

Pretext: Setting the scene for the 1956 Interstate Highway Act

We'll Take the High Road DAD: [00:26:23] Joe, turn the TV set off. *whines* Turn it off!
[00:26:26][3.3]

We'll Take the High Road WIFE: [00:26:30] Well, what is it? John? [00:26:31][0.6]

We'll Take the High Road DAD: [00:26:33] It's from the highway commissioner. [00:26:34][0.7]

We'll Take the High Road WIFE: [00:26:34] Highway commissioner? [00:26:35][0.7]

Taylor Seely: This audio is from 1957. It's from a promotional video for a federal law that passed one year prior.

We'll Take the High Road DAD: [00:26:37] We have found it necessary in locating the new interstate and National Defense Highway in the Hilldale area to acquire your property for right of way. And would like to arrange at your convenience a meeting with our appraisers and negotiators to establish a fair value and arrange the terms of the purchase.

We'll Take the High Road WIFE: You mean the freeway is going to come through our place?

We'll Take the High Road DAD: That's what the letter says. [00:27:01][23.1]

Taylor Seely: The scene shows a husband and wife, two kids, and a grandmother. They've opened a letter explaining how they're going to lose their home as a result of the new highway system being built.

We'll Take the High Road: [00:01:33] President Eisenhower's militant call for a grand plan to provide a modern controlled access highway system for safe, efficient transcontinental travel led to the passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. [00:01:49][16.0]

Taylor Seely: The grandma in the video is furious.

We'll Take the High Road GMA: [00:27:01] They have no right to do this. This is the Hapha place! [00:27:06][4.7]

Taylor Seely: She ends up taking her chair out front to sit underneath a big tree she planted to guard it from highway construction.

We'll Take the High Road DAD: [00:27:40] Joe, run on, tell grandma to come back in the house, the bulldozers will be here for two or three months yet. [00:27:45][4.4]

We'll Take the High Road JOE: [00:27:45] Yes, Dad. [00:27:46][0.3]

Taylor Seely: The father, for his part, takes a seat on the couch, looks flustered for a second, then lets out a sigh and says he's been thinking a lot about what he'd do if this happened.

cue some kind of old timey melancholic music

Taylor Seely: He said it came down to the greater good.

We'll Take the High Road DAD: [00:28:50] We all want the roads, but we want them on somebody else's place, not ours. We all want the benefits and the progress and the safety and the convenience. We want them without having to disturb our own setup. Well, if we want all these things, the highway has to go someplace. Now, the routes are selected by experts who have nothing against us. They don't even know us. They just designed the road to go where it will do the most good for everybody and for the overall plan. Well, it happens that this road goes through our place, and I think we'd be pretty small minded if we tried to fight it. I'm sure we'll be given a good price for our place and we can build a new house. And as far as I'm concerned, I just don't think that any family or business or individual has any right to hold up anything that will be good for his whole community and for his country, too. [00:29:46][55.5]

Taylor Seely: This government video paints the interstate highways as both a necessity and a luxury. This was during the Cold War, when highways were viewed as a crucial piece of infrastructure. If city populations needed to evacuate, people would need the roadways to do so. But the government was also selling them as idyllic amenities. The video shows attractive young couples road tripping cross country in cool convertible cars. And while it shines a light on some of the controversies surrounding the law, it concludes with a happy ending. It shows the ending the government wanted to see: the one where Americans didn't make a big fuss about losing their homes. But that is not an entirely accurate depiction of what happened. Certainly not for Phoenix.

15-sec sting

Introduction: What the highway act did for America and Arizona

Taylor Seely: Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com, where we answer the questions you ask about metro Phoenix. I'm producer Taylor Seely. In today's special, investigative episode, I'm exploring interstate highways and the effect they had -- if any -- on segregation in Phoenix.

music out

Taylor Seely: The 1956 interstate highway act was a massive undertaking for the country.

We'll Take the High Road: [00:02:21] The program involves the construction of forty one thousand miles of expressway, connecting every segment of the United States. [00:02:31][9.7]

Taylor Seely: These highways would be different from other federally funded U.S. highways. They'd be larger, more grand.

Taylor Seely: But immediately, people were concerned the impact they would have on their neighborhoods, businesses and towns as a whole.

We'll Take the High Road EMMA GOTH: [00:19:03] Mr. Gray, I'm Emma Goth. The chairman of Hilldale Beautification and Historical Committee. I've been studying these maps and each proposed route will destroy some natural beauty or some historical treasure of this community. After all, don't these things have some cultural and social value? Man does not live by bread alone, Mr. Gray. [00:19:28][24.3]

Taylor Seely: One solution, then, was to place the highways in parts of town the majority found less desirable.

We'll Take the High Road: [00:19:48] In our biggest cities rights of way are located in blighted or slum areas, which helps to clean them up. [00:19:57][8.2]

Taylor Seely: In cities across the country, interstate highways were specifically placed through neighborhoods that government officials considered unsightly. These neighborhoods were decimated by highway construction, and it was often part of programs called "slum clearance" and "urban renewal" or "beautification." These "slum areas" and "blighted neighborhoods," however, were typically home to low-income people who were mostly people of color.

Taylor Seely: The Black novelist James Baldwin in an interview in 1963 recalled the urban renewal programs as a means to displace Black residents and decimate their communities.

James Baldwin: [0:22] Urban Renewal. Which means moving negroes out. Negro removal. That is what it means. And the federal government is an accomplice to this fact! [0:45]

Taylor Seely: The destruction of Black neighborhoods resulted in displacing its residents farther away from white people than before, thereby further segregating cities. One example is the Dan Ryan Expressway in Chicago. Richard Rothstein, a fellow at the Economic Policy Institute, said the placement of that highway was modified to explicitly create a quote "firewall" between white and Black parts of town... That segregation still lingers today... But, did that happen in Phoenix? Is that story... our story?

