CONNECT TO BUILD: FRONTLINE ORGANIZATION AND FEDERAL INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

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The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), Justice40 commitments and ongoing federal appropriations combine to create opportunities to address long standing infrastructure needs in frontline communities. But ensuring that these resources meet the needs of the communities that bear a disproportionate share of the burdens of the housing crisis, transportation inequities and climate and environmental injustice requires more than the appropriation of funds. It requires getting these dollars to organizations that are rooted in frontline communities. These organizations possess the unique combination of insight, experience and community trust necessary to channel government dollars into the programs, processes and partnerships that align with frontline communities' priorities.

Through a series of interviews with leaders of organizations across the country that are keenly focused on aligning government policymaking and funding decisions with the needs and priorities of frontline communities, the Strong, Prosperous, and Resilient Communities Challenge (SPARCC) policy team led by staff at the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) explored how, if at all, these organizations are interacting with new federal funding opportunities and what approaches are helping them to move the needle toward the equity and justice-focused goals that drive their work. These conversations highlighted the power of—

- Previous experience working with local government and the relationships and access to information this enables;
- Long-standing, trusting relationships with other community-based non-profit groups that allow for information sharing, strategic partnerships and effective use of collective resources;
- Processes that increase transparency with respect to local or state government decision making and/or generate community-driven projects for local government consideration;
- Where trusting relationships permit, collaborative problem-solving with partners in government, particularly around important processes like procurement;
- Efforts to institutionalize equity in local government, which influence the priorities that govern the flow of public funds; and

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY CONTINUED

- Flexible, philanthropic funding that allows frontline organizations and partners to initiate or sustain work and experiment with new structures that facilitate the receipt or dissemination of government dollars.

At the same time, these conversations also surfaced challenges these organizations are confronting at this moment and, importantly, what they believe must be done to address them. Those who were interviewed shared recommendations grounded in what has worked well for them and other partners as well as areas in which barriers have proven difficult to overcome. They cited the need for—

- Flexible financial support to allow organizations to operate effectively on a day-to-day basis as well as to implement projects while they wait to receive federal dollars;
- Support to allow government agencies to align values and partner more effectively with communities;
- Increased government transparency about funding opportunities and decisions;
- Support for changes to organizational structure of frontline organizations to better equip them to secure and utilize funds;
- Expanded access to trusted navigators and individuals with specific expertise;
- Support for aligning partners in ways that are consistent with progressive values and support project success; and
- Alignment of project application and administration requirements with frontline organizations' capacities and needs.

The case studies featured in this report, the insights on what is working to move the needle that emerged from them and the recommendations concerning what is needed that were distilled from them all have important implications for the administration of federal infrastructure programs in coming years.

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, trillions of federal dollars have become available to support housing, transportation, environmental and climate justice infrastructure. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), Justice40 commitments and ongoing annual appropriations combine to create a moment of abundance unlike any in recent memory.[1] For those who are committed to addressing the needs of communities that have been consistently excluded from government policymaking and investment and who are disproportionately burdened by the housing crisis, transportation inequity and environmental and climate injustices, particularly Black and Brown communities, this is a moment of considerable promise. But to fully understand the potential of this moment and to seize it for the greatest impact, it's essential to explore a series of important questions:

- How do the organizations that are best positioned put these resources to use to address the needs of frontline communities and communities of color perceive these new funding opportunities?
- How, if at all, do they imagine taking advantage of them?
- What supports need to be in place to support them to leverage their unique combination of insight, relationships and expertise to seize these opportunities?

To understand the answers to these questions, the SPARCC team set out to learn directly from leaders in communities across the country who are deeply committed to housing, transportation, environmental and climate justice. Interviews were conducted with representatives of organizations that were thinking creatively about how to interact with current federal funding opportunities, including many that had been part of the Strong Prosperous and Resilient Communities Challenge (SPARCC) initiative, an effort to accelerate community-led projects and policies that center racial equity, a culture of health and response to the climate crisis.

In designing and implementing this project, SPARCC was also fortunate to benefit from the insight of two organizational partners with deep experience at the intersection of climate policy, community-driven decisionmaking and capacity building. The Emerald Cities Collaborative is a national nonprofit network of organizations that are working together to advance a sustainable environment while creating sustainable, just and inclusive economies with opportunities for all.[2] The People's Climate Innovation Center facilitates community-driven planning processes that move resources and power to the grassroots in order to meet frontline needs and priorities.[3] Both organizations were instrumental in helping SPARCC to envision this project and to translate that vision into reality.

A High-Level View: How Have Frontline Organizations and Partners Interacted with Federal Funding Opportunities?[4]

SPARCC and its partners determined early that the best way to gain a full appreciation for the opportunities and challenges arising from this moment would be to speak with leaders rooted in frontline communities. Conversations with these leaders about the work of their organizations surfaced a rich set of insights about how they perceive these opportunities and the ways, if at all, that they are interacting or planning to interact with these opportunities.

- In **Los Angeles, CA** advocates at the **Southeast Asian Community Alliance** have built upon the organization's previous experience working with local government and sought opportunities to interact with funding at multiple levels.
- Also in **Los Angeles, CA**, the **Social Justice Learning Institute** has similarly drawn upon previous experience and relationships with local government to help to influence the priorities that govern investment of public dollars and the processes through which programs are implemented.
- In **Chicago, IL**, the **Metropolitan Planning Committee** has published analyses that shed light on how public dollars are being invested. MPC also created a process for building a line-up of community-generated projects for consideration by local government decision makers.
- Also in **Chicago**, members of the **Elevated** coalition have leveraged philanthropic and government dollars by innovating with respect to organizational structure.
- **Chicago** is also the site of a creative partnership between the **Center for Neighborhood Technology** and local government to streamline procurement practices to make public dollars more accessible to community-based organizations.
- In **California's Bay Area, BARHII's** long-term advocacy for the establishment of local offices focused on racial equity is bearing fruit, shaping the way in which federal dollars have been spent.
- In **Memphis, Tennessee**, the **Center for Transforming Communities** has combined its strong network of relationships and its institutional administrative capacities to re-grant federal funds to frontline groups.
- In **Atlanta, Georgia, Georgia STAND-UP** is strategically aligning with its partners to make the most of resources.

Case Studies: Insights from Frontline Groups

In envisioning this project, **SPARCC and its supporting partners were eager to discern what opportunities frontline organizations perceive when it comes to federal infrastructure funding? How, if at all, are they attempting to seize these opportunities?** Some of the questions that emerged early in the process included—

- To what extent, if any, are frontline groups and partners positioning themselves to secure funds and direct them toward projects that align with the priorities of the communities in which they are embedded?
- How, if at all, are they attempting to influence decision-making processes in order to help these funds flow toward frontline community priorities?
- And if groups are not seeking to secure or influence the flow of these funds, how else are they aiming to advance their communities' goals in this moment of abundance?

In addition to frontline organizations' chosen strategies, SPARCC and its supporting partners were interested in understanding the underlying experiences, information and capacities that allowed these groups to make the most of funding opportunities.

> **What are the conditions and the capacities that are allowing frontline groups and partners to move the needle?**

While the collection of organizations whose leaders were interviewed is not fully representative of the universe of organizations that are striving to make sense of the opportunities created by current federal funding programs, these case studies and the observations and recommendations derived from them represent an important resource for frontline groups, the capacity builders that support them and the funders that invest in them. These insights are also likely to be helpful to those in local, state and federal government who are charged with administering current programs and who will be instrumental in the design and management of future generations of funding opportunities.

A. Southeast Asian Community Alliance: Building Upon Previous Experience with Local Government & Spotting Opportunities at Multiple Levels

A number of the frontline organization leaders with whom we spoke explained that previous **work to influence policy had allowed them to build relationships with local government, acquire insight into government processes and, ultimately, recognize opportunities connected to federal funding streams.** However, they noted that the types of opportunities they were able to identify varied with the degree of flexibility inherent in the funding program design and the degree of transparency provided by local or regional government entities.

