



→ The Journey Forward



A Guide for **Equitably
Reconnecting Communities**



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EQUIVOLVE

Table of Contents

Introduction

3

The Wayfarer's Map for Equitably Reconnecting Communities

6

Orienting

7

"Our Struggle Is a Long Struggle"

Orienting in National City & Southeast San Diego, CA

12

"We Know the Game and the Players"

Orienting in Durham, NC

16

Wayfaring

19

"Why Is this Time Different?"

Wayfaring in Trenton, NJ

32

Funding Projects to Equitably Reconnect Communities

35

Conclusion

38

Set Your Stars Worksheet

40

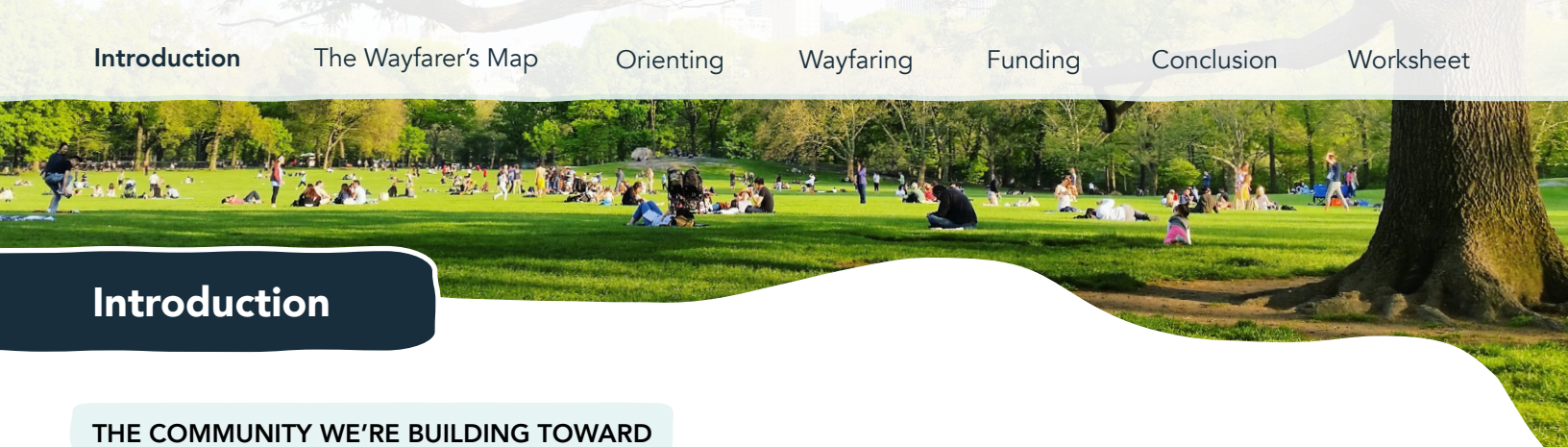
Appendix A: Glossary

44

Appendix B: Learning from the ERC Initiative

47





Introduction

THE COMMUNITY WE'RE BUILDING TOWARD

Imagine a connected community: a place where people of all ages, abilities, and identities can safely access everything they need to thrive. The transportation infrastructure — the roads, paths, and public transit — makes movement easy. The air, water, and land are clean and brimming with natural beauty. When local businesses close each evening, owners and employees make the short trip home on foot, by bike, or by transit. Children walk or bike to school with their friends. On weekends, people of all ages gather in parks and common spaces, playing, savoring healthy food from local vendors, and enjoying the beauty and vibrancy around them.

Have you been in a community like this one? Maybe it sounds like somewhere you have visited — or maybe it reflects your hopes for the future?

Connection — between people and places — is something we all crave, and something we all need. A sense of belonging is critical to our health and well-being.¹ Transportation infrastructure links places, making it easier for people to connect and goods to move. But where we place it and how we design it can also create divisions and cause lasting harm, even as it aims to connect. American cities are full of examples of how past infrastructure decisions — many of them deliberate, all of them consequential — have fractured communities and created harmful living conditions that must now be confronted and reimaged. Some of the most notorious examples emerged from the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which promised a network of interstate highways, and the subsequent decisions to build those highways through cities rather than around them. Over a million people, mostly people of color, were displaced from their homes as a result. Those who remained endured depreciated property values, environmental hazards that put their health at risk, and reduced job opportunities that limited their economic mobility.²

LEARN MORE

Dividing Lines: How Transportation Infrastructure Reinforces Racial Inequality by Deborah Archer offers a highly readable deep dive into the history of transportation infrastructure in the United States.

HOW CHANGE HAPPENS

When infrastructure causes harm, the roots often lie in the planning process itself — in who was consulted, who was excluded, and whose vision of the future was deemed worth pursuing. Transportation infrastructure projects

1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (Washington, DC: HHS, 2023), <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.

2 Smart Growth America, *Divided by Design: How New Federal Highway Projects Fuel Inequity in the United States* (Washington, DC: Smart Growth America, 2023).

are major capital investments. Between the people who live in affected communities and the officials directing millions of taxpayer dollars lie many layers of political and bureaucratic process. Closing that distance requires more than technical fixes. It requires a fundamentally different approach to planning — one that creates the conditions for the knowledge, creativity, and vision that already exist within these communities to surface and lead.

This guide draws on learnings from specific cities where that different approach is already underway. What those cities have discovered, and what these pages aim to share, is both a process and a promise: that when residents are genuinely included in shaping their own infrastructure, positive transformation becomes possible.

RECONNECTION: CHARTING THE PATH AHEAD

What does it look like when a divided community is reconnected? A highway removed and replaced with a greenway. A neighborhood no longer severed from its downtown. Children walking to school safely for the first time.

The infrastructure change — whatever form it takes — is necessary **to create the conditions that transform community life into one of access, connection, and opportunity.** And achieving that change in ways that improves lives without creating new harms **requires a new kind of planning and decision-making process.**



This guide is that process. Local communities decide what their futures look like, and we do not attempt to define those visions here. What we offer instead is a framework for how residents, community organizations, public agencies, and funders can work together to bring those visions to life.

About This Guide

The Journey Forward distills findings from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Equitably Reconnecting Communities Initiative into a framework that can be used to advance transformative, community-led infrastructure ideas.

The guide is organized in two movements. We begin by **Orienting** — identifying the values and commitments that will guide every step of the journey. We then move into **Wayfaring** — traveling together through a process designed to lead to reconnection that is both equitable and transformative. These movements are not linear. You should expect to cycle back, to re-orient, and to adapt as your project evolves and your relationships deepen. Moving at the speed of trust — letting community relationships, not project timelines, set the pace — is what makes the work possible and sustainable.

Shared Definitions Matter



Visit the [Glossary](#) for definitions of key terms used throughout this guide.

Equitably Reconnecting Communities in Small and Mid-sized Cities

The Journey Forward reflects learnings from the Equitably Reconnecting Communities in Small and Mid-sized Cities Initiative ("the ERC Initiative"), a three-year, \$10M investment by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The ERC Initiative built on the federal Reconnecting Communities Pilot by intentionally supporting small and midsize cities and generating knowledge to ensure that major reconnection projects are truly equitable. Equivolve served as the learning and strategy partner, developing this guide and other resources to share and apply lessons, insights, and wisdom from the initiative.



For more information about the ERC Initiative, Equivolve, and the methodology behind this guide, see [Appendix B](#).

WHO IS THE GUIDE FOR?

This guide is for anyone working to transform transportation infrastructure and the communities it shapes. That includes:

- **Community members & community-based organizations (CBOs):** People who live in communities affected by current or proposed infrastructure projects and organizations in those communities. CBOs may include anchor organizations serving the holistic needs of specific neighborhoods, or organizations serving specific functions across neighborhoods. These groups – community members and CBOs – overlap but are not synonymous. CBOs are often led or staffed by community members, but not always.
- **Public agencies:** Governmental agencies at the city, regional, state, or federal level – including local elected officials, departments of transportation, and regional planning agencies.
- **Funders:** Organizations that provide financial support for community-rooted infrastructure work, including planning grants and capacity-building investments. These may be philanthropic organizations, public agencies, or other entities.

Throughout this guide, we use the term “team” to refer to the group of people organized to develop and implement local transportation infrastructure projects. While this guide was developed through the RWJF Equitably Reconnecting Communities Initiative — which focused on small and midsize cities — its framework applies to communities of all sizes and contexts.

The path ahead is full of challenge and possibility. This guide exists to help you navigate both. Let's begin.



Credits and Gratitude

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THE WAYFARER'S MAP for **EQUITABLY** RECONNECTING COMMUNITIES

ORIENTING

COMMUNITY
SELF-DETERMINATION
and LEADERSHIP

HISTORICAL
TRUTH and
REPAIR

TRUST

TIME

WAYFARING

CULTIVATE
CONNECTIONS

BUILD
SHARED
VISION

SET GOALS
and AGREEMENTS

STAY the
COURSE

SHARE
and REFLECT

Orienting

Before setting out on a journey, a traveler orients themselves — understanding where they are, where they're headed, and who is traveling with them. Along the journey, they keep checking their bearings, adjusting as conditions change to stay on course.

Transforming transportation infrastructure requires the same kind of ongoing orientation. By grounding your work in clear guiding principles — your “stars” — you can navigate complexity, adapt to challenges, and stay aligned with your goals. If you lose your way, these stars help you reorient.

Four guiding stars shape this journey: community self-determination and leadership, historical truth and repair, trust, and time.

Orienting: familiarizing yourself with the environment and situation; determining your position in relation to key points

After learning about the orienting principles, use the [Set Your Stars Worksheet](#) to define your own.

★ Community Self-Determination & Leadership

Community means something specific in this context. It refers to the people and residents who have been or will be affected by the infrastructure project in question: those who lived nearby when a highway was constructed, those who were displaced or whose families were displaced and who live with the consequences today. We define community with such precision because the word is often used loosely, as a proxy for any broad group of people. When this happens, voices that should be central can get drowned out by voices that are welcome in the conversation but should not be leading it.

Self-determination means that these residents hold the vision for what their neighborhood becomes. It does not mean that they are consulted after a plan is drawn up or invited to approve someone else's design. Rather, they author the vision and have clearly defined opportunities to steward it through the public processes that will bring it to life.

The term *community self-determination* is used in the struggle to reinstate the rights of Indigenous peoples to maintain and deepen cultural practices and relationships with their ancestral lands. These relationships predate modern built infrastructure in the United States by centuries and in some cases millennia.

Examples of self-determination in the urban planning context include community-led governance bodies, resident control over funding allocations, and residents holding decision-making authority in design. In the work of transforming transportation infrastructure, community self-determination requires partners. Agencies, funders, researchers, and advocacy organizations all play important roles in ensuring that the affected community's expertise is valued and acted upon. There may be differences of opinion between residents

! POTENTIAL CHALLENGE

Avoiding Tokenism

Sometimes project teams engage individuals from marginalized groups in superficial ways, or expect them to speak on behalf of their entire community, or both. This practice, called *tokenism*, assumes that people with shared identities have interchangeable experiences and perspectives, but it also describes engaging people for optics rather than as trusted and valued contributors.

and well-meaning allies who lead CBOs but do not live in the project area. It is important to be intentional about whose experience and expertise are given priority, and to revisit that question regularly.

Self-determination can fall out of focus as new partners enter the coalition or infrastructure project team, as institutional voices grow louder, as grant requirements reshape priorities, or as the complexity of the infrastructure demands more technical expertise. Your team will want to watch for these shifts and course correct if residents' voices are being sidelined. For example, asking residents to repeatedly qualify their expertise or presenting residents with finished plans merely for approval are signs that self-determination is weakening.

TOOL

Community Benefits Agreements

Community benefits agreements (CBAs) turn communities' ideas for the future into legal mandates, building trust between developers and neighborhood residents and ensuring community self-determination guides the way forward. CBAs specify investments to be made over the course of a development project, including investments in environmental stewardship, jobs, and public space. Take a look at the [CBA database](#) maintained by the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia Law School. Finding an example in your city, region, or state will help you build a strategy for applying a CBA to your own project.

TOOL

San Diego's Resident Leadership Academy

The technical complexity of the governance process hinders community self-determination because residents may not understand where, when, or how to participate. To address this, San Diego County developed a [Resident Leadership Academy](#) curriculum. It includes modules on understanding city planning, redlining, how health is determined by zip code, learning how to read data, and interacting with decision-makers. It is solution-focused, doesn't require a degree, and celebrates community knowledge.

