

March 9, 2019

Dear Waterfront Design Team:

Remove or deck Interstate 5 throughout the waterfront – at least from the Powerhouse Science Center to the Crocker Museum. All other design approaches to the waterfront will be hampered as long as the highway is in place in its current form as a barrier between the city and the river.

As you know, the waterfront was once at the heart of Sacramento. As your design brief recognizes, the freeway now renders the river invisible, cuts off historic neighborhoods, adds noise and air pollution, and forces the public into unwelcoming access tunnels, bridges, and ramps. The highway is a design relic: It was built during a time of massive urban clearances that wiped away much of historic Sacramento, and is primarily where it is because Macy's demanded a downtown exit ramp. Today, it impairs the city, takes up valuable land, and provides incentives for development to sprawl into the county, rather than to reinvigorate the urban core. It is time to stop living with this bad idea from decades past.

There is nothing particularly radical about freeway removal. Cities have renewed themselves by restoring their waterfronts all across the country. The San Francisco Embarcadero is the most obvious local example, but you don't need an earthquake to remove a freeway. Seattle has finished its work over the past year as a matter of choice. Portland, Boston, Milwaukee, Rochester, and many other cities have completed or are embarking on the same process. Each time, the result has been reinvigorated waterfront districts with urban parks and museums. Fundamentally, people want to walk along the water and enjoy cultural institutions – think, for instance, of Chicago's museum campus, Boston's Charles Riverfront, Portland's Willamette bridges and parks, and so on. Sacramento, a city with two rivers, has instead turned away from them both, and locked them behind roads. As a result, a walk along our river is largely an experience of navigating highway noise and abandoned land.

Sacramento has, of course, sometimes attempted to reverse the damage – but our efforts have been halting and limited. The city has regularly studied either decking or removal, only to stop the process when costs began to be an issue. To be sure, there is an engineering challenge here, and a financing challenge. But these issues are not novel – city after city has solved them. California is now embarking on a major infrastructure renewal process, funded by the gas tax, and focused on complete streets rather than highway trenches. Sacramento is showing a new appetite for doing big things right, rather than half-measures – including moving forward with developing the Railyards, a project that will never reach its full potential as long as it is cut off the river. Between these new funding sources and renewed civic and private leadership, funding surely can be found to restore the primary asset of our capital city.

Moreover, in the long run, removal or decking (ideally removal) is the right economic choice. Cities with viable parkland and cultural districts on their waterfronts are more desirable. They attract investment. And the land made available by addressing the interstate can generate development that will, in turn, yield tax revenue and further increase property values downtown and throughout the city.

The time is right – even urgent. CalTrans is already proposing multi-billion dollar projects on I-5 and its connecting freeways that will further entrench the poor choices made decades ago. If these projects move forward as is, the waterfront will continue to primarily serve trucks passing through to other destinations, instead of the people who actually live in Sacramento. Accordingly, the city faces a sharp

choice: Double down on discredited urban planning ideas from the past, or move towards an appropriate, people-centered, future.

Indeed, this choice repeats itself on the CapCity Freeway (where more neighborhoods and parks could be activated with freeway removal) and the city's connecting roads – where freeway removal or narrowing could reduce dangerous air pollution exposure for many disadvantaged communities. Waterfront renewal is one priority among many: the city should consistently move away from freeways that harm neighborhoods and towards a reconnected urban fabric. The waterfront project is, however, a very good place to start.

To be sure, there is every reason to *also* move forward with the more modest effort to improve what is left in Old Sacramento and the surrounding area. But we should not settle with half-measures that ameliorate the harm done by the highway without articulating a real plan to swiftly replace it or deck it. The design committee accordingly should work with the city to recommend swift action, including any necessary engineering studies and funding analyses, to articulate and execute the real fix we need: A restored riverfront.

Thank you for your consideration. On behalf of myself and a growing citizen network dedicated to restoring the river and enhancing the city, I would be delighted to discuss further.

Sincerely,
Craig Segall

co-signed

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