Mark Tebeau: [00:06:57] So the way I would portray it is that what the freeway does is essentially underscores existing segregation. [00:07:06][8.4]

Taylor Seely: That's Mark Tebeau, an urban historian at Arizona State University.

Mark Tebeau: [00:03:25] So segregation was already deeply ingrained in cities including Phoenix, through housing, through things like housing covenants, through discriminatory practices that were part of the real estate industry in Phoenix. There was a, there was a North-South divide. [00:03:42][17.3]

Taylor Seely: This North-South divide was demarcated by Van Buren Street. The story behind that boundary dates back to the 1800s, when the town was still largely rural and farmers settled along the Salt River. But eventually, in 1891, the river flooded. And it kept flooding in the years that followed. So those who could afford to move, did. And they were mostly white.

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Taylor Seely: In subsequent decades, white real estate agents in Phoenix wouldn't show Black or Latino families homes in white neighborhoods. White home owners started implementing restrictive covenants in their home deeds. That meant a person of color could never purchase the home. Arizona also had segregated school systems and banned interracial marriage. And finally, there was redlining.

Phil VanderMeer: [00:09:49] What redlining amounts to is gauging the investment value of of land because the FHA federal government is ensuring these loans...

Taylor Seely: That's Phil VanderMeer, a professor emeritus at Arizona State University and a local historian.

Phil VanderMeer: [00:10:14] And so there was great concern early on that the federal government not lose any money off of this. And so they'd have to guarantee that their loans were likely to be repaid. And so that's why they went into this process of categorizing neighborhoods. Now, they wound up clearly using racial categories, which didn't necessarily relate to questions about value of property and so forth. [00:10:39][49.5]

Taylor Seely: The federal government outlined neighborhoods in red that it deemed unsafe or risky for banks to lend to and race played a key role.

Taylor Seely: In a Phoenix realty map of federal designations, the best areas were outlined in blue and complimented for their exclusivity and restrictions. In a redlined neighborhood in south Phoenix, the map says, quote, "This section, adjoining the railroad station and yards, is a semi-industrial section, with very poor houses. Negroes, Mexicans and different classes of foreigners are rapidly occupying this area."

musical interlude or pause

Taylor Seely: So it would be wholly inaccurate to say interstates invented segregation in Phoenix. As I've just laid out, it was already there - alive and well in the housing market through practices like redlining and racial covenants. But the highways did still have an effect.

Mark Tebeau: [00:04:40] What the interstate highway system does is it uses those disparities and accentuates them. So an example of how it uses them is that property along in so-called blighted neighborhoods, neighborhoods that were often there were declared blighted, not just because the housing stock was aging, but because the people who lived in them were African-American. So it depresses housing values in those neighborhoods. So interstates can gobble up that land inexpensively and those neighborhoods which are often viable, are

rendered less. So when freeways take huge portions of them and actually that's the story of what happens here in Phoenix. [00:05:27][46.5]

interlude music

What interstate highways the 1956 act built

Taylor Seely: To understand how interstate highways reinforced segregation, you have to look at three things. First: Where the highways were built. Second: The ensuing reactions from residents. And third: The response from the local government. Because the response from the government largely depended on who was reacting.

Taylor Seely: So let's talk about the first point: where the highways were built.

some kind of sfx

Taylor Seely: In metro Phoenix, the 1956 Act led to Interstates 10 and 17. Interstate 17 is our north-south interstate that connects Phoenix to northern cities like Prescott and Flagstaff. The 10 is Phoenix's east-west interstate, but it also bends south to connect Phoenix to Tucson.

Taylor Seely: You also have to understand two other streets: McDowell Road and Durango Street. They both run east to west. But McDowell is just north of downtown and Durango is several miles south of downtown. In 1956, McDowell was a predominantly white area, and Durango was predominantly Black and Latino.

Taylor Seely: Now the original plan was for the north-south I-17 to intersect with the east-west I-10 at Durango Street in South Phoenix. But that didn't happen.

White phoenixians' reactions to interstate highway proposals

Taylor Seely: Instead, I-10 and I-17 connect north of Durango. They connect at McDowell, near the predominantly white neighborhoods.

Taylor Seely: The reason why hits on the second and third thing you have to understand: the reactions from residents and what lawmakers did in response.

Taylor Seely: The problem with I-10 and I-17 intersecting at Durango was then-Senator Carl Hayden, a democrat, thought it wouldn't be close enough to benefit the growing communities of Tolleson, Litchfield and Goodear popping up west of downtown along McDowell. He argued the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads should therefore shift it north. And he won.

Taylor Seely: So at this point, the intersection of I-10 and I-17 moves north. It moves from the predominantly Black and Latino neighborhood of South Phoenix to the predominantly white neighborhood north of downtown.

Taylor Seely: But that northward shift now threatened predominantly white neighborhoods like Roosevelt and Coronado. Much like the family in the beginning of the episode, families in those neighborhoods could lose their houses for the sake of freeway construction. Instead, they organized. They fought back. They spoke out against the plan. And the city of Phoenix listened. It created an alternative plan -- one that would save houses in those neighborhoods. They created a highway in the sky, a freeway of heliocoils that would go as high as 100 feet in the air.

Soaring Sculptures Narrator: [00:10:10] The other interchange closely studied by the team has a wholly new kind of design and a new name: helicoil. It is a circuit interchange made up of a series of concentric helises to form a helicoil. I'm told it's economical to build, very efficient from a traffic-handling standpoint, and, as you can see, extremely satisfying from an aesthetic point of view. [00:10:37][17.9]

Taylor Seely: But that compromise wasn't enough. Residents thought it was too costly. They also thought it was ugly. People bought billboards to express their displeasure over the plan. They started arguing that their homes had historic value and even started winning Historic Designation status that protected their homes from demolition.

