

Black people are about to be swept aside for a South Carolina freeway – again

In a planned highway widening project, 94 percent of displaced residents live in communities mostly consisting of Black and Brown people







A "Road Ends" sign is displayed at the end of Jury Street in the Highland Terrace neighborhood in Charleston, South Carolina, on August 14, 2021. (Nora Williams for The Washington Post)

By [Darryl Fears](#) and [John Muyskens](#)

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NORTH CHARLESTON, S.C. — Weary-eyed and feeling all of her 85 years, Hattie Anderson doesn't want to fight anymore.

For most of her life, she held on to the large plot of land that she and her late husband Samuel pinched pennies to buy — even after the state ran a freeway through their mostly Black community, after the city used eminent domain to take nearly nine acres for a sewage drain, and after the state added a beltway. But now, as state officials plan another major road expansion, Anderson is offering to sell them her land and leave.

“If they don't take my house,” she said, “I'm going to be just in a little corner, in a little hole by myself. Where I am, it's like a dead end.”

The dismantling of Black communities for state and federal highways is not just a thing of the past. It's happening now a few miles north of Charleston with the proposed West I-526 Lowcountry Corridor, at a time when President Biden and his transportation secretary have vowed to stop it.

South Carolina is proposing to sweep aside dozens of homes, and potentially hundreds of people, to widen a freeway interchange choked with traffic in this booming coastal region. The \$3 billion project is expected to begin about two years after the plan becomes final.





In the decades since this photo was taken, two freeways cutting through the neighborhoods have displaced dozens of buildings – homes, churches, businesses. “Low-income and minority residents felt they were not properly informed or assisted with relocation,” the state wrote in a community impact assessment.

Today, Highland Terrace is separated from Liberty Park by lanes of traffic, sandwiched between the massive freeway interchange and the nearby airport.

History is about to repeat itself: South Carolina's preferred plan to expand the freeway interchange would result in the demolition or relocation of nearly 100 homes and businesses.

If Charleston County has its way, the roadbuilding and housing destruction would not stop in North Charleston. In late August, officials unveiled a separate, \$720 million plan for an expressway to begin near the expanded beltway and extend south to rural Johns Island and suburban James Island. Both places contain historic African American enclaves, where formerly enslaved people spread out from a nearby plantation in the 1870s.

Under the state's preferred proposal for the interchange upgrade, 94 percent of people and structures that would be displaced live in environmental justice communities mostly composed of Black and Brown residents.

They are the kinds of places that Biden vowed to protect as he campaigned for office. After his victory, he placed environmental justice advocates in key posts at the White House.

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The \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill awaiting a House vote includes a provision that seeks to mend communities of color that were broken apart by American freeways built over the last four decades. Democrats called for \$20 billion to retrofit and possibly remove highways that became barriers in underprivileged communities, while adding parks and walkway bridges to beautify these areas and make them safer for pedestrians and cyclists to navigate.

But as Biden tries to right past wrongs, Black residents in North Charleston dread a plan that threatens them now. They live in the apartments, trailers, starter homes and houses that South Carolina transportation officials framed in red for demolition.

Anderson is haunted by the memory of what happened to her robust community when the highway was first built and expanded when she was a young woman in her 30s.

“It kind of split Liberty Park and Highland Terrace up,” she said.

Black communities: ‘The point of least resistance’

Interstate-26 crawled up to Anderson’s doorstep from Charleston, where it originated in South Carolina.

The project launched immediately after Congress passed the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, paving the way for major roads that scarred and wiped out communities of color from Atlanta to Oakland, “often under the guise of urban renewal,” Deborah Archer wrote [in an article](#), “White Men’s Roads Through Black Men’s Homes: Advancing Racial Equity Through Highway Reconstruction.”

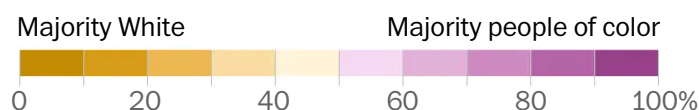
“Black communities were impacted because they were Black communities,” said Archer, a clinical law professor at New York University, during a phone interview. “They were impacted to remove Black people. They were impacted because people wanted to lock in segregation.”

