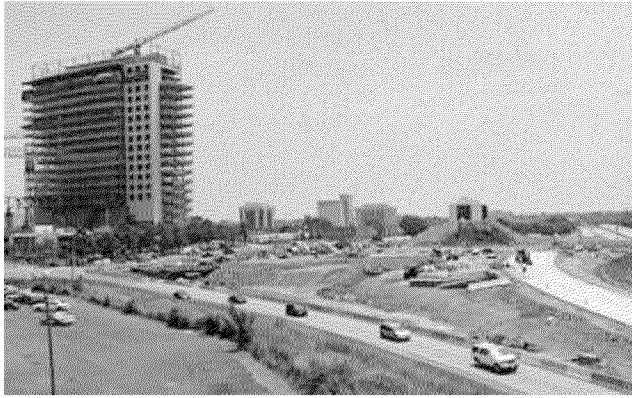


For new park, take the low road: I-277

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Construction this summer along I-277 is reconfiguring the ramps along the southern end of uptown.

It's been more than 10 years since I first heard the idea to pop a cap atop Interstate 277 just south of uptown and create a big park.

This was considered outlandish in some quarters, although other cities have capped sections of freeways and built all kinds of things on them. In Boston, the Copley Place shopping mall sits above the Mass Pike. Seattle, famously, built a park on top of a freeway.

But North Carolina isn't a state that thinks "urban" when designing freeways, so the freeway cap idea just sat there. I think people envisioned something like Boston's multi-gazillion-dollar Big Dig, in which a raised freeway was removed, a tunnel dug through pricey real estate and – finally – a park installed on top.

But the idea got mentioned in the Center City 2010 Plan, adopted in 2000. It proposed a 20-acre park atop the freeway as a long-term possibility.

The idea also popped up in the Second Ward Master Plan, which said a freeway cap could provide land for both a park and for more development.

In May 2007, I wrote a column saying the city was looking at ways to better connect uptown to South End and Dilworth, and the freeway cap was again being discussed.

It still is.

Starting Monday, a group of consultants hired by the city will do a four-day design workshop at the government center examining improvements to I-277 from Mint Street at the stadium to Kenilworth, at Little Sugar Creek. On Thursday they'll brief city staff, elected officials and the

people who own property or have options to buy property along that freeway stretch. The freeway cap is part of what they're supposed to study.

State owns the land

The state, not the city, built I-277, owns its right of way and would likely have to approve and pay for a freeway cap. Jim Kimbler of the Charlotte Department of Transportation, who's coordinating the planning, said the city has had only one exploratory meeting so far with NCDOT. "They were not as familiar with caps as I wished they were," he said.

What would go atop the cap, if built?

Public sentiment during the Center City 2010 Plan workshops clearly favored a park. But in some cities, such as Columbus, Ohio, freeways are capped to allow for development.

Developer Afshin Ghazi – who's building the EpiCentre on the old civic center property – has bought property overlooking the freeway, at South Tryon and Morehead streets, holding a one-story brick building and a surface parking lot. And when developers get interested, it seems, the city does, too.

If the city is envisioning development, will the idea for a park fade to black? The city isn't exactly passionate about parks, having turned its park department over to the county government almost 20 years ago and being fully content to let county officials bear that financial burden.

On Friday I went for a look at the would-be freeway cap site. I stood on the Tryon Street overpass, looking down at 11 lanes of traffic roaring through the gulch. Between the edge of the pavement and the end of the state's right-of-way on Hill Street are about 250 feet of waste land.

Trash, weeds and broken fence

The chain-link fencing was down, as if a vehicle hit it and no one had gotten around to repairs. In one spot the grassy weeds had been mowed, but across Tryon Street but elsewhere they were shoulder high. Trash clustered near the back-of-curb sidewalk.

I saw where a discarded orange sign, "Right Lane Closed Ahead" had been tossed into deep weeds. Pine trees, sycamores and oaks dotted an unkempt grassy knoll and the slopes leading down to the highway.

Other than some vigorous clumps of edible weeds – purslane, lamb's quarter and unripe passion fruits – and a charming flock of mourning doves darting around, it was wasted land. It's public land that isn't public. You can't go sit under sycamores and have a picnic.

The best thing to do with it, I'd say, is easy: Put a lid on it.