One such leader was Sissy Trinh, Executive Director of the [Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA)](). Trinh described how SEACA—which builds power among Southeast Asian youth and their communities in Los Angeles with the goal of bringing about a more just and equitable society through intergenerational, multiethnic dialogue, leadership development, and community organizing—had built relationships, experience and insight through its long-standing advocacy in connection with local climate investments.[5]

This work began ten years ago, when Trinh recognized that major investments in infrastructure were likely to be coming to the communities in which SEACA is rooted, which sit close to the Los Angeles River. With this in mind, SEACA began to advocate for the inclusion of provisions in the Los Angeles River Master Plan that would prevent the sort of displacement that often goes hand-in-hand with major investments in infrastructure.[6] This included the creation of a "land bank" to allow for the purchase of property early in planning phases, when real estate remains relatively cheap. This land can then be held and used to create permanently affordable housing. Through its work on the Los Angeles River Master Plan, SEACA was able to build relationships and cultivate trust with contacts in government, often by demonstrating a willingness to navigate inevitable challenges as they came up and to engage in problem-solving in good faith. In 2022, with years of experience working with county authorities, SEACA advocated successfully for the investment of nearly $50M in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars to establish the landbank called for in the Master Plan, providing much needed funds for displacement avoidance initiatives.

Trinh was careful to note, however, that the degree of local government transparency and funding program flexibility that allowed for success in this case is not always guaranteed.

A. Southeast Asian Community Alliance: Building Upon Previous Experience with Local Government & Spotting Opportunities at Multiple Levels

She observed that the funding of the displacement avoidance initiatives connected to the Master Plan was largely made possible because county officials had significant amounts of very flexible funding in hand and, thus, were eager for SEACA's input into how these dollars should be invested. Because dollars allocated under CARES or the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) are markedly more flexible than those allocated under IIJA and IRA it is not clear that they will give rise, as easily, to what Trinh referred to as obvious "win-win" opportunities. In addition, where eligible uses for funds are more narrowly defined, local governments may be less motivated to seek out frontline organizations as thought partners or cultivate them as potential recipients. Instead, they may be more likely to keep their plans to themselves and turn to more traditional partners for insight on how and where to invest funds.

Los Angeles, CA

Despite this, Trinh noted that SEACA remains committed to identifying other, less obvious opportunities to make federal funds work in support of community priorities. She noted that even in a situation in which an organization like SEACA may not be positioned to receive federal dollars or influence local government decision making around the use of these dollars, the organization might still be able to advance community priorities by shifting its focus to those local entities that do ultimately receive funding. **For example, a frontline organization might seek to influence hiring by entities that receive IIJA or IRA funding for local projects. Similarly, an organization might seek to influence local government procurement choices so that monies for community engagement or education activities flow to organizations that have the relationships and insight to do this work most effectively.**

SEACA's experience illustrates the **value of relationships with government** and the tremendous **potential for collaborative problem-solving and community impact that is unleashed when local governments are transparent** about the resources that are available for programming and **affirmatively reach out to frontline organizations to engage their expertise** on how to program these dollars.

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B. Metropolitan Planning Council: Enhancing Access to Information About Government Decision-Making

Leaders also described **efforts to make information about funding decisions more visible to community organizations and local governments and to integrate an equity analysis that could align with community priorities in the long-term.** Audrey Wennink is Senior Director at the [Metropolitan Planning Council](#), an independent, Chicago-based planning and policy organization that works to change perceptions, conversations and the status quo related to transportation and other planning issues.[7] Recognizing the opportunity created by the historic flow of federal infrastructure funds, Wennink and her colleagues conducted an analysis of the online Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) database developed by the Chicago-area Metropolitan Planning Organization with an eye to better understanding which municipalities have accessed competitive federal and state competitive grant funding for bicycle and pedestrian projects.[8] This will allow MPC and its allies to compare the profiles—including budget levels and staff capacities—of those municipalities that were able to access these funds to support projects aligned with and the groups' equity-focused priorities for active transportation planning and those who were unable to take advantage of these opportunities. The analysis has been converted into maps and integrated into other efforts to shape the public narrative and shared broadly.[9]

SPARCC partners in Chicago, IL. Courtesy of SPARCC

Like Trinh at SEACA, Wennink and her allies also cite previous successful advocacy vis-à-vis local and state government as an asset. In 2017, well before current funding bills were signed into law, MPC and its allies succeeded in getting the Illinois Department of Transportation (iDOT) to adopt a data-driven decision-making tool that has allowed for more transparency and equity in transportation planning.[10]

In undertaking this effort to bridge the types of gaps in government information sharing that Trinh and others described, MPC has **leveraged its considerable research, analytical and data visualization capacities and resources.** It has also been able to draw upon its **formal and informal partnerships with other organizations that have shared values and goals,** which allow for the sharing of information and alignment of strategies.

C. Social Justice Learning Institute: Influencing Formal and Informal Policy and Process

While some organizations had opted not to seek federal funding at the time of our conversations, they nonetheless shared important insights relevant to those interested in influencing the formal and informal policies that dictate how funding flows to and through local governments. This was the case with Derek Steele, Executive Director of the Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI), an organization that is dedicated to improving the education, health and well-being of youth and communities of color in California and Texas by empowering them to enact social change through research, training and community mobilization.[11] Building upon what Trinh and Wennink described, Steele explained how SJLI's relationships with local government officials allowed the organization to influence important, but often-less visible policies and processes. In addition, Steele discussed how advocacy by progressive organizations in Los Angeles had supported the flow of public dollars through systems designed to prioritize equity.

Steele cited SJLI's work over more than 10 years—dating from its 2012 advocacy for Measure GG, a bond initiative that generated $90M for repairs and upgrades to Inglewood, California public schools to its efforts to secure the 2020 passage of Measure J, with its precedent setting funding redistribution provisions.[12,13] Specifically, Measure J amended the Los Angeles County Charter to require that 10% of locally-generated unrestricted funds be reinvested in alternatives to incarceration, youth services and community development.[14] Shortly after, with the passage of the American Rescue Plan Act, Measure J's equity-focused approach to funding distribution came to shape the county's use of its allocated federal recovery dollars.[15]
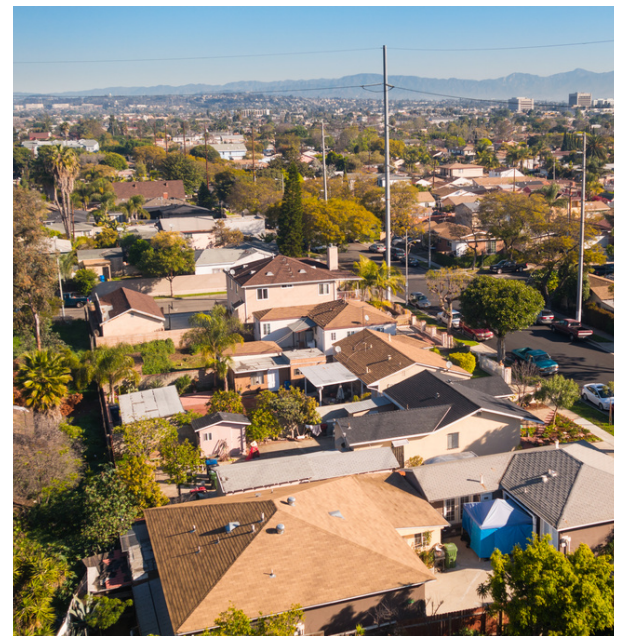
Inglewood, CA.

In addition, Steele has played leadership roles on the Care First Community Investment Committee (CFCIC), serving as Chair of the 24-member board composed of community representatives, people with lived experience, County department leaders and labor representatives who collectively advise on spending.[16] Steele notes that the CFCIC's work has helped to ensure that recommendations from community members and organizations that serve them influence the ways in which public dollars are directed.

