



# Back to the Future

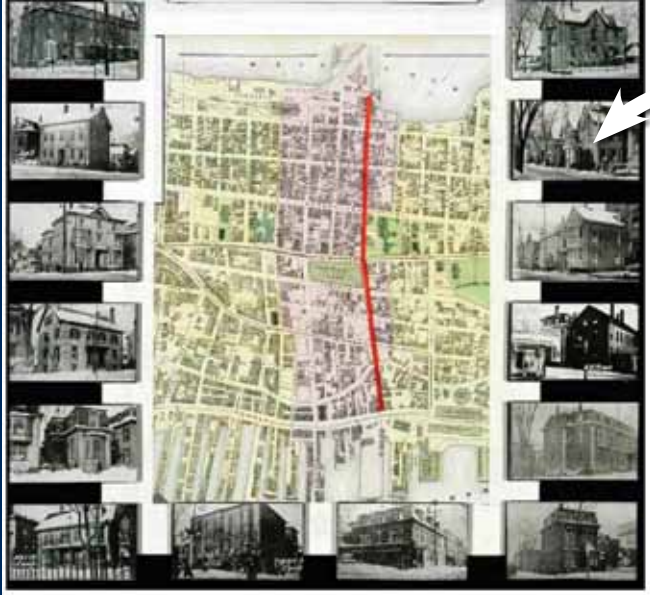
## The Franklin Arterial, reconsidered.

Just who did we think we were when we created the Franklin Arterial, marooning Munjoy Hill? And who do we think we are now, redefining it?

BY PATRICK VENNE

*Exactly how do we hit the brakes on the Franklin Arterial? Step one, give it back its old name, Franklin Street. Check. The word 'Arterial' was officially dropped in 2013. Patrick Venne, of Portland, is an attorney and urban planner employed in the real estate development industry.*

**A**rterial roads were all the rage as renewal strategies in the latter half of the 20th century. Now, as a demographic shift leads to a craving for intimacy in our public spaces, prior assumptions about the defining role of automobile traffic in the urban context are being questioned. Franklin Street sharply divides the peninsula from Interstate



This is what we lost.

This is what we have.

Archival photos and map at left show a bygone Portland. The graphic below shows the existing width of Franklin Street's lanes and sidewalks along the Back Cove stretch. The small graphic (opposite page) shows the road narrowed, with bike lanes and sidewalks on both sides to free space for development. The largest graphic (opposite) depicts Franklin Street near Commercial Street with added bike lanes and broader sidewalks.



295 to the waterfront—neither efficiently nor with Old Port shoppers in mind. Acres of Class A retail and business opportunity in one of the toniest real estate markets in Maine sits unused between wide travel lanes promoting fast and inhospitable traffic, while pedestrians are marginalized: Cross at your own risk. Not only that, our great divide obliterated an historic neighborhood and sectioned off the East End from its bustling downtown—the haves from the have-nots. To give it its due, Franklin Street enables lots of cars to access downtown directly, if slowly. The road has both pros and cons, but as the emphasis on sustainability from within replaces reliance on traffic from away, the street's present design appears like rush hour traffic—to be on its way out.

**E**ast Bayside's Jed Rathband, a developer and former candidate for mayor, insists it's time for a change. "The street is universally recognized as a failure." City councilor Kevin Donoghue, representing the East End, agrees: "It fails to fit into its urban context. The low-quality urban design serves only to repel people." Cultural-

RENDERINGS COURTESY IBI GROUP. LEFT: COREY TEMPLETON

ly, the area is still licking its wounds. The arterial “destroyed everything in its path,” says Christian MilNeil, chair of the Portland Housing Authority Board. “They bulldozed...houses that today would go for a half million dollars. The city’s most acute problem is a housing shortage, and Franklin Arterial destroyed hundreds of units in the most walkable part of the city.”

For a destination city on dozens of national Top-10 lists, Franklin Street seems sorely out of place, but we’re not the only victim of car-centric thinking. “I remember living in the North End of Boston when the Central Artery (Interstate 93) came down,” says Portland Planning Board chairman Stuart “Tuck” O’Brien. “The community was transformed in so many ways I didn’t even think were possible.”

It doesn’t take a crystal ball to see that Portland is in for a big makeover. But before we launch into it, we should remember—the future will judge us by the assumptions we make in changing it.

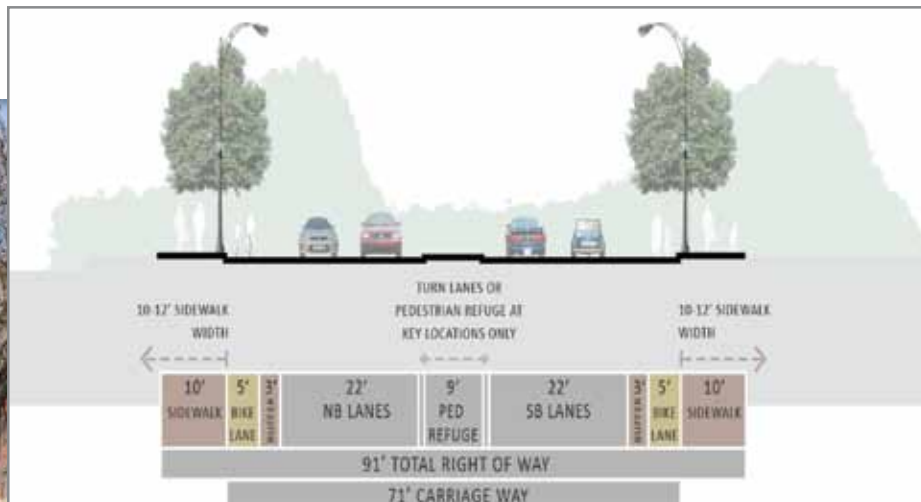
Activists and city staff, among others, have been working on plans that will alter Franklin Street in a way that could redefine the neighborhood. Markos Miller, chair of the study process underlying this work, says he envisions Franklin Street becoming more like other downtown Portland streets, with lanes close together, better sidewalks, and lined by human-scaled buildings. The intent, he says, is not to advocate for any particular design but rather to lead “a process of inclusive discovery based on data analysis.”

Formed in 2006, just as a peninsula traffic study was unfolding, the Franklin Reclamation Authority grew out of a community workshop involving the Munjoy Hill and Bayside Neighborhood organizations in an effort to articulate a more holistic description of what’s wrong with the street. Somewhat ironically, Markos Miller says, then-city manager Joe Gray—who began his tenure with the city in part by working on the creation of Franklin Arterial—was en-

thusiastic about the process and helped secure funding to support it.

City support continues for the work today. Portland Mayor Michael Brennan says, “My hope is that with a redesigned Franklin Street we can re-knit the neighborhoods with a pedestrian-friendly streetscape and end up with some parcels of land for housing development—while not adversely impacting vehicle access.” The challenge facing the Authority now lies in funding the infrastructural surgery necessary to implement the desired changes. And that could take time. The first leg of the study, which looked at alternative designs, was funded largely by a federal earmark; but after final recommendations regarding feasibility are forwarded for approval to the city council, Miller notes, the project will likely become one element of a larger capital investment plan.

Budgeting for projects like this always involves real “strategic trade-offs,” according to Donoghue. He envisions a “flexible implementation schedule whereby [the City] can make incremental improvements according to [its] means.” ■



This is what we could get.