Mark Tebeau: [00:20:36] north of the 10 neighborhoods like Coronado and Willo. All those community associations are literally formed to fight for the preservation of the neighborhood in the wake of freeway development. [00:20:47][10.4]

Taylor Seely: And perhaps most instrumental in the helicoil plan's demise was that The Arizona Republic, then published by Eugene Pulliam, went on an absolute tirade against the proposal.

Taylor Seely: The paper's opposition eventually prompted the city to put the highway plan to a vote in 1973. The voters said no.

Phil VanderMeer: [00:44:51] you get kind of a confluence of people who surprisingly stopped the whole project. But of course, it doesn't die because you still still have an expanding urban area. [00:45:04][13.6]

Taylor Seely: Finally, the deck park tunnel path was proposed, *upbeat music* which would go underground with a park built on top. It addressed the concerns of residents who wanted the downtown area to feel connected, not cut in half. It was put to a final vote in 1979, and it passed. The construction began in 1983 and it opened in 1990.

MUSIC FADE OUT

Taylor Seely: While the Roosevelt and Coronado neighborhoods saw the deck park tunnel as a better option than the prior proposals, it wasn't necessarily a win. It's possible that about 9,000 people were displaced. And the fight lasted two decades. As a result, the community deteriorated for a time.

David King: [00:17:36] what happened was because the route had been decided, but the construction hadn't started. Then you saw the long period of disinvestment. Where people wouldn't invest in their homes, they didn't want to build new stuff. You didn't see investment in, you know, in the community, as you would see with a community that had an indefinite future. [00:18:02]

Taylor Seely: That's David King, a professor of urban planning at Arizona State University. King said some of the consequences of disinvestment lingered for several more decades. The area started to recuperate, however, around 2010. And if you take a walk in the Roosevelt neighborhood today, you'll see more than a handful of luxury apartment complexes, trendy businesses and gorgeous historic homes with remodeled interiors.

Taylor Seely: So what do we learn from this? Well, here we had two major examples of controversies and proactive fixes from the government. Residents and politicians didn't want I-10 to connect at Durango, they wanted it along McDowell. So it happened. Homeowners in the newly designated historic communities didn't want their town to feel disconnected with the 10 bisecting it, so the state built underground. And added a park on top. These predominantly white neighborhoods didn't escape suffering. But when they reacted, the government responded.

Minority residents' reactions to interstate highway proposals

Taylor Seely: The same thing cannot be said for residents south of Van Buren. And for reasons tracing back to redlining and racially restrictive covenants ~~in other parts of town~~, this area — south Phoenix — was mostly populated by Black and Latino residents, with some low-income white people sparsely throughout.

Mark Tebeau: [00:21:09] I don't know of any efforts among -- in the 70s at least -- among non-whites or the poor that were successful in fighting freeways. [00:21:20][11.8]

Taylor Seely: There are three main neighborhoods I'll focus on to illustrate the different experience minorities in Phoenix lived through. The West Region and Okemah, which were predominantly Black neighborhoods, and the barrios, which were predominantly Latino neighborhoods. Now let's think back to Interstate 17.

Phil VanderMeer: [00:19:50] The North-South part of it is done in the 50s. ...

Taylor Seely: The early construction of I-17 was easy to layout because it cut through rural areas where no major neighborhoods existed.

Phil VanderMeer: ... The question is what they're going to do about what's called the Durango curve area, the East-West section. And this is the real bone of contention. [00:20:09][19.0]

Taylor Seely: Remember how I-10 was supposed to meet I-17 at Durango in South Phoenix? But then that didn't happen because northern Phoenicians wanted the 10 near them? And then they took years fighting over exactly how it would be built near them, resulting in the Deck Park

Tunnel? Well, during all this fighting, the highway planners got sick of waiting. And they weren't sure the 10 would ever get constructed in that downtown area at all. Yet they still needed to connect Phoenix to Tucson. That was the whole point of the 1956 act.

Phil VanderMeer: [00:23:14] So at that stage, they start thinking, OK, well, we better go back to constructing the southern route, which is now sort of the Durango curve area. [00:23:26][12.5]

Durango Curve reaction OR: Black communities' disruption

Taylor Seely: While the city drew up various proposals to appease northern Phoenicians and waited on them to figure out how exactly they wanted the 10 placed, they decided to go ahead and build out the 17 in south Phoenix. This would affect the predominantly Black "West region," first. To clarify: West region wasn't the formal name of the neighborhood. It's what the City of Phoenix called the area in a report it published on historic Black properties. By the time the city finished building out I-17's Durango Curve, it would entirely border the south west edges of the "West Region" neighborhood. Unlike Roosevelt and Coronado, the city didn't make the same sort of exceptions for the people in its path who would be disrupted. In fact, the city had already been buying up the land for this construction years in advance. And on May 15th, 1963, the Durango Curve opened.

Taylor Seely: Before and after images taken from overhead show dozens of homes vanished. The highway cuts neighborhoods in half. In addition to highway construction, Black people were also being displaced by the city's decision to expand its downtown Civic Plaza. As a result, many moved farther south and southeast, to the predominantly black "Okemah" neighborhood.

Taylor Seely: But a few years later, Okemah would be disrupted, too.

Taylor Seely: Phoenix was building out a portion of Interstate 10 called the Maricopa Freeway. It would include the "[Broadway Curve](#)," where I-10 would bend south around 52nd street. Just eight years after the Durango Curve, the Maricopa Freeway construction finished in 1971. It decimated parts of "Okemah." People there lost their homes, and the heartbreak was deep. In a city of Phoenix report documenting historic Black properties, a resident named Mary Boozer remembered the changes.

Taylor Seely: She said, quote, "You feel kind of lost, like they are pushing you out of your home. After I moved out of there, after I found out they were tearing my house down, I couldn't go down there. I just went down 40th street. I never came down Superior where we lived. When I moved I didn't go too far."

