

How I-40 changed Santa Rosa, New Mexico

The decline of a town and what it tells about rural communities



Santa Rosa, New Mexico was once a thriving stop along Route 66. Travelers stopped for gas, food, hotels, and recreation. Local businesses depended heavily on this tourism.

When Interstate 40 was built it rerouted traffic away from the town, Santa Rosa lost the flow of travelers that supported its community.

Without those visitors Businesses closed, Jobs disappeared and Residents moved away

What was once a busy Route 66 town began to decline.



The History

Across the United States, many towns experienced similar declines after the highway system expanded in the 1950s–1980s. The highway system was designed for speed and efficiency, not for supporting small local economies.

Towns like Santa Rosa that depended on pass through travelers were suddenly bypassed, meaning drivers could pass by without ever stopping. This created long term damage for many rural communities.



Effects Today

Santa Rosa has not fully recovered from the economic changes. Some of the issues locals have pointed out are:

- fewer local businesses
- fewer job opportunities
- young people leaving after high school
- increased substance abuse problems
- declining population
- weak local political leadership

Many residents feel the town has been left behind.

In my primary research, I interviewed a friend who attended high school in Santa Rosa with me. although she lived 30 minutes away in the same county she chose to attend high school in Santa Rosa. When I asked her about her perceptions of the town as a place to live and work, she described it as a tight community where connections are essential for securing good positions. When asked about the factors that led her to move away she mentioned limited options for groceries and restaurants, a lack of job opportunities, and a sense of abandonment as well as

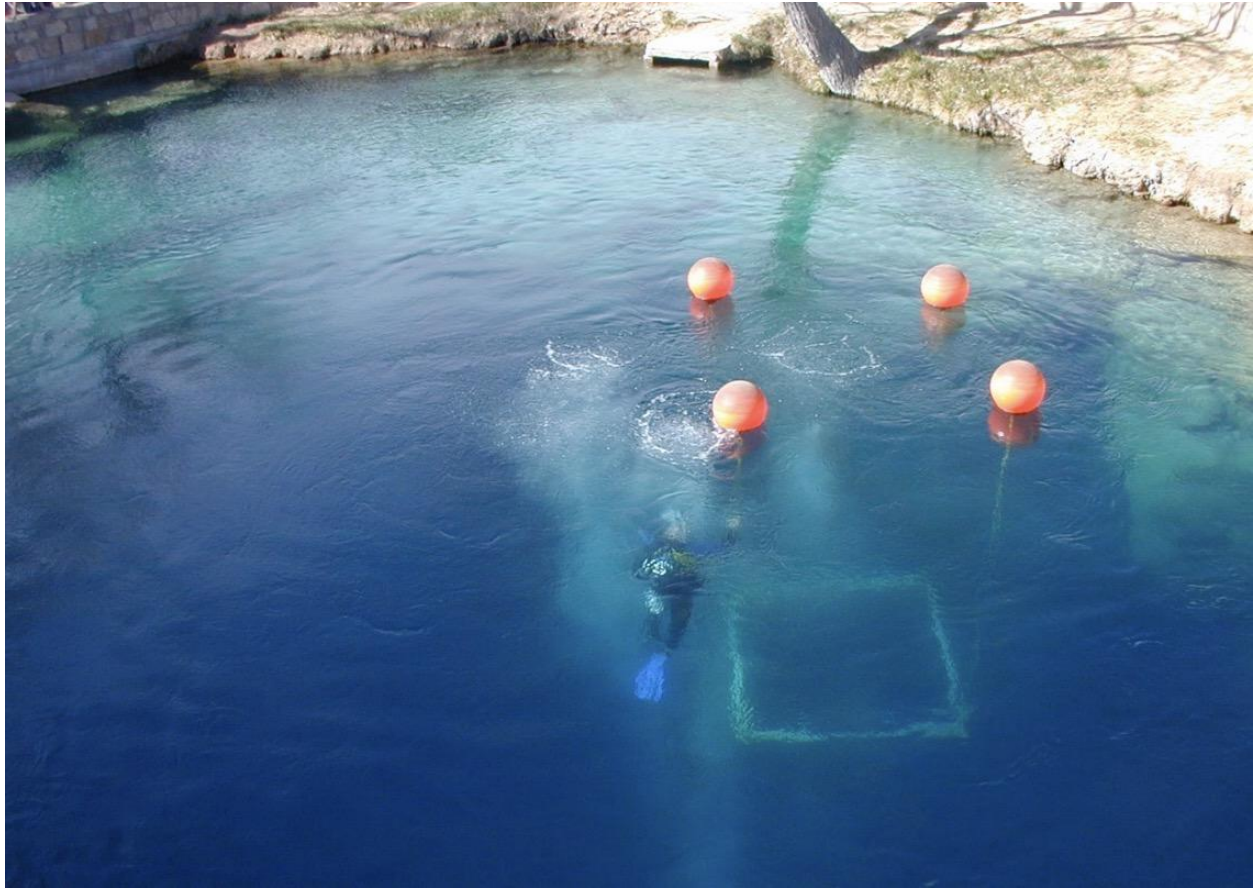
inadequate medical care. She stated that she would consider returning to Santa Rosa if the town were cleaned up, revitalized with more life and offered more opportunities.



Systems of Inequality

The decline of Santa Rosa isn't just about one highway.

We see a common trend, with rural communities being drained of resources as developments become more and more focused on major cities. When infrastructure decisions are made, small communities often have little political say. The result is uneven development that leaves some places struggling to thrive. Santa Rosa is only one of many Route 66 towns that experienced this change.



