

A Very Short History of the Inner Belt Highway in Cambridge

The Inner Belt expressway was a high speed road first proposed in 1948 to pass through the Cambridgeport Neighborhood. A wide swath of land 200 to 300 feet wide would have been cleared of all houses and made into a construction site for the new road. The aerial photo below shows most of the lower area of Cambridgeport, with the path of the Inner Belt as a white line. The **Red Arrow** points to the Lyndon Johnson Apartments, completed in 1973, at 150 Erie Street. The photo shows the path of the Inner Belt going through the LBJ Apartments.



The first plan for the Inner Belt master plan was released in 1948. By 1954, state officials proposed a six-lane expressway from the north through Arlington and Cambridge. Fresh Pond citizens met in a school auditorium and voted 700 to zero to oppose the road. In three months the road plan was withdrawn. This was the first expressway plan in Massachusetts to be rejected because of citizen protest. During the activist 1960s the political pendulum swung against highways. The Belt road plan was stopped by the "little people" with help from Governors, Congressmen and activist planners. Cambridge never lost a home to the highway bulldozers. The Inner Belt became history. The people won. In contrast to Somerville -- who were rewarded with construction of elevated I-93 from Medford to Sullivan Square -- Cambridge did everything right.

In the early days of the 1950s times were very different from today. Public officials could support highways and "slum clearance" projects that evicted thousands of residents. The Belt aimed to clear a swath of land 200 to 300 feet wide the entire length of the neighborhood from Memorial Drive to Mass Avenue and beyond to Elm Street and the Somerville line. Planners estimated that in Cambridgeport alone 2,200 housing units would be demolished for the highway work. Urban renewal demolition combined with the highway would have meant over 13,000 people would be forced to move.

In May 1960, 2,500 people turned out for the only Public Hearing held by the state on the Inner Belt. It was an overflow crowd, with almost everyone opposed to the Belt. Congressman Tip O'Neill berated the highway as a "Chinese Wall." The state legislature voted to give veto power to Cambridge, which protected the City until 1965, when the veto was revoked. O'Neill went to work to get a restudy of the highway route, and was successful in late 1966. Past approvals for Belt route were revoked to achieve fairness.

A state report in 1967 reaffirmed the Brookline Street as the state's choice for the Inner Belt. The period 1965-67 was the most threatening period for the residents. Two bus-loads of Cambridge residents and ministers took a trip to Washington to show their concerns -- 70 adults and 30 kids. Tip O'Neill went to work to get the restudy study done over properly. He won in Washington, and state officials began a more complete study.

In January 1969, Cambridge helped organize the Rally on Boston Common to greet Governor Sargent at the Boston State House. A housing crisis was boiling up in Cambridge, with pressures on governments and universities to take action and help. The LBJ apartments were constructed on Erie Street and the Inner Belt was never built.

The period from 1971 to 1972 was a time for a comprehensive restudy of highways and transit. In 1971 Governor Francis Sargent announced that he had rejected the Inner Belt and would use the money saved to build mass transit. Cambridge had done its job using citizens, advocate planners, elected officials and universities.

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HONOR ROLL : Important Names not to be forgotten ...

Governors Frank Sargent, John Volpe, and Mike Dukakis ; State Secretaries of Transportation Alan Altshuler and Fred Salvucci ; Representative Tip O'Neill ; Anstis Benfield, Rebecca Hall, Henrietta Jackson, and other members of Save Our City, Jack Wofford ; Tom Winship, Jack Thomas ; Alan Lupo, Barney Frank, Al Kramer, Bob Simha, Jim Morey, Justin Gray & Ellen Feingold, Bill McGrath, David Lee, Ken Geiser, Denis Blackett, Bob Goodman, Richard Cardinal Cushing, Fathers McManus, Butler & Corrigan, Tunney Lee, Lisa Peattie, Gordy Fellman, Mary Newman, James Killian, Lowell Bridwell, Rex Whitton, John Clarkeson, Dan Hayes, Ed Crane, Tom Mahoney & others who helped.