To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Councilmember Rigel Robinson (Author), Councilmember Terry Taplin (Co-Sponsor), Councilmember Rashi Kesarwani (Co-Sponsor), Councilmember Mark Humbert (Co-Sponsor)

Subject: Referral: Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program proposal to build a Freeway Lid over I-80 to reconnect West Berkeley to the Waterfront

RECOMMENDATION
Refer to the City Manager to assess the viability of transforming the University & I-80 interchange with the goal of removing the I-80 at-grade barrier between the Berkeley Marina and the rest of the City, and to explore related grant opportunities, including but not limited to pursuing a planning grant from the US DOT Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program in the next application cycle or future application cycles.

Staff are encouraged to look to successful examples of “freeway lid” projects around the country.

BACKGROUND
The Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program¹ is a five-year pilot grant program administered by the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) to provide municipalities and other planning bodies with resources to study and implement built environment changes that reduce physical barriers created by infrastructure, especially highway infrastructure. The program was created as part of the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. In the first grant cycle (2022), there were a few successful capital project awards but most approved projects were for study, planning, and design.

Notably, our neighbor the City of Oakland was awarded $680,000 in federal funding to explore ways to reconnect communities divided by transportation infrastructure along Interstate 980.²

Eligible facilities include a highway, including a road, street, or parkway or other transportation facility, such as a rail line, that creates a barrier to community connectivity, including barriers to mobility, access, or economic development, due to high speeds, grade separations, or other design factors.

¹ Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program | US Department of Transportation
² Caltrans, City of Oakland to Study Ways to Reconnect Communities Divided by Interstate 980 as Part of New Federal Program
Funding Available

<table>
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<th>Fiscal Year</th>
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Table: Funding allocated to the USDOT Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program through FY26

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) is currently anticipating planning for a redesign and rebuild of the University Avenue/I-80 overcrossing, although funding has not yet been identified. The estimated cost for this project in 2018 was $77 million, but due to rising construction costs it is almost guaranteed to be higher. As the project is not yet funded, if the City of Berkeley were to seek a more ambitious vision for the reconfiguration of the University/I-80 interchange, it is timely to develop that vision now.

**Freeway Lid Case Studies**

Many other cities in the U.S. have built lids over their freeways to mitigate the physical and psychological barriers they impose. Above these lids can be parks, buildings, or other spaces that mitigate the division between sides of the freeway. These treatments are geographically and infrastructurally dependent and require specific considerations for their surrounding contexts, including topography and the nature of the built environment. In many cases, the freeway in question can remain at the grade it is built at, but certain cases require a reconstruction of the freeway at a different grade.

Seattle has built several freeway lids in suburban areas to reconnect neighborhoods throughout the city. Each lid is built with specific attention to the surrounding topography and built environment, and contains park crossings that make crossing the freeway at these locations feel seamless and often even unnoticeable. This attention to the natural environment and inclusion of parks could be relevant to the design for a potential Interstate 80 freeway lid in Berkeley.

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3 [Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program | US Department of Transportation](https://www.dot.gov/programs/urban-rural/transportation-asset-management/reconnecting-communities-pilot-program)

4 [Caltrans Unveils Plans To Raise University Avenue Bridge In Berkeley - CBS San Francisco (cbsnews.com)](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/caltrans-unveils-plans-to-raise-university-avenue-bridge-in-berkeley/)
St. Louis, with its famous Gateway Arch divided from Downtown by Interstate 44, built a small lid that entirely changed the pedestrian experience around the City's most prized landmark. The “Park Over the Highway” opened in 2018, with support from the US DOT. The Berkeley Marina is similarly divided from Berkeley’s urban fabric by the I-80 freeway.

In 2022, San Francisco opened Tunnel Tops Park, a park over the US-101 freeway that offers picturesque views of the Golden Gate Bridge and provides new, high-quality parks space that connects the Presidio with Crissy Field. This design, which relates to the local topography and built environment, could serve as inspiration for a freeway lid in Berkeley focused on reconnecting parks space to the West Berkeley community.
Rationale for Recommendation

It is well-accepted in urban planning that freeways create barriers between different areas in cities that divide people and the built and natural environment — both physically and psychologically. The I-80 freeway separates historically redlined West Berkeley neighborhoods from vital public park space and thus limits access to that park space. Removing the at-grade freeway barrier between the Berkeley Marina and Berkeley proper would reconnect not only West Berkeley residents, but the entire city to its largest parks space and to the waterfront.

Planning is already anticipated for a University/I-80 interchange redesign by Caltrans. The City has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to combine this effort with a plan to remove the at-grade freeway barrier between the Berkeley Marina and University Avenue. Staff should assess whether this vision is possible to be incorporated into Caltrans’ planning work, and assess whether currently expected plans for University/I-80 go far enough to advance the city’s goals of sustainability, green space, and public access to the waterfront.

Construction of a project to reconfigure the University/I-80 interchange would involve a variety of stakeholders and have significant impacts on traffic flow and surrounding properties. It would require significant outreach and be a herculean effort, and one likely not possible without the support of significant outside resources. By pursuing a planning grant from the Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program, we can conduct the viability analysis necessary to understand whether this vision is realistic for Berkeley.
The I-80 freeway creates a significant barrier between much of Berkeley and its waterfront. For the benefit of Berkeley, its residents, and access to the Berkeley Marina, this item urges that we dream of a day that the substantial barrier between our pristine waterfront and our residents is removed.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS
Authoring and submitting a grant application would require staff time. Receiving an award could provide hundreds of thousands of dollars for planning and staff resources that may otherwise be fiscally impossible.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY
No direct environmental sustainability implications associated with authoring and submitting a grant application. However, removing the at-grade barrier between the Berkeley Marina and West Berkeley could allow for increased green space for people and wildlife, depending on the design.

CONTACT PERSON
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