

Race, Roads, and Right-of-Way: A Campaign to Block Highway Construction in Fort Madison, 1967–1976

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SITTING IN THE AUDIENCE at Sacred Heart Hall on March 24, 1975, Virginia Harper listened as Robert Coates, chief of public programs in the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), discussed the status of plans to improve U.S. Highway 61. In the complaint that she had filed five years earlier on behalf of the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Harper had alleged that the road project would destroy “the only true multi-ethnic area in the city of Fort Madison,” displacing citizens who “have been systematically denied the privilege of living in other areas of the community.” Her charge that the project followed “a tradition of disrupting minority group neighborhoods” had initiated a formal investigation by the DOT, attempts at arbitration, and, finally, Coates’s trip to Fort Madison. By meeting with city officials, highway planners, and Fort Madison residents, he would gather information to take

I thank the many people and organizations that helped me with this project, especially University of Iowa professors Shelton Stromquist and Leslie Schwalm, my other professors and fellow graduate students in the University of Iowa history department and staff in Special Collections, Map Collections, and the Iowa Women’s Archives of the University of Iowa Libraries, the Iowa Department of Transportation, the State Historical Society of Iowa, and the African American Historical Museum and Cultural Center of Iowa.

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back to Washington, D.C., Coates told the audience, to help the Secretary of Transportation make the final decision on whether the proposed route was discriminatory. Sitting next to Harper was James Meyerson, the New York-based NAACP lawyer who had been advising the local branch since January 1971 on the legal complaint that the project would violate Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Harper was joined by other Fort Madison residents who opposed the rerouting of the highway. Filling the first six rows of the auditorium, the opponents sat together in a block directly in front of the speaker's podium. That tactic, according to a city official, had a "definite psychological effect" on people who had come to the meeting to express their support for the proposed plan.¹

From 1968, when a public meeting was held to discuss rerouting U.S. 61, to 1997, when the Iowa DOT released an Environmental Assessment on a plan to rebuild U.S. 61 as a bypass, plans to improve Highway 61 sparked controversy and spawned protest in Fort Madison. Endorsed in a 1967 Iowa State Highway Commission report and eventually abandoned in 1976, the plan to improve U.S. 61 favored by Fort Madison city officials and highway planners included rerouting the road through the southern corridor of the city. That plan was not only the most expensive option, but also displaced the greatest number of people, including a disproportionately African American and Mexican American population. During that nine-year period, some Fort Madison residents rallied around the cause of blocking the project.²

Residents of the city and the outlying areas came together in a multiracial and multiethnic coalition to stop the highway construction project. Invoking their rights as residents and as taxpayers to have a say in the city's future, opponents wrote

1. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 3/25/1975; Virginia Harper to Equal Opportunity Division, Federal Highway Administration, Department of Transportation, 6/30/1970, file: Correspondence and documents, 1968-1974, box 3, Virginia Harper Papers, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City; Patrick Callahan to James Frazier, 3/31/1975, file: Correspondence and documents 1975, *ibid.*

2. The Iowa State Highway Commission (ISHC) became part of the Iowa Department of Transportation (Iowa DOT) on July 1, 1974. In this article, I will use the name appropriate to the time period.

letters, attended and spoke at meetings, and signed petitions in opposition to the highway. For some of these opponents, the effort to block the highway project was a civil rights campaign. Calling attention to the project's disparate impact on Fort Madison's minority population, opponents declared that the road project would perpetuate a history of unequal treatment of African American and Mexican American residents. They considered the project an injustice, and alleged that the project was in fact illegal. In the wake of the civil rights movement, opponents such as Virginia Harper saw this local conflict as part of a larger national campaign. In a letter to the editor published in the local newspaper in 1968, Harper stated, "This is not quite the time for sitting back and telling minority group members and lower income whites that they must sacrifice for the good of society as a whole."³

Deriving strength from the consistent oppositional activities of Fort Madison residents and legal assistance provided by the national NAACP, the campaign against the highway achieved success. Characterized as an unusual case by the director of the DOT's Office of Civil Rights, the Fort Madison conflict demonstrates the effectiveness of using the law as a tool to fight highway construction. Seeking to resolve the Civil Rights Act's violation outside of the courts, H. E. Gunnerson, the director of the Iowa DOT's Highway Division, recognized the significance of the case, both in the prolonged legal challenge it could present and in the precedent it could establish. When the charge of discrimination proved to be an insurmountable obstacle, the Iowa DOT proposed an alternate plan. The Fort Madison City Council later approved it.⁴

Many large American cities faced similar situations during the post-World War II period. From Boston to San Francisco to New Orleans, American cities became the sites of highway conflicts during the 1960s. In Fort Madison, as elsewhere, the proposed highway project fit into a larger plan for urban improvement and redevelopment. Highway 61 would have been

3. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 7/7/1968.

4. Bob Humphrey to Raymond Kassel, 10/7/1974, binder 4, U.S. 61, Fort Madison, Lee County, Iowa DOT, Ames; H. E. Gunnerson to Highway Commissioners, 5/8/1975, file: March 1975-July 1975, *ibid.*

relocated in an area characterized as having the “greatest amount of concentrated deterioration,” while improving traffic flow and access to the city center. The Highway 61 project began during a period when highway planners designed roads based on engineering principles, seeming to overlook the homes, parks, and public spaces that stood between point A and point B. From East Tremont in Bronx, New York, to the Center Street community of Des Moines, Iowa, entire neighborhoods were razed to make way for highways. Planners who designed roads based on slope and grade rather than on public support, combined with city planners and local officials who hoped to improve and redevelop areas with federal money, resulted in road projects that had devastating effects on minority and low-income communities throughout the United States.⁵

In many of those cases, highways were built in spite of local opposition. In Fort Madison, however, local activism and legal intervention successfully stopped the project. The campaign provided an opportunity for Fort Madison residents — living within and outside of the affected area — to unite around a common cause. The campaign brought residents together while the conflict exposed the divisions — both historic and contemporary — among them.

The charge of discrimination not only opened up a legal arena in which the project could be fought, but also galvanized widespread debate and discussion among city officials, highway planners, journalists, and residents about the meaning of racial discrimination and its role in shaping the city of Fort Madison. From editorials in local newspapers to comments at public meetings to correspondence between Fort Madison residents and DOT representatives, the topic of discrimination moved from the pages of the local NAACP newsletters to the center of public and private debates.

5. Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (New York, 1997), chap. 8; Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York, 1975), 850–94; Jack Lufkin, “Patten’s Neighborhood: The Center Street Community and the African-American Printer Who Preserved It,” *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* 77 (1996), 122–44; Don C. Shafer and Associates, *A Comprehensive Plan for Fort Madison, Iowa — Prepared for the Fort Madison Planning and Zoning Commission and the Iowa Development Commission* (1968), 141, U.S. 61, unfiled, Iowa DOT.

STRETCHING FROM New Orleans to the Canadian border, north of Duluth, Minnesota, U.S. Highway 61 follows the Mississippi River in Iowa, connecting the cities of Keokuk, Fort Madison, Burlington, Muscatine, Davenport, and Dubuque. Serving commuters who traveled from outlying areas to work at local businesses and factories, and businesses that transported freight in and out of the city by truck, U.S. 61 was part of a road system that city planners characterized during the 1960s as vital to Fort Madison's growth and development. Following sufficiency studies that revealed that the highway was in need of improvement, and origin and destination studies showing that the majority of its traffic in Fort Madison was local, highway planners endorsed plans to reroute the highway south of its original location. The southern area of Fort Madison — south of Avenues O and L and north of the railroad tracks, from 40th Street to 12th Street — was the proposed site for the improved U.S. 61 (fig. 1).⁶

Fort Madison's history was shaped by the railroad industry. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Santa Fe Railway Company connected its western and eastern rails at Fort Madison, establishing switching yards and various repair shops in southern sections of the city, along the river. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Santa Fe Company began recruiting workers from Mexico. Many single men came to Fort Madison and lived in boxcar barrios in the western end of town, adjacent to the rail yards. Fort Madison's population of Mexican men and women increased steadily in the first two decades of the twentieth century. They lived in three distinct areas: El Cometa, El Jarda, and Esta Fiate. Following a flood in the 1920s that destroyed their homes, Mexican American residents tried to purchase real estate, but found that their options were limited. Because discrimination prevented them from buying elsewhere in the city, Mexican American residents purchased land and began building homes along Avenue Q. A portion of this area, referred to as the "Mexican Village," has served as the site of La Fiesta, the annual celebration of Mexican Independence

6. Shafer and Associates, *Comprehensive Plan*, 10; *Proposed Relocation of the U.S. Route 61 and Iowa Route Number 2 in Lee County, Iowa* (Ames, 1967); *Planning Report, U.S. 61 and IA 2, Fort Madison in Lee County* (Ames, 1971).

Day, since the 1920s. Describing his childhood, Fidel Alvarez, a Mexican American resident who was born and raised in Fort Madison, characterized the area between 31st and 38th streets as his “world.” “I could travel down Avenue L and to Sacred Heart School,” he said, “but if I ever strayed from that the authorities would stop and ask me where I was going.”⁷

By the middle of the twentieth century, the southwest section of Fort Madison was the town’s “only true multi-ethnic area,” according to Virginia Harper, secretary of the local branch of the NAACP. African Americans moved to Fort Madison during the mid-nineteenth century and purchased homes throughout the city. About 230 African Americans resided in Fort Madison by the turn of the century (about 2.5 percent of the total population of 9,278). During the early twentieth century, African Americans, like Mexican Americans, faced housing discrimination. By the 1920s, African Americans lived primarily in two areas in the city: north of Avenue D in the eastern end of town, or south of Avenue L in the western end. Some African American men worked for the railroads, in what Harper considered the “hardest and dirtiest jobs in the yards and around the trains.” Fort Madison resident John Vasquez recalled that some African Americans lived just three or four blocks away from where Mexican Americans lived in Fort Madison. African Americans lived adjacent to the railroad tracks, along two city blocks that Vasquez described as “just like our village.” In the southwest end of town, African American, Mexican American, and white residents — especially children — socialized together. According to Vasquez, “in that area, in West Fort Madison, that was the late 40’s and 50’s, we kind of broke the barrier of everything.”⁸

7. Ted Sloat, *Fort Madison: A Pictorial History* (St. Louis, 1988), 9, 12, 30–36, 66–78, 80, 146; Sebastian Alvarez, Fidel Alvarez, and Frank Reyes, interview by Merle O. Davis, 2/3/1990, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City; Virginia Harper to Robert Coates, 4/11/1975, file: Correspondence October 1974–October 1975, box 3, Harry Harper Papers, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City.

