

## **Paving East Los Angeles: Building the Freeway System in East Los Angeles, 1940–1970**

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### **Abstract**

The freeway system in Los Angeles is widely considered a revolution in transportation. American philosopher Marshall Berman classified the freeways as a monumental and lasting achievement ranking with the transcontinental railroad, the Panama Canal, the Hoover Dam, and Sputnik. However, the Los Angeles neighborhoods that comprise East Los Angeles (East L.A.), specifically Boyle Heights and Lincoln Heights, were negatively impacted in disproportionate rates concerning the building of the freeway system in relation to the Los Angeles as a whole. Three major factors contributed to the excessive building of freeways, through the use of eminent domain, in Los Angeles. First, news outlets, such as the *Los Angeles Times*, began releasing vast amounts of negative news articles (propaganda) during the 1940s, concerning Mexican-American communities, deepening the racial divide in Los Angeles; East L.A. was one such community. Second, with a lack of political representation, East L.A., was a community with no voice leaving residents especially vulnerable to freeway construction. Third, through the city, state, and federal highway funding initiatives, Los Angeles, was in the position to build the freeway system. These factors led East L.A. residents to have minimal options to create effective opposition to the building of freeways. While the rest of Los Angeles had 61 percent of all freeways proposed built between 1940 and 1970, East L.A. would have every proposed freeway built. Proving that a lack of representation, minimal public support, and immense amounts of money, led to the City Council of Los Angeles enforcing eminent domain in significantly higher rates within East L.A. than in any other Los Angeles community. Consequently, the use of eminent domain in East L.A. led to mass displacement of residents, excessive amounts of noise pollution and environmental pollution, along with significant confiscation of public lands.

**Keywords: Los Angeles, Eminent Domain, Freeway**

### **1. Body of Paper**

The freeway system in Los Angeles is widely considered a revolution in transportation. American philosopher Marshall Berman classified the freeways as a monumental and lasting achievement ranking with the transcontinental railroad, the motion picture, the Panama Canal, the internal combustion engine, the Hoover Dam, and Sputnik.<sup>1</sup> However, the Los Angeles communities that comprise East Los Angeles (East L.A.), especially Boyle Heights, were negatively impacted in disproportionate rates concerning the building of the freeway system.<sup>2</sup> News outlets, including the *Los Angeles Times*, released disproportionate amounts of negative publicity concerning the Mexican-American communities. East L.A. was one of those communities. Furthermore, East L.A. was vulnerable due to their lack of political representation. These factors led to East L.A. residents having minimal options to create effective opposition campaigns, including protest, during the building of freeways. With lack of representation and virtually no public support, the City Council of Los Angeles enforced eminent domain in significantly higher rates within East L.A. than

in any other Los Angeles community.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, every freeway that was proposed in East L.A. between 1940 and 1970 was built. While the remaining portions of Los Angeles had 61 percent of the proposed freeways built.<sup>4</sup>

Los Angeles' most well-known and documented uses of eminent domain was the building of Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine. Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron approved a 10,000-unit housing project to be built and located in Chavez Ravine. In July 1950, all residents of Chavez Ravine received letters from the city saying they would have to sell their homes to make land available for the building of Elysian Heights.<sup>5</sup> The city promised residents who lived in the 600 homes that they would be able to move into the new public housing. With the promise of access to new and affordable housing many residents sold their homes right away receiving minimal compensation. Unfortunately, due to political tensions, and fear of communist ideals that were penetrating Los Angeles, the plan to use government funding to build public housing proved to be too radical an idea.<sup>6</sup> The land that was promised to the Chavez Ravine residents was subsequently sold to Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley.<sup>7</sup> The remaining residents of Chavez Ravine, who did not sell their homes, mounted protests against the city. During the beginning of the protests public opinion had been widely sympathetic in favor of these residents until news outlets, including the *Los Angeles Times*, worked to change public perception. The *Los Angeles Times* used negative headlines and articles which targeted residents of Chavez Ravine. These articles classified the Mexican-American residents who remained in their homes as squatters.<sup>8</sup> Public opinion turned against the residents of Chavez Ravine, and it allowed the police to literally carry out the residents who remained.<sup>9</sup> Negative views continued to affect Mexican-American communities as they became extremely vulnerable to the use eminent domain. Similarly, East L.A. had no public sympathy and insufficient political representation. These factors culminated into East L.A. suffering the same fate as those who once lived in Chavez Ravine. However, instead of a baseball stadium, they got freeways.

