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3/29/08  
Mini-Research Assignment  
Oral History and Community Memory

### **Relocating I-195 and Fox Point**

#### **Summary**

The relocation of I-195 will dramatically alter the landscape of Fox Point. By opening up space along the waterfront the highway's relocation will free 35 acres of valuable new land for development and reconnect Fox Point with the downtown area. While many residents of Fox Point support the plan, there is also skepticism about the influence of commercial developers on the final outcome of the highway relocation.

#### **Origins of the Plan**

During the 1970s Providence city planners began to discuss ways to redevelop downtown Providence into a more appealing and lively area. One of the most prominent advocates for redevelopment was the Providence Foundation, a community organization that was interested in promoting investment in downtown Providence. As proposals to redevelop parts of downtown came into fruition, the Providence Foundation began to explore the possibility of developing the area of the Providence river south of Transit Street.<sup>1</sup> In 1985, a local architect and planner named William Warner proposed moving I-195 south and developing the exposed waterfront area.<sup>2</sup> However the development of downtown overshadowed discussions of moving I-195, and the plan was put on hold.

In 1989, the Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT) initiated a study of the environmental impact of the I-195 because of concerns about traffic accidents. The Providence Foundation used this opportunity to urge RIDOT to consider moving the highway in order to open the land for development. The Foundation supported its

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Doug Riggs "Into the future with another major project looming, planners and architects worry that a decade of construction has destroyed the architectural integrity of Providence" *Providence Journal* Oct. 25, 1992

Franic J. Leazes, Providence: The Renaissance City (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004) p.251

proposal with a National Endowment of the Arts study that expounded on the potential for developing that area. The study resulted in the creation of the Old Harbor Plan in 1992. The Old Harbor Plan called for the relocation of I-195 alongside the Hurricane Barrier in order to develop the southern tip of the Providence River. The *Providence Journal* compared the plan to similar efforts in Baltimore and Boston to stimulate commercial development along the waterfront.<sup>3</sup> However because of budgetary obstacles, RIDOT did not approve the plan until 1996. In a statement endorsing the plan, RIDOT observed that moving the highway would both make the highway safer and provide “improved water transportation; increased public park land; and economic development alternatives.”

Construction of the highway began in 1997 and will not be completed until 2010. One of the reasons the project has taken so long is because the state has had difficulty finding funding for the project. In 1996, the *Providence Journal* reported that the project was still having difficulty finding funding.<sup>4</sup> Two years later, the Federal Highway Act gave Rhode Island \$50 million to fund the relocation of the highway.<sup>5</sup> But this is only a fraction of the total cost of the project, whose price tag continues to escalate. In order to fund the project, the state issued a type of bond called a GARVEE bond, which allows the state to pay off current expenses based on anticipated Federal highway allocations.<sup>6</sup> In 2004 a civil engineer working for RIDOT predicted the cost of the highway alignment would cost \$450 million. By 2006 the *Brown Daily Herald* reported that the project would cost \$600 million.<sup>7</sup> One year later the *Providence Journal* reported that costs had

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John Castelluci “The road to reclaim the waterfront Group proposes moving bridges of Route 195” *Providence Journal* September 13, 1992 p.1-01

Ken Mingis “City Plan to turn the tide where the river runs awry” *The Providence Journal* December 3, 1996

Leazes, p.251

2004-2005 Rhode Island Department of Transportation Annual Report, p.4

Oliver Bower “I-195 relocation underway as speculation about land use continues” *Brown Daily Herald* September 28, 2006

skyrocketed to 800 million dollars.<sup>8</sup>

### **Planning for the post-highway period**

In order to ensure that the post-highway development matched the interests of the community, the city held numerous community meetings. At a 2006 community meeting the *Providence Journal* reported that over 100 people including activists, students, preservationists, and architects attended. During the meeting the participants broke into groups to brainstorm different ways to use the land after the highway is moved.<sup>9</sup> The community has also independently petitioned the state and city governments using protests, letter writing campaigns, and media coverage. In 2004, a Fox Point neighborhood organizations wrote an angry letter to the city protesting the plan to build multi-story condos along the waterfront instead of preserving public spaces. The letter condemned the plan to develop the waterfront because it “lacks a balanced examination of the options available for the future of this priceless asset.”<sup>10</sup> A group of Jewelry District business owners also published a public letter condemning the city for letting private developers dominate discussions about post-highway development. The group lambasted the plan for being “weighted in favor of large buildings, private residential development, and demolishing important historic buildings, while giving scant attention to the open space, public use, and historic preservation options.” The letter also condemned the construction of Brown University dormitories in the area<sup>11</sup>

The prominence of Brown University in the area has caused some concern among residents who worry that much of the new land will end up in Brown’s hands. A 2006 *Brown Daily Herald* article reported that Brown University was discussing purchasing the

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Daniel Barbasi “Waterpark designs unveiled; public input sought” *Providence Journal* May 23, 2007

“Workshop Considers Plan for Rt.195 Open Space” *Providence Journal*, May 23, 3006.

