

## BUSINESS

# A Departure From Decades of Highway Policy

Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx is urging communities to think more carefully about where they build roads.

**ALANA SEMUELS** MARCH 29, 2016



Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx in 2015 (ALEX BRANDON / AP)

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Before he was the United States Secretary of Transportation, before he was Mayor of Charlotte, before he was a Charlotte city councilmember, Anthony Foxx grew up in a split-level house in Charlotte in the shadow of two freeways: I-77 and I-85.

When his grandparents bought the house in 1961, he says, the area was part of an interconnected networks of streets and homes, a true neighborhood. Later, the state added two highways, cutting the house and its neighbors off from the rest of the city. There was one road in and out after the highways were completed, and the neighborhood slowly became a place where no one wanted to live or open a business, and where not even the pizza-delivery guy would go.

“That infrastructure sent a signal to me about my life,” he says.

This pattern was not unique to Foxx’s neighborhood. As I’ve written about before, for decades federal money has been used to build highways through many American cities, destroying neighborhoods in the process. Foxx acknowledges that urban freeways were routed through low-income and minority neighborhoods, and that those divisions created “disconnections from opportunity that still exist to this day.” But now, Foxx says, he wants to do something about that. And as transportation secretary, he potentially can.

At a speech Tuesday at the Charlotte Rotary Club, Foxx will launch an effort to push federal, state, and local transportation decision-makers to make transportation projects more inclusive. He wants local decision-makers to agree to “connect people to opportunity” when they make decisions about building transportation. He’s gotten the governors of Virginia, Nevada, and Washington State to sign on, as well as Baltimore’s mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake.

To do this, Foxx wants decisions-makers to keep in mind three principles as they make these decisions. Principle one: While transportation needs to connect people to opportunities, it should also “invigorate opportunities within communities.” Two: Projects need to take into account communities that “have been on the wrong side of transportation decisions,” and figure out ways to make them stronger. And three: The projects should be built for and by the communities they go through.

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These principles are completely voluntary, and there is no enforcement mechanism. Those governors who have signed on are merely expressing their agreement with the principles, and not committing to spending money in any particular way. But Foxx is trying to change the culture of the department, which he hopes will change the way its money is used.

“If we wonder how this set of problems was created, it was a combination of federal money and state and local decision-making,” he will say, according to prepared remarks provided to *The Atlantic* in advance of the speech. “The same federal, state, and local governments that created these problems have an equally powerful ability to solve them.”

Foxx already created the department’s first Chief Opportunities Officer, who is trying to make sure “opportunity” is taken into account in transportation policy, a department spokesperson said. And in 2014, Foxx changed the criteria for federal TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) grants by adding “opportunity” as a criteria the government should take into account when awarding grants (Part of that effort is related to the Obama Administration’s agency-wide “Ladders of Opportunity” program, which seeks to help people reach the middle class).

Through the TIGER grants in 2014 and 2015, the department has invested \$235 million in 19 projects that tried to “restore” communities by creating bus rapid transit and streetcar lines and building bridges and corridors to connect disenfranchised neighborhoods.

And even without TIGER grants, some cities are already trying to incorporate these principles, Foxx says. Charlotte is completing a streetcar system; Ohio is building a bridge over a highway to help locals get around it; Los Angeles is employing locals to build a light-rail connector line in Crenshaw.

But it may turn out to be hard for Foxx to attain very different outcomes. Federal money goes straight to the states, which can do mostly what they want with it. About 90 percent of the \$60 billion the U.S. spends on surface transportation every year goes directly to the states. Local and state governments are the primary decision-makers for about 98 percent of all surface transportation expenditures, according to Foxx.

“You can never remove politics from all of this stuff,” says Robert Krol, a professor at Cal State Northridge, who studies the transportation funding.

For example, when the Department of Transportation made available \$1 billion for a 14-mile rail project in Baltimore, Governor Larry Hogan scuttled the project, rejected the federal money, and diverted state money to bridge and road projects.

Even with local buy-in, changing behaviors can be difficult. Smaller cities like Charlotte that build transit often struggle to get riders, because residents have become so accustomed to driving, which is usually faster anyway.

Still, Foxx hopes that the effort will gather steam as more communities become interested. The department is also taking a more proactive role in looking at state transportation departments that disenfranchise communities; in December, it launched an investigation into Alabama, which reduced service at 34 DMV offices.

These little things can make a difference: When, in 2014, Foxx changed the criteria for TIGER grants so that “opportunity” was one of the things the government took into account, more projects were funded that knit communities together, the department says.

Cabinet secretaries can set the tone for their departments, and that can have lasting effects. It was Thomas MacDonald, the director of the former Bureau of Public Roads that legitimized the concept of replacing low-income areas with highways, Foxx says. As a one-time elected official, Foxx has seen “how much thought goes into these decisions, and how callous previous leaders had been,” he says.

Current leaders aren’t necessarily callous, but they do have priorities, which most often include funding roads and highways, no matter where they go. Perhaps this will change with a push from the top.

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