Taylor Seely: None of the experts I spoke to knew of any major opposition from the West Region residents affected by the Durango Curve. I also couldn't find anything when I searched through historical Black newspapers. It doesn't mean there wasn't opposition. Just that we don't know about it. If there wasn't opposition, it may have been because the residents were never really given a choice. As I mentioned previously, the city had already been buying up the land. And when it came to political representation, there were no Black members on the Phoenix City

Council at the time. And the Black newspapers didn't have the kind of political sway The Arizona Republic under Eugene Pulliam did.

Phil VanderMeer: [00:25:08] You know, I'm not sure about how much opposition there was. This is a long time in process and the city had been buying land for over a decade. So I think it's kind of muted some of that, [00:25:24][16.4]

I-10 (Maricopa Freeway), Sky Harbor International Airport expansion reaction

Taylor Seely: Where there was opposition in south Phoenix, however, was in Golden Gate Barrio: The barrios were ethnic enclaves populated largely by Mexican migrants and Chicanos who banded together in south Phoenix during the era of segregation and intense discrimination. There were eight of them in south Phoenix and some dated back to the 1920s. They were historic communities and considered vibrant by the residents. But by the 1970s, their existence was being threatened. The city had built out I-10's Maricopa Freeway stretching across south Phoenix from the Durango Curve to the Broadway Curve. And barrio residents hated it. In a 1975 article from the Arizona Republic, a local official said, quote, "southside residents resent the east-west Maricopa Freeway in their area because it is ugly and divisive." It had demolished homes and divided neighborhoods. And now, the city was also going to build out the Papago Freeway and expand Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport. The Papago and the airport threatened a historic barrio called Golden Gate.

Taylor Seely: I spoke to one woman named Stella Pope Duarte. She lived in a barrio adjacent to the Durango Curve on 7th avenue. But she knew people from Golden Gate.

Stella Pope Duarte-2: [00:13:09] I know this one family, they had to, the bulldozer was standing right there and there were still some man still inside the house. They had to pull him out by force and get their house destroyed. [00:13:26][17.4]

Taylor Seely: The notion of demolishing barrio homes was deeply personal to residents. Its history as a community forged from segregation and discrimination built a sense of loyalty and camaraderie among neighbors. Their shared suffering made them closer.

Stella Pope Duarte-2: [00:18:17] we had our own get togethers, our own world, our own lives. We were comfortable among ourselves [00:18:25][8.1]

Stella Pope Duarte-2: [00:04:11] People would take care of their lawns. Now some of the folks here, they would grow plants and flowers and things and things like that and keep them as you don't neat as they could. And then, of course, there was the people that had on junk cars in their front yards, backyards in those days, nobody questioned any of that. And then there was a lot of walking. People would walk. We were all a walking kind of people. [00:04:38][27.7]

Taylor Seely: Stella and another resident who formerly lived in Golden Gate told me these were places where people knew their neighbors. They borrowed food from each other, walked in without knocking and everyone raised everyone's kids.

Stella Pope Duarte-2: [00:20:01] We used to sit out in the front porches. The kids playing. We used to play outside in that dusty road 'til 10 o'clock, 10, 30 at night. Running races and the parents and everybody - you could see them chatting, you know, sitting on the lawns. You know, I could see some of them smoking the little embers, you know, glowing in the dark. And I knew I was okay. My folks were there. My cousins were there. My grandparents were there. You see what I'm saying? I was OKAY. [00:20:34][33.1]

Taylor Seely: This was important for Stella who said she didn't feel that way in other parts of town. She remembered one time crossing Van Buren to sell potholders to some of the white families.

Stella Pope Duarte: [00:08:11] I had a little projects of selling potholders across Van Buren Street to go into the white neighborhoods. And you don't even tell these poor little Mexican kids selling potholders in the middle of summer and they, you know, they buy them and stuff. That was the glimpse I had. But I knew I didn't belong there. [00:08:32][21.7]

Taylor Seely: As a member of her elementary school's gifted program, she also took field trips to predominantly white areas of town.

Stella Pope Duarte: [00:08:46] when we would take trips to the other parts of the city, I would see the expression on people's faces. I mean, it was like, oh my God, these little black and brown kids. [00:08:56][9.9]

Taylor Seely: Here's Kristin Koptiuch, a retired professor of 26 years from ASU. She researched transnational migration and global urbanism.

Kristin Koptiuch: [00:27:00] It really gave people a kind of grounding and and an ethnocenter that they could use as a source of strengths and appreciation, a confidence in themselves that really was intolerable to a white supremacist city. [00:27:25][24.7]

Taylor Seely: But that safe little bubble would cease to exist if the highway and airport were built out. So prominent organizations like Chicanos por la Causa, which was founded by residents of the barrios to fight oppression and mistreatment, and members of the Sacred Heart church, a community mainstay located at 16th street and Buckeye Road, tried to fight the demolition.

Taylor Seely: In the end, their organizing was unsuccessful. The Papago Freeway demolished homes and enforced a barrier bordering the barrios' eastern edge. And both the freeway and the airport expansion demolished homes. All that remains of the historic Golden Gate barrio is the church, which the city now owns. You can still see it standing today. Its stature reduced amid desolate surroundings.

Kristin Koptiuch: [00:30:53] When those highways went through. They made a kind of devastation that's really hard to appreciate. [00:31:04][10.4]

Taylor Seely: Terry Goddard, who became the mayor of Phoenix in 1984 when most of Golden Gate had already been razed, still remembers it today.

Terry Goddard: [00:06:25] You just have to say it was, it was a social tragedy. You know, the city relocated a long term, very, very stable, largely Hispanic neighborhood that was right off the end of the runway because they were concerned about eventually having lawsuits and other other activities that would make the expansion of Sky Harbor more difficult. [00:06:48][22.6]

Taylor Seely: And that removal left residents with few options.