TOOL

The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership

[The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) by Rosa Gonzalez of Facilitating Power (2019) offers a tool for community groups and government agencies working to facilitate community participation in solutions development and decision-making. The tool describes a spectrum of engagement, moving from marginalization to placation, tokenization, voice, delegated power, and — finally — community ownership.

Mural in Southeast San Diego depicts Chicano activists' occupation and reclamation of the site now known as Chicano Park.



★ Historical Truth and Repair

A transformative infrastructure project must begin with an honest account of the project site and the broader patterns of social inequality in your city. Without this grounding, teams risk repeating decisions that lead to long-term negative outcomes and unsustainable futures. This means understanding the history of the place – who lived there before the infrastructure was built, who was displaced, and what racial, cultural, and socioeconomic communities bore its consequences.

In the United States, urban history starts with Indigenous settlements and the relationship between people and land that preceded colonial disruption. Settler colonialism interrupted established land management practices and created the ongoing conditions in which many communities are increasingly vulnerable to climate disasters like wildfires and floods. The people who live alongside highway infrastructure are on the frontline of the human health effects of degraded air, water, and soil quality, and the accompanying loss of biodiversity.

Active strategies to process and repair the impact of past decisions can take many forms, but the most successful will promote material changes to decision-making, funding and governance. Models that seek to repair harms to Indigenous tribes include “First right of return” policies, “Land Back” programs, and Indigenous land taxes. More general models include a focus on economic or ecological repair, such as reparations to descendants of people who were enslaved, entrepreneurship programs, economic reinvestment, cultural corridors, and environmental restoration efforts. Teams must also be intentional about preventing additional harm. Gentrification, retraumatization, and damage from climate change are real risks in infrastructure projects.

The responsibility of learning and teaching the history of the place should not fall only on the people who live there – or who once lived there before being displaced. Individuals who have historically benefited from systems of harm, and continue to benefit, have a responsibility to do the necessary homework about the project area. Moreover, community members should not have to explain why healing matters. Expecting people to explain their trauma can be disrespectful, retraumatizing, and a distraction from the work at hand.

Historical truth-telling is not a one-time reckoning. New team members may join who have not yet done the necessary learning. Political shifts may make it harder to speak about social and cultural histories and systemic harm. The urgency of deadlines can push historical context to the margins. For these reasons, teams must keep learning from local histories and stay focused on repair when conflict or harmful dynamics emerge.

TOOLS FOR DEVELOPING YOUR AWARENESS OF STRUCTURAL RACISM

Deep understanding of the many forms of racism and white supremacy culture can ground your team in self-awareness and equip them to disrupt those patterns. Without an awareness of these patterns, team members of all races

★ TOOL



City Snapshots: A View of Infrastructure History

Equivolve developed [City Snapshots](#) for cities that participated in the ERC initiative. These profiles were designed to prompt discussion and strategic thinking about healing and repair. The City Snapshots are organized according to five themes that recur in cities across the country: Forced Migrations; Industrialization and Uneven Economic Mobility; Urban Renewal and Disruption; Ecological and Environmental Impacts; and Public Safety.

➡ In the [Set Your Stars Worksheet](#), you will be prompted to gather details for your own City Snapshot and identify root causes for harmful transportation infrastructure.

- and especially those who identify as white - can unknowingly perpetuate harmful dynamics.

TOOL

Divorcing White Supremacy Culture

Divorcing White Supremacy Culture (whitesupremacyculture.info) is a website that builds on Tema Okun's 1999 article about the characteristics of white supremacy culture - beliefs and behaviors that can come out in subtle ways and perpetuate cycles of power, oppression, and harm.

TOOL

Dismantling Racism

Dismantling Racism (dismantlingracism.org) offers a web-based workbook and variety of action tools for individuals and groups at all stages of the learning journey.

★ Trust

The presence or absence of trust will make or break transformative infrastructure work, and it matters across levels – institutional, organizational, and interpersonal. Many communities, especially marginalized communities, have generations of evidence reinforcing the belief that institutions do not follow through on their promises. Mistrust of government agencies and outside organizations is warranted, and the people who are the focus of that mistrust must resist the impulse to become defensive or frustrated by it.

Along with trust in organizations and public institutions, trust also matters within and between communities. Different neighborhoods, racial and ethnic groups, or generations may carry their own histories of tension and division. In one ERC city, a Latino community member reflected on this candidly: "I still feel uncomfortable saying this, but it needs to be said: from a personal perspective, Black and Brown people need to work better together." He explained that these communities "used to be joined at the hip," but now division and conflict have grown. He wondered "if it was intentional by whites – dividing communities by funding inequitably." Rebuilding trust across communities that have been set against one another is essential for creating the broad coalitions this work requires.

When trust is present, it usually rests on a few recognizable foundations: authentic relationships, follow-through, and commitment to a shared vision. Long-term personal relationships are irreplaceable in building coalitions and advancing projects. These relationships foster the kind of trust and openness that enable team members to seek informal counsel and gather important

TOOL

A Trauma-Informed Approach

Consider how the challenges to trust within your coalition are also present within the very transportation system you aim to transform.

Public health and transportation agencies in California developed the 2023 "[Trauma-Informed Active Transportation Guide](#)" to educate transportation professionals about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress. As they state, "a trauma-informed built environment may promote well-being at the individual level (increased feeling of safety), improve the social environment (greater community connectivity), and complement traditional person-centered efforts to address trauma."

information. For example, one community member from an ERC city with deep ties in the community and long-term relationships with government officials explained the value of being able to call on those people and say, "I don't know what I'm doing, but here is what I want to do. Can you give me some advice?" Likewise, community anchor organizations that have served a neighborhood over many years hold trust that newer entities cannot replicate quickly.

The most important thing you can do to build community trust is to offer transparent evidence of follow-through. When commitments are broken, trust erodes – and in many communities these patterns of broken trust have been playing out for generations.

Think about the indicators you will use to understand whether trust is growing. Indicators could include increased participation in coalition meetings or community events and greater willingness to engage in conflict resolution. Tracking your selected indicators will help your team measure progress toward trust. A shared goal of trust-building can provide common ground that holds relationships together when the work gets difficult.



Time

Transformative infrastructure projects respond to harm inflicted over decades and centuries, and healing requires time. As one ERC community member put it, "It's taken 400 years to break us down; [it] will take 400 years to heal." And yet, in our current transportation infrastructure process, there is inevitable tension between long-term community timelines and short-term funding or political cycles. In the words of one ERC team member, "Speed and inclusion are on opposite ends of the spectrum."

Think through how your team will navigate time tensions with full transparency and set expectations that honestly reflect funding and timeline constraints.. To manage time's drag on your project, plan your project in phases, cultivate multiple resident vision holders, and aim to institutionalize practices that build trust. You will need wins to celebrate at all project stages to sustain your team's momentum. You will need elders who connect to the past and young people to carry the momentum forward. You will need public agencies to enshrine high standards for community engagement so that valuing community input is a standard practice, not something that can be lost when an employee leaves.

As we illustrate in the stories of Community Connectors, *community champions* are critical to sustaining this work across long timelines. These are residents who demonstrate leadership over the course of years in the life of a community, encouraging and facilitating engagement from others, sharing local knowledge, and sustaining movements across years and decades. Their presence ensures continuity when disruptions occur and maintains historical awareness and context for the work ahead.

Community Connectors
in Buffalo, NY



LEARN MORE

Transparency in Capital Infrastructure Project Spending

Many cities offer a funding dashboard tool that shares how, when, and what public funds are being used for capital infrastructure projects. For example, Seattle reports on a levy funding billions of dollars of projects at [STL Dashboard](#). They have an oversight committee, a public website with notes, and a dashboard to share how much has been spent across different project categories. The City of Charlotte, NC also has a [Capital Projects Dashboard](#). If your city does not have a similar tool, this could be an impactful topic for advocacy.



"Our Struggle is a Long Struggle"

Orienting in National City & Southeast San Diego, CA

Residents in National City and Southeast San Diego, California imagine welcoming spaces where biodiversity is on display, community gardens flourish, art covers buildings and highway flyovers, and the history of the place is acknowledged and visible. In overlooked stretches of soil and weeds dominated by car-centric infrastructure, including towering overpasses that carry vehicles at high speeds over the communities below, they imagine safe paths for biking and walking, clean air and soil, and landscapes resilient to the changing climate.

THE TEAM

- Mundo Gardens
- Urban Collaborative Project
- Caltrans
- City of National City
- Tipey Joa Native Warriors
- Vision Culture Foundation
- Groundwork San Diego - Chollas Creek



COMMUNITY SELF-DETERMINATION AND LEADERSHIP

In National City, Janice Luna Reynoso comes from a family whose stewardship of an empty lot near their home called her to found Mundo Gardens, a community garden and social justice organization empowering youth and families throughout San Diego and across borders. She is an executive director and a connector – weaving together people from different backgrounds and organizations, to advance the shared vision of creating safe, beautiful community spaces. Janice models caring, persistent leadership. One member of the team explained, "She is mirroring the community, that's all she's doing. She knows she has a responsibility and...she is creating other leaders in the community as she goes."

Led by Janice, the coalition of community organizations and agency staff is relentless in pursuit of a shared vision. They acknowledge the length of the struggle and are committed to drawing on subversive, creative strategies when necessary. Facing major challenges to their work, including the city cutting down the fruit trees they nurtured and the federal government withholding grant funds, a team member shared: "The one given is that we

The first two Community Connectors stories featured in this guide illuminate how ERC teams in different cities embodied the four **orienting principles** at the heart of equitably reconnecting communities. The details come from their Community Connectors grant work funded from 2023 through 2025, but each team has a longer history and continues to carry its vision forward.

(Above) Community Connectors team and friends in Chicano Park
(Credit: Vito Distefano)

can rely on each other.” The stakes are high and they draw inspiration from local history like Chicano Park, where activists occupied and reclaimed land beneath a highway interchange.



HISTORICAL TRUTH AND REPAIR

The team expressed gratitude for the people who laid the groundwork for their progress today. Janice's brother started the first community garden in National City, which she continues to cultivate. The Chicano activists who occupied and reclaimed the sites that are now Chicano Park and the Centro Cultural de La Raza created a model of community power that the team draws on today. The Black Federation successfully halted construction of Highway 252, a proposed freeway that would have displaced residents in San Diego, and reclaimed the land for parks, homes, and schools. And the Kumeyaay people have lived with and cared for the land since time immemorial. They face a long history of injustice and attempted erasure – traditional travel routes have become major interstates, ancient villages sit underwater, and the freedom to travel their traditional land is cut off by national borders – and their community is at the center of the work to reimagine the spaces. Maat Mataa Yum, a Kumeyaay phrase meaning “where people gather on the land”, is the name of the space beneath the towering freeway overpasses that now hosts pop-up coffee vendors and art, and will one day be a hub for community members to come together.



TRUST

The coalition in National City is multicultural and multigenerational, bringing together Latine, Black, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and Indigenous Kumeyaay leaders alongside state transportation agency (Caltrans) staff, artists, researchers, and residents with deep lived experiences of the infrastructure's effects. These partners bring different perspectives and skills, and different goals for what the project will achieve. Yet they have identified a shared vision that holds the coalition together, and they address internal conflict directly, with that vision in mind. The relationships are authentic - made between people rather than agencies. Advancing the work often means finding the right person within an agency to champion it. Sometimes it means becoming that person, moving from community resident to a role within an agency in order to drive change from the inside.

The team acknowledged the importance of the investment made through the ERC Initiative as a “seed investment” – a demonstration of trust that is invaluable for small organizations like theirs as they build confidence among other prospective funders.

Martha Rodriguez, Tipey Joa Native Warriors and Kumeyaay leader, welcomes visitors to Maat Mataa Yum.



“We are living in a society that has been racist since day one. Our strength is in combining forces.”

ERC team member

 TIME

The team acknowledged that the struggles emerged from long histories of injustice and that the work will continue across generations. That orientation to time has helped the team weather ups and downs with public funding. Over time, they have seen core community members move into roles at public agencies and have developed a sophisticated understanding of an infrastructure process that reaches across multiple jurisdictions. How do they keep up momentum? When the Equivolve team visited Maat Mataa Yum in April 2025, Janice welcomed us with colorfully painted Mexican jarrito mugs steaming with café de olla, a sweet, cinnamon-steeped coffee. The group formed a circle and team member Martha Rodriguez (Tipey Joa Native Warriors and Kumeyaay leader) led us in honoring the ancestors of the place. We closed our eyes and heard the cars flying past on the highway, but we also heard each other breathing. When we opened our eyes, everyone was smiling.