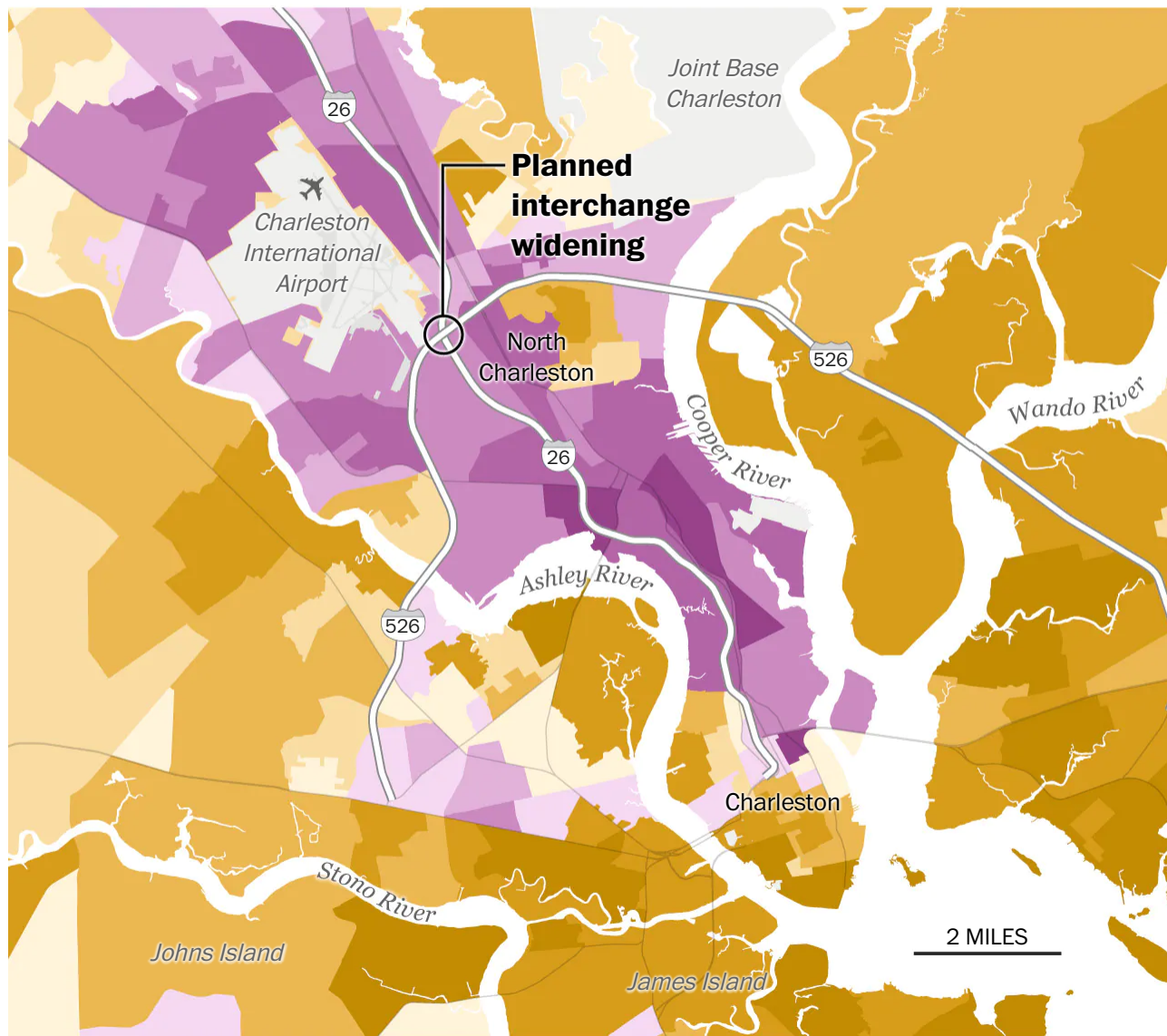
[Interstate highways were touted as modern marvels. Racial injustice was part of the plan.]

Kevin Kruse, a Princeton University history professor, recalled that Atlanta’s mayor openly said Interstate-20 was designed to divide White and Black communities. And it wasn’t just in the South. Interstate-579 cut off Pittsburgh’s Hill District of Black businesses and residents from the city’s downtown, while expressways also eviscerated Black communities in St. Paul and Detroit.

The practice of locating freeways, oil and gas refineries, transportation hubs, landfills, power plants, concrete batch operations and freeways in non-White areas is so common that they have a name: sacrifice communities.

A freeway expansion through majority Black and Hispanic neighborhoods





Sources: 2020 decennial census, Open Street Map contributors

Robert D. Bullard, a distinguished professor at Texas Southern University and the author of the 2004 book, “Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism and New Routes to Equity,” said residents living near freeways pay a heavy price. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 20,000 Americans die prematurely each year from motor vehicle pollution.

Anderson began noticing strange things when Interstate-26 arrived in 1969, and again when Interstate-526 joined it two decades later.