Why This Matters

Santa Rosa is more than a highway exit. It is a community with history, culture, and potential. Recognizing how infrastructure decisions shaped its decline helps locals think about how to rebuild and invest in the town again, whether through tourism, small business support, or community leadership. Understanding the problem is the first step for change.

“History: Route 66.” New Mexico Museum of Art, New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs,
<https://online.nmartmuseum.org/nmhistory/opening-the-west/route-66/history-route-66.html>

Santa Rosa Talks About ‘The Bypass.’” Route 66 News, 29 Dec. 2013,
<https://www.route66news.com/2013/12/29/santa-rosa-talks-bypass/>

“Route 66: Then and Now.” AOL News,
<https://www.aol.com/route-66-then-now-151500683.html>

1. Who is the intended audience for this social commentary, and what is the purpose of your social commentary? How did you meet the needs of your audience, and how is your purpose being met by this commentary?

The intended audience for my social commentary is people who live in or are connected to Santa Rosa, New Mexico, especially community members who have seen the town change over time. It is also meant for younger people from Santa Rosa who may not know the full history of why the town declined the way it did. The purpose of this social commentary is to educate people about how the construction of highways can affect economy and community, and to explain that the town's struggles did not happen randomly. Instead they are connected to larger systems like infrastructure decisions and economic inequality that often impacts small rural towns.

I tried to meet the needs of my audience by sharing the history of Santa Rosa in a clear and simple way. Many people know that the town used to be busier when Route 66 brought travelers through, but they may not realize how much the interstate highway system changed the town's opportunities. I used visuals and a simple layout so that the information could be easily understood and shared. My purpose is met because the commentary raises awareness about why Santa Rosa declined and encourages people to think more critically about the decisions that shaped the town's current situation.

2. What research questions were answered by this project? What was your favorite source, and why?

One of the main research questions I explored in this project was how the construction of I-40 affected Santa Rosa and other towns. I also wanted to understand why so many small communities declined after highways were built nearby. With my research I learned that the highway system was designed to make travel faster and more efficient, but it also bypassed many towns that relied on travelers stopping for gas, food, and overnight stays. This meant that towns small like Santa Rosa lost a large portion of their tourism and business income almost overnight.

Another question I explored was how these changes affected the people who still live in the town today. Losing businesses and job opportunities can have long term effects on a community, including people moving away, fewer resources, and social issues becoming more visible. Understanding these effects helped me connect the local situation in Santa Rosa to bigger patterns of inequality in rural communities across the U.S.

My favorite source was the article talking about how the bypass of I-40 affected Santa Rosa. I liked this source because it focused specifically on the town instead of speaking only about Route 66 in general. It helped me understand the impact that the highway had on local businesses and tourism, which made my commentary feel more connected to the real experiences of people in the community.

3. What were the challenges of this project? How did you overcome them?

One of the biggest challenges of this project was finding information that specifically talked about Santa Rosa instead of just Route 66 . There is a lot of information about the history of Route 66 and the interstate highway system, but fewer sources that focus directly on how these kinds of changes hurt smaller towns like Santa Rosa. I had to spend more time looking for articles that mentioned Santa Rosa or towns like it.

It was also difficult to link the town's decline to broader patterns of inequality. At first it seemed like the problem was simply that people stopped visiting the town after I-40 was built. However, as I kept researching, I recognized that this was part of a bigger trend where rural communities tend to suffer economically as resources shift towards larger cities.

I overcame these challenges by combining different types of research and asking for help during the research clinic. I used secondary sources that explained the history of Route 66 and the highway system, and then I put that information to my own knowledge about Santa Rosa. This helped me explain the historical cause of the problem and how it continues to affect my community today.

4. What did you do well in this draft that I'm evaluating? What could you improve upon if you had more time or access to other resources? How do you feel overall about this project?

One thing I believe I did well in this project was choosing a topic that is meaningful and relevant to my own community. Writing about Santa Rosa made the project feel more personal and important because I have seen how the town has changed throughout my life. I think I did a good job explaining the connection between the construction of I 40 and the economic decline of the town. I also tried to show how this issue is not only local but also linked to larger patterns that have hurt many other rural towns across the United States.

If I had more time or access to additional resources, I would improve the project by including more primary research. I would like to interview more longtime residents or former business

owners who experienced the changes when I 40 was built. I would have also liked to make a video instead of a document.

Overall I feel proud of the project because it helped me learn more about the history of my town and the reasons on why it declined. It also made me realize that many of the problems small towns have today are connected to bigger decisions made in the past. This project made me think more about how infrastructure and decisions can shape communities for years.

5. What else should I know about the project and your choices that will help with feedback?

One important thing to know about this project is that I chose this topic because Santa Rosa, New Mexico is a place that I have a personal connection to. I wanted to focus on an issue that people from the town often talk about but may not fully understand historically. Many people in the community know that the town declined after I-40 was built, but not many talk about how infrastructure choices and economic shifts can have long term consequences for smaller towns. I wanted this project to explain what happened but also encourage people to think about why it happened and how similar situations have affected other communities.

Another choice I made was to focus on making the information clear and easy to understand for a general audience rather than making it overly academic. Since the audience is community members, I tried to explain the history and the issue in a way that people from different backgrounds could understand. I also tried to connect the local story of Santa Rosa to social patterns like unequal development between cities and small towns.

When giving feedback it would be helpful to know if the commentary explains the connection between the highway and the problems that followed. I would also appreciate feedback on if the information feels informative for someone who may not know much about the history of Santa Rosa or Route 66.