Kristin Koptiuch: [00:20:16] And the people who got displaced from there by eminent domain, ~~they used~~ the city used Eminent Domain to take their home. And they razed them. So there's no question about going back there again. [00:20:32][15.8]

Taylor Seely: Here's Phil VanderMeer to explain eminent domain.

Phil VanderMeer: [00:30:58] Cities have the right to acquire property -- compensated -- if the purpose is a public purpose. So roads, power lines, airports, etc. are all public purposes. [00:31:21][23.1]

Taylor Seely: The problem, historians today say, is that Barrio residents were not fairly compensated.

Kristin Koptiuch: [00:49:41] Woeful amounts. Amounts of money that were based on the quality of the housing, which was zero. They got nothing for their lands. [00:49:53][10.2]

Taylor Seely: To clarify, the residents were compensated. But there's widespread consensus that payouts were very low.

Kristin Koptiuch: [00:50:49] they don't take into consideration the value of community when they decide on the price for a house. It's just based on the structure. And it's always really low. [00:51:03][13.3]

Taylor Seely: On top of that, almost all of the barrio residents owned their homes outright, which meant they didn't have mortgages. Here's Terry Goddard again.

Terry Goddard:[00:06:59] unfortunately, people who own their homes outright when they get the compensation, it wasn't enough to pay for a new home in Maryvale. So they ended up with mortgages and many of them did not were not able to pay the mortgages and ended up losing their homes. So it was just a triple whammy in terms of the impact on the neighborhood. A, it dislocated it. So it wasn't really put back together. B, the people did not handle or were not able to handle the finances in most cases very well. And so they got dislocated again. [00:07:32][32.8]

Taylor Seely: On top of the financial duress, the destruction was emotionally devastating as well. Stella Pope Duarte's old home near the Durango Curve still stands today. But she said the culture that used to exist is gone. She misses being able to just walk into a neighbor's home.

Stella Pope Duarte-2: [00:23:20] And so we had this kind of companionship that we couldn't rely on. And here. Are you kidding me? I have to make appointments with my own kids. [00:23:32][12.1]

Taylor Seely: The loss of homes in the south Phoenix barrios and historically Black neighborhoods left lingering feelings of pain and neglect among minorities. Maricopa County's historical aerial photography from 1949 to 1991 shows entire neighborhoods obliterated to dust and then replaced with highways and airport parking structures. [LINK](#) ...

Contrasting the treatment to white vs. minority neighborhoods

Taylor Seely: Hearing how fondly former residents remembered their old neighborhoods made me think back to the government commercial and the white woman from the beautification committee...

We'll Take the High Road EMMA GOTH: [00:19:03] ~~Mr. Gray, I'm Emma Goth. The chairman of Hilldale Beautification and Historical Committee. I've been studying these maps and each proposed route will destroy some natural beauty or some historical treasure of this community. After all, don't these things have some cultural and social value? Man does not live by bread alone, Mr. Gray.~~ [00:19:28][24.3]

Taylor Seely: Several sources I spoke to compared some of the minority neighborhoods that were demolished to the historic Roosevelt, Willo, and Encanto neighborhoods of today. Kristin Koptiuch said much of what is used as a selling point for neighborhoods today is what existed in the barrios.

Kristin Koptiuch: [00:28:17] they're desperate to sell community and people want to live there because they can get community with all like minded people who have the same exact color lawns and houses and all of the requirements of the HOAs - those kinds of communities actually exist and existed in Phoenix, but they were disparaged and disrupted. [00:28:44][27.0]

Taylor Seely: The barrios and barrio residents weren't held in high regard by white Phoenicians. South Phoenix had a stigma as being dingy and unsafe. Stella recalled a time when she turned on the TV to a local newscast. Reporters were talking about her neighborhood. Images on the screen showed her neighbors' homes.

Stella Pope Duarte: [00:03:56] . I saw that we were the worst slum area in Phoenix. And they showed the little houses all around my cousin's house. Some other homes [00:04:07][10.3]

Taylor Seely: The reporters were talking about her neighborhood as one of the must run down in the city. When Stella's mom came in, she didn't realize what was happening. At first, she was just excited to see her neighborhood on TV.

Stella Pope Duarte: [00:04:14] She comes in and says, look, we're on TV! And she said, 'Look! There's the house of' so and so. And you know, whatever. And I said no. But she didn't understand the word "slum" because they said, "This is the worst slum area in Phoenix. Something has to be done about places" like, you know, they, it, it was a newscast. [00:04:34][19.5]

Taylor Seely: Her mother Rosanna Pope was an Irish Latina woman who mostly only spoke Spanish.

Stella Pope Duarte: [00:05:10] So here's my mother asking me what's a slum? [00:05:13][3.0]

Stella Pope Duarte: [00:05:19] I said, Mama, that's where poor people live. And she said, "Poor people? Well, let's go help them." I'll never forget that. And I said, "Ma. It's us." She said, "What?! We're the poor?" I said, "Ma, can't you see what they're saying? We're the poor." [00:05:38][19.4]

Taylor Seely: This was the perception of south Phoenix. Not by those who lived there, but by those who surrounded it.

Taylor Seely: The government-funded highway commercial acknowledged the value in cultural treasures.

We'll Take the High Road EMMA GOTH: Man does not live by bread alone, Mr. Gray. [00:19:28][24.3]

Taylor Seely: But in the case of the barrios, highways took priority.

musical interlude

Why the disregard for south Phoenix residents?