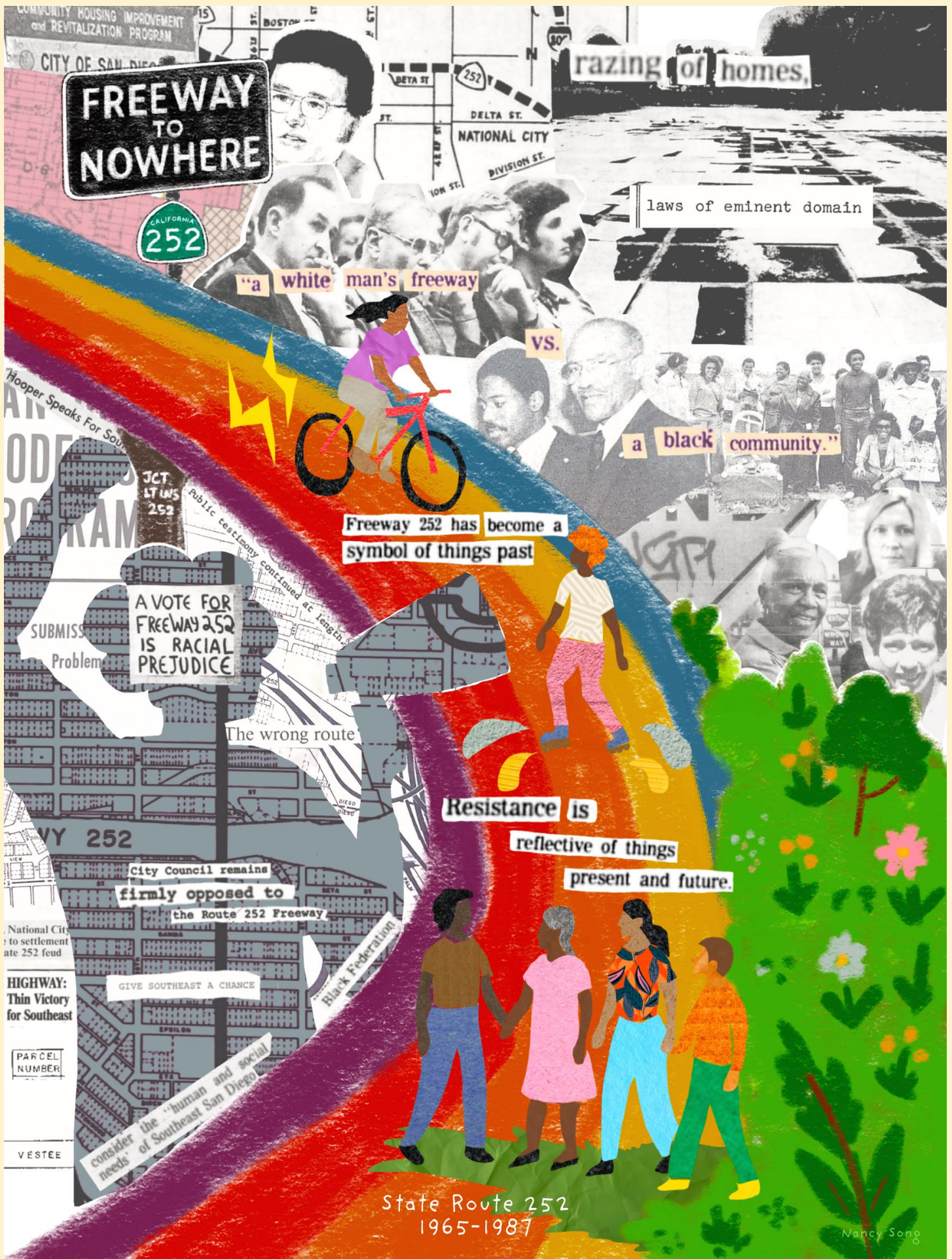
“Our struggle is a long struggle.”

ERC team member

 To learn more about the mobility legacies and ongoing work in National City and southeast San Diego, CA, visit citysnapshotsus.com/cities/national-city



Vision for the proposed park is brought to life through temporary art installations and conversation around the coffee truck.



Artwork by Nancy Song depicts the history of freeway planning and grassroots resistance in southeast San Diego.



"We Know the Game Because We've Been Playing for Generations"

Orienting in Durham, NC

Bragtown and Merrick-Moore are two adjacent, historically and predominantly Black neighborhoods in Durham, North Carolina. Investment is pouring into more affluent parts of Durham, bringing more housing and through-traffic to Bragtown and Merrick-Moore. Yet residents face danger every day because they lack basic street infrastructure. There are no sidewalks along a busy street in front of a school, leaving pedestrians and wheelchair users to navigate along the thin margins of the road while trucks fly by at high speed. Bus stops are ditches, with no seats or shelter from the weather and no flat ground off the road where people can safely wait. Across the street from one stop is a memorial to a young cyclist who was killed by a car. The neighborhood needs infrastructure improvements to keep residents safe, and intervention to stem the gentrification that is pushing them out.

In the face of these challenges, residents have cultivated connections across sectors to make their neighborhoods safer and more stable.

THE TEAM

- Bragtown Community Association
- Merrick-Moore Community Development Corporation
- UNC-Chapel Hill
- In partnership with City of Durham, NC & Durham County



COMMUNITY SELF-DETERMINATION AND LEADERSHIP

Bonita Green, Executive Director of Merrick-Moore Community Development Corporation, and Vanessa Mason-Evans, Chair of the Bragtown Community Association, lead the transformative infrastructure work in their communities. They hold the vision, the relationships, and the knowledge – gathered over years of advocacy – to connect the people within their communities and transform infrastructure to improve living conditions. Both women have local roots that extend back for generations and long-standing relationships with neighbors, many of whom are reluctant to talk to outsiders. They know how local systems work and regularly attend public meetings, representing their

(Above) Mural on a Bragtown store depicts ancestral roots, bondage, and a guiding star of cowrie shells.

communities even when meetings are scheduled at times or in locations that make it difficult or impossible for working people, parents, elderly people, or people with limited mobility to participate. In their words, they “know the players and the game.” They also know where they need support, and have partnered with researchers from the University of North Carolina to strengthen the capacity of their team. The researchers contribute expertise in transportation planning, housing, land use, and environmental policy, as well as the research skills and institutional resources to access and analyze new data to advance the project’s vision.



HISTORICAL TRUTH AND REPAIR

Life in a region built on slavery makes for haunting continuities; some team members’ enslaved ancestors labored on the university buildings that other team members now work inside. Rather than glossing over the painful past, Bragtown residents memorialize the struggles that their families overcame to prosper here. They spell their neighborhood’s name with a single G to disavow any connection to Confederate General Braxton Bragg. Vanessa’s family owns a convenience store that serves the neighborhood and sits alongside the same railroad tracks that carried her formerly enslaved ancestors to freedom. They left the plantation, rode the train, and settled on this plot of land. Murals on the wall pay tribute to this history, depicting Vanessa’s family lineage over the last two centuries in North Carolina and their ancestral roots in Ghana — a child, chains and a snake representing bondage, cowry shells in the shape of the North Star symbolizing freedom, and a Sankofa bird, looking to the past to guide the way forward.



Railroad tracks that carried formerly enslaved people to Bragtown, where many settled.



TRUST

Members of marginalized communities often mistrust universities due to histories of extractive research practices, in which researchers collect data and then leave, contributing little to directly improving conditions for those communities. The community-university collaboration unfolding in Bragtown and Merrick-Moore offers a powerful counter-example, rooted in trust.

The partnership was born out of conversations between Bonita and Danielle Spurlock, Associate Professor of Land Use and Environmental Planning at UNC, while they served together as board members of a local community organization. Bonita explained the challenges and vision for her community, and Danielle recruited colleagues to support the effort. In the work that followed, university partners were careful to stay focused on what the community wanted, rather than their own external project goals. As one UNC researcher told students who engaged in the work, “It’s not about you, it’s about the bigger picture. Embrace the fact that you thought you’re doing one thing, but now you’re doing something else.” They advise students and fellow researchers to “examine your intentions,” including underlying motives. If your goal is to help — help who, and for what reasons? Is there a sense of superiority at play? What is the end goal? For transformative projects,



In Merrick-Moore, school buses, fast-moving traffic, and pedestrians are forced to co-exist without sidewalks.

research or publication cannot be the end goal — “the end goal is to have the neighborhood look like the neighborhood wants it to look.”

The community leaders and researchers have strong, authentic relationships and communicate openly with one another. As they talked about their work with the Equivolve team, the conversation was an effortless weaving of perspectives — a community leader would describe a situation in vivid, sensory details and a research partner would chime in with broader, systemic context. The team’s interactions were genuine and extended past the bounds of formal project settings. In the words of one team member, “We have become part of each other’s lives.”

★ TIME

Bonita and Vanessa have been advocating for infrastructure improvements in their community since they were children — and the legacies of injustice they are working to address reach much further back. When the researchers considered joining the project, Danielle clearly communicated to all involved that this work was a long-term commitment and would continue regardless of their success on any particular grant application.

With Bonita and Vanessa’s generational and historical perspectives and the deep commitment of their friends from UNC, Bragtown and Merrick-Moore are on the path to achieving their vision of a safe and connected community.

📍 To learn more about the mobility legacies and ongoing work in Durham, NC, visit citysnapshotsus.com/cities/durham



Bragtown mural shows a book with the title, *Knowing Our Past While Embracing Our Future*.



Wayfaring

With their stars set, the wayfaring team begins their journey forward.

Wayfaring — traveling from one place to another — requires vision, navigation, awareness, and adaptability. The wayfarer generally has a destination in mind and, once they have their bearings, sets a path in that direction. As they travel, they monitor the changing landscape, weather conditions, and the wellbeing of their companions. When they encounter difficulties, wayfarers may need to adjust their route — sometimes trying one way, realizing it will not work, and circling back to a path they previously passed by, now with a deeper awareness of the surrounding landscape. The path they end up traveling may look very different from the route they initially envisioned, but they regularly check in with their orienting tools — their guiding stars (and maybe their maps, landmarks, compass, or GPS) — to make sure that they are still heading in the right direction.

In shaping the course of their journey, who the wayfarer travels with matters as much as where they are going — and will in fact help determine where they go and how they get there. The wayfarers will be more likely to reach their destination safely — and much more likely to enjoy the journey — when they have a shared vision for where they hope to go, trust one another, communicate effectively, and genuinely care for the wellbeing of their companions. Along the journey, traveling companions may tire, get hurt, or need to leave the group — and new companions may join. Wayfarers must adjust their pace to accommodate the needs of the group, so they can all travel safely to their destination.

The wayfarer's journey to advance a transformative infrastructure project works in much the same way. **As you set out on your journey, consider the following six phases:**

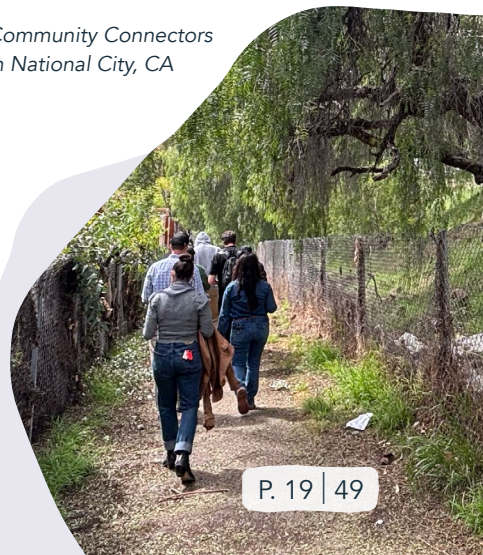
- **Cultivate connections.** Invite people to travel with you.
- **Build shared vision.** Together, decide where you want to go.
- **Set goals and agreements.** Make a plan for how you will get to your destination.
- **Stay the course.** Travel the path, persevering and adapting in the face of challenges.
- **Share and reflect.** Tell your story, celebrate successes, and reflect on your progress.