“Animals came from out of nowhere,” she said. “I saw foxes. Raccoons would lift bricks off the top of trash cans.”

To this day, she said, “I put lime around here for the snakes.” Over time, noise from thousands of cars and trucks intruded too. “You can hear them.”

Anderson is not surprised that Liberty Park will be hard hit again. Black residents are “the point of least resistance,” she said.

‘A history of negative impacts’



Ruthmae Whitney looks out at the cars passing-by on Interstate 26. (Nora Williams for The Washington Post)



Another reoccurring "Road Ends" sign is displayed in the Highland Terrace neighborhood. (Nora Williams for The Washington Post)

Ruthmae Whitney opened her front door one August day and the sound of heavy traffic poured into her house.

Truck engines growled. Hot rods shrieked as they raced past the speed limit. Even when the door is closed, the muffled drone of more than 100,000 vehicles per day is a never-ending whoosh.

At rush hour, it often becomes a horn-honking grind. “I can sit on my porch and see how congested it is on the highway,” Whitney said.

She has lived in Highland Terrace — about a mile from Hattie Anderson — for about 52 years, around the time Interstate-26 arrived. It forced Whitney, now 86, and her mother to evacuate their first house on Jury Lane.

“Here you just got settled, and here comes the highway taking your place,” she said.

The addition of the beltway two decades later brought the road within a few feet of her current home on Good Street. The proposed expansion spared that house but, she said, it would eliminate the house next door, take a chunk of her property and “put me very close to that highway.

“I’ll be hearing all that traffic noise even more,” Whitney said.

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On the telephone at her office in Columbia, the state capital, Joy Riley was apologetic. Riley, the project manager for the expansion, acknowledged that Black residents were wronged when the interstates were originally built.

“We had a history there going in of negatively impacting these communities,” Riley said, “and so the challenging part was trying to go in and figure out how can we address the traffic issues but also look at what’s been done in the past and try to do something different now.”

Riley was adamant that the project has to be done. The interchange that joins Interstate-26 and 526 is undersized in a county where the population has doubled since 1960 to more than 411,000. “The interchange just can’t handle the number of vehicles that come through there daily. You’re just stuck. You can’t get out.”

The department’s preferred alternative would acquire 33 single family homes, four apartment buildings with at least 35 units, 11 mobile homes and eight

duplexes. Two community centers and at least one church will be leveled. The plan doesn't say how many people would be forced out of those buildings.

From the moment the county and state proposed two freeway projects in 2010 and 2019, environmental groups such as the Low Country Alliance for Model Communities and the Coastal Conservation League have fought them.

First, Charleston County sought to build an expressway with bridges between Charleston International Airport and Johns Island and James Island, where many emancipated slaves resettled in the 1800s. Later, the state said it would have to infringe on Black communities again to widen the interstate.

The activists argue that South Carolina is approaching 21st Century traffic congestion in North Charleston with a mid-20th Century solution.

“While other cities are taking down expressways, Charleston’s still trying to build more expressways while also fixing the mistakes they made in the past by widening the current one,” said Jason Crowley, senior program director for communities and transportation for the conservation league. “It doesn’t make sense.”

[How the racial makeup of where you live has changed since 1990]

As they battled the state project in North Charleston, advocates called on officials to include measures to help residents, which planners ultimately accepted.

The state is now planning to build affordable housing, mostly apartments and a few single family homes — about 100 units. It will offer financial counseling for first time home buyers and anyone seeking a home away from the affected area.

In addition, the state is promising to enhance the area with parks and better lighting, improve access to public transportation and construct a walkway bridge to help pedestrians navigate streets amputated by the freeway.

Together the improvements cost about \$100 million, Riley said.

Despite the cosmetic makeover, the plan's fine print reveals that people who choose to stay will face potential harm: "The residents of the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the I-526 and I-26 interchange are likely to experience greater impacts to the quality of the air they breathe than residents living in areas further removed from high traffic interchanges."

It was the clean open space that attracted Whitney to Highland Terrace. She moved there from Charleston in 1957 because houses had big yards and her mother loved to garden.

They were near Liberty Hill, another community established by formerly enslaved people. Many Black residents were Gullah, who speak an English Creole directly linked to West Africa.

"These people were basically among the least assimilated Black people in the United States because of their isolation on the Sea Islands," said Damon Fordham, an adjunct history professor at The Citadel military college in Charleston. They were brought over to grow rice and "they retained the African-ness of their speech."



