

The Movement for Communities over Highways in Shreveport, Louisiana

Shreveport is the anchor of northwest Louisiana and is the fourth largest metropolitan area in the state. The city began in the 1800s as a company town but grew quickly in the pre-Civil War years on the backs of enslaved Africans, who picked cotton for the hundreds of planters in the region, which was transported through Shreveport down the Red River to New Orleans to market. This exploitation of Black labor was just the start of the many racial injustices that plague Shreveport today. Even after slavery had been abolished, Black people were trapped in a cycle of debt bondage, indentured labor, tenant farming, and sharecropping (Brock 2001, chap. 3; Bayliss 2020).

Through the 1900s, Shreveport's economy was tied to the booms and busts of the fossil fuel industry. These are some of the same industries that have caused hot spots of toxic air pollution along an 85-mile stretch of the Mississippi River in Louisiana nicknamed Cancer Alley (Younes et al. 2021; Human Rights Watch 2024).

Meanwhile, the history of policy decisions leading to segregation and redlining from the 1950s kept Black people stuck in a cycle of disinvestment. In the early 1900s, the rise of racial zoning laws and racially restrictive covenants were designed to keep Black people out of White neighborhoods (Seicshnaydre et al. 2018). Through the 1930s, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), a federal agency, graded the "residential security" of loans through a practice known as redlining (Nelson and Winling 2023; Lewis 2020, 34). The Federal Housing Administration's pivotal 1938 Underwriting Manual emphasized how "infiltration of inharmonious racial groups" had a negative impact on credit risks. As a result, Black neighborhoods like Allendale were marked as "hazardous" or "declining," without hiding that the presence of people of color was the justification for a poor

rating. This made it more difficult for people in these areas to access federally subsidized mortgage financing and guarantees, cementing segregation, White flight, and disinvestment in central cities.

While many of these explicitly racist practices were ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court throughout the 1900s, practices of segregation continued through "neutral zoning" that placed Black neighborhoods next to harmful and noxious industrial land and associated them with "blight." Private market discrimination, segregated public housing, urban renewal, and predatory lending together upheld these practices to create today's highly segregated city (Seicshnaydre et al. 2018).

Then In Came the Highways

The construction of the urban interstate segments added to these harms, not just for Black neighborhoods but for the city overall. Through the 1950s to 1960, while Shreveport was a "city on-the-grow," its leaders decided to cut through the heart of the city with I-20 east to west and I-49 south to north (Mitchell 2019). Thriving "Crosstown," the first Black settlement following the Civil War, was wiped out, and other vibrant Black neighborhoods were severed (Moore 2011). Shreveport was a compact city in 1950 with around 127,000 people living in 24 square miles. The commitment to the I-20 and I-49 urban highways marked the shift to car-dependent infrastructure expansion and the beginning of population decline in historically Black core neighborhoods in the city, such as Allendale, where the population dropped from 34,600 in 1959, when I-20 construction began, to 16,000 by 1970. The threat of I-49 through Allendale caused continued property disinvestment and population loss to 3,700 by 2020 (Lau 2014).

In 1997, plans for the 3.8-mile I-49 Connector north of I-20 through Allendale to the I-220 loop were officially terminated by the FHWA and Louisiana Department of Transportation (LADOT). But in 2009, the zombie freeway was politically revived. The Northwest Louisiana Council of Governments (NLCOG) and LADOT released an over-2,000-page stage 0 feasibility study to connect the two portions of I-49 through Shreveport in an effort called the I-49 Inner City Connector (I-49 ICC). While only a stretch of less than four miles, this urban freeway threatened the loss of 2,300 homes from 1970 to 2000. The unjust disproportionate impacts continue for over 100 remaining households in the historic Black community of Allendale, as nearby property values are devastated and community members experience a host of air quality, safety, and economic harms.

Allendale Strong Has Been Building Community for over a Decade

Against these concrete behemoths, grassroots advocates are fighting for the communities they have built and love.

In 2005, many evacuees from Hurricane Katrina moved to Shreveport and needed a place to stay. At this time, the I-49 ICC was officially a dead project. Community Renewal International and the Fuller Center for Housing banded together to help not only provide first-time homeowner housing but also reverse the cycle of poverty and high crime that often befalls urban neighborhoods. The Center built 48 houses in Allendale, where Hurricane Katrina victims and other low-income individuals and families were able to invest sweat equity to buy homes with interest-free mortgages. The community is anchored by two Friendship Houses (community centers inside homes) and since 2005, crime has dropped by more than 70 percent. In 2009, after new homeowners were already growing a safe and loving community, NLCOG revived the I-49 ICC concept, with the agency's preferred route running over most of the new homes and the two Friendship Houses. Those that would not be run over would be left in the toxicity zone of the elevated freeway (Figure 1, p. 3)