8. Virginia Harper to Equal Opportunity Division, Federal Highway Administration, 6/30/1970; *Burlington Hawk Eye*, 3/25/1975; Harry Harper, interview by George Garcia, 8/23/1976, 8/25/1976, and 9/13/1976, box 1, Harry Harper Papers; Sebastian Alvarez, Fidel Alvarez, and Frank Reyes interview; John Vasquez, interview by Deborah Fink, 5/9/1994, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City; Felix Sanchez, “Memorias — Symbols of Mexican American

Housing discrimination coupled with employment discrimination limited the housing options of Mexican Americans and African Americans throughout the twentieth century. Only one-quarter of all Fort Madison residents lived in the southwest section of town, but approximately three-quarters of the minority population lived there. Thus, minority residents composed over 30 percent of the population that would be displaced by the road construction project, whereas Mexican Americans and African Americans composed less than 10 percent of Fort Madison's total population of approximately 14,000 residents in 1970. While discrimination contributed to the demographics of the area, economics also played an important role. Residents living in the southwest area of town were priced out of the greater Fort Madison housing market. Of the 112 homes located along the proposed route for Highway 61, the average home was valued at approximately \$5,000. At that time, only five available homes located elsewhere in Fort Madison were of comparable value. When describing the conditions of the southwest area at a public hearing, one Fort Madison resident stated, "Many of us have a tendency to go by and look down our nose at them. . . . These people don't have the nicest looking homes in town."⁹

integration in Fort Madison," Fort Madison Art Center, Fort Madison, 2002; Virginia Harper and Lois Eichacher, "Fort Madison," in *The Iowa State By-stander, 1894–1994: 100 Years of Black Achievement* (Des Moines, 1994), 69.

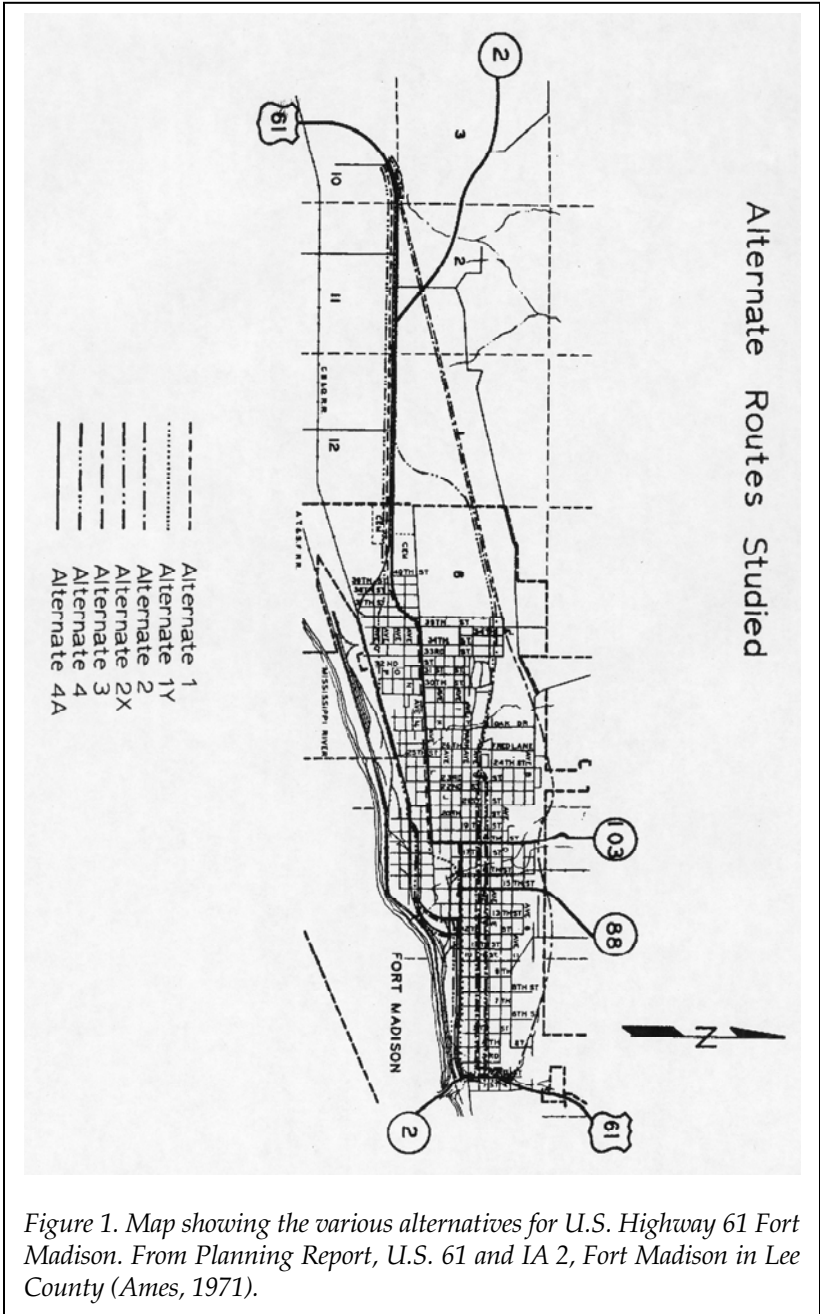
9. Leon Larson to Joseph R. Coupal, 5/24/1974, binder 4, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT; average home value calculated using information in memorandum from Dave Drake to Bob Humphrey, 3/8/1974, file: US 61 Lee County, January 1973 to May 1974, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT; available housing information based on October 1971 information included in "Draft, Environmental Statement, Administrative Action for U.S. 61 in Fort Madison, Lee County, Iowa," p. 8, file: December 1970–December 1971, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT; population data on the west end of the city from "United States of America before the U.S. Department of Transportation, Re: Proposed Withholding of Federal Grants Pursuant to Title VI of Civil Rights Act," 1976, file: Correspondence and documents, 1976, box 3, Virginia Harper Papers, and comments of Glenn Ahner, Transcript of Public Hearing on Highway Plan, 1/27/1972, Fort Madison, p. 62, Iowa DOT. The total number of African American and Mexican American residents in Fort Madison, as well as the number of displaced people and their race and ethnicity became highly contentious issues between supporters and opponents of the plan. Different people cited different figures throughout the conflict. According to the 1970 U.S. Census of Population, there were 429 black residents in Fort Madison. There were various estimates of the number of Mexican Americans living in Fort Madison in 1970. The 1970 U.S. Census of Population had a

Of the seven plans described in the 1971 Iowa State Highway Commission (ISHC) planning report, the two proposed routes for Highway 61 through the southern corridor of Fort Madison — alternates 4 and 4A — were the most expensive and displaced the greatest number of people. All of the routes would have displaced families and businesses, but the southern routes would have displaced either 566 or 586 people, significantly higher figures than those associated with the other routes. Yet the ISHC recommended the construction of Alternate 4A, and the Fort Madison City Council endorsed the plan.¹⁰

With the exception of the bypass plan, all of the proposed routes went through the city, either following the original alignment of U.S. 61 or along some variation (fig. 1). According to the ISHC, alternates 1 and 1Y, the two plans that basically followed the original alignment, would not “alleviate much of the congestion. Traffic service would, therefore, not be significantly improved.” Alternate 2 or 2X, the two plans with a northern alignment through the city, “proved unsatisfactory. . . . the one-way pairs would cause a disturbance to the neighborhood and community activities (church, school, health facilities, and parks).” In addition, the alignment would have destroyed a post-World War II housing subdivision, “situated on land whose property value is higher than in most other residential areas.” The report explained, “replacement of homes of a high price range would

sampled question on “Persons of Spanish Language.” From the results of this sampled question, it was estimated that 587 “Persons of Spanish Language” lived in Fort Madison. According to Virginia Harper, who cited data provided by the local Office of Equal Opportunity, approximately 1,000 Mexican Americans lived in Fort Madison at the time of the conflict. My calculation of the impact of the highway on the minority population of Fort Madison is based on the 1970 U.S. Census of Population data for African American residents (429) and an average of the two figures for the Mexican American population (794). According to the 1980 U.S. Census of Population, there were 612 “People of Spanish Origin” in Fort Madison, which makes the averaged number of 794 seem high, although plausible. To determine the proportional impact of the highway construction project on white versus minority populations, I based my percentages on data included in the “U.S. DOT Case Summary, US 61, Fort Madison, Iowa, NAACP Complaint of Discrimination,” binder 4, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT. It reads, “approximately 146 families are to be relocated, by 4 or 4A, totaling 568 individuals. Of the 146 families, 95 are on assistance; 23 are Black and 29 are Mexican-American.”

10. *Planning Report, U.S. 61 and IA. 2, 3, 18–19, 22, 33–35.*



be difficult." The bypass plan, Alternate 3, would not solve Fort Madison's traffic problem, according to highway planners, because the majority of Highway 61 traffic was local. The ISHC suggested that the bypass could have a negative effect on the city because "such a bypass will not serve the commercial or industrial interests of the city, thereby stifling growth." The report concluded that the southern alignment would be the best solution.¹¹

Fort Madison city officials — including the mayor and the city council — as well as local businesspeople, members of the Chamber of Commerce's Transportation Committee, and other Fort Madison residents supported the southern alignment (Alternate 4 or 4A). According to the Fort Madison Chamber of Commerce, the southern alignment would not only solve the traffic congestion problem, but also "represents the maximum benefit per dollar expenditure on this highway improvement and the lowest local tax dollar demand." According to Mayor Gordon Lane, the city council recognized the southern option as "fulfilling the necessity for another east-west through street that most definitely will otherwise plunge our citizens into bonded indebtedness that will take our city many years to overcome." A local banker endorsed the plan because "the basic needs to the community must be considered to permit growth and expansion that will benefit far more people than those who may be inconvenienced."¹²

The highway project was promoted as a safety measure, a step toward further commercial and industrial growth, and an economically sound choice that could increase property values and tax revenues. With the motto "Where Business Prospers," Fort Madison had experienced economic growth during the postwar period. Chevron Chemical, John S. Breck, Armour Dial, and other companies built new plants in Fort Madison during the 1960s and 1970s, joining the city's established business core that included the Schaeffer Pen Company and DuPont. According to the ISHC report, the southern alignment "should boost

11. *Ibid.*, 3, 18–19, 22, 33–35.

