Subsidizing Automobility: 
Financing Highway in the U.S.

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I. Introduction

This paper aims to examine highway building and finance as one of the major factors that has contributed to the widespread automobility in the U.S.\(^1\) One of the defining aspects of American culture and society is the dominance of the automobile. It may be true that the mass adoption of the automobile and ensuing car dependent culture are no longer an exclusive feature of America. Not only have other advanced countries reached a high level of automobile ownership

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1) In this paper, the term highway is used to include the major state and federal roads, not necessarily the ones with limited access and no signal lights like the Interstate Highways.
comparable to that of America and developed mature automobile culture, but America’s lead in automobile production has long been challenged. Yet, it is America that most rapidly embraced the automobile and developed the prototype of automobile culture. More importantly, vast land but inadequate mass transit make the automobile seem to be an indispensable part of American life, while freedom, mobility and individuality it promises speak directly to what is commonly seen as American national characteristics, giving the automobile’s predominance in the country an aura of inevitability.

However, as various studies show, the fate of the automobile in America was by no means certain. Peter D. Norton demonstrates that, often seen as “intruders,” “a nuisance” or “uninvited guests,” automobiles’ place on the street was contested well into the 1920s. Not surprisingly, this led to various campaigns by automotive interest groups—self-christened as “motordom”—to redefine motorists as legitimate users of streets, especially since the specter of market saturation loomed over the automobile industry from the mid-1920s. He also argues that the twin evils of traffic congestion and accidents threatened automobiles’ future in cities where those problems were more acute, against which motordom lobbied for road building as a solution to both problems (2008). Likewise, David St. Clair shows the efforts of automotive groups to motorize American cities during the 1930s and after by lobbying for urban highway building, as the ownership and use of automobiles were low in cities due to traffic congestion (1986). Given this, the triumph of the automobile is not a fait accompli preordained by America’s natural environments or its people’ supposed predisposition, but had to be actively fought for and achieved.

It is noteworthy that both Norton and St. Clair highlight “social reconstruction” as well as physical construction of streets as being