In 2012, with growing mistrust of the I-49 ICC public process facilitated by NLCOG, an Allendale Strong initiative called Loop-It was established as a learning-doing community committed to preserve, promote, and grow its community values and connections to other Shreveport neighborhoods. Community members documented the history of elevated, limited-access inner-city expressways and collected information about worldwide trends to tear down existing and block new elevated expressways. The initiative sprang into action, circulating positions and letters, organizing community members to attend NLCOG meetings, and pursuing legal action. Using the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to obtain NLCOG's travel demand model, Loop-It brought on a technical modeling expert to debunk NLCOG's

modeling methodologies in a series of memos and to show how the employment growth assumptions accelerate depopulation of the city.

Thus began the more-than-10-year battle against NLCOG, LADOT, and business interests running a \$100,000 misinformation ad campaign promoting the I-49 ICC. As the group has learned, the process is long and is meant to wear out anyone fighting a freeway.

Throughout the years, Allendale Strong has been rooted in the strength of its community. It began to attract scientists, communications experts, and all sorts of people with skills to help the cause. National organizations such as the Congress for the New Urbanism, Smart Growth America, and Strong Towns have used their voices in the media and helped the group navigate bureaucratic processes. In 2021, Allendale Strong was one of the early organizers of the Freeway Fighters Network, a coalition of community advocates across the country who work in solidarity to advocate for national-level USDOT policies to prioritize people over highways and reconnect communities from past highway harm. More recently in 2024, Allendale Strong banded with groups across the state, including in New Orleans, Lafayette, Monroe, Baton Rouge, and Natchitoches, as the Louisiana 4-Corners Coalition for Transportation Planning Reform.

For Dorothy Wiley, the founder of Allendale Strong, enough is enough. She lived on Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina and watched how the construction of the I-10 elevated expressway sapped the community. After moving to Allendale, she faces the same threat yet again, with the specter of a highway threatening displacement.

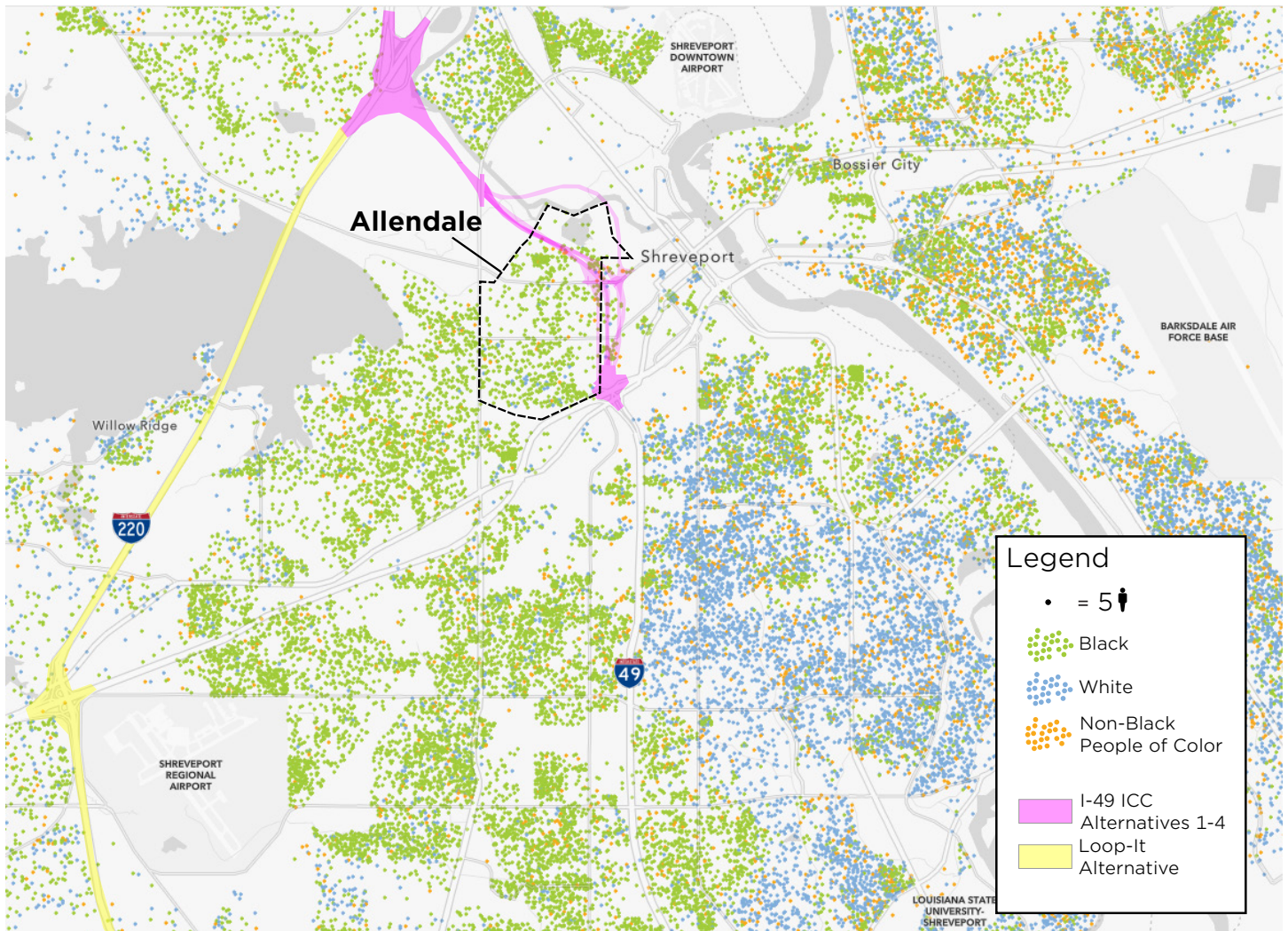
“I was powerless against a hurricane named Katrina, but I am not powerless against a man-made roadway that could equally destroy my home and life.”