12. Comments of Mayor Gordon Lane, Paul Rice, and Anthes Smith, Transcript of Public Hearing on Highway 61 Plan, 1/27/1972, 14, 24, 36.

land values along the corridor . . . and serve the existing industrial area and encourage new commercial and industrial growth." According to the local banker quoted above, "we have attracted new industry and new business and new people to the community, and we haven't provided some of the basics to which they, and all of us, are entitled."¹³

Following World War II, elected officials and civic leaders in Fort Madison, as in other places throughout the nation, focused their attention on improving the city. According to urban historian Raymond Mohl, "the problems of deteriorated housing, blighted neighborhoods, and urban decay had been only partially addressed during the New Deal era. Clearing inner-city slums was on the agenda of most postwar mayors, planners, and developers." In addition, city officials and planners were reassessing the condition of urban streets and parking. The national trend toward suburbanization meant that urban transportation and road systems needed to accommodate an ever growing commuter population. Those commuters took their tax dollars with them to the suburbs, leaving many municipalities in financial crisis. During this period, urban renewal projects were conceived as ways to clean up cities, provide new housing, encourage growth of the business sector, and lure middle-class residents back from the suburbs. With the passage of the Housing Act of 1949 and the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, the federal government provided financing for redevelopment and highway projects that dramatically changed urban spaces throughout the United States.¹⁴

The southwestern area of Fort Madison was repeatedly marked for redevelopment and renewal. The Mayor's Civic Planning Committee of Fort Madison formed in 1946 to investigate the condition of housing, traffic flow, and municipal services and to make recommendations for improvements. On the

13. Sloat, *Fort Madison*, 182–83; *Planning Report, U.S. 61 and IA. 2*; Comments of Anthes Smith, Transcript of Public Hearing on Highway 61 Plan, 1/27/1972, 36.

14. Raymond Mohl, "Shifting Patterns of Urban Policy," in *Urban Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Raymond A. Mohl (New Brunswick, NJ, 1993), 14; Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York, 1985); Jon Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940–1985* (Baltimore, 1990).

topics of residential areas and zoning, the committee concluded that “no well defined area exists where a slum area elimination project would be warranted,” but select homes should be improved. According to the committee, the area south of Avenue L and adjacent to the railroads was a prime location for industrial growth and development. In 1958 the Fort Madison Planning and Zoning Commission enlisted the professional expertise of Harland Bartholomew and Associates, an established firm that provided redevelopment plans for many American cities. Their 1960 comprehensive plan for Fort Madison outlined ways to make the city “more attractive as a place for people to live, work and raise a family,” because “aesthetic qualities contribute to the desirability of a city and can be measured in economic terms.” In regard to housing, the report noted that “there are no extensive slum areas as are found in many large cities,” but there were areas with “some substandard and dilapidated dwellings,” primarily south of Avenue L. In Don C. Shafer and Associates’ 1968 comprehensive plan for Fort Madison, an assessment of the city’s structures revealed that the west end of town, with the majority of housing located south of Avenues L and O, had the “greatest amount of concentrated deterioration.” Both comprehensive plans highlighted the need for rehabilitation and redevelopment in the vicinity of the proposed highway project.¹⁵

In 1967 and again in 1971, the ISHC recommended rerouting Highway 61 through the southern area of the city. During this period, Fort Madison officials were also planning an urban renewal project for the city. The General Renewal Plan included plans for updating and clearing substandard structures on the south side of town, from Second Street to 39th Street. When the city council received an update on the plan in October 1971, questions were raised about the connection between the highway project and the urban renewal project. According to the

15. Civic Planning Committee, *Improvement and Development Program, Recommended for the City of Fort Madison by the Mayor’s Civic Planning Committee, Fort Madison, Iowa* (Fort Madison, 1947), 99; Harland Bartholomew and Associates, *The Comprehensive City Plan, Fort Madison, Iowa: Prepared for the City Planning and Zoning Commission* (St. Louis, 1960), 67 and fig. 17; Shafer and Associates, *Comprehensive Plan*, 139, 141, Condition of Structures Map; Mohl, “Shifting Patterns,” 14.

director of public works, "If the highway goes through the GNRP [General Renewal Plan] area, money spent by the city (\$400,000 or more) could be termed in-kind services. . . . if the highway does not go through the area, it won't make any difference. There will be plenty of ways the city can provide in-kind services."¹⁶

As part of an overall plan to improve the city, Fort Madison leaders also proposed building low-income housing in the city. Although they were separate projects, the Highway 61 plan and the low-income housing project were connected. Federal law required that housing be secured for all displaced persons prior to road construction, and the highway project would have funneled residents into low-income units. When a referendum to approve the housing project went to vote in May 1970, some residents urged others to vote against it as a means to block the highway project. Opponents wrote letters to the editor of the local newspaper urging residents to vote "No." Although the referendum narrowly passed, the fifth ward — the southwest area of the city that would be directly affected by the highway construction — voted against it. Disregarding the chair of the Low-Income Housing Authority's assurances that the projects were not connected, residents of the fifth ward took a collective step toward blocking the Highway 61 project.¹⁷

As the environmental movement gained momentum and the civil rights movement demonstrated the power of grassroots organizing, public opposition to road projects became more common. Historians have found that immediately following the 1956 infusion of federal dollars into highway construction, "facilitating traffic flow justified almost any engineering endeavor." But a shift in the planning process occurred during the mid-1960s. Highway builders found it increasingly difficult

16. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 10/28/1971; *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, 10/27/1971.

17. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 5/11/1970, 5/6/1970; Virginia Harper to Regional Office of HUD, 5/19/1970, file: Iowa Racial Issues, Highway 61, newspaper clippings, 1968–1976, box 3, Virginia Harper Papers. Also in the Virginia Harper Papers is a photocopy of an undated newspaper article on the Highway 61 project from the *Des Moines Register* [ca. April 1970] that focuses specifically on the issue of replacement housing for residents displaced by highway construction. Handwritten at the bottom of the photocopy is "VOTE NO MAY 12th" (the date of the citywide vote on the low-income housing referendum).

to place engineering principles above community concerns. City officials and highway proponents often faced opposition at the local level. During the 1960s, successful oppositional campaigns in Boston, San Francisco, and New Orleans proved that residents could stop road projects. Activists involved in those campaigns and others wrote and published histories of highway conflicts, highlighting the organizational methods and tactics employed by opponents.¹⁸

Responding to these attacks, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) created new policies and Congress passed new laws in the late 1960s that changed the way roads were designed and built. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 required highway planners to investigate the impact of roads on the environment, and new federal policies required that relocation housing be secured prior to construction. In Fort Madison, opponents used these new policies and laws to advance their cause. They attended and spoke at the public meetings that FHWA policy required. They reminded city officials and highway planners about the lack of affordable housing for displaced residents. According to the *Des Moines Register*, the Fort Madison case was "Iowa's first major test of federal [relocation] regulations to keep people from being bulldozed out of the way of new highways." In addition, once NAACP Assistant General Counsel James Meyerson became involved in the conflict in

18. Peter Norton, "Fighting Traffic: U.S. Transportation Policy and Urban Congestion, 1955–1970," *Essays in History* 38 (1996), on-line journal available at <http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/EH/EH38/Norton.html>, accessed 9/9/2005; Raymond Mohl, "Race and Space in the Modern City," in *Urban Policy*, 110; Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), esp. chap. 8; Edward Weiner, *Urban Transportation Planning in the United States: An Historical Overview* (New York, 1987), 14; Mark H. Rose and Bruce E. Seeley, "Getting the Interstate System Built: Road Engineers and the Implementation of Public Policy, 1955–1985," *Journal of Policy History* 2 (1990), 23–55; Alan Lupo, Frank Colcord, and Edmund P. Fowler, *Rites of Way: The Politics of Transportation in Boston and the U.S. City* (Boston, 1971); Richard O. Baumbach Jr. and William E. Borah, *The Second Battle of New Orleans: A History of the Vieux Carré Riverfront Expressway Controversy* (University, AL, 1981); William Issel, "'Land Values, Human Values, and the Preservation of the City's Treasured Appearance': Environmentalism, Politics, and the San Francisco Freeway Revolt," *Pacific Historical Review* 68 (1999), 611–46; Helen Leavitt, *Superhighway — Superhoax* (New York, 1970); Ben Kelley, *The Pavers and the Paved* (New York, 1971); and A. Q. Mowbray, *Road to Ruin* (Philadelphia, 1968).

January 1971, he pursued a charge of discrimination in a federally funded project, a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.¹⁹

OPPONENTS of the proposed relocation of Highway 61 relied on external support, specifically the involvement of NAACP lawyer James Meyerson, throughout the conflict, but Meyerson's assistance did not ignite the conflict. Nor did Meyerson's legal work drive the campaign against the highway. According to Meyerson himself, the effort "came from the bottom up."²⁰

Between the March 8, 1968, public hearing, when the ISHC first proposed the southern route, and the January 27, 1972, public hearing, when the plan was again presented in Fort Madison, the Committee Against the Relocation of Highway 61 formed to initiate local action. In the spring of 1970 the Fort Madison Human Rights Committee met with the Iowa Human Rights Commission to discuss the potential impact of the highway and to determine a strategy for opposing the project. The chair of the Iowa Human Rights Commission and the president of the Fort Madison NAACP branch, Dr. Harry Harper, an African American physician who lived and worked in the city, led the meeting. From the audience, Harper's daughter Virginia addressed the attendees: "Some people [in the highway corridor] own their own homes but often can't buy north of Avenue L because of discrimination." A member of the Committee Against the Relocation of Highway 61, she subsequently filed a complaint with the DOT on behalf of the local branch of the NAACP prior to the committee's first public meeting in December 1971.²¹

Virginia Harper, who had been born and raised in Fort Madison, led the fight against the highway project. Her civil rights activism began at an early age. When she was just 10 or 11 years old, she refused to sit in the area designated for African

19. *Des Moines Register*, undated [ca. April 1970], file: Correspondence and documents, 1976, box 3, Virginia Harper Papers; James Meyerson to Virginia Harper, 1/17/1972, *ibid.*; James Meyerson to James Frazier, 10/16/1974, file: Correspondence and documents, 1968–1974, *ibid.*

20. James Meyerson to author, 9/10/2004.

21. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 5/7/1970.



Virginia Harper (seated, center), identified as executive secretary, poses with the other officers of the Fort Madison branch of the NAACP in this undated newspaper clipping. Her father, Harry Harper, first vice president, is standing behind her. Photo courtesy Iowa Women's Archives (IWA).