C. Social Justice Learning Institute: Influencing Formal and Informal Policy and Process

In addition to the **power of long-term efforts and structural reforms that redirect resources in service of equity goals,** SJLI's experiences speak to the potential to influence policy implementation through access points that are often less visible. For example, Steele cited SJLI's work to shift $10M from policing to programs supporting Black youth through its advocacy in connection with the Los Angeles Unified School District's Black Student Achievement Plan.[17] However, as a result of this work and the relationships it helped the organization to develop with the LAUSD staff charged with implementation, SJLI soon observed that there were gaps in existing systems that would

LAUSD Headquarters in Los Angeles, CA.

make it challenging for non-profit organizations to support these important programs. Specifically, SJLI observed that procurement processes were misaligned with the needs of the frontline organizations that were best equipped to do the work in question.

Two important factors allowed SJLI to intervene and ultimately facilitate a solution. **Relationships of trust with local government administrators allowed SJLI access to information about the specific challenges government administrators were confronting.** Without such trust, SJLI might instead have been confronted with a simple "no," and both parties would have missed an opportunity to surface workable solutions. Secondly, SJLI **drew on its partners' and its own experiences running programs in public schools and dealing with the associated financial administrative requirements, an asset that allowed them to recognize the policies and processes that were likely to create problems** for frontline groups as well as to suggest alternatives. Ultimately, SJLI was able to work with LAUSD staff to find a set of better options, and the issues SJLI flagged were featured in the program FAQs, providing much needed clarity for eligible non-profits and easing their participation. This example, while focused on mundane administrative policy changes, is arguably just as important as the charter amendments and funding process shifts that Steele helped to bring about. This is because it illustrates the tremendous assets that frontline organizations possess and how they can operate with even greater impact when local governments create openings for such collaboration.

C. Social Justice Learning Institute: Influencing Formal and Informal Policy and Process

Steele was adamant about the importance of yet another asset that has contributed to SJLI's impact over the years: its partnerships with other frontline organizations, which are premised on trust built over time and allow for a keen understanding of complementary capacities. Steele explained that SJLI and its partners often examine opportunities through this lens, considering which organizations might be best suited to engage in policy advocacy related to a given initiative and which might be best suited to engage later, once implementation is underway. **These practices are bolstered by ongoing communication and information sharing, which helps to ensure that collective resources are deployed for the broadest and most meaningful impact possible.**

Statue of Mexican musician Lucha Reyes in Mariachi Plaza
in Boyle Heights, California.
Courtesy of SPARCC

D. Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative: Supporting Local Government Infrastructure for Health Equity and Influencing the Flow of Public Dollars

Similarly, an example from California illustrates how efforts to integrate equity analysis into policymaking and funding decisions can allow for the flow of federal resources to support community priorities. The [Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative (BARHII)](#) has been deeply involved in such efforts. BARHII brings together 10 public health departments in the Bay Area with over 200 other partner organizations to devise impactful programs affecting the area's most vulnerable residents, build organizational capacity to develop equity-based solutions to the region's most pressing problems and influence policy that improves the quality of life for millions in the Bay Area.[18] BARHII is also committed to building the infrastructure needed to create health equity nationwide.[19]

Melissa Jones, who serves as Executive Director of BARHII spoke with SPARCC about the organization's experiences and observations interacting with federal funding. She was joined by Deyanira Zavala, who serves as Managing Director for the National Equitable Recovery Alliance at BARHII. NERA is a group of coalitions across six regions—many of whom were once part of SPARCC—that are working together to ensure equitable deployment of federal resources. NERA organizes itself around four impact tables: Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD) /Transit Justice, Black Health and Wealth, Community Ownership and Cultural Data.

Jones explained that in recent years, BARHII had been working to encourage more municipalities to adopt an equity officer model, by which they appoint a senior staff person to spearhead governmental efforts to advance equity, including assessing inequities, setting goals, and ensuring progress. One of the many areas where equity officers can make an impact is in transforming governmental procurement policies and practices, as demonstrated by the recent work of Sonoma County's equity officer. In Sonoma County, the Office of Equity was established in 2020 with the goals of addressing social and racial equity issues and ensuring that county policies and programs result in more positive outcomes for communities of color.[20] In December of 2021, Sonoma County's Board of Supervisors approved millions in ARPA funds to support community-led projects. The program through which federal dollars were distributed designated public and private non-profit entities, as well as private, for profit institutions, County departments and other public bodies among those eligible for funding. Importantly, the program strongly encouraged partnerships and noted that those who came together to submit applications had the potential to receive additional points under the scoring rubric.[21]

D. Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative: Supporting Local Government Infrastructure for Health Equity and Influencing the Flow of Public Dollars

The Equity Office was central to the community-driven process through which proposals were generated. A 15-member "ARPA Equity Work Group," which spent two months analyzing deeply embedded barriers toward achieving equity with government funds as well as strategies for overcoming these barriers. It partnered with several other government offices to host five virtual town hall meetings. These public gatherings, along with community surveys, input from the Equity Work Group and feedback from Board Members allowed for the identification of ten community priority areas, including assistance to households' basic needs, childcare, housing, culturally-responsive disaster response and more. These then became the funding priority areas for the county's Notice of Funding Availability , allowing agencies to address programs related to community needs. Ultimately, community members generated some $172M worth of potential projects, of which $39.3M were ultimately funded by the county. [22]

> **This Sonoma County victory underscores the truth that when government systems are reconfigured with equity at the center, the potential for transformation is significant.**

This outcome—in which millions of public dollars are being channeled to projects that are community-driven—also has its roots in a number of factors. **BARHII's decades of experience supporting area public health agencies to identify and address health equity have earned the organization a strong reputation and credibility that, in turn, laid the foundation for its work to embed equity officers in the Bay Area and elsewhere across the country.** Its depth of experience with respect to previous rounds of federal, state and local funding no doubt also prepared BARHII to recognize the opportunities that would come with ARPA, IIJA, IRA and other federal funding flows. And like Elevated Chicago, SJLI and others, its **membership in communities like SPARRC and more recently, NERA, have given it access to spaces in which like-minded leaders are thinking and acting creatively to take advantage of the moment.**

E. Metropolitan Planning Council: Building a Line-Up of Projects Reflecting Community Priorities

In Chicago, MPC has not only engaged in efforts to track funding, it has also attempted to build a line-up of community-generated projects for consideration by local authorities who are, in turn, responsible for submitting applications for funding to federal agencies.[23] In advance of the launch of the U.S. Department of Transportation's (U.S. DOT) Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Grant program (RCN), which will provide $185 million in planning grants for projects across the country that reconnect communities cut off from opportunity and burdened by past transportation infrastructure decisions, MPC led a process of collecting community-generated projects.[24] These were then presented to local officials for review and potential inclusion in their application to the U.S. DOT for funding.[25]

Through this process, MPC collected some 120 ideas and put forward a list of 22 proposals, focused on highway re-design, transit infrastructure, viaduct improvements, underpass community space, parks and bike, pedestrian and complete streets projects.[26] These projects were then reviewed and rated by an advisory committee of experts representing environmental justice organizations, local transportation agencies from across the region and other government offices and equity-focused groups among others.[27] They were then offered to the City of Chicago and other entities as candidates for their RCN applications.

Notably, the City of Chicago submitted an application to U.S. DOT that drew upon these ideas. While this city application was not ultimately funded by U.S. DOT, the process nonetheless provides a compelling example of how a policy organization can help to steer federal dollars toward community priorities by creating a structure in which ideas flow to local decision makers not from large scale developers, construction companies and other "usual suspects," but from the community itself. This example also illustrates how a policy organization can leverage relationships in order to ensure involvement of local and regional government officials, contribute technical acumen and expertise to support alignment with federal program goals, create an on-ramp for consideration of community-generated ideas by local decision makers, support presentation of these ideas in forms that are legible to these decision makers and, thus, help to expand the universe of projects that are ultimately considered for federal investment.