— Dorothy Wiley
Founder of Allendale Strong

We Deserve a Future without the Harms of Highway Expansion

Allendale Strong seeks to prioritize community values in transportation planning, not the values of the past legacies of unsustainability and inequity. The group envisions a future prioritizing growth within the city based on multimodal, safe, wealth-building streets with local ownership. For the I-49 ICC, it sees a ground-

FIGURE 1. Shreveport Is Highly Segregated by Race



Shreveport is divided by I-49, with Black communities concentrated to the West having substantially lower life expectancy, economic status, and quality of life than White communities to the East (Lewis 2020). Most of the proposed I-49 Intercity Connector (ICC) expansions extend that boundary to the north through Allendale, while alternative proposals could circumvent further harm by routing through traffic along a rebuilt State Route 3132 in the South to the existing I-220 loop.

SSOURCE: MODIFIED FROM ESRI 2023 TO INCLUDE THE I-49 ICC PROPOSALS..

“The last place that [this money] needs to be expended is on an unnecessary and destructive highway, when the surrounding roads, streets, sidewalks, water, drainage, and sewer systems within many of our neighborhoods are still awaiting long-promised but still yet undelivered equitable investments from the local, state, and federal governments.”

— Kim Mitchell
 Director of the Center for Community Renewal

level business boulevard as a nearby investment while routing through traffic to the existing I-220 loop that surrounds the city and connects I-49 north and south of the city (thus the name “Loop-It”).

In the 1950s, US cities began an untested experiment to grow economic prosperity by accelerating outward growth of cities’ infrastructure. Land use planning was disconnected from transportation planning. Allendale Strong’s learning-doing community exposed how outdated 1950s transportation planning assumptions about the benefits of driving more, driving farther, and driving faster have continued to inform technical engineering practices and economic justification calculations that support highway capacity expansion. These outdated assumptions prevent decisionmakers and transportation planners from seeing important realities: (1) cities have overbuilt infrastructure they cannot afford to maintain; (2) urban highways have harmed cities socially, environmentally, and economically; and (3) in older parts of cities, once-destination places along pedestrian-preference, wealth-building streets have declined due to “stroad” investments, unsafe high-speed roadways with sparse walking infrastructure that people must navigate, given their crucial access points for goods and services. Transportation planning assumptions are in direct conflict with community desires for unique and quality places that are the basis for city master plans. And while transportation plans continue to be funded, city

master plans remain unfunded. The negative outcomes generated by this conflict will not be addressed without intention. Allendale Strong has proposed collaborating with the metropolitan planning commission to:

1. Shift transportation planning aspirational values to prioritize city master plan aspirational values.
2. Reconnect transportation planning to land use planning that prioritizes community values over engineering values.
3. Engage community members in meaningful learning-doing opportunities to holistically cocreate solutions to problems generated by transportation planning-induced growth pattern realities.
4. Participate in Louisiana 4-Corners Coalition for Transportation Planning Reform’s statewide campaign to engage community members in unstroading Louisiana cities.
5. Form community-led street design teams to set design criteria values for city wealth-building streets and place-connecting roads.

This feature is excerpted from Freedom to Move: Investing in Transportation Choices for a Clean, Prosperous, and Just Future. Read the fully referenced report at www.ucusa.org/resources/freedom-move.

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Allendale Strong is a learning-doing group committed to renew the Allendale Neighborhood relationally, economically and environmentally.

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The Union of Concerned Scientists puts rigorous, independent science into action, developing solutions and advocating for a healthy, safe, and just future.

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