The phases are presented in sequence here, but in practice your movement through them will be much more fluid. You will move through phases repeatedly, looping back to previous steps and often working on several at once. The

Wayfaring: traveling from place to place; being on a journey



Community Connectors
in National City, CA



dynamic nature of these phases is an integral feature of journeys that seek to equitably transform transportation infrastructure, as it reflects the need to be responsive to the residents who are most affected and the changing conditions that surround them.

As you embark on your journey, remember your guiding stars! The journey may be long and your path will almost certainly change along the way, but continuing to check in with your four guiding stars – community self-determination and leadership, historical truth and repair, trust, and time – will ensure that you are engaging in a process that enacts the knowledge, creativity, and vision already present in your community.



Cultivate Connections

To advance the collective vision, you will need to build a coalition with people who relate to the infrastructure in different ways. Begin by assessing the current conditions and connections in your community. Power mapping will help you determine who is already on the journey with you and who else you might want or need to bring along. With this understanding, you can build your core team and support network for the journey ahead.

Coalition-building requires relationships and mutual respect. Successful coalitions grow from authentic, long-standing relationships and expand to include others with shared values. Wayfaring can occur over generations, and will likely require engaging younger people to carry it forward. As the network expands, the skills, expertise, access, and capacity of the group also evolve, helping sustain and advance the work.

Every transformative infrastructure coalition will look different, but certain areas of expertise should be represented:

- **Resident vision holders** are essential. They have lived alongside the infrastructure for years and can imagine how life will be different with the proposed changes.
- **Transportation agency staff** or others who know how to influence what projects get prioritized for funding bring critical knowledge. These allies within government work to move resident visions through processes that were not designed for them, creating paths to “yes.”
- **Economic and workforce development experts** who know the local landscape of labor and job pipelines, land use, and businesses can help connect the project to broader community needs.
- **Local policymakers** who can advance legislation or programs that support the project offer institutional leverage.
- **Grassroots groups** with a focus on mobility justice and/or transportation equity bring organizing capacity and movement-level knowledge and energy.
- **Keepers of traditional Indigenous knowledge** with historical ties to the area bring a living connection to the deeper story of that place. For example, many roadways in the United States were built on top of



Community Connectors
in Minneapolis, MN

Native trails and trade corridors. This expertise will not be available for all projects, given the reality that Indigenous communities are still recovering from colonial violence, but you should look into whether there are Indigenous-led organizations who might be partners.

This phase should result in a core team that will meet regularly and drive the work forward, a strong, diverse network of public, private, and grassroots collaborators, and an understanding of individuals outside of this network who may oppose or complicate the group's vision.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Everyone

- **Prioritize community expertise.** Residents know the conditions in their neighborhoods. Be intentional about whose voices carry the most weight, and ensure that residents who are most affected by the project are included at every stage - providing insight, shaping plans, and making decisions. A team member who works in a neighborhood but does not live there, or advocacy groups whose priorities reflect their own agendas rather than those of longtime residents, may have valuable contributions. But their perspectives should not overshadow people who have lived with the consequences of harmful infrastructure. Prioritizing community expertise means engaging fully, without retreating from conflict or criticism. Community members must be able to express themselves and see their ideas come to life.
- **Protect authentic engagement.** Respect resident vision holders' expertise and dignity through authentic and action-oriented engagement that is trauma-informed and sensitive to context. Are you expecting residents to do work as volunteers while consultants perform similar tasks with professional compensation? Instead of developing or funding a project and then asking for community endorsement, co-develop projects with communities from the beginning.
- **Include all ages.** Bring in both young people and elders. Young people ensure the work continues beyond the people currently at the table. Elders and legacy residents hold historical knowledge and relationships that are irreplaceable.
- **Acknowledge harm and the need for reconciliation.** Start meetings with a land acknowledgment. This is not just a courtesy; it acknowledges where the harm started and grounds the work in historical truth. Those who have benefited historically and continue to benefit must commit to doing the necessary homework beforehand. Do what you can to learn the history and context, and do not expect the affected communities to teach you. Asking community members to constantly explain the harm distracts from the work at hand and can be retraumatizing.



Teams from across the country convened in Seattle, WA to cultivate connections within and across projects

TOOL

Indigenous Land Acknowledgements — and Beyond

Land acknowledgements are formal statements, often shared at the beginning of a meeting or event, that recognize and share gratitude to Indigenous peoples who are traditional stewards of the land. The Native Governance Center offers a [Guide to Indigenous Land Acknowledgment](#), as well as a [Going Beyond Land Acknowledgement](#) series that offers important information about moving beyond language and offering concrete steps for how you plan to support Indigenous communities into the future.

- **Work with community anchor institutions.** Anchor institutions, such as CBOs, churches, universities, or hospitals, often have deep relationships and hold community trust. Organizations with a holistic focus on neighborhood issues, strong relationships, and dedicated staff can serve as effective bridges between communities and public agencies. Projects can build on the networks and capacity these institutions have already developed.
- **Root down.** Relationships should extend beyond the immediate project team to include community members with historical knowledge of related initiatives, as in the coalition built by Mundo Gardens (see Spotlight: National City).
- **Build trust across racial groups and communities.** Communities that have been divided, whether by race, neighborhood, or other characteristics, may need to actively rebuild relationships. One organizer noted that cross-community solidarity “scars the hell out of people,” and that is precisely what makes it such a powerful coalition-building tool.

For Community Members & CBOs

- **Use your coalition strategically.** Consider whether a public servant, community resident, or another coalition member might be the best messenger in a given setting. One ERC team member explained, “you can be a mover and shaker, but you can shake the wrong limbs.” The right message coming from the wrong person can sometimes do more harm than good.
- **Expect more from government.** As one ERC team put it, “reparations are owed to us from the government, so why would we not work with them to get those things for us?” They explained that if public investment caused harm, it makes sense to expect government investment in repair. The same team also challenged the “idea that all government is distant, nameless, faceless, and harmfully bureaucratic” by thinking of individuals within government, not agencies themselves, as partners.
- **Start local.** Identify who supports the project, even if that means just one or two champions within a handful of local agencies. As you build support, these local champions can advocate for project support from state and federal levels.

For Public Agencies

- **Honor the skills that partner organizations bring to the work.** As you gain an understanding of what skills residents can bring to the project, consider how to include those skills in procurement requests. One ERC team member highlighted that agencies can use a scope of work to call in local thought leaders, rather than writing a scope that would require bringing in new organizations without connections to the project.
- **Offer resident leadership programs.** A number of interviewees spoke about how a resident leadership program gave them a starting point for advancing an idea for infrastructure they had developed from their lived experience.
- **Build trust across agencies.** Trust and collaboration between agencies across jurisdictions is important. Focus on the shared goal, even when reasons for being at the table differ.

TOOL

Contracting with CBOs

In response to feedback from local organizations, Los Angeles County's transit agency, Metro, developed a framework for partnering directly with CBOs. As they explain in their 2025 strategy document, “collaborating with CBOs in the planning and operations of public agencies increases equitable outcomes, public participation and can foster trust between the community and public agencies.”



See Metro's [“Community-Based Organization Partnering Strategy”](#) [here](#).

For Funders

- **Go right to the source.** Fund CBOs directly when possible, so that they can leverage their relationships and lead the important work of coalition-building.
- **Ask the right questions.** When considering funding an infrastructure project, ask about who is engaged but also how, looking for indications of strong connection to the community where the project is taking place.

As the work progresses, teams often need to bring in new partners with skills the team now realizes it needs, or to rebuild connections after leadership changes.



Build Shared Vision

With your coalition taking shape, the next step is to articulate a shared vision for what the neighborhood can become and how transforming transportation infrastructure can get it there. A long-term vision must be created with residents, through an open invitation to imagine neighborhoods that meet their needs. Equity-oriented visioning is informed by awareness of history and prioritizes the needs and aspirations of historically marginalized communities.

The shared vision should reflect what you want the ultimate outcome to be, rather than being limited to the scope of a grant. In the words of one ERC team, ask yourself: “What do we want to see in our life, for real?” What is the big dream for the neighborhood? What is the immediate project that will help build toward that vision?

By the end of this phase, your team should have a shared vision for what will be physically changed by your transportation infrastructure project and how those changes will help the neighborhood flourish.

Building and communicating shared vision is most impactful early in the wayfaring process. The further a project moves through a transportation agency's delivery process, the harder it gets to make meaningful changes to design and scope. Agencies resist those changes because once funding is approved and a contractor is engaged, adjustments can mean costly delays.



RECOMMENDATIONS

For Everyone

- **Surface local histories.** In many places, people won't be able to remember a time before the transportation infrastructure. For example,



in Trenton, earlier inhabitants of the area are gone and current residents can't remember a time when they could access the river. Their coalition held an event to show images of what the park used to look like before the highway. Similarly, the Minneapolis team organized an event that featured a historic map of the neighborhood before it was divided by a highway. Public history projects can educate and inspire community imagining.

- **Identify root causes.** Be explicit about the connections between current realities (e.g., neighborhoods with high unemployment rates) and root causes (e.g., the interstate cut off the neighborhood from downtown and made it difficult for residents to access employment).
- **Honor Indigenous peoples and their relationships to the land.** Indigenous peoples hold kinship and historic relationships to the land that predate the infrastructure by centuries, and in many cases by millennia. These relationships are foundational to understanding what has been lost and what repair means in a given place. Honoring Indigenous peoples means recognizing their ongoing presence, sovereignty, and connection to the project area. Examples include using Indigenous place names, respecting traditional gathering sites, learning about traditional travel routes that became interstates, and listening to and partnering with the living communities that continue to steward these relationships.



Community Connectors
in Minneapolis, MN

Examples of ways to acknowledge and honor Indigenous people, from Kumeyaay leaders in National City:

- Natural History Museum display of Mastodon bones found in the area should acknowledge that Kumeyaay people lived alongside them.
- Display a welcome sign in the San Diego Airport: "Welcome to Kumeyaay Land"
- Create more places for Kumeyaay to share their culture and benefit economically, like the marketplace in Old Town San Diego
- Create spaces for traditional celebrations
- Incorporate native names and uses of plants into signage in public parks and educational experiences
- Interrupt cultural genocide by allowing Kumeyaay to collect native plants and access the ocean
- Allow unrestricted travel across traditional Kumeyaay lands, which include both sides of the United States-Mexico border
- **Include climate vulnerabilities and ecological repair.** Your vision should address local vulnerabilities to climate disasters. Centuries of colonial displacement followed by decades of intensive infrastructure construction have left many communities vulnerable to climate disasters like wildfires and floods. Transportation infrastructure projects can be an entry point for using public investments to build climate resilience, including restoring biodiversity, improving air and water quality, and rethinking how land around infrastructure is managed. Learning from Indigenous land stewardship practices can inform this work, but this learning should happen in relationship with Indigenous communities, not through

Community Connectors
in Minneapolis, MN



extraction of their knowledge. In National City, the Mundo Gardens team embraced biodiversity and ecological restoration as part of the healing, "for its own sake." They drew on the Indigenous tradition of reciprocity, recognizing elements of the project site as relatives rather than resources to exploit.

- **Plan for diverse perspectives.** Even people who live next door to each other might feel differently about what would make a better neighborhood, and distinct cultural communities may bring distinct priorities and histories of tension with each other. Building a shared vision across these differences requires intentional multicultural engagement. Communities that have been divided, whether by race, neighborhood, or inequitable funding patterns, may need to actively rebuild relationships before a shared vision can hold. This cross-community solidarity can be both uncomfortable and powerful.

For Community Members & CBOs

- **Articulate a shared vision.** Challenge yourselves to articulate the vision in one sentence, in language that will inspire widespread buy-in. Once all parties involved agree on the same long-term vision, plans and details can be worked out. A shared vision also provides an orientation point in times of conflict - a way to stay grounded and return to the purpose of the work, even when tensions arise.
- **Define your site.** What is the scale for your vision? Get as specific as possible: this block, this neighborhood, this stretch of state highway.