Americans and Mexican Americans at a local movie theater. At the University of Iowa, she was one of five African American women who integrated a dormitory in 1946. After further education at Howard University and the College of Medical Technology, Harper moved back to Fort Madison to work as an x-ray technician at her family's medical practice. Like her father, she was active in the local branch of the NAACP, serving as secretary and later as president. Through her involvement in the NAACP, she waged battles against racial discrimination in schools, the state penitentiary in Fort Madison, and local businesses. In the NAACP newsletters that she edited from 1963 to 1970, Harper included information on national civil rights issues, as well as local boycott campaigns of businesses that demonstrated discriminatory hiring practices or discriminatory treatment of patrons. Following a 1968 public hearing on the highway plan, Harper, then age 39, wrote a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, asking "just what will happen to those people whose homes will be confiscated in what is no more or less than a form of urban renewal?" She continued to ask this and other questions when she contacted the DOT and the Midwest office of the U.S. Office of Housing and Urban Development. Her

June 30, 1970, letter to the Equal Opportunity Division of the U.S. DOT reached officials willing to investigate her complaint.²²

Challenging the gender conventions associated with civil rights activism, Harper was considered an oppositional leader by Fort Madison residents, city officials, and DOT officials alike. In the position of NAACP branch secretary — the parameters of which she clearly defined for herself — Harper had both the authority and the access to participate in the conflict in many different ways. She corresponded with the NAACP lawyer, DOT officials, and city officials. She also met with state and federal officials in Fort Madison and Washington, D.C., and served as a spokesperson for the NAACP branch and, more generally, for Fort Madison's minority population. When the "highway men" — as Fort Madison residents called them — made technical arguments about slope and grade, Harper responded with her own plan for the highway alignment. When Fort Madison's "city fathers" — as at least one opponent referred to them — accused her of failing to represent the position of the minority population, she dismissed their comments. Throughout the conflict, Harper maintained her position when her knowledge and authority were questioned. She remained committed to the campaign until the project was abandoned in the mid-1970s.²³

The oppositional campaign that Harper initiated was sustained by the efforts of residents of Fort Madison and the outlying areas. It began as a multi-issue campaign, supported by residents who lived throughout the city and in surrounding towns. While maintaining the support of people living in other areas of the city, leaders and organizers focused their attention on mobilizing the affected population. Opponents must have

22. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 7/6/1968; Virginia Harper to HUD, 5/19/1970, file: Correspondence, 1969–September 1974, box 3, Harry Harper Papers; David Hudson, Marvin Bergman, and Loren Horton, eds., *The Biographical Dictionary of Iowa* (Iowa City, 2008), 214–16. For examples of NAACP newsletters, see file: Civic leadership positions, newsletters, 1963–1966, box 2, Virginia Harper Papers.

23. Virginia Harper to James Frazier, 1/19/1975, file: U.S. Highway 61, Fort Madison, Iowa, Correspondence, October 1974–75, box 3, Harry Harper Papers; Bill Holvoet, Fort Madison resident and Southeast Community Action Program employee, phone discussion with author, 7/15/2005. For more on gender and activism in the context of the civil rights movement, see Robnett, *How Long?*

recognized that they would achieve their goal only with the support of the residents who would be affected. Leaders emerged from within the affected population who represented their specific interests. They created petitions, organized rallies, and encouraged their neighbors to speak out against the project. These opponents asserted their rights to have a say in the process and to remain in their homes. One such opponent, Milo Prado, declared, "as a Mexican American, [I] do not feel like I am living in a slum district even tho some people think we are. We have nice homes and are all satisfied where we are located. The people of Fort Madison moved us [to our current location]. Now they want to move us again. Do you not call that discrimination? I do."²⁴

A diverse and politically active group of Fort Madison residents joined Virginia Harper on the Committee Against the Relocation of Highway 61. Committee member Fidel Alvarez, a Mexican American resident who lived south of Avenue L, was involved in the Fort Madison Human Rights Commission, as well as civil rights organizations such as La Raza and the Davenport-based La Rosalida. In addition to his work on behalf of the oppositional campaign, he participated in other local efforts such as recruiting the first Mexican American teacher to work in the Fort Madison schools and participating in the Governor's Task Force on Mexican American issues in Iowa. Casey Lopez, a member of La Raza and the NAACP, and the first Mexican American man to serve on the city council, also joined the committee. He focused on mobilizing residents within his ward who would be affected by the road construction. In addition to Alvarez, Harper, and Lopez, two Fort Madison residents living outside of the affected area, Marvin Strunk and William Holvoet, a representative of the Southeast Iowa Community Action Program, joined the committee.²⁵

Drawing from their combined experience, and presumably relying on their affiliated organizations for financial assistance and resources, the Committee Against the Relocation of High-

24. Milo Prado to DOT, undated [ca. October 1974], file: Correspondence, October 1974–1975, box 3, Harry Harper Papers.

25. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 5/7/1970, 6/27/1972; Sebastian Alvarez, Fidel Alvarez, and Frank Reyes interview.

way 61 launched its oppositional campaign. Prior to the January 1972 public hearing sponsored by the ISHC, the committee organized a meeting at Sacred Heart Hall where 130 attendees discussed the impact of the road project and strategies for opposing it. The committee prepared for the meeting by notifying the ISHC, the local congressman's office, and the local press, all of which sent representatives to the meeting. It also circulated printed ballots, with an option to "favor the south route" or "support the bypass," as well as place for the name and address of each attendee. The ballots marked "support the bypass" were later submitted to the ISHC and became part of the project's official record. The committee sent follow-up letters to remind attendees of the upcoming public hearing, along with addressed and stamped envelopes for recipients to use to write to the Highway Commission to make a formal request to speak at the hearing. This organized approach was effective: 12 people who had attended the committee's December meeting spoke in opposition to the highway at the public hearing the following month or wrote a letter that became part of the hearing transcript.²⁶

Thus, when the ISHC presented the southern alignment at the January 1972 public hearing, the opposition was prepared. Few chose to carry the placards that the committee had provided at the entrance of Sacred Heart Hall, but many people spoke out against the rerouting of the road through the southern area of the city. With some speaking as individuals and others on behalf of organizations or groups, opponents generally received applause from the crowd whereas supporters' comments were received in silence.²⁷

For many Fort Madison residents, the threat of the highway was a call to action. At the hearing — as was the case throughout the entire conflict — Fort Madison residents expressed many different reasons for opposing the project. As a resident

26. Ballots in Transcript of Public Hearing on Highway 61 Plan, 1/27/1972; Form letter from Committee Against the Relocation of Highway 61 to Mrs. Baxter, 1/10/1972, binder 2, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT; *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 12/2/1971.

27. *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, undated [ca. January 1972], file: Newspaper clippings, 1968–1976 and undated, box 3, Virginia Harper Papers; *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 1/28/1972.



Tillie Rascon and Fidel Avarez hold signs prepared for the public hearing. From Burlington Hawk-Eye, January 27, 1972.

living south of Avenue L, Eva Perez wanted highway planners to know that the houses in the area looked better on the inside than they appeared on the outside. Introducing himself as a former councilman, Robert Brown stated that “they are trying to shove this down our throats,” adding that the plan will actually create “bottlenecks” within the city. Speaking on behalf of some Mexican American residents living in the affected area, Sebastian Alvarez stated that they had been forced to move after the flood of the 1920s, and that they should not have to move again.²⁸

Following the January 27, 1972, public meeting, the Committee Against the Relocation of Highway 61 disappeared from the public record. Committee members, including Harper, Alvarez, Holvoet, and Lopez, continued to organize oppositional activities and speak out against the highway project, but it is unclear to what extent they coordinated their efforts and regrouped to discuss their progress. From 1972 to 1976, newspaper accounts

28. Comments of Eva Perez, Robert Brown, and Sebastian Alvarez, Transcript of Public Hearing on Highway 61 Plan, 1/27/1972, 59, 65, 42.

and correspondence between the city and the Iowa DOT refer to people as individual activists rather than as members of a formal committee. On the other hand, the personal papers of Harry Harper and Virginia Harper suggest that the opponents continued to communicate with each other and worked together throughout the conflict.²⁹

Opposition leaders focused on mobilizing specific groups of residents and often served as spokespeople for them. For example, when Gene Salazar, a Mexican American man, met with highway personnel and city officials, his comments were limited to the desires and concerns of the Mexican American residents living south of Avenue L. Prior to the 1972 public meeting with the highway planners, Fidel Alvarez and Tillie Rascon made placards with slogans such as "Mexicans against the highway through the barrio," some of which were written in Spanish. In 1972 Casey Lopez chaired a public meeting sponsored by La Raza that was held along Avenue Q. Speaking in both English and Spanish and addressing issues of concern primarily to Mexican American opponents, Lopez encouraged attendees to sign petitions and write letters in opposition to the highway.³⁰

While Lopez, Alvarez, and others spoke on behalf of Mexican American residents, Virginia Harper saw herself as speaking for all of the opponents of the highway. In fact, after filing

29. Within the records I reviewed, I found several references to coordination and communication among opponents. See Virginia Harper to James Meyerson, 7/13/1974, file: Correspondence, 1969–September 1974, box 3, Harry Harper Papers, in which Harper tells Meyerson that she was contacted by a young Mexican American about an "activist group" organizing against the highway; Virginia Harper to James Meyerson, 7/27/1974, *ibid.*, in which Harper refers to a letter that she sent to "young Mexican Americans who are working to organize opposition to the Highway"; and James Meyerson to Virginia Harper, 3/28/1975, file: Correspondence and Documents, 1975, box 3, Virginia Harper Papers, in which Meyerson asks Harper to "keep Gene and the others advised." In addition, a petition circulated by Milo Prado and a collection of letters sent to the DOT in October 1974 are part of the Harry Harper Papers. There is no evidence that Harry Harper was involved in circulating the petition or that he organized the letter-writing campaign. These petitions and letters suggest that opponents were keeping each other informed of their activities.

30. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 7/6/1972; *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, 1/27/1972; Patrick Callahan to Robert Humphrey, 10/10/1974, file: September 1974–February 1975, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT.

her initial complaint, she specified to an Office of Civil Rights official that she acted “on behalf of people of all races and their civil rights.” Just as her initial complaint had included 14 reasons to oppose the proposed route — ranging from discrimination to traffic safety concerns — Harper continued to raise various issues throughout the campaign against the highway. As a spokesperson for all opponents, she must have realized the importance of incorporating diverse complaints against the highway into the opposition’s message.³¹

Whether they voiced concerns about pollution, distrust for the planning process that seemed to benefit local businesspeople, or fear that the displaced residents would be unable to find suitable replacement housing, opponents lived throughout the city (see Map 1). Most of the Fort Madison residents who signed the petition lived north of Avenue L and would not have been displaced by the highway project. Opponents also lived outside of the city limits, in surrounding towns such as Wever and Montrose and other cities, including Burlington and Keokuk. Petition signers who lived outside of the city limits (not represented on the map) composed 17 percent of the total signers. Some of those people may have commuted to Fort Madison and signed the petition at work. Others may have known Harper through her work or the various organizations that she belonged to and signed the petition in her presence. Still others may have signed the petition when one of their friends or neighbors circulated it locally.³²

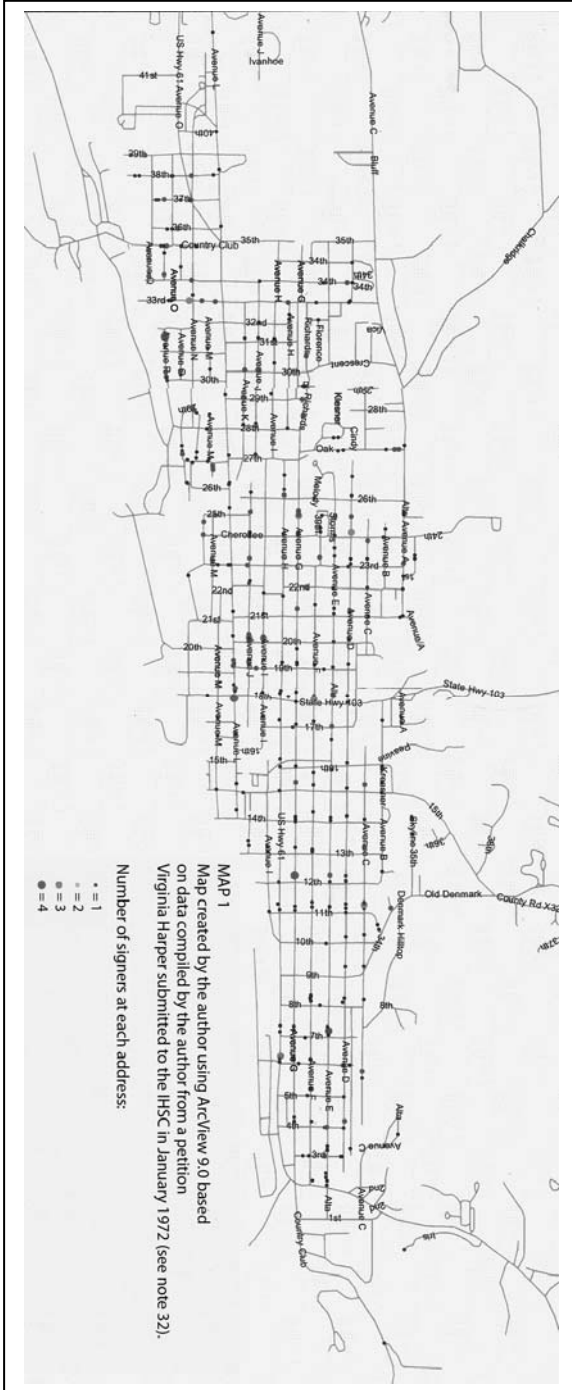
31. Virginia Harper to William Bailey, 9/2/1970, file: Correspondence, 1969–September 1974, box 3, Harry Harper Papers; Virginia Harper to Equal Opportunity Division, Federal Highway Administration, 6/30/1970; Cover sheet to petition submitted to ISHC, Transcript of Public Hearing on Highway 61 Plan, 1/27/1972.

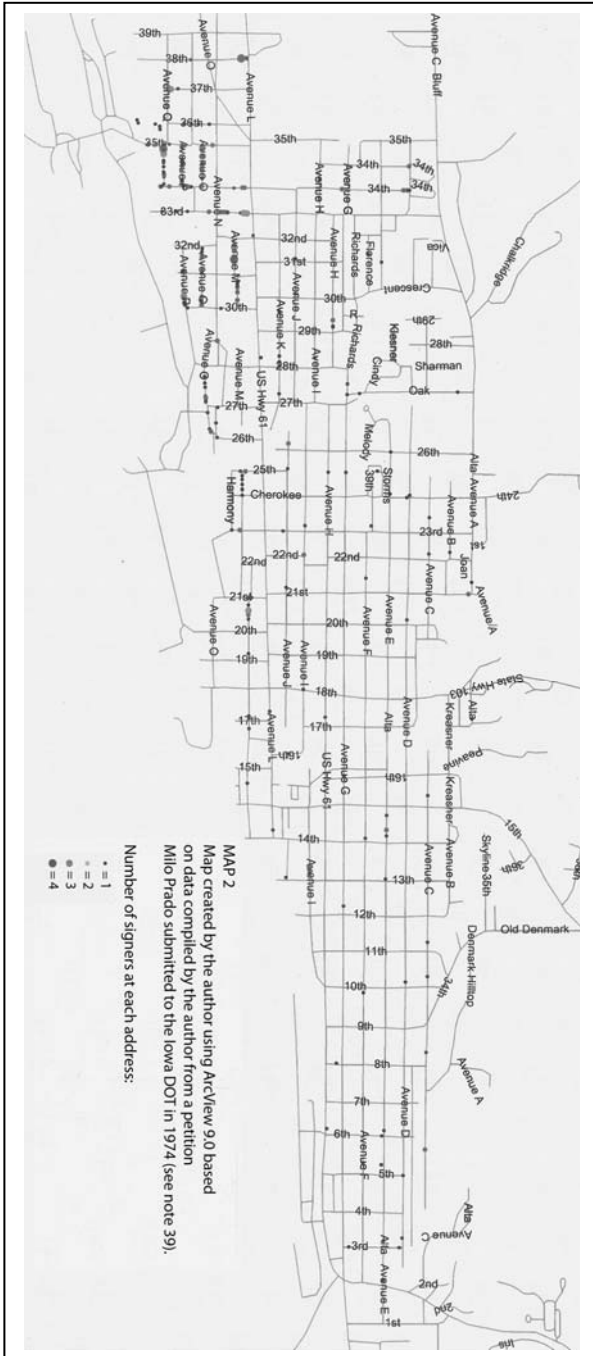
32. The petition Virginia Harper submitted to the ISHC in January 1972 became part of the official transcript of the Public Hearing on Highway 61 Plan, 1/27/1972. According to the ISHC, there were 732 signatures on the petition; I identified 693. Unlike DOT officials, I counted entries for “Mr. and Mrs. X” as two entries rather than one, but I counted duplicate signatures only once. Of the 693 legible signatures on the petition, I plotted the home addresses of 525 signers on a map of Fort Madison (see Map 1). I used either the address provided by the signer or the address found in the *City Directory* if the signer did not provide one. The other 168 could not be plotted because 120 signers had home addresses outside of Fort Madison, 3 lived in trailer parks, 22 had rural route or post office box addresses, and 23 were unmappable for other reasons.

Why would so many people oppose a project that would not have a direct impact on their lives? Some signed the petition because they had strong feelings about the environmental impact, the charge of discrimination, the loss of homes, the cost of the project, and other issues. Others who lived in Fort Madison but outside of the affected area may have signed the petition because they feared that they would be affected. The petition was circulated prior to the January 1972 hearing, so many must have signed it without knowing the exact route, which houses would be demolished, when the project would start, and other details of the project. Media coverage of the issue had thus far been limited, and public information about the planning process was sparse. Many people would have relied on informal discussions at workplaces, social clubs, and other locations to learn more about the project.

Harper's petition suggests that such discussions occurred at the Schaeffer Pen Company, one of the city's major employers, on October 25 and 26, 1971. Having filled one of Harper's petition templates, employees continued signing their names and addresses on the back of Schaeffer Pen Company documents. In all, 57 Schaeffer employees signed four pages of the final petition that Harper submitted to the ISHC. From inspectors to machine operators to factory workers, employees in primarily low-level positions within the company signed the petition. The effort is suggestive of the oppositional campaign's strategy to reach residents in their neighborhoods and workplaces and through their social organizations.³³

33. Petition in Transcript of Public Hearing on Highway 61 Plan, 1/27/1972; Virginia Harper to William Bailey, 12/1/1970, file: Correspondence, 1969–September 1974, box 3, Harry Harper Papers. Of the 83 people who signed the four petition pages, 57 were employed at the Schaeffer Pen Company. I used a Fort Madison 1972 *City Directory* to obtain this employment information. The 26 people who were not Schaeffer employees included spouses of workers and individuals for whom the directory did not provide employment information. It is unclear who began circulating the petition at the Schaeffer Pen Company, but there is no reason to believe that the Schaeffer management supported the petition effort. Instead, one can imagine that workers may have been discussing the project during lunch, or may have been passing the pages to one another during the workday, when someone ran out of space on the page and wrote his or her name on the back of the Schaeffer documents. When Harper "called for" her petitions, the pages from Schaeffer were forwarded to her.





