

21 Trillion Dollar Blind Spot: The High Price of Building Highways to Nowhere

Michael Phillips
Chief Operating Officer | TDJ Enterprises

I remember first standing at the edge of West Baltimore's infamous "Highway to Nowhere." Before me stretched a concrete trench—a dead-end strip of road flanked by graffiti-streaked walls and overgrown weeds. In the 1970s, this gash of highway tore through a thriving neighborhood, displacing nearly 3,000 residents, only for the project to be abandoned mid-construction.

What remains today is more than just a forgotten stretch of asphalt; it is a physical scar, a monument to the misguided urban planning decisions of the past. At best, it is an exercise in futility: 1.3 miles of pavement leading nowhere. At worst, it stands as a stark reminder of how infrastructure projects, designed in the name of "progress," have historically bypassed, bulldozed, and severed communities of color.

But this highway is more than a Baltimore story. It is a powerful metaphor for what is happening to our economy today. Just as federal planners once cut through the hearts of Black and Brown neighborhoods—isolating them and leaving behind lasting trauma—our economic systems continue to do the same. We have built financial highways that leave trillions of dollars in economic impact stranded on the shoulder, unable to reach their full potential. This is America's blind spot, and it's costing us dearly.

A significant financial institution put a number to this cost: The U.S. economy has lost an estimated \$16 trillion over the past 20 years due to discrimination alone. To put that into perspective, nearly an entire year's worth of economic output was erased because millions were denied full access to education, jobs, homeownership, and business capital.

Now, when diversity and inclusion are under attack, we must recognize that this is not just a moral failing—it's terrible economics. If we open the off-ramps and invest in the communities where growth is already happening, we stand to unlock a \$5 trillion boost to the U.S. economy over the next five years. We can no longer afford to ignore the hidden exits where untapped genius and innovation are waiting to merge into the main flow of opportunity.

One of the most promising pathways forward is impact investing—channeling capital in ways that generate both financial returns and social good. Unlike charity, impact investing is not about pity or handouts. It is about recognizing opportunity where others see risk, betting on potential over prejudice, and choosing innovation and dignity over despair. It is about constructing new on-ramps onto the economic highway so communities once excluded from prosperity can drive their development.

Dr. King spoke of economic justice as the next frontier of the civil rights movement. More than 50 years after his assassination, his words remain a call to action. We must refuse to accept an economy that builds highways to nowhere while leaving entire communities stranded. Instead, we must demand an economy that invests in mobility—infrastructure, people, ideas, and opportunity. The cost of inaction is simply too high.