For Public Agencies

- **Identify the best intervention point for community vision.** How is community visioning currently incorporated into planning at your agency? Do projects get programmed based on community preferences, or do they come in only during project delivery? If the latter, work with your colleagues and leadership to find opportunities to bring in community visioning earlier in the process so that it is embedded in long-range plans and the mechanisms for queuing up projects for funding.
- **Be careful not to water down ideas.** Many communities have had negative experiences with paternalistic public engagement that reworks and repackages their ideas to fit the dominant narratives. For example, in a California junior high school, students designed a mural that depicted gang members placing bandannas in a fire and the Virgin Mary appearing in the smoke. However, the school found the design objectionable and replaced the bandannas with popsicles. The students resented it because they had been censored and the mural no longer represented their vision. What might a different path have looked like?
- **Listen for alternatives.** Be willing to change your plans if residents' vision offers a viable path. Prioritize community-authored design choices, even when they challenge dominant narratives. Policies and laws exist that perpetuate the status quo and block progress toward community-driven transformation. People work at public agencies because they want to serve, yet they often feel constrained by regulations. The work of community-oriented insiders is to change the rules that inhibit progress. As one city official on an ERC team put it, "policies, rules, and laws can

"Coming together is making us stronger. It is multicultural and it's been good medicine."

ERC team member about bringing together organizations with Black, Chicano, and Kumeyaay leadership

"You don't have to do everything, just do something."

ERC team member

TOOL

Inclusive Visioning Process

As an urban planner in California cities, James Rojas observed that existing processes for capturing public input on proposed projects were not designed to include perspectives from Latinx community members like his grandmother. He developed a tool called Place It! that invites participants to play with small toys and found objects as they respond to a prompt. It could be "build your favorite childhood memory," or "build your ideal neighborhood." At its heart, Place It! is designed to honor the lived experiences that everyone brings to the table and draws them out for inclusive, community-rooted visioning.

 [Learn more about Place It! Here](#)

change. We can change them at all levels. We must follow the rules while changing the rules.”

For Funders

- **Fund planning grants.** Planning grants can create the conditions for community-led visioning, coalition-building, and early design work. For more on planning grants see the [Funding](#) section of this Guide.
- **Seed deeper change.** Support CBOs advocating for changes to planning processes that would bring in community visioning earlier, before projects are scoped and funding is committed.
- **Experiment.** Partner with a team that includes CBOs and agency staff to design a case study where you support the capacity for community engagement throughout an infrastructure project, then analyze what actions effectively embedded the community-rooted vision in the final product. Then, fund an advocacy campaign that would enable CBOs to advance those actions through legislative or administrative channels.
- **Support community ownership.** Fund communities to create and hold the project vision, design, planning, decision-making, and benefits. Encourage self-determination in ownership models, allowing for community members to direct their work and change course as needed.
- **Learn from the past.** Fund local history initiatives that will shed light on past community life and inform the visioning process.

In developing a vision, you will likely identify multiple projects that would improve quality of life in your neighborhood. To narrow to a specific project that will advance the vision, it's key to have folks in the room who have a technical understanding of the processes for infrastructure planning and can help shape the direction of action.

“I don't see [the highway], I see the future...it's going to be something that we love and can be proud of.”

ERC team member

TOOL

Learning from the Past: City Snapshots

To facilitate local conversations about historical legacies and their connections to current conditions, RWJF funded the development of [City Snapshots](#) for cities that participated in the ERC Initiative.



Set Goals & Agreements

Once you have a shared vision and a project in mind, the next step is to set concrete goals and agreements that will guide the work. To gauge how a project is advancing the vision, your team needs milestones. What does this project need to achieve in order to advance the vision? Goals may need to shift as the coalition expands, because new members bring perspectives and abilities that change what the team is capable of achieving. Along with setting goals, the group should define its shared expectations for collaboration and communication and, crucially, its plan for accountability.

By the end of this phase, your team should have a set of goals with clear milestones to achieve them, community agreements for how the team will work together, and a plan for accountability to the broader community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Everyone

- **Define decision-making roles early.** Clearly define roles for decision-making and do so early in the process. Ensure that community residents hold some of those roles and at least partial ownership of the project plans and benefits. The specifics will vary widely; team members should define what meaningful decision-making power looks like in the context of their project.
- **Respect community-authored choices.** Develop shared understanding and respect for community-authored design choices, even when they challenge dominant narratives or fall outside standard guidelines. The vision belongs to the community. When partners push back on residents' choices because they are unfamiliar or uncomfortable, it undermines self-determination.
- **Share the goals.** Communicate project timelines and strategy clearly to coalition members and neighborhood residents.

For Community Members and CBOs

- **Set expectations with your community.** Educate community members about the long-term nature of infrastructure projects so that they have realistic expectations of the work and don't lose trust in the process when visible results take time. Build in accountability practices from the start, including regular updates to the broader community, so that the team stays answerable to the people they aim to serve.

For Public Agencies

- **Acknowledge limits and look for workarounds.** Consider limitations of agency policies that block direct community agreements and co-ownership, and work to address those barriers.
- **Translate.** Infrastructure timelines and processes are complex and unfamiliar to most residents. Communicate clearly about what to expect.

For Funders

- **Help the vision meet the road.** Invest in CBOs' capacity to engage with technical experts who can help develop plans for navigating the existing infrastructure process and bringing the vision to life.

Goals may need to be revisited as the coalition expands and new voices join the work. Shifting goals in response to new input is a crucial part of the process.



Community Connectors
in Minneapolis, MN



Stay the Course

Turning vision into action may be a long, slow process. Celebrating small wins along the way is important for showing progress, sustaining momentum, and building trust. Events and street activations that give people a taste of what the transformed neighborhood will look like can energize the coalition and keep them connected with the vision.

As the project progresses, unexpected developments will likely crop up. Allowing time for groups to work through difficult periods in ways that are authentic and healing is critical for long-term success, even when it does not fit into original project timelines. If your coalition can adapt to changing circumstances while staying true to your guiding stars and the course you set, it is an indication that something powerful and transformative is happening in the infrastructure process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Everyone

- **Show progress along the way.** Find related opportunities where the work can move quickly and achieve small victories. Seeing tangible outcomes helps with healing and sustains engagement over the long haul. When long-term engagement is required, consistently involving partners in these small projects along the way is a good way to keep them committed and connected. The benefits of moving quickly, however, must be balanced with the need to engage community members and other partners fully.
- **Communicate.** Clearly communicate the long-term nature of the work and manage expectations of progress. Without clear communication, residents may expect to see results more quickly than the team can deliver, and unmet expectations reinforce beliefs about lack of follow-through. Strategic communication — crafting messages that all partners can agree on, creating materials, disseminating to the appropriate audiences in formats that are accessible to them, continuing communication and addressing misinformation — is a thoughtful, time-intensive process and tends to take longer than anticipated.
- **Focus on the shared vision.** When divisions and tensions arise, stay rooted in the shared vision that drives the work. The details may differ, but there should be a clear, shared purpose beneath it. The shared vision is what holds coalitions together.
- **Allow for expansive, flexible timelines.** Resist false urgency imposed by grant deadlines, agency schedules, or political cycles, and allow timelines to change and adapt. Build flexibility into project plans so that when things take longer than expected, it's treated as the process working as intended rather than an obstacle or delay.
- **Acknowledge and address conflict.** As one community member shared, "What usually shuts down [a movement] is internal conflict." The wayfaring coalition should acknowledge that there will be conflicts, identify a process



TOOL

Nonviolent Communication

Our segregated society has not prepared most of us to navigate cultural differences with respect, and the power imbalances created by race and class inequities can manifest as tension, hurt feelings, and resentment. As your wayfaring coalition starts to move your vision forward, it will be helpful to have a shared framework to handle disagreements and misunderstandings.

One framework is nonviolent communication, which was developed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg during the 1960s racial integration of schools. Through trainings, certifications, and other resources, the [Center for Nonviolent Communication](#) works toward "a world where everyone's needs matter and people use their power to foster connection, build collaborative communities, and address differences peacefully."

for addressing them, and follow through on that plan when conflicts arise. Silence in the face of conflict usually reinforces the status quo and perpetuates historical power dynamics. When things feel off, it is important to have conversations about it and not perpetuate harm.

For Community Members & CBOs

- **Expect challenges.** Solving societal problems is ongoing work that no one project alone can accomplish. In dynamic relational, political, and physical contexts, challenges will inevitably arise. Staying oriented in your guiding stars and shared vision can help navigate these times, along with strong relationships and a willingness to adapt.
- **Be persistent.** It's a long game, so don't give up if it's not happening as smoothly as expected. As one community organizer recommended, if you hear a "no," think of it as a "not right now." Try again later, with someone else. Who knows — someone new may have heard your ask and unseen momentum may be building.

For Public Agencies

- **Deliver progress.** Find solutions adjacent to the project where you can move fast, to demonstrate that things can happen. The coalition needs your help in identifying small victories.
- **Work at the pace of community.** Meet people where they are. On one ERC team, the state department of transportation was directly involved in community outreach — compensating residents for their time, running a collaborative design group, providing food and childcare, and going door to door to get the word out about plans. In another ERC city, public servants went out on kayaks to connect with young people playing by the river.
- **Recognize that lack of trust from community members is warranted.** Agency staff committed to rectifying past harms may not be received warmly by the communities they seek to serve. These individuals may not have been personally involved in creating the historical harms and may be members of the harmed communities themselves. Some interviewees who worked for public agencies shared that they felt frustrated or hurt when community groups dismissed them as part of the problem, but it is important to remember that mistrust typically exists for a reason. Advancing work in these contexts requires humility and a sustained focus on what the affected community members say they need.
- **Keep showing up.** If the project stalls, keep spending time in spaces where community members authentically express themselves. Do not fear or avoid community engagement, even when it comes with anger, blame, or other difficult feelings. It can be traumatic for marginalized communities to be silenced because of bureaucratic hurdles.

For Funders

- **Provide long-term funding.** Transformative infrastructure projects typically extend far beyond the scope of any one grant cycle. Projects can encounter major barriers to progress when funding ends, and the continuous search for more funding takes valuable time away from the work itself. Funders can make a major difference by offering long-term

TOOL

Celebrate and Renew

As your project drags on, a great way to sustain your wayfaring coalition and local residents is to stage a happening that immerses folks in the transformed neighborhood your project aims to catalyze.

Atlanta-based [community builder and social practitioner Nedra Deadwyler](#) has always found ways to connect her passions for Black neighborhood history and healthy mobility. In 2022, she launched the Save Your Spaces festival to nourish Atlantans with artistic reflection, civic engagement opportunities, and celebration. The goal is to give a "renewed sense of what is possible."



[Learn more about Save Your Spaces here.](#)

Community Connectors in Minneapolis, MN



funding opportunities – three years or more – that allow time for teams to plan, build coalitions, iterate, and work through their process. Short-term funding opportunities, while well-intentioned, can create additional hurdles. For example, Trenton's Community Connectors grant allowed them to launch a campaign to build public will, but finding funding to continue the work has been difficult. Without additional funding, they risk adding to a long pattern of broken promises in their city.

- **Fund projects that repair harm.** Huge amounts of funding are available for highway projects that prioritize fast-moving cars, and those projects continue to bypass meaningful involvement with the communities that are harmed by this infrastructure paradigm. More funding opportunities are needed that explicitly acknowledge and seek to address past harms, such as the Reconnecting Communities program.

If momentum stalls or the context shifts significantly, consider returning to:

- **Cultivate Connections** to rebuild or expand the coalition.
- **Build Shared Vision** to reground in the community's original intent.



Share & Reflect

Over the course of your journey, your team will need to take time to reflect on progress, share updates, celebrate wins, and tell their story. This phase is where the team reconnects with the broader vision and goals of the project, assesses how the project is taking shape and adjusts goals as needed. Have new possibilities opened up that the team didn't expect? Has the project drifted away from the original vision?

To stay accountable to residents, the coalition should be intentional about communicating progress periodically and do so using formats that are accessible to all relevant audiences, including different age groups.

Reflection and reporting can inform ongoing visioning, support trust-building, expand the coalition, and potentially attract additional funding. It is important to document the process and share lessons learned — not just internally, but also for broader audiences. Sharing widely builds collective knowledge, including insights and practices that can be implemented or adapted in other locations. It can also shift the field toward planning practices that are more conducive to advancing transportation infrastructure changes that truly represent residents' visions and reckon with historical legacies.

By the end of this phase, your team should have updated goals and milestones that reflect where the work actually stands, a project narrative that tells the story of the work in the team's own voice, and various methods of publicly sharing progress.