Harper's petition should have alerted highway planners and city officials of the uphill battle they faced in pursuing the southern alignment. From African American business owners to white retirees, and from Mexican American families living in the "Mexican Village" to white families with rural route addresses, the opponents of the highway plan were a diverse group, with many different reasons for rejecting the southern route and supporting the bypass plan. City officials attempted to gain support for the highway project by assuring residents that it would not disrupt the "Mexican Village." They also publicized the comments of minority residents who supported the plan. But their tactics failed to sever the ties that bound opponents together. Invoking their rights as residents and as taxpayers, opponents refused to cede control of Fort Madison's development and future to highway planners and city officials. In her letter to the editor, Marta Werner accused those who held "the destiny of fifteen thousand people" of asking Fort Madison residents to "cheer the bulldozers as they tear up our streets, plunge people into debt and destroy ruthlessly the environmental and human values which Fort Madison residents guarded zealously for 100 years."³⁴

Although reformed DOT procedures required public hearings on a project before final approval of a route, the opponents of Highway 61 faced the challenge of trying to stop a project with very little information about its status and progress. Harper learned of steps taken to move forward with the plan through her regular correspondence with the DOT's Office of Civil Rights and the NAACP attorney, as well as through media coverage of the issue. Characterizing the public hearing as a "sham," Harper and others felt that the route had been selected without considering the widespread opposition to the plan. Oppositional activities were largely reactive, responding to actions taken by the city or the Iowa DOT to proceed with the project. When months passed without receiving any correspondence from Harper, Meyerson, the NAACP attorney, urged Harper to keep him apprised of any new developments, warn-

34. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 5/11/1970.

ing, "It is important to stay on top of things . . . so that we don't get sandbagged."³⁵

Organizers needed to maintain and expand support for the campaign over the course of several years. Opponents participated in the campaign differently, with varying levels of involvement and commitment. Some signed a single petition, others signed several petitions and wrote letters to the DOT, and still others sat in silence during public hearings. Of the close to 700 people who signed Harper's petition, seven either spoke at the 1972 public hearing or wrote a letter of opposition that became part of the January 1972 hearing transcript. Thus, of the hundreds of people who opposed the project, only a few were willing to speak out on more than one occasion. For some people, the demands of work and family may have left little time to devote to participating in an oppositional campaign. Others relied on spokespeople to convey their position on the project. For some, their reticence to go on record against the project may have been linked to misinformation or fear.³⁶

While Harper's petition mobilized opponents throughout the city, residents who lived in and around the affected area were organizing themselves and bringing their friends and neighbors into the campaign. From meetings at the local League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) club to a petition campaign during the summer of 1974, oppositional activities brought affected residents into the campaign to ensure that their voices were heard. Harper was aware of these activities, but there is no reason to believe that she was involved in organizing them or that she attended the meetings or rallies. Residents living in or adjacent to the affected area looked to their own leaders,

35. Virginia Harper to Federal Highway Administration, Department of Transportation, 6/30/1970, file: official correspondence, box 3, Harry Harper Papers; James Meyerson to Virginia Harper, 4/13/1972, file: Correspondence: 1969–September 1974, box 3, Virginia Harper Papers; Mohl, "Race and Space in the Modern City," in *Urban Policy*. Meyerson's concern was warranted in the wake of the passage of the Federal Highway Act of 1956, when highway projects were often approved and construction begun before residents could organize and plan oppositional activities.

36. Virginia Harper to Robert J. Coates, 4/12/1975, file: Correspondence and documents, 1975, box 3, Virginia Harper Papers. Figures based on my comparison of the petition and Transcript of Public Hearing on Highway 61 Plan, 1/27/1972.

such as Gene Salazar and Milo Prado, who circulated petitions, organized rallies, and encouraged affected residents to join the campaign.³⁷

The highway threatened the way of life for people living south of Avenue L, both those who would be relocated and those who would be left with a road in their front yards. For residents living in or adjacent to the affected area, the campaign against the highway was not about traffic or environmental concerns; rather, it was about saving their homes and preserving their community. For those residents, Milo Prado emerged as leader, specifically representing the interests of the affected population. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Prado worked as a laborer at various Fort Madison factories, including Anchor Metals, Boyles Galvanizing, and the Fruehauf plant, and both he and his parents lived in the vicinity of the proposed highway project. He attended the December 1971 meeting organized by the Committee Against the Relocation of Highway 61. In addition, his comments were included on a cassette recording of Spanish-speaking opponents that Virginia Harper sent to the DOT in April 1975. In his letter to the DOT, written on his behalf by his English-speaking tenant, Prado identified himself as a Mexican American man who “was asked to write this letter to you on behalf of some of the people of Fort Madison.” Focusing on the position of elderly residents — those white, African American, and Mexican American people who lived along the route — Prado predicted that they could not survive the move. “Why put our elderly in their graves any sooner than we have to,” he asked. “Regardless of their color they will go their [*sic*] fast enough. Especially when they don’t want the highway.” He concluded his letter by asking the DOT to “answer this letter so I can show it to these old people so that they can rest at night and stop their worrying.”³⁸

37. See note 29 in regard to Virginia Harper’s knowledge of petitions and rallies organized by other individuals.

38. Milo Prado to Iowa DOT, undated [ca. October 1974], file: Correspondence, October 1974–1975, box 3, Harry Harper Papers; Virginia Harper to James Frazier (draft), 4/8/1975, file: Highway 61 correspondence and documents, 1975, box 3, Virginia Harper Papers. Biographical information on Milo Prado is based on information in Fort Madison city directories.

In 1974 Milo Prado submitted a petition that had circulated from June 15 to July 6. Of the almost 400 petition signers, approximately 10 percent had attended the December 1971 meeting organized by the Committee Against the Relocation of Highway 61 or had signed Harper's petition. Unlike Harper's petition, which circulated for two years, Prado's petition circulated for less than a month, during which time more than half as many people signed it as had signed Harper's. And although people who signed Harper's petition may have done so with little information about the project, signers of Prado's petition may have been visited by city officials with regard to acquiring their properties, may have attended one of the local meetings, or may have read the front-page newspaper coverage of the issue. Prado concentrated his efforts within the affected area, especially around the "Mexican Village" at 34th Street and Avenue Q (see Map 2). Written in Spanish and English, the petition begins, "We, the undersigned, Mexican-Americans and all other interested persons of Fort Madison, Iowa, are opposed to the relocation of U.S. Highway 61, through the city." The petition was signed by Mexican American, white, and African American residents.³⁹

Contrasting the home addresses of the signers of the petitions in 1972 and 1974 reveals how the support base of the oppositional campaign had evolved (compare Maps 1 and 2). Campaign supporters who signed Harper's petition in 1972 lived throughout the city. Although some people who lived north of Avenue L and outside of town signed Prado's 1974 petition, most signers lived in or near the affected area. Portions of the proposed highway path can be traced by following the concentrations of signers.

Affected residents resented that their homes were considered "blighted" and that they were being forced to move from

39. Petition, file: Correspondence undated, box 3, Harry Harper Papers. Having counted entries for "Mr. and Mrs. X" as two entries rather than one, and counted duplicate signatures only once, I found 391 legible signatures on the petition. Of these, I plotted the home addresses of 325 signers on a map of Fort Madison. I used either the address provided by the signer or the address found in the city directory if the signer did not provide an address. The other 66 could not be plotted because they had home addresses outside of Fort Madison, lived in trailer parks, had rural route or post office box addresses, or their addresses were unmappable for other reasons.

the homes that they had worked hard to purchase and maintain. Many of the affected residents were retired, and approximately 65 percent of the families living along the highway route received some form of public assistance. Many were concerned about how they could afford to move, and some echoed Prado's fears that they could not survive the move. In their letters to the DOT, generated during a letter-writing campaign in October 1974, affected residents described the condition of their homes. Margaret Hagmeier, who was Milo Prado's tenant and helped organize the campaign, wrote, "I do not consider that I am in a slum district. [My home] has three rooms all paneled with ceiling tiles. Now does that sound like a slum place to you? . . . It is nice along here so why disturb us." Other residents explained the history and the meaning of their homes. Vicente Mendez wrote, "I am a Mexican-American citizen who has worked hard to build my home for my wife and children and we do not want what we have worked for so many years for to be destroyed. . . . We like our home. . . . We have lived here since 1926 when we were run out of the Santa Fe yards by the flood waters." Although they would not have to move, Mrs. Frank Perez and Mrs. Timoteo Prado wrote in their letter to the DOT that they considered themselves "affected" because their homes would face the new highway. Those affected had "sweated" for their homes, according to Perez and Prado. Furthermore, discrimination had prevented many of the African American and Mexican American residents from living elsewhere. Perez and Prado predicted, "they will confront that problem still now, because there are people who can't still except [*sic*] us yet."⁴⁰

FOR SOME Mexican American and African American residents, those living outside as well as inside the affected area, the campaign against the highway was part of a larger, national

40. Don Ward to File, 6/20/1972, binder 3, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT; "US 61, Fort Madison, Iowa, NAACP Complaint of Discrimination," binder 4, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT; Margaret Hagmeier to DOT, undated [ca. October 1974], file: Correspondence, October 1974–1975, box 3, Harry Harper Papers; Vicente Mendez to DOT, undated [ca. October 1974], *ibid.*; Mrs. Frank Perez and Mrs. Timoteo Prado to DOT, 10/14/1974, *ibid.* General description of letters based on those included in file: Correspondence, October 1974–1975, box 3, Harry Harper Papers.

campaign against discrimination. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) reached its initial finding of discrimination in May 1974, based on the complaint filed by Virginia Harper and the NAACP. Both the City of Fort Madison and the ISHC refuted the charge and moved forward with the project. The city compiled its own information about the affected population through a series of home visits, in which city officials, accompanied by translators, met with residents who lived along the highway route. The city contended that "this entire complaint is the opinion of one person or people who are unfamiliar with the people and the circumstances of the City of Fort Madison." In response to the city's actions, Gene Salazar and four other Mexican American residents organized a rally on July 10, 1974. The flier advertising the rally addressed "Hermanos y Hermanas" ["Brothers and Sisters"]:

On July 2, 1974, the All-Anglo City Council of Fort Madison reached a zenith in their traditional disregard for the dignity, sentiments, and legitimate political expression of anyone voicing opposition to their self-serving and pre-determined decisions. WHITEWASH! . . . Well, what did you expect from ("One-of-my-best-friends-is-Mexican-American . . .") Mayor E. R. Rainey? Or from Fifth Ward Councilman Wayne Mitchell, whose sole purpose seems to be to keep the Chicanos, Blacks, and everyone else south of Richards Drive politically impotent? . . . Obviously, we are not being heard . . . so we must speak louder. We must come together to shout our Chicanoism.⁴¹

The Highway 61 project forced Fort Madison residents to consider how race had shaped the city in the past and how it would do so in the future. For some opponents, such as Virginia Harper, racial and ethnic discrimination was at the heart of the highway project. For other opponents, the charge was just one issue of the campaign, not the only one. For city officials, the charge of discrimination threatened to tarnish the city's image and had to be disproved. For local journalists, the charge opened up a larger discussion of race relations and road construction, debates that were delivered to the homes of Fort Madison resi-

41. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 6/28/1974; Liza Montez, Gene Salazar, John Rascon, Manuel Salazar, and Clarence Estrada, Flier for rally on July 10, 1974, file: Correspondence, 1969–September 1974, box 3, Harry Harper Papers.

dents. For Iowa DOT highway planners and officials, the controversy was uncharted territory.⁴²

While local incidents of racial discrimination were reported in the bimonthly NAACP newsletters that Harper edited, the highway conflict brought both historic and contemporary incidents to the attention of a wider audience. Personal stories became evidence in the legal case. When Wendell Carter, an African American resident, met with a civil rights officer sent to Fort Madison to investigate the charge in September 1970, he explained that African American residents had been prevented from buying property in other areas of the city. At the January 1972 public meeting, the president of the local branch of the NAACP read a statement prepared by NAACP legal counsel accusing the ISHC of “total insensitivity” to the minorities living south of Avenue L because of their race and ethnicity. Endorsing the southern routes, the NAACP charged, “authorizes, encourages, and sanctions continued discrimination.” When two ISHC officials visited Fort Madison in 1973, Fidel Alvarez shared the history of the Mexican American community in Fort Madison, emphasizing how discrimination prevented Mexican American residents from buying land in more desirable areas of the city. In private discussions and public hearings, Mexican American and African American residents spoke about how they had experienced discrimination in Fort Madison.⁴³

Following the 1974 federal finding of discrimination, some opponents supported the discrimination charge, while others continued to focus on other reasons why the highway project should be blocked. The president of the local NAACP branch supported the charge based on a history of housing discrimination in Fort Madison; “the reason I think the highway shouldn’t

42. “A Response to the Case Summary of the Complaint of Discrimination, from the City of Fort Madison, July 1974,” held in Fall 2001 by Ms. Pat Zemlicka, Planning and Zoning, Town Offices, City of Fort Madison; H. E. Gunnerson to Highway Commissioners, 5/8/1975; Bob Humphrey to Raymond Kassel, 10/7/1974.

