can't tell, Ned is working on his book, which I've been pushing hard on him, believe me.

Megan Kimble:

Get Scrivener then.

Nolan Gray:

We want to do a quick lightning round here. Great. So, Megan, what is the best taco in Austin?

Megan Kimble:

Toscana.

Nolan Gray:

Very good.

Megan Kimble:

Do I say more or is this one word lightning round?

Nolan Gray:

You can say more or we can move on.

Megan Kimble:

Toscana is a food truck in east Austin and they have one kind of taco and it is the best taco in Austin.

Ned Resnikoff:

All right. Another Austin question. So Austin is a big live music town. Where's the best place to catch some live music?

Megan Kimble:

I'm going to say Stubb's is my favorite venue. It's kind of like the answer now is like, "How much money do you have? But if you're mid-range, Stubb's is the place to go.

Nolan Gray:

Okay. You're the dictator of transportation policy for Texas for a day. You can remove one stretch of urban freeway in Texas. What's gone?

Megan Kimble:

Well, I live a mile from I-35, so I'm going to be selfish and I'm going to remove the stretch that starts at South Austin, Ben White, and it goes to 290. I just want that gone. Because it would benefit me in my life greatly.

Ned Resnikoff:

If you could have any city's transportation network just grafted onto Austin, which would it be?

Megan Kimble:

Foreign or domestic?

Ned Resnikoff:

Can be either.

Megan Kimble:

No, I've never been to Paris, but I see a lot of people overlay Paris transit networks onto different cities. I'm just going to go with the Twitter intelligentsia and say that.

Nolan Gray:

You spent a lot of time in Dallas and Houston. Favorite neighborhood in both cities?

Megan Kimble:

I spent a lot of time reporting in the Fifth Ward in Houston, and it's underrated. It's not a neighborhood I would send... It's not a tourist neighborhood, but I got invited into people's homes. I met so many cool people. There's awesome barbecue at the Nickel City, Nickel Sandwich Grill, great barbecue. Dallas? Bishop Arts in Dallas.

Nolan Gray:

I WAS spending a lot of time in Dallas because my partner has a lot of family there. I think Dallas is overall an underrated city. I feel like there's a lot of buzz around Austin. I had a little bit of a weird affection for Houston because of the non-zoning thing. But in Dallas, I think people talk about it like it's just a big corporate office park, but I think it's a lot more interesting and dynamic of a city, I think than maybe a lot of folks who... Especially on the urbanist track, I think. And I think that it comes through in your book that there are a lot of people in Dallas who are trying to build a better Dallas and are embracing some of what's great about it.

Megan Kimble:

Yeah. It's an unlikely place for a highway removal conversation to have taken hold in Texas, but indeed, they have gotten farther than any other city in considering that idea.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I mean, one of the things that I think comes through in your book is that this is not necessarily the way I think anyone thinks about Texas, but it is a very urban state. I mean, there are a lot of very rural areas, but I mean Dallas, San Antonio, Houston, Austin, I mean those are all big cities.

Megan Kimble:

Yes. And our state politics does not reflect that.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah. I've always appreciated your reporting and this book was fantastic. I'm curious, what's next for you? What's interesting to you going forward? A book is such a huge thing. I hope you're taking at

least somewhat of a break and enjoying folks engaging with your work so far. But as any good writer, I'm sure you're already thinking about what's next. So what's next?

Megan Kimble:

I don't know. I mean, I am a full-time freelancer, so I write magazine stories. I write a lot for Bloomberg City Lab and Texas Monthly, and I have a story coming out in the New York Times about the Colorado Department of Transportation. So I'm still covering transportation. I don't feel exhausted. I feel like I now have expertise that I can find really interesting stories and don't have to do all of this learning about what is NEPA and how it works. So still covering transportation. I mean, I got into this because I was a housing reporter, so I'm interested in covering housing.

I'm working on a story right now for Texas Monthly about the statewide effort and zoning reform in Texas, which is bringing together very unlikely political allies. My MO as a reporter is I love to learn. And so as soon as I feel like I'm done learning about something, I'm going to move on. I just reported a story for Texas Monthly about groundwater, and I'm now suddenly absolutely fascinated by groundwater. So expect more on a water beat.

Nolan Gray:

Awesome. Well, Megan, thanks so much. Again, the book, *City Limits Infrastructure, Inequality, and the Future of America's Highways*. I loved it. I know it's kind of trite, but I couldn't put it down. I was really enjoying it. I was totally engaged with the characters, and this is definitely a book that I want to get on the desk of every transportation commissioner. So thanks for writing it and thanks for joining the Abundance podcast.

Megan Kimble:

Oh, so fun to be here and talk with you too. Thank you for having me.