Financing a multi-billion-dollar freeway construction project that covered 4 percent of Los Angeles, twice the rest of all other areas of California, would be difficult.<sup>10</sup> Los Angeles first tried to offset the cost of highway projects through fuel taxes that had been collected between 1920 and 1940, yet the city found itself lacking the financial capital necessary to precede. Los Angeles then placed new bond measures on the 1940 ballot to help secure funding. Consequently, in 1941, the Street Vacation Act was passed, allowing agencies to remove or vacate residents from their homes using eminent domain. At the same time, the Defense Highway Act of 1941 was passed federally, which provided federal funding towards the building of freeways. These funds were used towards the implementation of the Street Vacation Act. The federal funds were also allocated to compile various studies that analyzed areas where the use of eminent domain for the use of freeways was most cost effective. These studies, in turn, became the foundation from which every future report pulled data, and subsequently led to the beginning of eminent domain enforcement in East L.A. The reports and studies produced became one of the most significant factors towards the displacement of residents of East L.A.<sup>11</sup>

East L.A. was first victim to eminent domain in 1944 to make room for the construction of the Santa Ana freeway. This portion of the Santa Ana freeway would result in the eviction of 200 residents.<sup>12</sup> Historian George Sanchez of USC states, "[Freeway] planners decided Boyle Heights was a place they could build freeways because there wouldn't be a tremendous amount of political repercussions."<sup>13</sup> Freeway planners also needed to keep costs to a minimum, and simultaneously avoid manufacturing and industrial areas. Regions including Boyle Heights and Lincoln Heights, two neighborhoods that compromise East L.A., were hit the hardest since they met all of these requirements. However, to continue the freeways project the Los Angeles City Council needed to show a plan for building the remainder of the freeways, and in 1947 the expansion of Los Angeles' Master Plan was produced. The Los Angeles new Master Plan proposed that the building of the freeways would begin in 1950 and completion of construction by the early 1970s. The Master Plan called for first three major freeways to be built in East L.A. The process of eminent domain was enforced immediately in East L.A. ensuring the chosen freeway route would be available when the time for construction came.

The Los Angeles City Council wanted these projects to commence immediately. However, even with the bond measures that passed in 1940, insufficient financing continued to slow the desired rate of progress.<sup>14</sup> The Collier-Burns Act was passed in 1947 and provided the most significant amount of funding towards the construction of the freeway; this legislation guaranteed that Los Angeles had a freeway system.<sup>15</sup> Los Angeles profited immensely from these taxes due to a massive influx of people moving to Los Angeles. Population went from 576,673 in 1920 to roughly 2 million by 1950.<sup>16</sup> Within a few years, the Collier-Burns Act raised nearly \$76,000,000 per year, and that money went directly towards the construction of freeways.<sup>17</sup> Federal-Aid Highway Act in 1956, provided the final source of funding, and allocated \$28,000,000,000 for nationwide highway/freeway construction.<sup>18</sup> Along the same lines as the Collier-Burns Act, Los Angeles uniquely benefited from the Federal-Aid Highway Act. Los Angeles now had the necessary funding to complete construction.

Los Angeles began the process of eminent domain that led to the eviction of residents who lived on land now designated for the freeways. The Haynes Foundation published a report in 1949, where they classified properties on

a scale from one to nine (one being the worst and nine being the best). The neighborhoods that comprise East L.A. collectively ranked a two out of nine in this report.<sup>19</sup> Directly after this report was published, the Division of Highways Agency was created to canvas local neighborhoods and reported their findings back to the city to start purchasing properties. Division of Highway's agents used land appraisal reports, compiled by the right of way agents, to offer residents the fair market value required by eminent domain laws. Unfortunately, for residents of East L.A., appraisal agents submitted various negative reports of the area, driving down property values. Agents submitted reports stating the neighborhoods were "infiltrated by minority groups, mostly [of] Latin derivation."<sup>20</sup> Another of these reports states there are "small low priced dwellings occupied by families of Mexican descent," and finally, "predominantly Mexicans residing in homes of the cheapest class."<sup>21</sup> News coverage during the 1940s and 1950s, had negatively displayed Mexican-Americans. This negative portrayal in the media helped to cultivate a negative disposition towards Mexican-Americans led to the readers of the reports to assign lower values to communities dubbed Mexican-American. With all the reports collected, property devalued, and financing from the city, state, and federal level completed, the city started buying property. In 1953, the city of Los Angeles created the Urban Right of Way Acquisition Fund and allocated \$10,000,000 to purchase homes and land using the authority of eminent domain, which had also been financed by the state, and local legislation, and passed a few years earlier. The result of all those negative reports, and the Acquisition Fund buying property at lowered values, led to a 1960 study, which showed "East Los Angeles had the greatest concentration of poor housing in the country."<sup>22</sup> These factors allowed for the purchasing of land through eminent domain to continue at extremely high rates for incredibly low prices, which, in turn, allowed for the construction of freeways to be built unimpeded.