Community Connectors
in Spokane, WA



RECOMMENDATIONS

For Everyone

- **Communicate creatively.** Your methods of communication should reflect the diversity of your audience. Elderly residents, young professionals, busy parents, and school-aged youth, for example, likely receive information in very different ways. Consider an array of communication formats and outlets that will be engaging and accessible to your different audiences. Possible formats include written reports, news articles, infographics, videos, images, presentations, emails, flyers, zines, or artistic renderings. Outlets for these communications might include traditional media, social media, public gatherings (e.g., churches, schools, block club meetings), email lists, community newsletters, events and demonstrations hosted by the coalition, and conversations with neighbors.

For Public Agencies

- **Follow through.** When an organization gathers community input but does not follow through on urgent concerns, it erodes trust and stalls the broader work. For example, one coalition partnered with their state department of transportation to gather community input on street safety. Residents were disappointed when the agency failed to address the urgent safety concerns that were raised and instead carried on with their long-term planning. Reflection should include honest assessment of whether commitments have been honored and whether residents feel heard, which requires gathering feedback from outside the agency.

For Funders

- **Support CBOs in sharing their work.** CBOs can serve as trusted messengers in their communities. Fund the communication and reporting work that keeps teams accountable and connected to the communities they serve.

Reflection often reveals the need to loop back to an earlier step in the process - revisiting the shared vision, expanding the coalition, or updating goals and agreements.

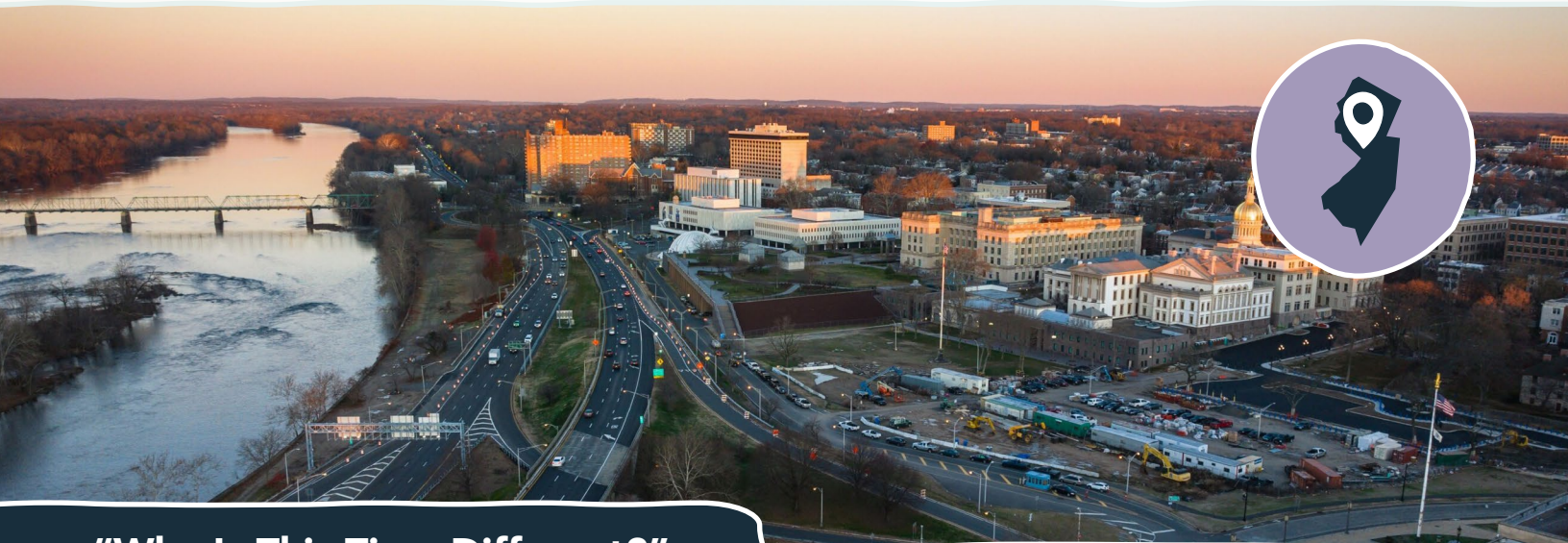
TOOL

Facilitated Reflection

Your coalition likely knows plenty of good facilitators who haven't been along for your wayfaring journey, but share your orienting principles. Consider inviting one of them to lead a reflection process for your team where you can discuss progress, your orienting stars, and name unexpected turns in your journey so far. Take a few pictures, make a few charts together, and if a graphic facilitator is in the mix for visual notetaking, so much the better! You'll end up with a story to share with residents and others you want to update – and likely a refreshed to-do list.

Community Connectors from National City and Southeast San Diego, reflecting and planning.





"Why Is This Time Different?"

Wayfaring in Trenton, NJ

The Trenton ERC team illustrates how wayfaring often requires returning to earlier stages of the process. In Trenton, the team backtracked along the wayfaring path in order to build a stronger shared vision and more robust connections. By surfacing the history of disconnection and creating opportunities for residents to reimagine what was lost, the team strengthened a collective vision for the future. At the same time, their use of small, visible, public-facing actions helped them stay the course as they built momentum, trust, and public will for longer-term transformation. This team reminds us that advancing transformative infrastructure is much more than technical solutions — it involves persistence, shifting narratives, forging connections, and making progress visible for everyone.

THE TEAM

- New Jersey Future
- County of Mercer
- City of Trenton
- Equity by Design
- Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission

As the Delaware River winds its way from the Catskill Mountains toward the Atlantic Ocean, it passes through the heart of Trenton, New Jersey. And yet, downtown and the surrounding residential neighborhoods are cut off from the river by a multi-lane interstate built in the 1960s to quickly move people into and out of the city.

The Trenton ERC team is working to transform this infrastructure and reconnect the riverfront, connecting residents with natural beauty and recreational spaces, supporting new businesses and tourism, and fostering economic opportunities in a downtown that has long been passed over. Others have attempted similar work in the past, but with little success. The ERC team began their outreach with the question, *"Why is this time different?"* To advance this major 10-year initiative, they launched a campaign to increase awareness among residents, shape the vision, and build momentum for the work ahead.

(Above) Photo credit: New Jersey Future



CULTIVATING CONNECTIONS

New Jersey Future is a smart-growth policy nonprofit with strong community ties in Trenton since the 1980s. They maintain strong relationships with various governmental agencies and the people within them and have earned deep trust from community members. Their love and care for Trenton, their deep relationships across government and community, and their knowledge of the planning and redevelopment world equipped them to grow what the team called their "trust circle." Through conversations, events, and organizing, they built interest in the project from residents and politicians alike. They convened a Steering Committee to expand the reach of the campaign and engage residents.



BUILDING SHARED VISION

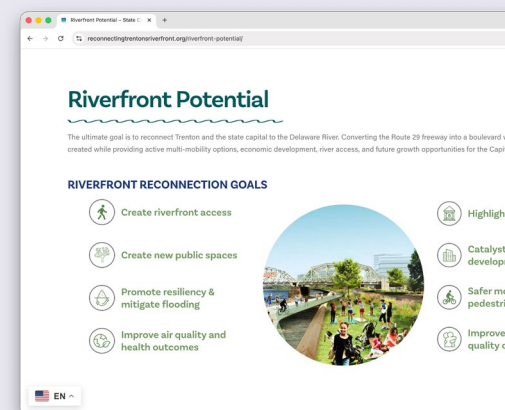
When Route 29 was built, residents resisted. But 50 years later, no one remembers a time when the river was accessible. Building a shared vision for the project, therefore, required concerted effort, beginning with education about the history of the landscape and the park that was once located alongside the river. Conversations focused on what reimagining Route 29 might mean to residents. What issues did they connect with most - safety, recreation, economic opportunity? The project team engaged community members in many ways to share information and gather their input, including town halls and street outreach. The campaign's name – Reconnecting Trenton's Riverfront – was born out of these conversations and reflects the shared vision.



SETTING GOALS AND AGREEMENTS

Reconnecting Trenton's Riverfront is a 10-year vision. To get there, the team identified initial goals: launch a campaign to build local support among residents and politicians for converting Route 29 into a waterfront boulevard, form a steering committee, develop branding materials, and publish a website.

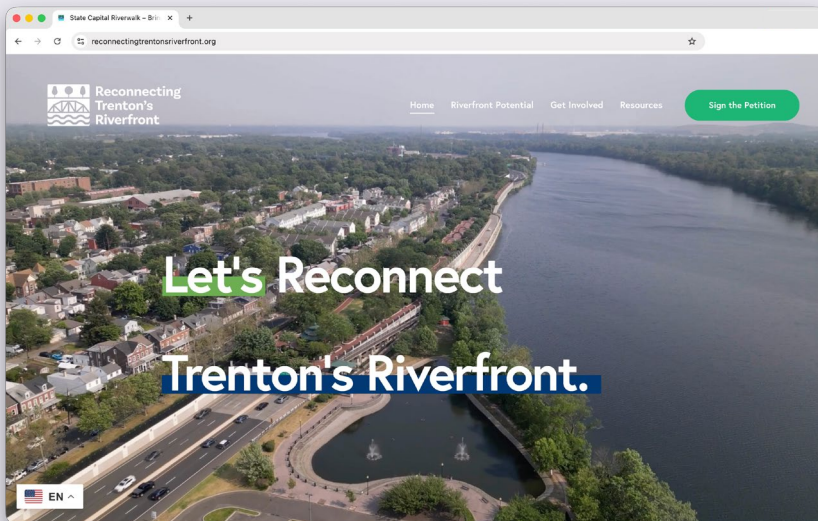
Trenton's riverfront – past, present, and future. (Photo credit: New Jersey Future)





STAYING THE COURSE

Over the course of 2024 and 2025, the team developed materials to spread awareness and build enthusiasm for what the site can become. They created a website to communicate the vision through vibrant renderings, video, and historical overlays showing what the space once was alongside renderings imagining possible futures. The release of the website was a major accomplishment in itself, demonstrating progress and signalling to everyone involved in the campaign that their ideas had been heard. It now serves as a tool for sustaining momentum over time – offering a platform to communicate progress toward the longer-term goal of converting Route 29 into an urban boulevard.



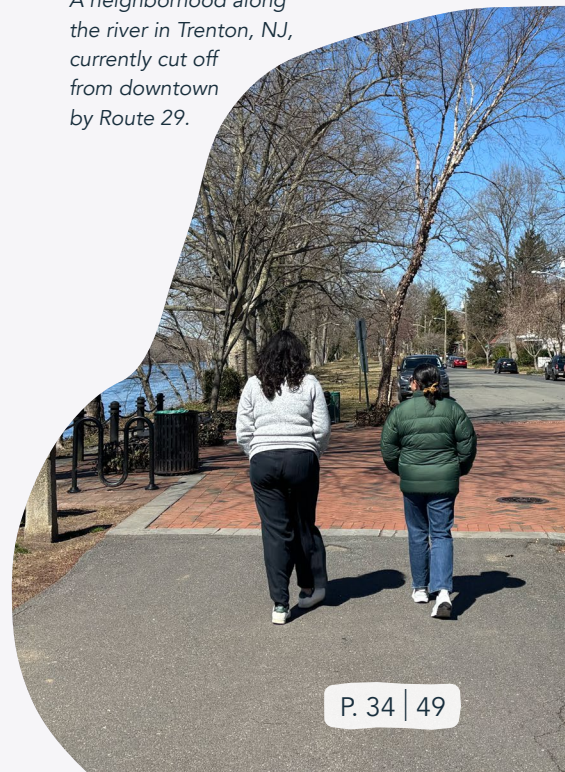
SHARING AND REFLECTING

Sharing progress has been central to Trenton's approach from the start, and the website and social media pages continue to keep the broader community informed. Reflection, meanwhile, has surfaced a harder question: whether funding will be available to sustain the work.

Trenton's project represents what becomes possible when funders invest in the planning stage of a large-scale initiative. Over two years, the team built capacity, shaped a shared vision, and helped community members who had no memory of river access to imagine what it could mean to have it back. With that growing engagement comes growing responsibility to deliver on the project's commitments. Long-term, flexible funding will be critical for New Jersey Future to continue to coordinate the many parties engaged in this work and to see the long-term vision through to completion.

👉 To learn more about the mobility legacies and ongoing work in Trenton, NJ, visit citysnapshotsus.com/cities/trenton

A neighborhood along the river in Trenton, NJ, currently cut off from downtown by Route 29.