Taylor Seely: You may be wondering: Why? Why didn't the opposition of south Phoenix residents matter? Roosevelt and Coronado received accommodations. Did city planners intend to reinforce segregation? Was that part of the plan? Certainly we have some evidence that intentions to segregate may have existed nationally. In fact, some of the government officials who worked on the project acknowledged that intent. Alfred Johnson once served as the executive director of the American Association of State Highway Officials. He knew the lawmakers who wrote the 1956 act. [In an interview in 1972](#), he said some city officials in the mid-50s thought the highways would give them an opportunity to get rid of certain neighborhoods. But he used racist slurs to describe those neighborhoods. And we've chosen not to include such slurs in this episode.

Taylor Seely: In Phoenix, slum clearance commissioners applied for federal funding to address 'badly blighted residential districts on the southwest and southeast sides' in 1956. However, I did not find materials explicitly expressing an intent to segregate by the City of Phoenix.

Taylor Seely: Stigma almost certainly played a role in Golden Gate's downfall. But it was also a matter of placing different values on different areas. The barrios weren't valued the way the Roosevelt and Coronado neighborhoods were. Those neighborhoods were called "historic." South Phoenix, by and large, was called a transit corridor. Its value was being industrial.

Phil VanderMeer: [00:25:24] it's also through an area which had I mean, this is relatively close to the railroad, you know, so and it's a warehouse district. [00:25:43][18.8]

Taylor Seely: There was another reason, too.

Phil VanderMeer: [00:20:45] There's a second problem, and that's money [00:20:48][2.5]

Taylor Seely: The fact that the land was cheaper in south Phoenix than other parts of town made it easier for the city to build out the Durango Curve and the Maricopa Freeway.

Phil VanderMeer: [00:41:17] So they're really thinking about the least expensive way to build these roads [00:41:24][7.0]

Taylor Seely: Remember, this area had a long history of being redlined and thus its value was under assessed. Plus, city officials thought if the state had interstates, it might increase tourism, which would help the town prosper.

Phil VanderMeer: [00:41:27] Phoenix is Arizona is not a wealthy state at all in the 40s, 50s and even into the 60s. [00:41:38][11.0]

Taylor Seely: And finally, there was a big incentive to build highways.

David King: [00:03:37] one of the innovations was that the federal government would pay up to 90 percent of the construction of a road through the interstate system. [00:03:45][8.6]

Taylor Seely: With the feds fronting the bill, Phoenix wanted to take advantage.

David King: [00:03:52] And ultimately that became very, very attractive to transport planners who were designing these systems. And city leaders were very interested in any type of development, like an investment in their cities. [00:04:08][16.2]

Phil VanderMeer: [00:42:58] So. Did anybody think about additional barriers to migration? Maybe. But that's not a primary factor. I think they're, they're relying on restrictions and segregation on realtors not selling land and, and that sort of thing. [00:43:24][19.8][22.6]

Taylor Seely: I can't definitively say what all the intentions were of lawmakers locally and nationally. We know the primary goal of the 1956 act was to connect the big cities.

Taylor Seely: But regardless of intentions, there were consequences.

Taylor Seely: At the end of the highway commercial, the family that was displaced finds a beautiful new home.

We'll Take the High Road: [00:30:02] The people who had been inconvenienced for a short time were all in fine shape. Business was good. Property values were up. Even Grandma had to admit there's about as much satisfaction in planning a new tree as there is in admiring an old one. Maybe a little more. [00:30:19][16.9]

Taylor Seely: But for both white and minority people in Phoenix, their experiences looked nothing like this. When highways came through, their property values did not go up. Businesses did not thrive. And they were not properly compensated for the loss of their homes. Highway construction hurt everyone who lived near or in the paths. ... pause ... But in the decades after, one reality became clear: the pre-existing segregation of the Valley coupled with the ongoing stigma of south Phoenix now made worse by the new interstates led to consequences more difficult on minorities and reinforced segregation in the Valley.

Musical interlude

How the impact drove segregation and perpetuated disparate outcomes

Taylor Seely: So, what were those consequences? They were disinvestment, displacement and suburban sprawl. And all those things increased and perpetuated racial wealth, health and educational gaps, making upward mobility more difficult.

Part 1: Urban sprawl

Taylor Seely: Remember the story of the Deck Park Tunnel? That battle lasted 20 years. And during that time, no one wanted to open a nearby business or fix up their home for fear it could be demolished or lose value once the highway came in.

David King: [00:18:20] So what happens is those who can afford to move, move [00:18:25][4.9]

Taylor Seely: At the same time, while the highways are leading to the effectual close of some neighborhoods, they're also facilitating the growth of others.

Maryvale Promotional Video: [0:16] There's an abundance of literature about our homes,

Taylor Seely: Places like Maryvale in west Phoenix. And since housing segregation wasn't outlawed until 1968 with the Fair Housing Act, only white Phoenicians could move there in the beginning.

Maryvale Promotional Video: and you'd be surprised at the number of national magazines that have written stories about them! [0:16]

Mark Tebeau: [00:04:15] what happens is these suburbs develop and essentially wealth moves out. It's predominantly white wealth.

Taylor Seely: That meant not only was Phoenix becoming further segregated by literally moving white people farther away, but those white people -- who had the wealth to build a tax base needed to sustain a city and the social capital to ensure lawmakers paid attention to them -- they took that with them too.

Kristin Koptiuch: [00:32:47] the price of sprawl meant the destruction of the inner city neighborhoods. Some of which have. Managed to bring themselves back into existence. And some that haven't. And are still struggling. And some that disappeared altogether, [00:33:11][23.5]

Taylor Seely: In 1984, the Arizona Republic reported that while Phoenix had always been a historically segregated city, according to the census and other data, that segregation was increasing. For the mostly white people who made it to the suburbs, their wealth was building. But for the people remaining in south Phoenix — mostly minorities — a litany of side effects accumulated and cross reacted. First was an increase in wealth disparities and stigmatization.