F. Elevated Chicago + Elevated Works: Influencing Investment of Federal Dollars Through Multiple Strategies

Chicago, Illinois has also been the site of other efforts that illustrate powerfully how community priorities can shape investment of federal dollars. Elevated Chicago (EC), is a collaborative of residents, community organizations, artists, developers, regional nonprofits, community development financial institutions, city officials, policymakers, activists and philanthropists that seeks to erase boundaries, shift power, and de-center elements of white supremacy culture that harm community development.[28] Elevated Chicago, like BARHII, is a member of NERA. NERA's work on equitable transit-oriented development (ETOD) and transit justice is largely focused in the Chicago area.

Both Roberto Requejo, Executive Director of EC, and Deyanira Zavala, Managing Director for Equitable Recovery at NERA participated in conversations as part of this project, sharing insights that speak to both the opportunities and challenges new federal infrastructure dollars present and the types of partnerships that are pivotal at this moment.[29] Requejo and Zavala described how the EC collective was able to draw upon over 25 years of experience in ETOD advocacy to push the City of Chicago to use ARPA dollars to fund ETOD projects. In a separate effort, the City's Department of Housing combined ARPA dollars with $600 million in local bond funding to build housing near transit.[30]

However, in order to seize the opportunity to secure federal funding and take direct action in support of their priorities, members of the Elevated Chicago coalition recognized that they needed to organize themselves in a new way. Elevated Works (EW) was formed to allow the coalition to compete for federal dollars. Bob Dean, Chief Strategy and Program Officer of the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT), described how the coalition came together to agree upon the establishment of a new entity and then determined that CNT would assume the role of fiscal agent. This new organizational structure allowed EW to compete for federal dollars flowing through the City of Chicago. Ultimately, the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) awarded EW $1M in ARPA funds to provide technical assistance on ETOD for DPD grantees completing real estate development projects. EW is drawing upon the collective assets of over 20 member organizations and mission-driven consulting firms to provide a wide range of support for these DPD grantees. Those who will be providing this support include community-based organizations, law firms, transportation planning enterprises, entities that focus on market analysis, organizations deeply experienced in zoning and other planning issues, a public art-focused organization and housing data analysis experts.

F. Elevated Chicago + Elevated Works: Influencing Investment of Federal Dollars Through Multiple Strategies

The success of this effort to secure federal funds to support community priorities can be attributed to several factors. The members of the Elevated coalition had a long history of working together through EC. This meant they had **strong relationships built on trust as well as a robust understanding of one another's strengths**. As in the work Derek Steele of SJLI described, the groups' understanding of their respective assets allowed them to recognize that CNT's possession of finance mechanisms necessary to receive and distribute funds, its ability to track expenditures and manage reporting and its history of having received and successfully managed federal funds in the past made the organization a strong choice for fiscal agent. Perhaps, most importantly, these relationships and understandings allowed Elevated coalition members to trust that those assets would be leveraged for the collective benefit of the larger group.

Consistent with the experiences of other organizations that have been able to take advantage of federal funding opportunities, EW has also found that **access to flexible, reliable philanthropic funds has been instrumental** to their success. Thanks to an agreement with a funder, the Elevated coalition can draw upon these dollars to match government investments, defray administrative costs and support the work of organizations that cannot accept federal funding.
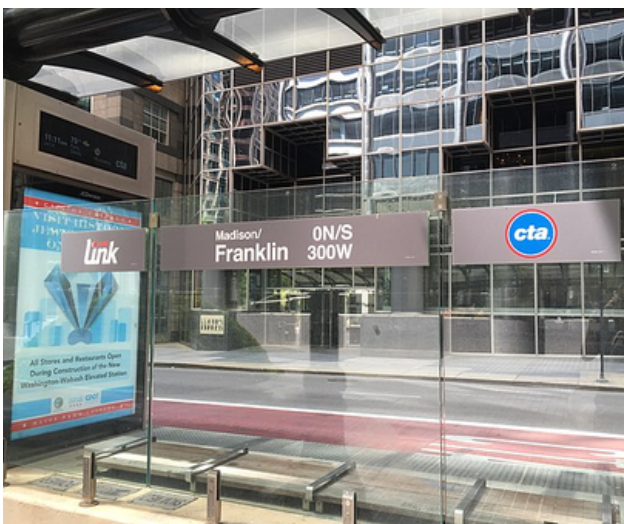
Madison-Franklin bus stop in Chicago, IL.

Requejo and Zavala explained further, describing how philanthropic dollars flowing to Elevated Chicago and government dollars flowing to Elevated Works could complement one another, allowing for greater progress toward coalition members' shared ETOD goals than would otherwise be possible. For example, Requejo and Zevala described how philanthropic dollars flowing to EC could allow for purchases needed for development projects well before the arrival of slow-moving federal dollars. Similarly, philanthropic funds could cover the costs of cultural projects, community engagement activities or pre-development grants to partners.

G. Center for Transforming Communities: Leveraging Relationships and Organizational Capacities to Re-Grant to Frontline Organizations

Just as organizations like SJLI and BARHII have worked to transform the channels through which federal dollars will pass so that they pour into community-driven projects, so too have organizations brought their own expertise and capacity to bear to direct dollars toward community priorities. In Memphis, Tennessee, the Center for Transforming Communities (CTC) focuses on cultivating "neighborhood democracies" through place-based organizing approaches and the development and implementation of strategies to address neighborhood interests in the areas of community education, health, arts and culture, youth, land and housing and environment.[30]

Connie Binkowitz, Director of Development and External Policy at CTC, explained that in 2020 the organization received a grant of $188,250 from the City of Memphis Division of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to distribute federal dollars to community-based groups across the city for community development projects. These grants were funded with City of Memphis funds and federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) dollars and disseminated through DHCD's Community Coalition Grant Pilot Program.[32] The organization is currently administering and disseminating another round of funding with the funding sources braided in the same manner as the Pilot Program.

Multiple factors have made it possible for CTC to directly distribute federal dollars to other frontline organizations that are deeply committed to community priorities . First, CTC had—in part due to participation in SPARRC—**experience with the administration of microgrants to other smaller organizations.** In addition, CTC had the benefit of a **pool of flexible, philanthropic funding that it was able to draw upon to cover the costs associated with this regranting model,** an incredibly important asset given that the government grant program in question operates on a reimbursement basis. In addition, as with other leaders who spoke with SPARCC, Binkowitz noted the tremendous benefit of the **knowledge and trust cultivated through over a decade of partnerships with other area CBOs.** This has allowed CTC to match funding opportunities with organizations based on a deep understanding of their strengths, often spotting opportunities that would not have been visible to a government administrator or a non-profit organization less closely connected to community.

H. Georgia STAND-UP: Aligning Strategically with Partners to Create New Opportunities

Across organizations, one of the most fascinating themes that emerged involved the creative strategies that leaders were developing to leverage the strength of the field for greater impact. Over and over, leaders mentioned how their organizations had collaborated —through informal and formal arrangements—to design, advocate for and implement proposals. These arrangements reflected sophisticated understandings of their respective strengths as well as trust-based information sharing that unlocked opportunities for impact that might not have been identified otherwise.

In some instances, these collaborations involved strategic use of time. SJLI, for example, described how the organization and its partners, after years of collaborations on government funded projects, had developed a keen sense of which entity would be best suited to engage during a particular phase of a given project. For example, while youth in SJLI's programs might be intensely involved in creating a framework for a needed program or policy change, another partner organization might be better suited to engage at the implementation phase. Yet, by remaining in close relationship, partners ensured that both organizations were able to use their limited resources to achieve the greatest possible impact for their communities.