The passage and creation of the Street Vacation Act, Collier-Burns Act, Federal Highway Defense Act, Division of Highway Agency, and the Acquisition Fund left the only thing left to do was build the freeways in East L.A. And more freeways were built in East L.A. than the rest of Los Angeles, with seven freeways in total. The first three of these segments began in East L.A.<sup>23</sup> Freeway mileage increased in East L.A. from 41.5 miles in 1950 to 166 miles by 1955.<sup>24</sup> These freeways spanned over 702 acres of land, effectively covering 19 percent of East L.A.<sup>25</sup> Boyle Heights and Lincoln Heights were two communities within East L.A., which were hit the hardest. 10 percent of these two cities' property would be covered in freeways.<sup>26</sup> The total amount of residents who were removed and displaced in these two communities alone was 21,011.<sup>27</sup> In these two communities, there were more than 5,000 homes destroyed to make room for the freeways.<sup>28</sup> The total number of residents displaced in the entirety of East L.A. is unknown. However, between 1950 and 1960 was the only time in East L.A. history when population rates decreased.<sup>29</sup> The population in East L.A. dropped by roughly 9 percent while the rest of Los Angeles saw a population gain of nearly 500,000 people each year after 1945.<sup>30</sup> Population data and low property values show the destructive force of eminent domain and the constant freeway construction had on turning East L.A. into an undesirable location to raise a family.

The building of the freeways had several other negative consequences, aside from mass displacement. The most notable consequences for East L.A. was the confiscation of public lands and noise pollution. Public parks, public schools, and other public facilities were the most desirable areas to build freeways since local officials had direct control over the use of these lands, and the City of Los Angeles purchased them at minimal cost. The selling of public lands for freeway use was extremely detrimental for school children. Schools are required to have a minimum of seven acres of property. However, due to selling these lands, schools were now allocated only 2.4 acres of land.<sup>31</sup> This meant cities, including Boyle Heights and Lincoln Heights, had schools with roughly 4.6 acres less than the minimum requirement. The lack of acreage meant schools had less space for classrooms, less green space, less black top space. Having less space along with being located in extremely close proximity to freeways, (since the missing acres were turned into freeways) schools in East L.A. were highly negatively affected by noise pollution. A report conducted by the Barrio Planners Inc. named *Impact... On... Impact*, completed in 1971, highlighted how severe freeway noise pollution was during the 1960s in East L.A. The report states that the noise of freeways ranged from the high fifties and into the seventy-decibel range. A noise level study showed that a regular conversation with background noises at forty-five decibels could "make it difficult for the hearer to understand" what had been spoken.<sup>32</sup> At sixty decibels, the noise would interfere with someone using a "raised" voice.<sup>33</sup> Finally, at seventy-two decibels the noise is so loud it interferes with someone using a "shouting voice."<sup>34</sup> For example, inside classrooms at Bella Vista Elementary School, decibel readings were at sixty-five, meaning teachers had to shout constantly for their students to understand what was being said. Noise levels and land shortages, along with displacement are examples of how East L.A. was disproportionately negatively affected by freeways and their construction. While other Los Angeles communities may have had to compete with the noise from the construction of one freeway, East L.A. was forced to compete with the construction of seven.

Through the 1940s and 1950s, the cost of building freeways remained rather low; however, as the freeway system started to encroach on surrounding neighborhoods, the cost of these projects skyrocketed. Several factors played into the rapid rise of the cost of freeways. First, Los Angeles had continued to gain population and popularity which

increased the cost of housing, and radically increased the cost for the city to buy properties. Second, the surrounding communities had witnessed the damage that the freeway system had done in East L.A., and these communities were able to boycott freeway construction successfully. These surrounding communities including Pasadena, Hollywood, Beverly Hills, and Santa Monica, and were able to call upon their city representatives to fight against construction. This community's success forced the alteration of the path of the freeway, and cost of freeway construction rose exponentially.

The aforementioned areas that were successful in boycotting the freeways were similar to one another in the fact that they had predominantly wealthy neighborhoods, with a majority White population. These factors represent all of what East L.A. did not have through the 1940s-1960s. East L.A. did not have the support of surrounding communities, and East L.A. did not have adequate city council representation or expensive property. Eminent domain has been used in Los Angeles time and time again. From the forced displacement of thousands of residents in Chavez Ravine, to the unknown tens of thousands displaced throughout East L.A. East L.A., early on in the process of freeway building was targeted by city officials. East L.A. was mostly low income, had low property value, and had a non-existent political representation, all of which meant displacing the residents was incredibly easy. Each of these factors allowed the Los Angeles City Council and city planner to exploit the residents of East L.A. in the name of progress.

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