Karen A. Davis “Residents Oppose Condos” *Providence Journal*, June 7, 2004

“Summary of Community Critique of Warner Master Plan for India Point” 4/19/2004 at <http://64.233.167.104/search?q=cache:OEgel4z2970J:www.jewelrydistrict.org/scripts/forums/showthread.php%3Fthreadid%3D123+SUMMARY+OF+COMMUNITY+CRITIQUE&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=2&gl=us&client=firefox-a> (accessed 4/1/2008)

land after the highway was removed. The article quoted a local Fox Point politician who expressed concern that “not all of the land go to nonprofits because they are not taxable.”<sup>12</sup> Yet Brown students are also very involved in advocating community concerns about the highway. In November 2005 Brown students protested against RIDOT for abruptly removing an encampment of homeless people which was interfering with highway construction. The students disputed the fairness of RIDOT decision to move the people with only three days notice without providing any alternative housing.<sup>13</sup> Although its unclear what the new area will look like in 2012, most likely it will reflect both public concerns and the interests of commercial developers. A 2007 plan for the waterfront area partitioned eight acres of public parks which will include public amphitheater, playgrounds, public walkways, and docks for boating. However the remaining land is set aside for private commercial development.

## **Timeline**

**1970s**---First ideas for highway relocations come up during meetings of Providence Foundation

**1985**—Architect William Warner crafts Old Harbor plan—re-establish city streets

**1989**---RIDOT begins study of environmental impact of I-195

**1991**—Providence Foundation director Rob Freeman and William Warner conduct NEA sponsored feasibility study on moving the highway

**1992**—Old Harbor Plan—Three proposed plans: 1. Repair roads not other changes 2. Align a new road just south of the Hurricane barrier 3. Build a new bridge alongside the old one

**1996**—Environmental Impact Assessment completed for Old Harbor Plan, state chose to build a new bridge alongside the Hurricane barrier opening up development in that area. Department of Transportation provides funding for project

**1997**—Construction begins on I-195 relocation plan starting with renovation of

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Oliver Bowers, “I-195 relocation underway as speculation about land use continues” *Brown Daily Herald*, September 28, 2006

Robbie Corey-Boulet “Standoff to save homeless encampment draws student activists” *Brown Daily Herald*, November 15, 2005

## Washington Bridge

**1998**—Federal Highway Bill Passes providing 50 million dollars in funding for relocation of I-195

**2005**—RIDOT re-names the section of I-195 that crosses through Providence “I-way”  
India Point pedestrian crossway removed

**2006**---New bridge over Providence River put in place

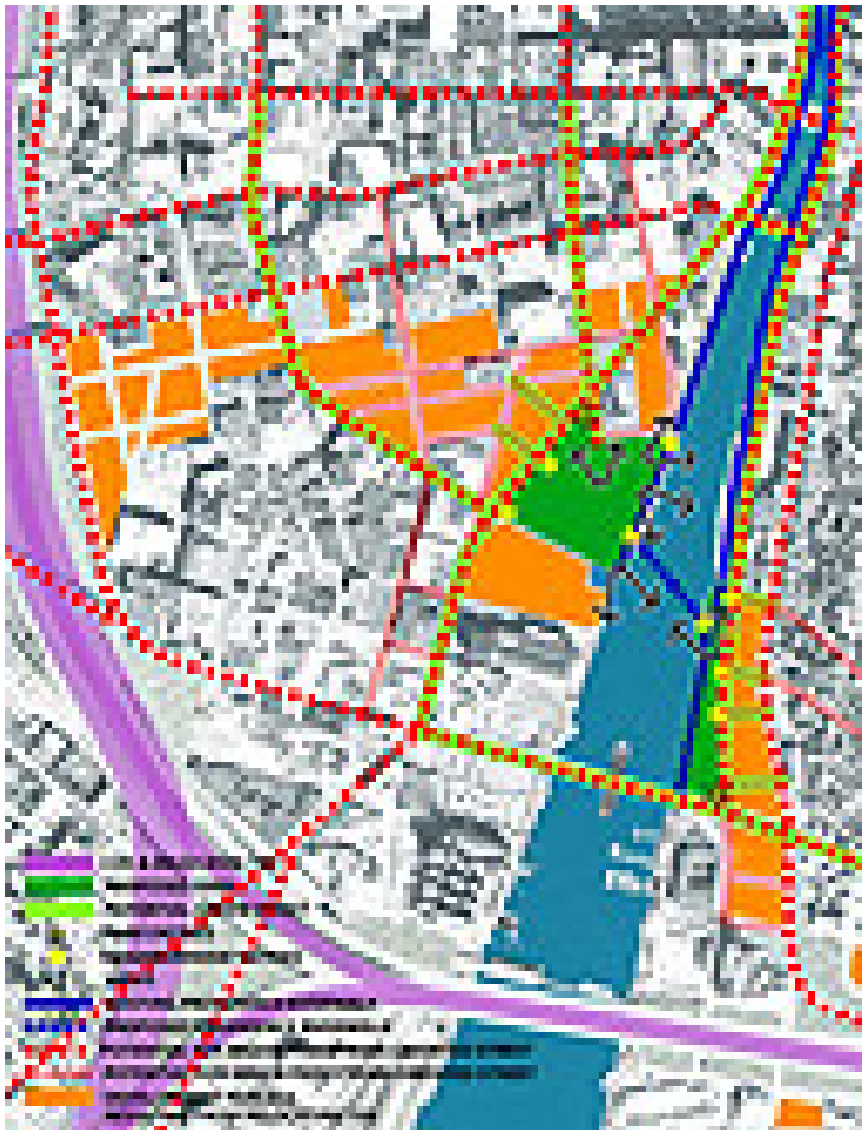
**2007**—Parts of bridge put into use

**2010**—Expected completion of new I-195 highway

**2012**—Expected completion of “Old Harbor” development



## New Providence Bridge



City Plan for development of land after relocation of I-195. Areas in green are public

parkland, areas in orange are land open for commercial development



Plan for new public park