In other instances, creative approaches to partnerships were instrumental in allowing organizations to make progress when federal, state or local delays threatened to impede forward motion. As noted above for example, Elevated Chicago, described how **flexible funding from philanthropic partners allows for important steps like purchases necessary to keep community-driven development projects on track**. This is incredibly valuable given the ponderous pace of federal, state and local government contracting processes and the feverish activity in many real estate markets.

Elsewhere, this same type of ingenuity has similarly helped to advance community priorities. In Atlanta, [Georgia Strategic Alliance for New Directions and Unified Policies (Georgia STAND-UP)](#) is a leading force for progressive base-building, advocacy and leadership in the South with an almost a 20-year history of advocating for greater civic engagement and maximum voter participation, building community infrastructure and fighting to achieve equity in housing and criminal justice.[33] Ms. Deborah Scott, Chief Executive Officer, was generous enough to share insights based on the organization's decades of experience and its current efforts to maximize the opportunities created by federal infrastructure funding programs.

H. Georgia STAND-UP: Aligning Strategically with Partners to Create New Opportunities

Ms. Scott described how Georgia STAND-UP approached development of the Georgia Trade Up Program, illustrating how skillful use of time and careful orchestration of partnerships can convert resource and time constraints into new opportunities. Ms. Scott described how the organization had prepared several classes of community members to connect directly to union apprenticeships. However, because the number of these apprenticeships is typically limited and they only become available in connection with specific contracts, Georgia STAND-UP soon found that it had more talent in search of opportunities than apprenticeships to which to connect them.

The organization determined to use these lulls in activity to its advantage, partnering with philanthropic institutions and others to create a pre-apprenticeship program that prepared candidates to navigate the apprenticeship process by, for example, preparing them for interviews and other requirements. In this way, Georgia Trade-Up is helping to create a new pool of trained construction workers who are likely to be particularly sought after as implementation of IIJA and IRA move forward.

> **Like Elevated's work in Chicago and CTC's work in Memphis, this example demonstrates how pouring philanthropic funding into organizations that are deeply committed to community priorities and deeply knowledgeable about community assets has the potential to enhance the impact of federal investments.**

The Beltline in Atlanta, GA.

I. Center for Neighborhood Technology: Collaborative Problem Solving Around Procurement to Facilitate the Flow of Public Dollars to Frontline Groups

As multiple leaders noted, the mechanics through which federal, state and local agencies disseminate funds can prevent frontline organizations from accessing dollars that could advance their housing, transportation and climate and environmental justice priorities. Grants that function through reimbursement only, slow-moving procurement processes and interactions with cumbersome government technologies can all act as disincentives to frontline groups that might be interested in securing public dollars. Impressively, however, some are drawing upon what they have learned from their encounters with these systems in order to shift the dynamics of funding distribution so that they work more effectively for frontline organizations.

In Chicago, CNT has partnered with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), the regional planning organization for several counties—including Cook County—in northeastern Illinois to identify changes that can be made now to improve the flow of public dollars to frontline organizations in the future.[34] Through this process, they are identifying the policies and practices that make it difficult for frontline organizations to accept federal dollars and developing alternatives that have the potential to increase the flow of these dollars to trusted intermediary organizations or directly to frontline groups. Among these barriers are insurance, invoicing and reporting requirements and limited capacity for contract reviews. CNT is working with CMAP to explore how simplified procurement processes, advertising language, streamlined memoranda of understanding and less complex reporting can make it feasible for groups that are rooted in and trusted by frontline communities to receive these dollars without also taking on crushing administrative burdens or serious financial and reputational risk.

This example builds upon an important lesson emerging from other case studies above, namely that—where there is trust and openness—**collaborative problem-solving with partners in government that focuses on how to adjust procurement processes is an area that is rich with potential.** These processes will govern the dissemination of the sizeable sums that are flowing through state and local governments. With years remaining to program and expend federal infrastructure dollars, exploring changes to these systems that can be launched now is a wise investment of time and financial resources.

III. Moving Forward: What's Needed

The leaders who participated in these conversations shared incredibly rich insights about how they and their partners have been able or are preparing to make the most of public dollars. However, their collective experience has also given them considerable insight into what is needed to better position organizations like theirs to take advantage of current funding programs. These are offered here as guidance for those in government, capacity-building organizations, national advocacy groups and philanthropic institutions who are eager to see federal infrastructure investments meaningfully advance the priorities of communities at the frontlines

A. Flexible Financial Support to Enhance Projects or Sustain Them While Awaiting Government Dollars

A number of leaders noted that they had opted not to pursue federal dollars, not because they didn't recognize opportunities but, rather, because they could not afford to complete the required programmatic work in advance of reimbursement by the administering government agency. They referenced experiences in the past in which reimbursement had taken several months, if not more than a year. Under these conditions, taking on government-funded projects requires flexible, reliable funding—whether from philanthropic institutions or from income derived from the sale of products or services—that organizations can use to cover program costs. This is particularly important where plans involve frontline organizations redistributing dollars to smaller community-based groups that are partnering on a given project. This is because smaller organizations will be even less likely to be able to complete their work if funds do not flow to them expeditiously.

As noted above, **however, where flexible, philanthropic resources are available, incredible things are possible**. Elevated Chicago's Roberto Requejo, the Center for Neighborhood Technology's Bob Dean and the Center for Transforming Communities' Connie Binkowitz, for example, all described how flexible, philanthropic funding has allowed them to seize opportunities in connection with federal funds. These dollars can support the early stages of real estate development projects, bolster partnerships between organizations of different sizes and with distinct capacities and enable frontline organizations themselves to disseminate funds to groups they know to be deeply committed to community members' priorities.

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Another leader reinforced these points, outlining the multiple possibilities that flexible, philanthropic funding can support. These include funding for new staff positions at frontline organizations—such as roles in finance and operations—that enhance their capacity to absorb funds. Similarly, this leader flagged that flexible philanthropic dollars could also fund groups of experts—such as grant writers, lawyers, finance experts and compliance specialists—to provide free services for frontline organizations. With this concrete assistance, frontline organizations could more easily compete for and manage funds.

B. Flexible Philanthropic Funding to Support Government to Partner More Effectively with Community

Our conversations also revealed **powerful new possibilities for philanthropic investment bridging government and community.** One leader argued that philanthropic investment could advance the priorities of frontline communities by supporting local governments to align with the values of and become better, more effective partners to such communities. Specifically, they noted that many governments lack the capacity to administer funds, much less to do so with an eye to equity. When capacity is lacking, government plans often shift from aspirational to perfunctory, following the path of least resistance instead of building a path toward transformation.

Accordingly, there may be a need and an opportunity to focus philanthropic investment on staff in state and local agencies and offices who are responsible for administering these funds. Such efforts could focus on helping government administrators to understand their authority under federal statutes, regulations and guidance. In addition, philanthropic dollars could be deployed to deepen government officials' understanding of what meaningful community engagement and community-driven decision-making are and—just as importantly—practices that are consistent with each. Beyond this, philanthropic institutions could fund efforts to train government administrators about how to be in ongoing relationship with frontline organizations and the communities in which they are rooted. Such smart investments focused on supporting value alignment and deep partnership between government and community could transform the way federal infrastructure dollars flow over the next few years as well as their impact.

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Importantly, however, there needs to be more philanthropic and trust-based investment in sustained community-driven planning processes that result in better planning outcomes led by community partners. For example, the [National Association of Climate Resilience Planners (NACRP)](#) trains community-accountable, frontline facilitators to lead local community planning processes that subvert the traditional top-down planning dynamics in order to have trained community organizers at the ready throughout the country. In order for the local-government to community partnerships to sustain and thrive and result in meaningful plans and policies, there needs to be resourcing for facilitation that centers racial and economic justice beyond one administration, one local government staff ally or elected official tenures.