43. Memorandum and Report of Investigation from the director of Civil Rights to Federal Highway Administrator, 12/31/1970, File: December 1970–1971, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT; James Meyerson to ISHC, 1/22/1972, file: Correspondence and documents, 1968–1974, box 3, Virginia Harper Papers; Margie Church to File, 3/19/1973, binder 3, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT.

go that way is we as Blacks weren't put down there by choice." On the other hand, Marta Werner, an opponent who traveled with Virginia Harper and Gene Salazar to Washington, D.C., to meet with representatives from the Office of Civil Rights, wrote to the ISHC suggesting that "many factors . . . should be considered besides the sociological discussion of racial discrimination." It is unclear whether she rejected the charge or feared that her concerns about the environmental impact were being overshadowed by discussions of discrimination. One of the two petitions circulated during the summer of 1974 rejected the charge of discrimination, evidence that some residents opposed the highway project even though they rejected the discrimination charge.⁴⁴

Many opponents referred to historic incidents of housing discrimination, but such discrimination, according to Virginia Harper, was not limited to the past; it continued in the present. In her April 1975 letter to the U.S. DOT, Harper provided examples of African American and interracial families who were unable to purchase property in certain areas of Fort Madison. According to Harper, during the late 1960s some Fort Madison residents purchased available lots collectively and circulated petitions to prevent minority men and women from moving in to their neighborhoods.⁴⁵

In spite of the legislative and judicial steps taken to address widespread residential segregation, culminating in the 1968 Fair Housing Act, minority residents still faced local resistance when they tried to move into white neighborhoods throughout the

44. Bob Humphrey to Dave Drake, 3/8/1974, file: January 1973–May 1974, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT; Grace Harris to unknown, undated [ca. October 1974], file: Correspondence, October 1974–1975, box 3, Harry Harper Papers; Marta Werner to Joseph R. Coupal, 6/13/1974, binder 4, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT; Patrick Callahan to Robert Humphrey, 7/8/1974, *ibid.* Some people who signed Milo Prado's petition during the summer of 1974 in opposition to the southern route and in favor of the bypass also signed another petition that was circulated at the same time in opposition to the charge of discrimination. The other petition was presented to the Iowa DOT by Patrick Callahan, assistant to the director of public works. The purpose of the second petition is not entirely clear. According to Callahan, the petition was circulated by two residents living in or near the affected area. Handwritten across the top of the page reads: "We the undersigned see no discrimination in the proposed alternate 4-A." Handwritten in a different style is "In Favor," and "Highway 61" is written further down the page in another style of handwriting.

45. Virginia Harper to Robert Coates, 4/11/1975.

United States. By resisting housing desegregation, school desegregation, and efforts to stop employment discrimination, white men and women have gone to great lengths to protect “the privileges of whites by denying communities of color opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility.” At times, white resistance to housing desegregation was overt, such as the violence that occurred when African American residents moved into Trumbull Park in Chicago. At other times, white residents prevented minority residents from moving into their neighborhoods through more covert methods, such as unspoken agreements with real estate agents. Working-class and middle-class white residents who organized to maintain residential segregation were acting on “their perception of the threat of black newcomers to their stability, economic status, and political power.” In Fort Madison, some residents perceived the population that would be displaced by the highway as a threat. According to Harper, some residents organized, attended meetings, and circulated petitions during the early 1970s to prevent the construction of the low-income housing projects where many displaced residents would have been moved. The residents who opposed the housing projects were concerned that the low-income housing would be built too close to their homes. These and probably other residents were unwilling to accept changes in Fort Madison’s racial, ethnic, and class makeup.⁴⁶

With the highway issue featured in editorials and front-page news stories and also covered in television news reports, Fort Madison residents were barraged with mixed messages about the discrimination charge. Following the FHWA’s initial finding of discrimination, the City of Fort Madison rebutted the charge in a lengthy statement that was published in the *Evening Demo-*

46. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, 1998), 33, viii; Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don’t Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (New York, 2000); Dionicio Nodín Valdés, *Barrios Norteños: St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican Communities in the Twentieth Century* (Austin, TX, 2000), chap. 5; Arnold R. Hirsch, “Massive Resistance in the Urban North: Trumbull Park, Chicago, 1953–1966,” *Journal of American History* 82 (1995), 522–50; Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), 211; Virginia Harper to James Meyerson, 6/24/1972 file: Correspondence, 1969–September 1974, box 3, Harry Harper Papers; Virginia Harper to Robert Coates, 4/11/1975.

crat on June 28, 1974. The City of Fort Madison stood behind the highway project, stating that "the southern route [alternate 4A] was selected because it was determined to be the best solution to the transportation problems of the City of Fort Madison. There was never any attempt to find out the number of minority families and then to automatically select the one route with the most minority people." Throughout its response to the charge, the city posed questions about what constitutes discrimination. At several points, the city turned the discrimination charge around and accused the accusers of discrimination. For example, when responding to the charge that the city discriminated against specific residents, the report stated that "to label an entire city of 14,000 people as being guilty of discrimination is a discrimination remark in itself." When discussing opponents' support for the bypass plan, the city asked whether the farmers whose land would be purchased for right-of-way purposes could file a charge of discrimination. "After all, farmers are a minority in this nation too. What if a highway project takes the property of an Irishman or a German? Is this discrimination?" Analyzing the data compiled by the NAACP and the Office of Civil Rights, the city suggested that both organizations discriminated against certain residents by not asking everyone living in the affected area for their opinions.⁴⁷

The city's comments and questions about discrimination and reverse discrimination reflect the debates occurring at a national level at the time. For example, in the workplace, white men began protesting and filing complaints of reverse discrimination following the passage of civil rights legislation and the establishment of affirmative action programs during the 1960s. In the context of the Fort Madison highway conflict, there were instances in which residents not only questioned the validity of the discrimination charge but also suggested that all Fort Madison residents could feel the effects of discrimination. During the January 1972 public hearing in Fort Madison, Anthes Smith, a local banker and supporter of the plan, spoke in favor of the proposed highway route. Following the hearing, Smith wrote a

47. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 6/28/1974; "A Response to the Case Summary of the Complaint of Discrimination from the City of Fort Madison, July 1974," 6, 13–15, 26, 27.

letter to the ISHC in which he explained that he omitted several sentences from his prepared comments out of concern for how they would be received by the audience. These included, "It's interesting to speculate — if a new highway resulted in forcing these Mexican Americans to remain in their present locations, would the same persons be arguing that this is enforced segregation and should not be? I think it very possible they would." When Robert Coates, a U.S. DOT civil rights official, traveled to Fort Madison to chair a public hearing on the issue of discrimination, he conducted a series of polls in which he asked minority residents who lived along the proposed highway route for their opinions on the project. Demanding to know why as a white resident living in the affected area he was not invited to participate in any of the polls, a resident asked Coates, "Are you discriminating against me?" This outburst was reported in a local newspaper, raising questions about who could make such claims.⁴⁸

While city officials continued to challenge the charge, journalists explored the relationship between race and roads, raising larger questions about discrimination and highway construction. Following the FHWA's 1974 finding of discrimination, the *Des Moines Register* published an editorial in which the editors accused the ISHC of placing "highway economics" above human considerations. Identifying the connection between the paths chosen for highways and low-income neighborhoods, the editors predicted, "If highway builders are guided by cost alone, the disadvantaged will be the first to be displaced." A few weeks later, the editors of the *Fort Madison Evening Democrat* published a different position on the project. They emphasized how relocation benefits would break the cycle of discrimination. With the money received for their properties, minority residents, according to the editors, could move to other areas of the city and improve their living conditions. Situating the highway conflict in a larger argument about the history of racial inequality, *Burlington Hawk-Eye* columnist Les Peck wrote, "In the past, whites

48. Dennis A. Deslippe, "'Do Whites Have Rights?': White Detroit Policemen and 'Reverse Discrimination' Protests in the 1970s," *Journal of American History* 91 (2004), 932–60; A. Anthes Smith to Robert Humphrey, 1/28/1972, Transcript of Public Hearing on Highway 61 Plan, 1/27/1972; *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, 3/25/1975.

have always had their way in telling minority groups where to live, where to work, where to eat. But nature's scales are tipping to the opposite side. The rights of minorities are being emphasized. . . . Mother Nature remembers. And she is telling whites that the bill for past wrongs is due and they are accountable."⁴⁹

For state highway officials involved in the Highway 61 project, the charge of discrimination raised new questions about their procedures for designing roads. While legislation required that they investigate the impact of a particular route on historic sites and wildlife habitats, highway planners did not have guidelines to follow to gauge the impact of a project on people. In fact, according to one highway engineer, policy dictated that a route be approved *before* the affected people were contacted regarding right-of-way acquisition. When highway officials traveled to Fort Madison in June 1972 to investigate the route, they met with representatives from various city agencies to discuss the impact of the project. When someone described the racial, ethnic, and class breakdown of the displaced population, the highway officials pleaded ignorance. According to one engineer, they had no way of knowing the racial composition of the affected population prior to finalizing a plan. In an internal DOT meeting on the issue of discrimination, the same engineer claimed that he had no way of identifying minority neighborhoods on the aerial maps used to design roads.⁵⁰

After the FHWA's finding of discrimination in May 1974, highway planners continued to meet with each other and with city officials to determine how to proceed with the Highway 61 project. Following an internal Iowa DOT meeting, an employee underscored the failure of highway personnel to demonstrate "our responsibility as objective planners." Acting as "tools of the city," Iowa DOT personnel, according to this employee, re-

49. *Des Moines Register*, 6/7/1974; *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 6/21/1974; *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, 4/2/1974. Des Moines had had its own highway controversy in the 1960s, when freeway construction displaced the vital, largely African American Center Street community. See *Urban Renewal Programs and Their Effects on Racial Minority Group Housing in Three Iowa Cities*, Report of the Iowa State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, June 1964, 3–12.