Damon Fordham, a local historian, stands in front of an old gas station that used to be at the entrance of the Highland Terrace neighborhood. (Nora Williams for The Washington Post)

As White residents left the area, Black people created a tightknit community. They established Club Zanzibar and Club Jamaica, highbrow gathering halls that Fordham wasn't even aware of when he was a Black kid growing up in nearby Mount Pleasant.

Some women were called "Chilly Bear Ladies" because they filled Dixie cups with crushed ice and flavored it with fruit juices or Kool-Aid. They sold the low budget Popsicles to children for dimes.

The freeways tore through near the end of the civil rights movement, dividing neighborhoods, crushing homes and forcing out occupants like Whitney. "It was bad, sad," she said. "Nobody wants to lose friends that they've been around for some time."

Convinced the state will keep coming back until nothing is left of Highland Terrace, Liberty Park, Ferndale and Russelldale, Whitney wants to leave.

“What I think is because they know that Blacks can’t really afford lawyers to fight, they have to go with moving us,” she said. With housing prices rising sharply in White neighborhoods around her, Whitney is at the mercy of appraisers who often undervalue African American homes.

A [2018 study](#) by the Brookings Institution said homes in largely Black neighborhoods were appraised for 23 percent less than those in mostly White neighborhoods — even when they were of similar quality. It found that homes in Black communities are undervalued by \$48,000 on average, a [\\$156 billion cumulative loss](#) nationwide.

Houses in Whitney’s area received the lowest appraisals of all on the transportation department’s maps, valued as low as \$31,000.

“What I’m hoping, since they say they’re going through with this highway, is that they would give us a fair price and consider the fact that we didn’t ask to move and we cannot buy a house and build a house for the price of what we built this for,” she said.

DeAndre Gadsden, who lives across the street from Whitney, said the house he purchased four years ago for \$100,000 is now worth twice that. But the state, which has yet to offer an appraisal, will have the final say.

However, state officials did offer an appraisal of Hattie Anderson’s five-acre property in Liberty Park — and she didn’t like what she saw.

‘A textbook case of highway robbery’

Samuel Anderson was a believer in owning land and building wealth.

He bought a plot in Liberty Park in 1944. When Hattie married him years later, she supported him by saving. “At first I started with pennies and then I graduated to dimes. When I got to quarters I was big time.”

In time, they owned nearly 13 acres.

But the state and the city of North Charleston immediately started to chip away at their property and its worth. The interstate uprooted their neighbors and the city forced them to accept \$43,000 for more than eight acres of land for the sewer project.

With a big chunk of land gone, the Andersons were hemmed in by roads and a creek widened for sewage. The family stopped using the front of their home because a small bridge that led to their driveway could no longer straddle the creek.

Thirty years later, they still use a dirt path in the backyard to come and go.

“What you have described is a textbook case of highway robbery,” said Bullard, the author and Texas Southern University professor.

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After [Samuel Anderson died in 2006](#), Hattie Anderson clung to what was left of the land. But when she realized the government was going to keep building roads around her, she relaxed her grip.

The state needs a plot like hers to replace a community center the road expansion would tear down. They said her 5.7 acres with a 2,000 square foot house are worth \$712,000.

“It is ridiculously low for the almost six acres she has,” said Anderson’s daughter, Cynthia. “She’s very upset. We have to calm her down because she’s says that’s not right, they’re taking my land and I’ve been here all this time.”

Riley said the state is planning a second appraisal of Anderson’s property because “we’re kind of in a weird market right now,” given that housing cost have skyrocketed in the last year-and-a-half.

The offer reminded Hattie Anderson of her husband’s 1980 legal fight against the city’s bid to take the family’s property through eminent domain for what she called “a ditch.”

At a court hearing, she recalled, a judge said, “We’re not going to make you any richer or any poorer” when he ruled in the city’s favor.

“We were upset,” Anderson said. “But we got to a place where we accepted the things we couldn’t change.”

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About this story

The 1957 aerial photograph of North Charleston is courtesy [of the U.S. Geological Survey](#).

People of color include all those identifying as a race and ethnicity other than White alone and non-Hispanic.

Chris Dixon contributed to this report from Charleston. Additional data work by Ted Mellnik.

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[Darryl Fears](#) Follow 

Darryl Fears is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter on the national staff who covers environmental justice. Over more than two decades at the Post, he has covered the Interior Department, the Chesapeake Bay, urban affairs and race & demographics. In that role, he helped conceptualize a multiple award-winning project, "Being A Black Man."

[John Muyskens](#) Follow 

John Muyskens is a graphics editor at the Washington Post specializing in data reporting.

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