C. Increased Government Transparency About Funding Opportunities and Decisions

Multiple leaders cited examples of how **a lack of government transparency had limited their ability to make the most of current opportunities**. They noted, for example, how government officials' willingness to engage them in conversations about upcoming opportunities and plans varied, with high levels of engagement when these actors were desperate to program abundant, flexible funds—such as those flowing through ARPA—and low levels of transparency with respect to more restrictive IIJA and IRA dollars.

Similarly, leaders spoke about how their ability to offer suggestions about where to invest public dollars was limited by the failure of officials in government to communicate meaningful information about the specific, federal program from which the dollars were flowing as well as program goals and parameters. Opportunities for creative problem solving have, no doubt, been lost as a result of this lack of transparency. Whether these missed opportunities for information sharing and solutions development grow from intentional withholding on the part of government or an inability to sort through the volume of federal funding opportunities, there is a need to explore interventions that address this challenge.

D. Expanded Access to Trusted Navigators & Individuals with Specific Expertise

Relatedly, multiple leaders project partners spoke to noted that they did not have the **in-house capacity to track funding opportunities and decisions at the federal, state or**

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 local levels. They were simply too busy with their central missions to identify and seek out opportunities, even at a rare moment of abundant federal funding. This in turn, means that frontline organization leaders, despite their considerable experience, insight, creativity and —most importantly—knowledge of and commitment to community priorities, are limited in their ability to advocate for or influence decision-making around federal infrastructure funds. Leaders commented on how valuable it would be to have access to individuals who could do the research and analysis necessary to match organizations to funding opportunities. Multiple leaders expressed a desire for more support to understand what the funding opportunities are and all the steps necessary to access them. Across the board, leaders were clear that an ongoing relationship with a trusted navigator who understands the funding opportunities and—just as crucially—understands the nuances of their work would dramatically advance their ability to identify, create and act on opportunities in connection with infrastructure funding programs.

A model for this exists in the form of the Justice40 Accelerator (J40A), which seeks to reimagine government resource delivery systems through a restorative and reparative framework that better supports Black and historically disinvested in communities of color. Through a unique, 12-month cohort process, the J40 Accelerator prepares climate and environmental justice organizations to build their capacity, partnerships, readiness and to access government funding to implement community-designed solutions.   Several J40 Accelerator program navigators also made time to speak with SPARCC about the support that they provide to frontline organizations that are part of the cohort. This [35] conversation reaffirmed the impact that time and resource constraints have on organizations' ability to engage in ongoing tracking of activities as well the strong desire for opportunity identification and matching technical assistance services provided by trusted individuals.

The navigators also explained that in doing this work, they had begun to build a community of values-aligned technical assistance providers, a crucial asset in the long-term effort to maximize funding opportunities over time.   This was consistent with comments from a number of other leaders who noted that they and their partners needed access to individuals with specific, relevant expertise[36]. With support from individuals and firms with expertise in research, data visualization, mapping, grant writing, grant administration and other specialties, they noted, their organizations could be far more competitive. The

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conversations that took place as part of this project affirm that there is considerable demand for precisely this type of one-on-one approach to capacity building.

Christina Cummings, Vice President of Operations at the [Partnership for Southern Equity (PSE)](), expanded on these points. PSE works to advance policies and institutional actions that promote racial equity and shared prosperity in metropolitan Atlanta and the South more broadly and has been a core partner on the J40 Accelerator. Cummings described how the Accelerator was designed to respond to frontline groups' desire for guidance in navigating potential opportunities as well as their need for ongoing support tailored to their specific challenges. Much like the navigators project partners spoke to, Cummings explained how the Accelerator helps to mitigate the risk of information overload for groups. Cummings also explained how—with two years of valuable experience to draw upon—PSE and the other core J40A partners were considering how the model might be replicated in particular regions or states.

E. Support for Changes to Organizational Structure of Frontline Groups

Leaders also mentioned that they needed support for making structural changes to their organizations that could dramatically enhance their capacity to advance community priorities. This could be in the form of more flexible public grant funding that allowed for organizational capacity investments, including administrative, legal or needed technical assistance. This could also take the form of the matching power of unrestricted philanthropic or for-profit capital funding. For example, they mentioned how with the right kind of financial and technical assistance, they could transform, shift or add to organizational structures. A 501c(3) non-profit might, for example, form a community development corporation that could purchase property and build affordable housing.

Even as leaders emphasized the importance of greater investment in their particular organizations, they also highlighted the value of creative approaches to meeting such needs across the field more broadly. Specifically, they flagged the need for centralized civic infrastructure such as regional technical assistance hubs or robust fiscal sponsorship providers capable of taking on the administrative burden of public funding on behalf of smaller community-based organizations.

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F. Support for Aligning Partners in Ways that are Consistent with Progressive Values and Advance Project Goals

Unsurprisingly, a number of leaders mentioned the need for support for identifying the right partners for particular projects and determining the roles that each partner is best suited to play. They expressed interest in mapping or strategy screening tools and practices that would help partners identify who should do what, why, where the overlaps sit and what intricacies these involve. In addition, they expressed a desire for support that would help them to be in healthy, resilient relationships with their partners. This is particularly helpful when it comes to partnerships involving a mix of nonprofit and for-profit partners.

> **Support is needed for navigating complex power dynamics, centering the needs of community partners and working through inevitable conflict.**

Relatedly, leaders made the point that aligning these relationships with progressive values was not always easy to do. They wanted to understand how to ground these partnerships in values and practices of interconnection and solidarity instead of competitive or extractive dynamics. Leaders also emphasized that there was a particular type of partnership that was needed—national organizations stepping up to play the role of receivers and disseminators of federal funds.

G. Alignment of Application and Administration Requirements with Frontline Organizations' Capacities and Needs

Many leaders expressed frustration about the administrative burdens associated with applying for and administering public dollars generally and federal dollars specifically. Some noted that these burdens were significant enough to prevent them from exploring federal funding opportunities. Others expressed frustration that programs that were designed with racial and environmental justice in mind were not structured in a manner that incentivized or facilitated applications from the frontline organizations that have long been committed to these goals. Similarly, they noted the barriers that inhibit frontline

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organizations from competing for these dollars or managing them effectively upon receipt. These leaders recommended that federal and state agencies either pursue reform of the rules that govern existing application, compliance and reporting requirements or, perhaps more feasibly, identify opportunities for increased flexibility within the current structures.

Where application and earlier stages in the process are concerned, another participant suggested that federal and state officials work more actively to identify potential funding opportunities for organizations based on groups' particular strengths. For example, organizations with strong voter registration operations could be approached to repurpose these teams to recruit residents to sign up for affordable broadband programs. Likewise, groups that are trusted by community members could design and lead meaningful community engagement efforts. As noted above, insights from those who have worked on navigator programs in recent years suggests that many additional steps are required to move from awareness of a funding opportunity to the capacity to apply for, win and manage federal dollars. Still, this recommendation reaffirms several important points. Namely, it is crucial that government agencies that are administering funding programs understand the assets that frontline organizations possess. In addition, they must appreciate these groups' unique ability to ensure that program impacts are felt at what CTC's Connie Binkowitz referred to as the "last mile." As such, reducing the amount of work that frontline groups must do to filter through the countless opportunities that are currently live but may not be a good fit for them is essential.

Consistent with this theme, one participant offered a concrete set of suggestions for resources that would make it easier for frontline organizations to take advantage of current funding opportunities. This list included—

→ **Analysis** that allows organizations to figure out what types of growth or other changes would enable them to take advantage of funding opportunities. Particularly, there was interest in understanding what opportunities an organization might be able to access if certain capacities were enhanced, who might help to support enhancement of those capacities and how the organization in question could help to support other groups' development in turn.