Part 2: Wealth gap

Mark Tebeau: [00:23:22] this has become one of the great stories of urban history because meanwhile, everybody out in the burbs can get a loan. And they can afford cheap capital and they can afford inexpensive housing that where the value rises over time. And these inner city neighborhoods, these central city neighborhoods that are being redlined - that capital and thus the ability of the housing to rise in value or even to be rehabilitated is diminished. Right. [00:23:53] So it creates an incredible wealth gap [00:23:56][34.2]

Taylor Seely: To better understand that wealth gap, you have to understand the nature of how highways affect homevalues. Here's David King.

David King: [00:14:39] because the interstates are what we call a disamenity, people will pay more to live farther away from them. So for household households like to be close enough for easy access to an interstate, but not close enough that they're bothered by it on a daily basis. They don't want to hear it, but within a few minutes, they want to be able to drive to an interchange where they can get on. [00:15:05][25.7]

Taylor Seely: So once it was decided that highways would be placed in south Phoenix, minority homeowners who tried to sell didn't make money because their homes had lost what little value they may have previously had. And for those who lost their homes to eminent domain, the compensation from the city was so low most couldn't afford to move to the new communities right away. Some residents went homeless. Some crowded into the homes of their friends and family, speeding up the process of neighborhood wear and tear. And because of the general disinvestment, businesses weren't coming, which meant employment wasn't easy to come by. Those who did have a little money sometimes moved to other affordable areas of Phoenix.

Stella Pope Duarte-2: [00:13:27] the majority of those moved to the west side by west. I mean west of the freeway. What we now know as the I-17. So they were west of that, because that was the only place where they could afford anything. [00:13:45][17.4]

Taylor Seely: Around 39th Avenue and McDowell Road, there's even a Golden Gate Community Center, created by former Golden Gate Barrio residents.

Stella Pope Duarte-2: [00:13:59] they began a whole culture on the west side, basically. And of course, then that caused a white flight because people once they saw that they were coming in, you know, wherever the Anglos saw that there would be either black or brown people coming, they would flee. It's like, 'You can have these houses, we're getting the hell out of here.' We don't want, you know we don't want to live around you guys. Because you're dirty. Because you don't, you're not educated because you don't act. Right. Because, you know, whatever you're from Mexico or. Whatever their thoughts were. [00:14:37][38.0]

Taylor Seely: Look no further than Maryvale for an example of this migration pattern. Kristin Koptiuch said south Phoenix Latinos started moving to Maryvale three decades after white citizens moved there.

Kristin Koptiuch: [00:37:41] into the housing, which was cheap by then because it was old, came migrants and ethnic Latinos looking for affordable housing. [00:37:58]

Taylor Seely: But when they came, others went.

Kristin Koptiuch: [00:37:12] The young families that moved there in the 1950s were fearful of urban change and the minoritization in their neighborhoods. And they moved out. You know their homes were older by then. They moved out. Either they died or they moved to a new subdivisions further out somewhere. And there was a kind of mini white flight. [00:37:42][30.3]

Taylor Seely: The first masterplanned neighborhood built by John F. Long for middle income white Phoenicians, a neighborhood powerful enough that Senator Carl Hayden would fight for the relocation of Interstate 10 to be closer by, is today a minority-majority village. According to Arizona's department of health services, [76% of people living there say they are Latino](#). But not only did the ethnicity of the residents change, the attitude toward and reputation of the area changed.

Kristin Koptiuch: [00:28:44] Maryvale is the site of the biggest, strongest Latino community and it has become the demonized part of the city. It's shifted from South Phoenix over to Maryvale. [00:29:01][16.5]

Taylor Seely: As Maryvale aged and Latinos moved in, a similar pattern of disinvestment that had occurred in downtown repeated. White residents stopped caring for their homes. Many Latinos, burdened by expensive new mortgages, didn't have a lot of money to keep up with home maintenance. Businesses closed and jobs left. In terms of upward mobility, no substantial change has occurred for the residents there today.

Taylor Seely: Maryvale in 2019 was home to some of the lowest income Phoenicians. 60% of the residents lived 200% below the federal poverty level. Nearly 40% of the children 12 and younger in Maryvale lived in poverty. ([LINK](#))

Taylor Seely: And on top of the wealth gap, suburbanization also led to the degradation of education quality and the destabilization of neighborhoods.

Part 3: Educational disparities

Taylor Seely: For example, school populations and funding changed. Bradford Luckingham, a former historian and the author of *Minorities in Phoenix*, wrote that from 1967 to 1970, the population of white students at Phoenix Union High School dropped from 35.1% to 19.3%. Without the tax dollars from middle-class white families, schools began to struggle financially. Once that happened, student drop-out rates increased and crime rose. The number of street gangs grew, many of which operated in minority neighborhoods.

Stella Pope Duarte-2: [00:15:18] It was a volatile time, a volatile time later on when the kids started um.. When you have a situation where people are oppressed, they without even sometimes knowing, they will strike out against that oppression and they'll do it in you know, in a violent way. Be against one another because the uh, frustration. These. This thing of I'm not good enough, I'm good enough, these messages are internalized and all of a sudden they form this little subculture to show you, allow them to show you the kind of macho man I am. [00:16:01][40.9]

Part 4: Health disparities

Taylor Seely: The ensuing de facto segregation also resulted in disparate health outcomes. In 2005, a group of ASU professors published a study that found [chronic environmental inequities](#) for residents of south Phoenix. This is because interstate highways invited more industrialization and pollution to the area. The researchers wrote, quote, "Interstate 17 was placed directly across Latino neighborhoods of South Phoenix paralleling the historic rail corridor. The resultant high levels of highway traffic contribute to substantial ambient air pollution in this zone today."

Taylor Seely: To give you a little comparison, the report also found this: "In metropolitan Phoenix today, 3% of residentially zoned areas directly border industrial zoning, in contrast to 35% of neighborhoods in South Phoenix."