50. Tom Jackson to Bob Humphrey, 6/11/1974, file: June 1974–August 1974, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT; Don Ward to File, 6/20/1972, binder 3, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT.

lied on questionable data provided by the city instead of investigating the discrimination issue themselves and drawing their own conclusions. Recognizing the gap between the intent of city officials and the desires of residents, the employee charged, "we seemingly ignore statements made by individuals and rely on those made by elected and other officials." The employee's memo about the failures of highway planners on the Highway 61 project stands alone within the Iowa DOT files. A draft of a response to the memorandum remains incomplete. With a reference to an alternate plan for Highway 61 written in the bottom right corner of the draft, the writer no longer felt the need to respond to his colleague's criticism.⁵¹

When the City of Fort Madison and the Iowa DOT refused to comply with the FHWA's recommendation to abandon the southern plan, the U.S. DOT attempted to resolve the situation through arbitration. At a meeting held in October 1974 at DOT headquarters in Washington, D.C., representatives from the city, the Iowa DOT, and the NAACP, as well as Fort Madison residents Virginia Harper, Gene Salazar, and Marta Werner, met with representatives from the Office of Civil Rights. After the involved parties rejected alternate proposals for Highway 61 suggested by the Office of Civil Rights, Robert Coates, chief of public programs in the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. DOT went to Fort Madison to gather more information for Secretary of Transportation William Coleman and James Frazier, director of the DOT's Office of Civil Rights. In a letter dated October 9, 1975, Secretary Coleman concurred with the findings of the Office of Civil Rights and declared the project discriminatory, a violation of Title VI, and ineligible for federal funding. In accordance with the law, the Iowa DOT was entitled to a hearing on the issue.⁵²

AS ATTORNEYS for the respective parties began to prepare for the hearing, Iowa DOT personnel and city officials recognized the difficulty of moving forward with the project and be-

51. Tom Jackson to Bob Humphrey, 6/11/1974; handwritten response to 6/11/1974 memo, file: June 1974–August 1974, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT;

52. William Coleman to Howard Gunnerson, 10/9/1975, file: Correspondence and documents, 1975, box 3, Virginia Harper Papers.

gan to investigate alternate options for Highway 61. During the spring and summer of 1975, they discussed the feasibility of making low-cost improvements to the existing road by widening it. Unlike the southern route, the new plan would neither displace hundreds of individuals nor affect a disproportionate number of minority residents. At a public meeting on May 13, 1976, held to discuss the plan, highway engineers met harsh criticism from an audience of approximately 140 people. John Busard, a resident who lived along Highway 61, addressed the rowdy audience, "Let's give the boys [highway officials] a chance. . . . If we don't like it [the plan], we can give them hell." During the meeting, an unidentified member of the audience asked, "Can we get a petition up and say that we object . . . because of noise and because of air pollution and because of discrimination you'll have our property. Can we get up and do like the . . ." Cutting her off in mid-sentence, a highway planner told her that the Iowa DOT welcomed public participation.⁵³

Although alternative plans were under discussion for Highway 61, the discrimination charge and Title VI violation associated with the project remained. After a pre-hearing on the issue in March 1976, legal counsel for the U.S. DOT contacted legal counsel for the Iowa DOT regarding a settlement. In exchange for the withdrawal of Secretary Coleman's finding of discrimination and the associated violation of Title VI, the U.S. DOT required that the Iowa DOT abandon the plan to re-route Highway 61 through the southern corridor. Both sides agreed to the settlement. Once the low-cost plan was finalized and the city council approved it during the spring of 1976, Secretary Coleman notified the director of the Iowa DOT's Highway Division of the withdrawal of his earlier finding. In the letter, he explained, "While we were of the opinion that a Title VI violation could be demonstrated by the impact of the proposed routing, we were also aware that we were not dealing with an attempt affirmatively to hurt the people living in the Southern Corridor." After the charge was withdrawn, Fort Madison Mayor Rainey received a letter from President Gerald Ford

53. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 5/14/1976; Transcript and staff comments on Public Information Meeting in Fort Madison, 5/13/1976, pp. 15-16, Iowa DOT.



The national NAACP office provided invaluable support for the campaign to stop Highway 61. Here Virginia Harper (center) meets with NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins and Doris Hudson of Denver, Colorado, at an NAACP National Youth Work Committee meeting in New York in the early 1970s. Undated photo courtesy Iowa Women's Archives.

in reference to the settlement that stated, "it was good to learn that the disagreement over the routing of U.S. 61 has been resolved."⁵⁴

Following the May 1976 public meeting on the new low-cost improvement plan, the city council met to discuss the plan. The city's attorney suggested, "we might raise a question whether the new route is discriminatory." His comment did not reflect a genuine concern that the new route was discriminatory. Rather, he was emphasizing his distaste for the discrimination charge and his dismay that the project had been blocked. He went on

54. John Hart Ely to Asher Schroeder, 3/22/1976, file: August 1975–September 1976, Iowa DOT, U.S. 61; William T. Coleman to H. E. Gunnerson, 6/17/1976, File: August 1975–September 1976, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT; President Gerald Ford to Mayor Rainey, 6/29/1976, file: August 1975–September 1976, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT.

to discuss Secretary Coleman's withdrawal of the Title VI violation, stating, "to me it's not only a withdrawal, it's a semi-apology." Whether the attorney's comments represented the position of the city council is unclear; after his comments, the council moved on to another topic for discussion.⁵⁵

As for Fort Madison residents, the discrimination charge meant different things to different people. Highway planners discussed it briefly at the May 1976 public meeting, and a couple of audience members mentioned the issue during their comments. In addition to the audience member described earlier who threatened to charge the Iowa DOT with discrimination, another Fort Madison resident wrote a letter to the Iowa DOT in opposition to the new plan. He stated, "I'm against the highway through town. I will holler discrimination all the way." These particular residents seem to have seen a discrimination complaint merely as an effective way to stop something they did not support. For Harper, who had filed the initial complaint of discrimination in 1970, the out-of-court settlement and the withdrawal of the discrimination charge seemed to have been disappointing. Although her letter to the NAACP lawyer in regard to this development is unavailable, Meyerson's response to Harper suggests her feelings. "While I understand your feelings about the withdrawal of the finding of discrimination, it is sort of moot if the highway is not located as it is now proposed; and it must be considered a victory for the minority community in Fort Madison, a victory assumed by the minority community, alone."⁵⁶

FOR THOSE INVOLVED, the successful campaign against the highway demonstrated what could be achieved by organizing. For all residents, the conflict seemed to have had the effect of encouraging them to participate actively in the highway planning process. During the fall of 1978, the Jaycees and the Transportation Committee of the Fort Madison Chamber of Com-

55. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 5/19/1976.

56. George Otte to Raymond Kassel and Robert Humphrey, 11/16/1978, file: February 7, 1978–March 1979, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT; James Meyerson to Virginia Harper, 4/15/1976, file: Correspondence and documents, 1976, box 3, Virginia Harper Papers.

merce sponsored a traffic survey campaign that was originally proposed by a Fort Madison resident. The survey asked for opinions on the future of Highway 61, with specific questions about the low-cost improvement plan as well as the bypass plan. By distributing surveys and setting up collection boxes in local grocery stores, banks, and businesses, organizers received more than 3,600 responses, which they sorted and counted. The Iowa DOT, responding to a query about the survey from a Fort Madison resident, said that it knew nothing about the traffic study. The organizers later mailed the final results to the Iowa DOT, emphasizing that the majority of respondents were in favor of the bypass plan.⁵⁷

The most significant result of the successful campaign was that the southern corridor was preserved as a residential area. For people living within the area, the victory allowed life to continue as before, neighbors to remain next door to each other, and houses to be passed from one generation to the next. La Fiesta, an annual celebration of Mexican Independence Day held along Avenue Q, continues to be regarded as one of the city's annual attractions. It is hard to imagine what would have become of that tradition and others if the highway had been constructed.

Because of public opposition and lack of support from the city council, the plan for low-cost improvements to Highway 61 was dropped until the mid-1980s, when construction finally took place. During the intervening years, the bypass plan was discussed but never constructed. Following a public hearing on the bypass plan during the summer of 1996, the Iowa DOT prepared an environmental assessment on which the FHWA based its initial approval of the plan. According to the Iowa DOT, the Highway 61 bypass project is scheduled to begin in spring 2009, with projected completion in 2011 or 2012.⁵⁸

Other than in four paragraphs devoted to a history of the conflict in the "Project History" section of the 1997 environmental assessment, and a fleeting mention of the campaign in a survey of African American history in Iowa, the story of High-

57. *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, 11/21/1978; Raymond Kassel to unknown, 12/7/1978, file: February 7, 1978–March 1978, U.S. 61, Iowa DOT.

58. Ingrid Teboe, Field Services Coordinator, Iowa DOT, e-mail message to author, 4/3/2008.

way 61 has been buried in the pages of local newspapers, Iowa DOT files, personal papers, and the memories of those involved. The story is significant not only because the highway project was stopped, but also because it demonstrates what can be achieved through collective action. The campaign brought people together, while the conflict revealed racial, ethnic, and class divisions among the residents of Fort Madison. In their effort to block construction, opponents exposed how racism and discrimination shaped the urban space, both in the past and in the present. Through their campaign against the highway, African American and Mexican American opponents compelled all residents, city officials, and DOT personnel to consider the history and status of race relations in Fort Madison, where, some organizers declared, “the oppressive past is dead. WE are the present; and the future is ours to define.”⁵⁹

59. Environmental Assessment, U.S. 61, Bypass of Fort Madison, Lee County, Project Number NHS-61-1(85)-19-56 (U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, and Iowa Department of Transportation, July 1997), pp. 3-8, Iowa DOT; Bill Silag et al., eds., *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838-2000* (Des Moines, 2001), 329; Flier for rally on July 10, 1974, file: Correspondence, 1969-September 1974, box 3, Harry Harper Papers.