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How Can Funding from the Federal Infrastructure Bill Help Communities Like Hayti, Fractured by "Urban Renewal," Rebuild?

Thomasi McDonald : 10-13 minutes : 11/17/2021

H.M. "Mickey" Michaux, North Carolina's longest-serving member of the General Assembly before he retired in 2019, grew up in Durham.

Before he was elected to the state house in 1972, Michaux worked at his father's law and real estate offices on the 800 block of Fayetteville Street. His father's business was one of many in the Hayti District that was upended by the "urban renewal" of the 1950s and '60s that promised new wealth and prosperity but instead drove the Durham Freeway through the heart of the community, displacing thousands of residents and business owners, Michaux told the *INDY* this week.

"We had to move," Michaux recalls. "We succeeded, but there were those that did not."

Now, decades later, the federal government—whose urban renewal program, initiated by President Dwight Eisenhower, destroyed Hayti and other burgeoning Black communities across the United States—is proposing to help rebuild a part of Durham's most historic Black neighborhood.

On Monday, President Joe Biden signed into law the \$1.2 trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act that promises to rebuild the nation's crumbling roads and bridges, and strengthen its water infrastructure and internet, while creating well-paying jobs and a better economy.

The new law is purportedly designed to make good on the decades-long broken promise to rebuild Hayti and similar Black communities with the creation of what the Biden administration describes as "a first-ever program to reconnect communities" that were buried under a federally funded highway system under the guise of urban renewal.

"Too often, past transportation investments divided communities—like the Clairborne Expressway in New Orleans or I-81 in Syracuse—or it left out the people most in need of affordable transportation options," the White House stated in an infrastructure bill fact sheet.

But the bill has already fallen short of the president's initial ambitions.

Biden originally sought \$20 billion to finance the project, noted Fred Broadwell, an organizer with the Durham Freeways to Boulevards Justice Project—a group that works with the company Congress for New Urbanism, which advocates for smart growth—in an email to the *INDY* in early November; by then, the funding had decreased to \$4 billion. This week, when Biden signed the bill into law, the funding had dropped to \$1 billion.

With violent crime soaring nationally in neighborhoods most affected by urban renewal, for some observers, reconnecting the communities with new roads does not begin to address the inequities that were left in the wake of the urban destruction.

Broadwell, a West End resident and urban planner, says his group was one of the "instructive chorus of communities" that helped persuade President Biden to include funding to address the damage caused by urban renewal in Black communities. Broadwell also noted that the \$1 billion will likely be used for planning and design, while an additional \$4 billion in the Build Back Better legislation, currently pending in Congress, will be used for construction.

Broadwell describes a national movement slowly gaining steam to tear down urban freeways that have destroyed African American communities. He says instead of Durham residents trying to determine how to best live with the freeway that's becoming more and more congested during commuter hours, get rid of the thing and replace it with a boulevard lined with affordable housing and retail leading into the downtown district.

"The freeway cuts off the Hayti area from downtown. That's a critical problem," he said. "If you remove the freeway, that frees up a fair amount of land for affordable housing. You could build a significant amount of affordable housing along that corridor, and end up with a better street."

Hayti and similar communities across the country thrived against all odds during Jim Crow and created businesses, homes, and most especially, community.

Michaux recalls a self-sufficient community that "didn't have to go across the tracks for anything," unless it was to do business with Mechanics and Farmers Bank, Mutual Savings and Loan, or the N.C. Mutual Life Insurance Company; the all Black-owned enterprises on Parrish Street eventually earned the moniker "Black Wall Street" as a tribute to the community's economic success.

When urban renewal "reared its ugly head," in Michaux's words, in Durham between 1955 and 1960, he had just returned to Durham after attending graduate school at Rutgers University and worked at his father's business full-time while attending law school part-time.

"They promised to come in and do away with the blight and build a general hospital, and that's what we fell for," says Michaux, who first ran for office near the end of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott at the behest of a young Martin Luther King Jr. who became a close friend.

Though Durham's general hospital was built as part of the federal government's ostensible renewal of the area, Michaux notes that it's not at all in the heart of the Black community. The Durham Regional Hospital, which first opened its doors on October 3, 1976—merging Watts Hospital north of downtown and Lincoln Hospital in Hayti—sits miles away from Fayetteville Street, on North Roxboro Road.