→ **Application templates** that allow organizations to understand what they need to do to be competitive. What do they need to communicate about their mission and values given program goals? What programmatic and operational capacities does

III. Moving Forward: What's Needed

organization need to have in place to successfully take advantage of a particular opportunity? What types of entities should the organization partner with in order to pursue the particular opportunity, and what are the roles that partners can play? What are some examples of tools and practices that might minimize conflict and help to resolve conflict when it inevitably arises?

→ **Analysis** that helps organizations understand where other entities—particularly government agencies and for profit organizations—might need them and the opportunities these needs create. This was mentioned by more than one leader who was interested in making it easier for frontline organizations to understand where language in program rules, guidelines, notices or other documents set expectations around "community engagement" that might create footholds for demanding that local governments or other actors seek out their expertise and incorporate their insights into plans and implementation steps.

→ **Free and easy access to federal grant-writing expertise**. This was also mentioned by multiple leaders who noted that they lacked staff with federal grant-writing experience and recognized that assistance from such experts would make them much more competitive for funding.

Members of SPARCC in Memphis, TN.
Courtesy of SPARCC

IV. Conclusion

Frontline organizations and other partners with long-standing commitments to transforming the housing landscape, building transportation equity and achieving climate and environmental justice have a tremendous amount of wisdom to share about the factors that allow them to make use of public dollars consistent with community priorities. While the interviews conducted by project partners and the insights emerging from them represent only a portion of the learnings that are emerging from organizations across the country in this, they nonetheless point to several important observations.

Relationships with partners in government, where grounded in trust, can play a powerful role in connecting frontline organizations with public dollars. Similarly, trusting relationships among community-based organizations have also proven instrumental by supporting information sharing, facilitating matches between projects and the organizations best suited to implement them and—importantly—allowing for creative partnerships and structural arrangements that make it easier for groups that are steeped in community priorities to receive and disseminate public funds.

Similarly, there are steps that can be taken to enhance transparency about federal funding opportunities and make those opportunities more accessible for frontline organizations. Partner organizations can draw on relationships, technological capacity and policy expertise to increase transparency in ways that may be useful to frontline organizations and create on-ramps to federal consideration for community-driven projects.

Unsurprisingly, there is also a connection between efforts to integrate racial equity considerations into government decision making and the flow of public dollars to support frontline community priorities. Whether this occurs through the establishment of offices focused on equity or the enactment of policies that shape funding decisions with an eye to equity, these more structural changes have tremendous potential to support community-driven projects.

Members of SPARCC in Los Angeles, CA.
Courtesy of SPARCC

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IV. Conclusion

These are just some of the valuable insights emerging from this project that may be of interest to local, state or federal program administrators, capacity building organizations, philanthropic institutions and others. Whether this moment of abundant infrastructure spending produces meaningful progress on the priorities that matter most to the communities that bear the brunt of systemic inequities.

Continue reading for an appendix of additional resources and Footholds for Community: A Resource for Frontline Organizations + Partners.

Appendix: Additional Resources

Many organizations have compiled resources that are designed to help justice-oriented organizations to understand and seize federal infrastructure funding opportunities. A number of these resources are listed below along with links and brief descriptions.

The J40 Accelerator has compiled the Justice40 Resources page, an incredibly comprehensive collection of resources, including tools to help identify particular funding opportunities, information on IIJA and IRA, tracking resources and guidance on how to prepare to manage grants and how to find appropriate technical assistance.

The Emerald Cities Collaborative's People's Justice40+ Community Benefit Playbook includes information about a range of federal spending bills and also includes guidance on how frontline organizations and community groups can develop community benefit plans.

The People's Climate Innovation Center has produced a vast range of resources that may be helpful to frontline organizations, their partners and government decision makers. These include PCIC resources explaining the spectrum of community engagement to ownership and community-driven planning and additional resources created by partner organizations.

The White House has produced a range of resources that provide information about federal funding opportunities. These include resources that identify infrastructure funding opportunities, available technical assistance and state-by-state investment under the IIJA and climate and clean energy related opportunities under the IRA for which groups may be eligible.

The Communities First Infrastructure Alliance curates and posts resources relevant to frontline organizations seeking to understand and take advantage of federal funding opportunities.

The We Power Policy Toolkit synthesizes critical lessons learned related to policy strategy and policy organizing. It is intended as a resource for those who are doing work around community-centered processes to create transformative change and to add to the many voices calling for a change of status quo, top-down policymaking. This may be of particular interest to frontline organizations that seek support for coalescing around progressive values and moving forward with their infrastructure efforts consistent with those values.

Appendix: Additional Resources

The [Community Climate Shift](#) Screening Tool, developed by the People's Climate Innovation Center may be helpful to frontline organizations that are interested in matching coalition partners to project roles.

[In the Public Interest](#) has compiled a set of resources for state and local governments, as well as advocates, seize opportunities in connection with federal infrastructure spending.

[Lead Together](#) is a compilation of resources related to the American Rescue Plan Act, which was enacted in 2021 to support recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic crisis. These include case studies of how groups have seized opportunities connected to these funds, which may be helpful to frontline groups and other partners.

The [Highline Network](#) has created a [toolkit](#) organized around various goals, such as mapping assets, aligning with partners and reviewing community networks.

The [Greenlining Institute](#) has produced a set of [guiding principles](#) for advancing equitable and resilient mobility efforts in order to help build community resilience to climate change impacts.

The [Rails to Trails Conservancy](#) has produced a range of resources focused on [funding for trails, walking and biking](#).

The [Equitable and Just National Climate Platform](#) has created a [Justice40 Resource Guide](#) and [Funding Finder](#) for frontline groups to learn more about the [Justice40 Initiative](#) and how to access funding.

Footholds for Community: A Resource for Frontline Organizations + Partners

Guidance materials for a number of federal funding programs include language that sets expectations for state and local government coordination with community members and community organizations. While these provisions vary in strength, they may create footholds for frontline organizations and their partners to demand that local agencies engage with them in more meaningful ways.

This resource identifies where these provisions can be found and what they say for the 16 programs below. It also provides information about how to contact federal offices responsible for administering these programs. This tool is intended to support frontline organizations and partners that may be interested in influencing state and local planning and implementation of projects funded through these federal programs.

Program Name: Clean Water & Drinking Water State Revolving Funds (IIJA)
Federal Agency: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
State and/or Local Agencies: State, tribal and territorial entities responsible for water infrastructure
Community Engagement Expectations: Program materials state that–
- EPA expects states to "engage residents and community stakeholders in disadvantaged communities."
- States are "encouraged to reach beyond traditional stakeholder organizations and engage neighborhood and other organizations connected to the community to help identify needs, comment on Intended Use Plans (IUPs) and communicate priorities."
- States are "strongly encouraged" to conduct public engagement activities while developing their IUPs."
Federal Administrator Contact: Office of Groundwater and Drinking Water (OGWDW)

Program Name: Local and Regional Project Assistance Grants (RAISE) (IIJA)
Federal Agency: U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)
State and/or Local Agencies: States, localities, public authorities, special-purpose districts, territories, Tribes, transit agencies and multijurisdictional entities.

Footholds for Community: A Resource for Frontline Organizations + Partners

Community Engagement Expectations: [Program materials](#) state that—
- DOT expects applicants to demonstrate that they have "meaningfully sought community input through public involvement, particularly engaging environmental justice communities or disadvantaged communities that may be affected by the project" where applicable.
- Applicants must also include a "public involvement plan" in their applications that demonstrates "meaningful engagement of the community affected by the project, to include environmental justice communities or disadvantaged communities where applicable."
- Application review will include consideration of "Partnership and Collaboration." High scores in this category will be awarded to those applicants that have or demonstrate plans to "support and engage diverse people and communities," for example by engaging with "community-based organizations to ensure equity considerations for underserved communities are meaningfully integrated throughout the lifecycle of the project."