Funding the Process

Learning about your city or region's transportation infrastructure process is an important early step for any team. While the process for transportation infrastructure varies by state and region, common funding sources include federal grants, pass-through federal funding distributed through state departments of transportation, state gas tax revenue, and local and regional tax measures. The diagram below from the U.S. Department of Transportation shows the four major phases of transportation infrastructure development.

To meaningfully shape an infrastructure project, community partners need to be part of the process throughout these phases. In this section, we detail how planning grants can be a starting point for establishing the wayfaring coalition at the heart of transformative infrastructure projects, and how funders can then sustain community-rooted participation over the years it takes to get a project built.

What Do Transportation Planning Grants Cover?

Federal, state, and local planning grants are often the first source of funding available to advance a community-rooted infrastructure project. They play a critical role in shaping what gets built—and whose vision is reflected in the final outcome.

At their best, planning grants create the conditions for community-led visioning, coalition-building, and early design work. However, not all planning grants are structured the same, and understanding what they can — and cannot — support is essential for setting realistic expectations and advocating for equitable use of funds.

Some Key Considerations:

- **Who controls the resources?**
Are CBOs resourced to lead or co-lead engagement and visioning efforts, or are they positioned as participants in externally driven processes?
- **How are community members compensated?**
Are residents being paid for their time, expertise, and leadership?
- **What is being prioritized?**
Does the scope of work prioritize technical analysis over community vision — or are both integrated meaningfully?

LEARN MORE

[Building Great Transportation Infrastructure](#), developed by the U.S. Department of Transportation, provides a basic introduction to transportation infrastructure development that will be useful for anyone new to the topic.

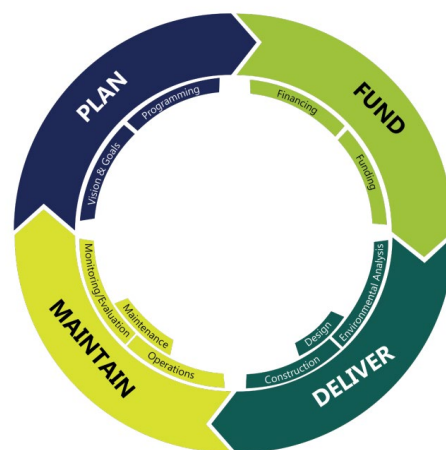
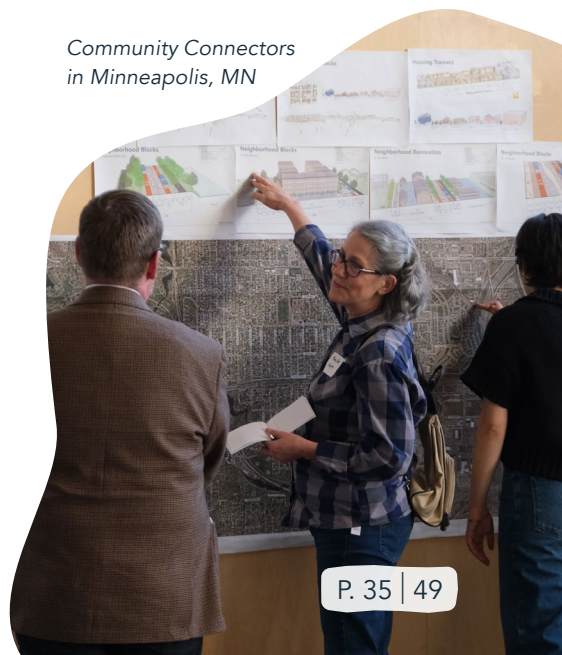


Diagram from *Building Great Transportation Infrastructure*

Community Connectors
in Minneapolis, MN



Common Planning Grant Sources:

- Federal grants¹ (e.g., Community Planning Funding grants, Community Development Block Grants, Safe Streets and Roads for All)
- State/local funds
- Private foundation grants
- Corporate sponsorships
- Crowdfunding or individual donations

Planning Grants May Support a Range of Early-Stage Activities, Including:

- **Community engagement and visioning**
Designing and facilitating processes that enable residents to shape the future of their neighborhood
- **Technical studies and feasibility analysis**
Traffic studies, environmental reviews, land use analysis, and other assessments required to move projects forward within agency processes
- **Conceptual design and alternatives development**
Early design work that translates community vision into potential infrastructure solutions
- **Coalition-building and coordination**
Time and resources to build and sustain partnerships among community members, agencies, and other stakeholders
- **Capacity-building for CBOs**
In some cases, funding can support staffing, stipends, or organizational development that enables CBOs to participate meaningfully in the process
- **Public communication and storytelling**
Materials, events, and strategies that build awareness, public will, and shared understanding of the project

Understanding the "Color of Money"

Not all planning dollars are flexible. Different funding sources come with different requirements that shape how funds can be used. These requirements are sometimes referred to as the "color of money."

Depending on the sources of funding, key differences may include:

- **Funding amounts**
Planning grants can range widely, from smaller capacity-building grants to multi-million-dollar federal awards.
- **Match and/or insurance requirements**
Some grants require local matching funds or high insurance coverage – or both – which can be a barrier for smaller organizations or under-resourced communities.
- **Allowable uses**
Certain funds prioritize technical studies over community engagement, while others explicitly support equity-focused processes.

¹ USDOT's Reconnecting Communities program has been canceled, but other federal programs continue to fund planning activities.

! POTENTIAL CHALLENGE

Walking the Walk, or Just Talking the Talk?

In one ERC city, the governor announced an initiative to invest in transportation with the aim of addressing harms. However, the call for project proposals had a short turnaround that made it out of reach for community-based efforts. ERC team members described the initiative as performative and disconnected from community organizations, and they were concerned that the timeline for this new funding would not align with their existing effort. Still, they remained hopeful that the coalition they had built would position them to influence the governor's initiative toward more authentic collaboration with communities.



Community Connectors in Spokane, WA

• Reporting and deliverables

Grants often require specific outputs (e.g., plans, reports, design concepts) and structured reporting that can constrain how the work is carried out.

• Eligible applicants

In many cases, public agencies must be the lead applicant, which can limit direct access to funding for CBOs unless partnerships are intentionally structured.

• Payment and/or reimbursement models

Some grants pay stipends upfront, some pay for completed deliverables, and others offer reimbursement for time, materials, and work completed. Each of these models presents different risks and potential barriers for applicants to consider, particularly for organizations applying for government grants.

Understanding these dynamics early can help your team align expectations, structure partnerships more equitably, and advocate for flexible funding and payments that truly support community leadership.

Recommendations for Funders: Sustaining the Coalition

For Public Funders

- Offer **grant writing assistance**. Many CBOs have the relationships and knowledge to lead transformative work, but lack the administrative capacity to navigate complex application processes.
- Offer **fellowships** for staff at CBOs to learn how the infrastructure process works. These fellowships build relationships and trust so that a project can benefit from both public servants' professional knowledge and community members' lived knowledge of the project area.
- Provide a public **calendar** of transportation infrastructure decision points and funding timelines, with clear indications of where local residents can provide input.
- Structure **procurement processes** so that CBOs can contract directly when needed. [See LA Metro's strategy for partnering with CBOs.](#)

For Private Funders

- Fund community members and CBOs directly and without restrictions, such as pass-through funding to community partners. Funding CBOs directly reduces the intermediary layers that can dilute community control and create extractive dynamics.
- Offer funding opportunities that affirm the value of residents' knowledge and self-determination, and require that affected residents are meaningfully represented on the project team.
- Direct applicants to write freely and express their projects' true goals in language that feels authentic.
- Allow creative application formats, such as including images or videos.
- Fund long-term participation in coalitions that aim to transform infrastructure.

! POTENTIAL CHALLENGE

Community Members Need Not Apply

One ERC city team shared their experience with a state grant that directly acknowledged transportation systems' historical harms to marginalized communities, but was open only to applications from regional agencies rather than CBOs. The team was able to navigate this challenge due to the strength of their coalition. Because the funded coalition had been built by and staffed with local residents, the regional agency staff on the team were able to build a grant application that led with community voice and vision.

Site of the proposed park in National City, CA



Conclusion

The Journey Forward

This guide began by asking you to imagine a connected community, where people of all ages, abilities, and identities can safely access all that they need to live the lives they want. In those connected communities, transportation is a joyful experience. A walk along tree-lined streets, greeted by birdsong and friendly neighbors. Children looking out the windows of a bus, enjoying the journey with their friends and pointing out familiar landmarks as they roll by. A driver savoring the pink light of sunset as they cruise slowly through the neighborhood. These communities are beautiful, safe, and full of life.

Bringing those visions to life requires a new process for planning transportation infrastructure. More than additional funding programs or expanded engagement, it requires a fundamental shift in how infrastructure decisions are made and by whom. That means changing who gets to define the problem, whose knowledge is acted upon, how accountability is maintained throughout the process, and whose solutions are tested and implemented. When residents of affected communities take the lead, when history is acknowledged and repaired, and when relationships are built and valued over time, community transformation becomes possible, and its benefits ripple across local economies, health outcomes, and cultural life.

The Journey Forward offers a guide through this new process. The journey is a collective one, made by a group of wayfarers representing diverse sectors and experiences, united by shared vision and authentic relationships. Residents of the communities most affected by the transformation lead the way, and their creativity, knowledge, and vision are brought to life through deep, cross-sector collaboration with public agencies and funders. Four guiding stars -- community self-determination and leadership, historical truth and repair, trust, and time -- follow wayfarers on their journey, orienting and reorienting them to who they are, where they have come from, and where they are going.

This wayfaring process names the often unseen but essential elements of transformative planning, including building and sustaining relationships, aligning partners around a shared vision, navigating complexity, maintaining momentum, adapting to change, and celebrating progress. It also makes clear that this work is iterative, not linear. Teams engaged in the work of transforming transportation infrastructure will likely experience moments of forward momentum and periods of resistance, revisiting earlier stages as new information, relationships, and challenges emerge. This movement is actually a sign of strength and trust — of success, rather than failure.

Public art in
Southeast San
Diego, CA



The Wayfarers' Responsibilities

Transforming transportation infrastructure requires coordinated shifts across roles and institutions. On the wayfarer's journey:

- **Community members and CBOs** in the areas affected by the desired transformation are the holders of local knowledge, relationships, and vision. They lead the journey. Residents shape not only project outcomes, but the processes that determine how those outcomes are reached, including how decisions are made, how resources are allocated, and how accountability is upheld.
- **Public agencies** examine the policies, practices, and assumptions that guide project development, including how problems are defined, how timelines are set, and how community input is incorporated. Supporting community-led outcomes may require adapting existing processes, sharing decision-making authority, and redefining success in ways that extend beyond traditional measures.
- **Funders**, both public and private, create conditions that enable and sustain the wayfaring journey. They recognize the role funding plays in shaping process and outcomes, resourcing early-stage work, supporting community capacity, and providing flexibility where possible.

Unleashing the Future

Imagining a connected community is inspiring — but let's go even further. When a community is connected, what becomes possible?

Imagine a woman walking to work, relaxed and letting her mind wander. She once spent her mornings waiting anxiously at the bus stop, worrying about whether she was safe there, when the bus would arrive, and whether she would be able to make it to work on time. Now, in her connected community, she is at ease. Immersed and attuned to the world around her, she finds curiosity and creativity growing, generating new ideas that may have stayed dormant if worries about transportation had continued to dominate her mornings. She arrives at her destination rejuvenated and relaxed – ready to bring some of those bold new ideas to life.

When transportation infrastructure creates connection and joy for all, rather than obstacles and stress, human potential is unleashed. Connected communities create conditions that allow people to feel safe and spacious enough to let their minds wander.

Imagine the world we can build together, when all people are free to dream.



Set Your Stars Worksheet

PURPOSE

Use this worksheet to identify the principles that will guide you on your journey to transformative transportation infrastructure. Whereas projects typically begin with the process of researching, documenting, and mapping a project area's physical inventory (e.g., land boundaries, community assets, and other geographic markers like important streets and destinations), this worksheet will push you to go deeper and ground your work in our four orienting stars.



To download an editable version of this worksheet, visit tinyurl.com/yrbrxxx4 or use the QR code.