Michaux says Fayette Place, the public housing apartments that were eventually built, were initially an improvement from the blight removed by urban renewal. But today, only a vacant lot remains after Fayette Place was demolished more than a decade ago.

"It's more blight there now than what was there in the first place," Michaux says. "So basically, we got screwed."

Michaux says Biden's program should benefit people who lost their businesses and homes as a result of urban renewal. And he thinks businesses and homeowners who remained in the community and are now paying higher taxes as a consequence of gentrification should benefit from the federal funding.

"[Highway] 147, because of urban renewal, ran straight through White Rock Baptist Church," Michaux says of one of the city's oldest and most storied congregations. "White Rock had to move. Is there something that could be done for White Rock? There are arguments for and against. My argument is for rebuilding the community."

Marion Johnson, a consultant with [Frontline Solutions](#), a Black-owned firm that supports local nonprofits and foundations with a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, said in an email to the *INDY* that she thinks the "most urgent use for the Build Back Better funding is housing."

"Not just building more affordable housing, but also extending an eviction moratorium until this pandemic is actually over," Johnson continued. "That includes funding rental assistance to accompany the moratorium, because pausing evictions without pausing rent really just becomes a horrible game of delaying the inevitable."

[Angela Lee](#) is executive director of the Hayti Heritage Center, the former home of the old St. Joseph AME Church that was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

According to a joint 2016 report by the city's historic preservation commission and the city-county planning department, the old church was "a center in the Hayti community" and "remains today as the last authentic physical reminder of early Hayti."

Lee told the *INDY* this week that the infrastructure funding, coupled with funding from other groups that want to invest in the district, makes this the right time for city officials to redevelop the Fayetteville Street corridor and offset the damage done by Highway 147.

Lee noted that although Hayti [sits in the shadow of downtown](#), it's not currently mapped in the downtown district.

Lee says the St. Joseph's Foundation in 2018 received a grant as part of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Safe Routes to School, which would reconnect Hayti to downtown by creating a safe walking route from the Hayti District to Parrish Street.

"It's less than a mile away," Lee said about the proposed route. "It would encourage our residents, especially our seniors, to get out and walk more and enjoy the beautiful scenery that could be created."

Lee says the infrastructure funding could be used to perhaps shut down the Fayetteville Street exit off of the Durham Freeway and the adjoining bridge to develop an even more expansive walking route into downtown.

"It would be a beautiful thing," she adds. "The bridge is dangerous, and so many people have to walk that way with no barriers on the sides. I think it's important for the health of the community to close off the exit and create a walking area. I'm not a planner, but I wonder what that would look like."

This summer, during the city's Juneteenth celebrations, Henry McKoy, a professor of entrepreneurship in N.C. Central University's business school, [introduced Hayti Reborn](#), a \$1 billion proposal to transform the vacant 20-acre Fayette Place into a "global equity project," anchored by "the world's first equity research and development park," to "systematically close racial wealth gaps by creating global networks of equitable cities."

McKoy envisions a sparkling global-minded environment where people in the community live, have access to centrally located resources, visit the Hayti museum, study at an innovation school and research lab, work at a biomanufacturing facility, shop at a grocery store, enjoy food halls and retail spaces, and have structured parking.

This week, McKoy told the *INDY* that the Hayti Reborn concept proposes reconnecting the two sides of the Durham Freeway "to represent what needs to be mended from the past harm."

McKoy says the federal funds set aside for reconnecting communities could be used in Hayti in at least two ways: First, the city could set up a reparative justice fund, he says, and collect the names of families who were displaced residentially or business-wise from the [Highway 147] project and the urban renewal.

"The reparative justice fund could compensate those individuals or their families directly—or purchase them replacement homes or businesses from what was destroyed," McKoy says. "Likely [it] would be for their descendants. But [it] would try to address a past harm."

Then, McKoy says, the city could set up a fund to support the same for the next generation, because African Americans were harmed by the highway.

"The number of homes and businesses destroyed without adequate compensation could be replaced currently and ensure they are owned by African Americans," McKoy explains. "This could hopefully lay the foundation for a rebirth of the community, based on direct reparative justice or indirect."

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