Taylor Seely: To put it simply: people in south Phoenix live in a more industrialized area. That means their air is more polluted, which can lead to a number of health consequences, like asthma and difficulty sleeping.

David King: [00:14:27] So not only was the initial construction problematic, but the ongoing operation of these facilities has led to ongoing harm for the for the communities that are nearby. [00:14:39][12.8]

Musical interlude

Taylor Seely: At this point, I've thrown a lot of information at you. So let me summarize what we've learned. The 1956 highway act created Interstates 10 and 17 in Phoenix.

We'll Take the High Road: [00:01:33] President Eisenhower's militant call for a grand plan to provide a modern controlled access highway system (quote fades)

Taylor Seely: Wealthier white residents had a say in the construction of I-10. They wanted it to be moved to benefit communities like Tolleson and Goodyear. And those in downtown fought the city on its design.

Soaring Sculptures Narrator: [00:10:10] The other interchange closely studied by the team has a wholly new kind of design and a new name: helicoil.

Taylor Seely: The government listened and created the Deck Park Tunnel. White families were still displaced, but they had options for where they could go.

Maryvale Promotional Video: [0:16] There's an abundance of literature about our homes,

Taylor Seely: The same could not be said about predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods in South Phoenix. Those neighborhoods once boasted strong communities.

Stella Pope Duarte-2: My folks were there. My cousins were there. My grandparents were there. You see what I'm saying? I was OKAY. [00:20:34][33.1]

Taylor Seely: But the communities in south Phoenix were unable to plead to the government in the same way. The city council didn't recognize the historic value of their neighborhoods or their church. Ultimately, many were forced from their homes.

Stella Pope Duarte-2: [00:13:09] I know this one family, they had to, the bulldozer was standing right there and there were still some man still inside the house. ~~It's easy to go and they say we will go no.~~ They had to pull him out by force and get their house destroyed. [00:13:26][17.4]

Taylor Seely: Some became homeless. Others moved in with family. Decades later, some would move to places like Maryvale. You begin to see a pattern repeat of what historians have called "white flight." And with that: wealth leaves, political power leaves, and the remaining community is again under-resourced and a host of problems stem from that. So that is where we're at, not just in this episode, but in the present day.

Coming full circle: South Phoenix residents feel ignored today

Taylor Seely: This pattern and these problems -- disparities in wealth, education, health -- they're not relegated solely to the past. Many of the same concerns about equal opportunity and equitable treatment for residents of south Phoenix persist today. Here's my colleague, the Arizona Republic's reporter covering south Phoenix, Megan Taros.

Megan Taros: [00:04:06] there's this sense of like, you know, it's it's coming. Gentrification is inevitably, you know, with development, it happens, you know, but the development is slowly creeping into South Phoenix. And like I said earlier, there is this sort of weird paradox between like we don't want to put nice things in South Phenix. We're afraid of South Phenix. It's

dangerous. And also like, oh, what? We can take advantage of this opportunity. And so I think they're navigating the the sort of beginnings of a new normal. [00:04:38][32.1]

Taylor Seely: Residents in south Phoenix are afraid of getting priced out of their community. That's especially true as developers have moved into the area, creating luxury housing. And the potential for light rail expansion in the area is worrying residents as well.

Taylor Seely: And just like in the past, when south Phoenix residents felt their voice didn't matter when they spoke in opposition to the highways and the airport expansion, some today feel their concerns over how light rail will affect their cost of living is also being ignored.

Megan Taros: [00:17:43] it's this difficult sort of thing to grapple with because it's like, well, we don't want to get pushed out of our apartment because we can we can barely afford. I mean, a lot of things [00:17:55][12.1]

Taylor Seely: It's not that south Phoenix is against the light rail.

Megan Taros: [00:18:53] So there's this other idea was just like what I like, I need a light rail. You know, if I can take the light rail to work like that would be great. But then it's also like, OK, so the light rail gets me to work. But then, you know what happens when I don't like I can't afford the rent. I don't have a house. So I think, you know, so it's it's sort of. Yeah. I think there's a lot of mixed emotions about it. [00:19:15][21.9]

Taylor Seely: Like any other community, the residents there want stability. They want to make sure what's being put in their community serves their community.

Megan Taros: [00:03:45] But it's a matter of, OK, we can have these things. They're not exclusive. You know, we can have these things, but they have to work for us. They have to be affordable. [00:03:56][10.4]

Taylor Seely: It's about having a voice.

*music

Taylor Seely: Throughout this episode, I've focused specifically on interstate highways. But in the time that I-10 and 17 were being built, the same fights between residents and cities were happening all over the Valley. When Scottsdale residents didn't want Loop 101 on the east side to be too close to their neighborhoods, they fought the city to push it farther east into tribal land. That's where it exists today. When Phoenix proposed a highway called Paradise Freeway that would extend east and west essentially along Camelback Road, the residents in Arcadia fought them repeatedly until the city just gave up. And those fights still happen today. But they are made possible by residents who have the money to sue the city and by residents whom local leaders listen to. The end result equals real-life consequences and differences in quality of life and opportunity for people of different neighborhoods, which also tends to mean people of different races and socioeconomic statuses. In Phoenix, interstate construction led to disinvestment and displacement. It impoverished residents and made upward mobility more

difficult. That in turn reinforced decades-old segregation patterns, which may have otherwise deteriorated sooner. We'll never know. We can't go back and change things. The best we can do — the only thing we can do — is learn from the past.

Taylor Seely: Audio in today's episode came from Periscope Film LLC archive, John F. Long's promotional video, "The Homeowner," PBS and Arizona Department of Transportation. If you liked today's episode, please let your friends know about our show. Word of mouth reviews like that really help our podcast reach new people. And we want to share as much of the history of Phoenix -- both good and bad -- as possible. I'm producer Taylor Seely, signing off for now.