HOW TO USE THIS WORKSHEET

- 1 **Respond to the questions** individually or as a project team.
Draw from local knowledge and data. It's okay if you don't have all the answers. Note gaps that emerge and work to fill in the information over time.
- 2 Once you have answered the questions, work with your team to develop **orienting statements** for each star. These statements will serve as clear, memorable reminders to orient and inspire your work, and could take the form of words, phrases, or images with descriptions.
- 3 Use the orienting statements to inform your planning as you move through the phases on the wayfarer's journey.
- 4 Revisit the statements periodically , both to remain grounded and to consider ways in which these orienting statements may evolve over time.

 Community Self-Determination & Leadership

PLACE & COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Who is here, and what defines this place?

1. Who lives in the project area today?
2. Who has historically lived here?
3. Which communities are most impacted by this project?
4. What are key community assets (e.g., schools, parks, businesses, gathering spaces)?
5. How do people currently use and/or move through this area?

Notes:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slightly aged or off-white appearance.

POWER & DECISION-MAKING

Who makes decisions about the transportation infrastructure you want to change, and who influences those decision-makers?

1. What agencies or jurisdictions control this area, space, land, and/or roadway?
2. Who are the key decision-makers (formal and informal)?
3. Who is included in decision-making, and who is not?
4. Where are the key points of influence or leverage?

POLICY & FUNDING ENVIRONMENT

What rules and resources shape what's possible?

1. What policies, plans, or regulations apply to this project area and/or jurisdiction?
2. What funding sources are available or being pursued? What constraints or requirements come with that funding?
3. Are there existing equity or climate commitments guiding public investment in transportation infrastructure?

**HISTORICAL TRUTH & REPAIR****CITY SNAPSHOT**

Use Equivolve's City Snapshots tool as a reference to create a profile of major mobility injustices in your neighborhood's history.

1. Forced Migrations
2. Industrialization & Uneven Economic Mobility
3. Urban Renewal & Disruption
4. Ecological & Environmental Impacts
5. Public Safety

HISTORICAL CONTEXT & LEGACY

What past decisions shape current conditions?

1. What major planning or infrastructure decisions have shaped this area?
How have they impacted the people, the community, and the ecosystem?
2. What past or present harms have affected this community (e.g., displacement, redlining, environmental injustice)?
3. What community organizing or resistance has occurred here?

Notes:

EXISTING CONDITIONS***What is happening on the ground right now?***

1. What are current transportation conditions (e.g., safety, access, connectivity, reliability)?
2. Where are the biggest gaps or inequities?

ECONOMIC REPARATIONS***What programs target investment based on past harms in your area?***

1. Is there a movement for reparations to descendants of enslaved people?
2. Do Indigenous groups in your area have federal recognition? Do they hold reservation land or other land rights?
3. What kind of entrepreneurship opportunities exist in the project area?

ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION***How do living systems fare in the project area?***

1. Are there spaces in the neighborhood where habitat restoration is occurring?
2. Where are the local waterways and what is their condition?
3. Does a local institution track wildlife in the area?
4. Is there a legacy of industrial pollution in the project area?
5. Who are the leaders in local environmental justice?

**TRUST****COMMUNITY TRUST & READINESS*****What is the state of relationships and engagement?***

1. What is the level of trust between community residents and public agencies?
2. What has past engagement looked like — what worked or didn't?
3. Who are trusted community leaders or organizations?
4. What ways do people communicate information in this community? Are these effective or are there other means to share information?
5. What would meaningful engagement look like here?

Notes:

TIME

RISKS & OPPORTUNITIES

What could help or hinder progress?

1. What are the biggest risks to equitable outcomes?
2. What opportunities or momentum exist right now?
3. Are there upcoming decisions or timing factors that matter?
4. Where is there alignment or tension among community partners?

VISION ALIGNMENT

How does this project connect to the future community vision?

1. What do residents want for the future of this place?
2. Who benefits from this project? Who might be burdened?
3. What would a transformative outcome look like here?
4. What needs to change to achieve that vision?

Notes:

[illegible]

Appendix A: Glossary

Colonialism: The practice of one nation extending its political, economic, and cultural power over another territory and its people

Settler colonialism: A form of colonialism in which an outside group permanently occupies and claims sovereignty over Indigenous peoples' ancestral territories, displacing or eliminating existing populations to establish a new society. Throughout the United States, cities and towns were founded on the ancestral territories of Indigenous peoples. While each place has a unique history, the broad pattern is that disease, violence by white settlers, and U.S. military intervention decimated Indigenous populations. The survivors were usually removed to sites far from their ancestral territories that had been selected by U.S. government entities. As white settlements grew, they eventually ceased to think of themselves as colonizers, but it is factually correct to describe the United States as a country founded on settler colonialism.

Community: We use this term to refer to residents in neighborhoods affected by current or proposed infrastructure projects.

Community-based organizations: Organizations rooted in communities, which may include anchor organizations serving the holistic needs of specific neighborhoods, or organizations serving specific functions across neighborhoods. CBOs are often operated by community members, but not always. These organizations are often referred to as grassroots, and may be part of coalitions or in other ways partner with policy-oriented organizations referred to as grastops.

Community-rooted: A term describing an organization, project, social enterprise, or other entity that has deep ties to the place it serves. It is led by people whose lives have been shaped by local cultures and challenges, and it aims to foster the values of that place through its activities. Where the project generates economic benefit, that benefit flows to local residents.

Equitably Reconnecting Communities Initiative: A three-year, \$10 million investment by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, launched in 2023, to support small and midsize cities in advancing community visions for redressing the harms of transportation infrastructure. For more information, see [Appendix B](#).

Equity: A principle that begins with a recognition of communities' different challenges, needs, and histories, then calls for action based on fairness and justice. In the context of government, equity often means directing particular attention to groups harmed by past public investment, with the aim of avoiding repeating those patterns of unfairness.

Transportation equity: The application of equity principles to transportation planning and investment, with particular attention to communities harmed by past infrastructure decisions. Find out how your local or state government defines equity in the context of transportation. Here is an example from California's state transportation agency, CalSTA:

Historically, transportation decisions prioritized movement of vehicles over the movement of people. We also built a transportation system that in some cases had detrimental impacts in underserved communities. We aim to create an equitable and accessible transportation network and to provide equitable opportunities for all people. [Source](#).

Funders: Organizations that provide financial support for community-rooted infrastructure work, including planning grants and capacity-building investments. These may be public or private philanthropic organizations, public agencies, or other entities..

Infrastructure: The physical systems that enable the movement of people and goods, including roads, bridges, tunnels, railroads, fuel lines and charging stations, and other elements of transportation systems that enable the flow of people and goods. Many states direct funding to infrastructure rather than operations and maintenance, which can be a challenge for transit agencies. The ERC Initiative focused on physical infrastructure (e.g., highways dividing communities) and the agencies that fund, design, build, and maintain them.

Multimodal infrastructure: Transportation infrastructure designed to support multiple modes of transport (walking, biking, rolling, and driving). For decades, American transportation planning aimed to increase the efficient movement of car traffic. This created many places where, even off of highways, people walking, using mobility devices, or biking have to move carefully as they navigate drivers traveling at high speeds. These spaces may be what planners call "high injury networks" or they may simply feel unsafe. The [Complete Streets model](#), which is now being adopted by transportation agencies across the country, centers multimodal infrastructure as its goal. A related model is the [Safe System Approach](#), which aims for multimodal safety rather than fast car travel, and which has been adopted by the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Marginalized: A term describing populations or communities that face systemic barriers due to social and institutional discrimination.

Mobility justice: A multiracial and multi-issue social movement that envisions historically marginalized communities moving freely. Transportation systems are expected to move people and things; mobility justice highlights how social conditions beyond transportation shape who can move freely and who cannot. Mobility justice often overlaps with transportation equity but may include a focus beyond the transportation sector and outside of government. Equivolve's [Pathways to Mobility Justice](#) defines four primary areas of focus: community self-determination, reparations and repair, safe and joyful spaces, and economic opportunity and affordability.

Reconnecting Communities Grant Program: A federal grant program, authorized under the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act), that authorized \$1 billion to support projects reconnecting communities divided by transportation infrastructure.

In early 2025, the Trump administration significantly shifted federal priorities, canceling or threatening existing Reconnecting Communities awards. As of publication, no additional funding cycle is expected; readers should verify current program status.

Street activations: Events and interventions that temporarily reclaim roadways for pedestrians, cyclists, and community use, encouraging residents to experience streets beyond car travel. Street activations can include open street events such as *ciclovías* (temporary road closures that open streets to pedestrians and cyclists), resource fairs, cultural festivals, public art demonstrations, and community walks or bike rides. A [2014 report for the League of American Bicyclists](#) explored the role of street activations in “unfreezing” street culture.

Tokenism: The practice of engaging individuals from historically marginalized groups in superficial ways and expecting them to speak on behalf of their entire community.

Transportation public agencies: Government agencies at the city, regional, state, or federal level responsible for planning, building, and maintaining transportation infrastructure and operations. This could include departments of transportation, public works departments, regional transportation planning agencies, transit operators, and other public agencies that own or operate transportation systems.

Appendix B: Learning from the ERC Initiative

ABOUT THE ERC INITIATIVE

This guide documents learnings from the Equitably Reconnecting Communities in Small and Mid-sized Cities Initiative ("the ERC Initiative").

Launched in 2023, the ERC Initiative was a \$10 million investment by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation intended to support small and midsize cities in advancing community visions for redressing the harms of transportation infrastructure. These cities have historically struggled to access federal resources, and the Initiative aimed to build the local knowledge, capabilities, and relationships that would better position them for future transportation funding while advancing environmental justice aims and repairing past harms.

The initiative's name is derived from one such federal program – the Reconnecting Communities Pilot (RCP). Established in 2022 as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, RCP dedicated \$1 billion over five years to support planning, capital construction, and technical assistance to "equitably and safely restore community connectivity through the removal, retrofit, mitigation, or replacement of eligible transportation infrastructure facilities that create barriers to mobility, access, or economic development."

The ERC Initiative built on this federal program in two ways: by intentionally supporting small and midsize cities, and by documenting lessons and developing recommendations to ensure that these major reconnection projects are truly equitable — advancing the visions of historically marginalized residents rather than replicating harmful patterns of the past.

The major activities of the Initiative included:

- **Capacity-building** for 15 small and midsize cities, led by [Smart Growth America](#), through its Transportation for America program, in partnership with technical assistance providers ([Equitable Cities](#), the [New Urban Mobility Alliance](#), and [America Walks](#)). This work was referred to as the Community Connectors program.
- **Identifying and shifting systems and policies** by facilitating partnerships and advancing community-rooted projects, led by Communities First Infrastructure Alliance in partnership with philanthropic-serving organizations ([Health and Environmental Funders Network](#), [The Funders Network](#), and [Neighborhood Funders Group](#)); and
- **Learning and strategy** to communicate and apply learnings from the Initiative, led by [Equivolve](#).

ABOUT EQUIVOLVE

To document and activate learnings from the ERC Initiative, RWJF partnered with Equivolve, a strategy and design firm dedicated to unlocking human potential and reimagining the systems that shape opportunity. At Equivolve, we believe that real transformation happens when we recognize the deep interconnections between people, institutions, and the structures that shape our lives.

Our work spans disciplines — education, economic mobility, health, transportation, and more — not as separate fields, but as interdependent forces that, when calibrated effectively, fuel greater possibility at scale.

DOCUMENTING & ACTIVATING LEARNINGS

Equivolve engaged in the following data collection methods:

- **Surveys:** Two annual surveys conducted with participants from the 15 cities involved in the Community Connectors program..
- **Interviews:** Annual interviews conducted across two years with all Community Connectors cities, as well as interviews with grantees and subgrantees of the Initiative, including technical assistance providers and Communities First Infrastructure Alliance.
- **Site visits:** Two-day site visits to three cities in year two – Durham, NC, National City, CA, and Trenton, NJ. Visits included guided walking tours of the project areas and focus groups, including a modified photovoice protocol.
- **Sensemaking workshop:** In year two, 23 representatives from 11 Community Connectors cities and two TA providers came together for a two-day gathering in Minneapolis to collectively review preliminary findings, add nuance and context, and inform directions for sharing learnings.

Motivated by participants' calls for shared language and relationships across community members, philanthropic organizations, and governing agencies, Equivolve developed this guide to offer a resource for individuals from various perspectives and sectors. We hope it will propel cities across the country toward futures where people of all identities are connected, thriving, and living to their fullest potential.