Federal Administrator Contact: [U.S. DOT Office of Infrastructure Finance and Innovation](#)

Program Name: [Multimodal Project Discretionary Grant Opportunity (IIJA)](#)
Federal Agency: U.S. Department of Transportation
State and/or Local Agencies: States, localities, Tribes, metropolitan planning organizations, special-purpose districts, public authorities and multijurisdictional entities.
Community Engagement Expectations: [Program materials](#) state that—
- Applicants are expected to include a description of "how the project has or will meaningfully engage communities affected by the project, with effective public participation that is accessible to all persons regardless of race, color, national origin, disability, age, and sex."
- The application should also describe "planning and engagement in the project design phase…to mitigate and, to the greatest extent possible, prevent, physical and economic displacement."
- The application should also include a "description of public engagement about the project that has occurred, proactively inclusive of historically disadvantaged communities, including details on compliance with environmental justice

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- requirements and the degree to which public comments and commitments , have been integrated into project development and design."
- Applications are also expected to include a public involvement plan "demonstrating meaningful engagement of the community affected by the project, to include disadvantaged communities or other communities with environmental justice concerns, where applicable."
- These expectations are reflected in the rubric by which applications will be evaluated.

Federal Administrator Contact: U.S. DOT Office of Infrastructure Finance and Innovation

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Program Name: Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements Program (IIJA)

Federal Agency: Federal Railroad Administration (FRA)

State and/or Local Agencies: States, Tribes, public authorities, Amtrak, rail carriers, nonprofit labor organizations representing rail employees

Community Engagement Expectations: Program materials state that—

- FRA will assess "community engagement efforts already taken or planned, the extent to which engagement efforts are designed to reach impacted communities, whether engagement is accessible for persons with disabilities or limited English proficient persons within the impacted communities, and how community feedback is taken into account in decision-making."

Federal Administrator Contact: Office of Policy and Planning

Program Name: Railroad Crossing Elimination Program (IIJA)

Federal Agency: Federal Railroad Administration (FRA)

State and/or Local Agencies: States, localities, territories, metropolitan planning organizations, port authorities

Community Engagement Expectations: Program materials state that—

- FRA will assess "community engagement efforts already taken or planned, the extent to which engagement efforts are designed to reach impacted communities, whether engagement is accessible for persons with disabilities or limited English proficient persons within the impacted communities, and how community feedback is taken into account in decision-making."

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Federal Administrator Contact: Office of Policy and Planning

Program Name: Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) (IIJA)
Federal Agency: Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
State and/or Local Agencies: States, territories and Tribes (with localities, state agencies and Tribes as eligible sub-awardees)
Community Engagement Expectations: Program materials provide that—
- FEMA will assess the degree to which sub-applications describe "outreach strategy and supporting activities appropriate to the project and the community that advance mitigation."
- FEMA will also assess the degree to which sub-applications outline the "types of community planning processes leveraged" and describe "how input from a diverse range of stakeholders, including overburdened and underserved communities, was gathered and incorporated into project conception and design."
- FEMA will also attend to the degree to which sub-applications outline how such "community planning and stakeholder input will continue to be used to help direct project execution."
- FEMA also sets specific expectations regarding engagement with people with disabilities in outreach efforts.
Federal Administrator Contact: FEMA Regional Office or State Hazard Mitigation Officers

Program Name: Flood Mitigation Assistance Grants (IIJA)
Federal Agency: Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
State and/or Local Agencies: States, localities, territories
Community Engagement Expectations: Program materials provide that—
- Integration of the needs of people with disabilities is expected to "occur at all levels, including planning; alerting, notification, and public outreach; training; purchasing of equipment and supplies; protective action implementation; and exercises/drills."
Federal Administrator Contact: FEMA Regional Office or State Hazard Mitigation Officers

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Program Name: [Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient and Cost-Saving Transportation - Discretionary Program (PROTECT) (IIJA)](#)
Federal Agency: Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)
State and/or Local Agencies: States, localities, Tribes, metropolitan planning organizations, special-purpose districts, public authorities, federal land management agencies applying with states
Community Engagement Expectations: [Program materials](#) state that—
- FHWA will evaluate applications with an eye to "Public Engagement, Partnerships and Collaboration." This includes attention to the extent to which the "planning process will engage a wide range of applicable partners and stakeholders and incorporates opportunities...for public collaboration" with partners such as "community-based organizations."
- Applications will also be evaluated with attention to the degree to which the engagement process described "will involve a range of relevant experts in diverse areas and demonstrate inclusion of disadvantaged populations or communities that have or will likely experience a disproportionate impact from a natural disaster or catastrophic event."
- FHWA will also examine applications to determine the degree to which they demonstrate "how input provided will be considered during the planning grant implementation process."
- In connection with a criterion focused on "Equity and Justice40," FHWA will assess whether applications demonstrate "in detail how meaningful public engagement with disadvantaged communities will occur throughout a project's life cycle."
- In addition, projects that score "Low" or "Medium-Low" with respect to economic analysis may be selected for awards if they demonstrate clear benefits with respect to community engagement.
Federal Administrator Contact: Office of Acquisitions and Grant Management

Program Name: [Safe Streets and Roads for All (IIJA)](#)
Federal Agency: U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)
State and/or Local Agencies: Metropolitan planning organizations, political subdivisions of states, territories, multijurisdictional entities
Community Engagement Expectations: [Program materials](#) provide that—

Footholds for Community: A Resource for Frontline Organizations + Partners

- Applicants for Action Plan Grants are expected to use funds to produce Action Plans reflecting "robust engagement with the public and relevant stakeholders, including...community groups, that allows for both community representation and feedback."
- DOT will also attend to whether information received from engagement and collaboration is analyzed and incorporated into the Action Plan.
- In determining whether an applicant's existing plans are equivalent to an Action Plan, DOT will assess the extent to which the plans were developed through "engagement with the public and relevant stakeholders, including the private sector and community groups" and the degree to which "information received from the engagement and collaboration" was incorporated into these existing plans.
- Engagement is also a priority for Implementation Grants.
- If environmental impacts are discovered, communities must be engaged.
- DOT's evaluation rubric for Implementation Grants includes an "Equity, Engagement and Collaboration" criterion under which DOT will assess the extent to which projects and strategies include "meaningful engagement with the public, including public involvement for underserved communities, community benefit agreements, and relevant stakeholders such as...community groups, as part of implementation."

Federal Administrator Contact: Office of the Secretary

Program Name: [Charging and Fueling Infrastructure Grants - Corridor and Community Charging Programs (IIJA)](#)
Federal Agency: Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)
State and/or Local Agencies: States, localities, territories, Tribes, metropolitan planning organizations, special-purpose districts, public authorities
Community Engagement Expectations: [Program materials](#) state that—

- DOT expects project narratives for Corridor Program to include a description of the outcomes from collaborative engagement with stakeholders, though the illustrative list of stakeholders does not specify community organizations.
- Applicants to the Corridor Program should include information about "any coordination or public engagement that has been completed or is on-going regarding [the] project."

Footholds for Community: A Resource for Frontline Organizations + Partners

- Both Corridor and Community Projects will be assessed with an eye to "Equity, Community Engagement and Justice40." "Highly-qualified" projects will be those that include "meaningful public engagement throughout a project's life cycle and to the extent possible, projects that target at least 40 percent of benefits towards low-income communities, disadvantaged communities, communities underserved by affordable transportation, or overburdened communities."
- After completing its Merit Review, DOT will prioritize projects that demonstrate "exceptional benefits" with respect to "Community Engagement," among other criteria.

Federal Administrator: Federal Highway Administration

Program Name: [Brownfields Program (IIJA)](#)
Federal Agency: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
State and/or Local Agencies: States, localities, Tribes, public housing authorities, Indian housing authorities, 501c(3) nonprofits
Community Engagement Expectations: Program materials state that—

- Applicants to the [Job Training Program](#) must include discussion of planned community engagement in project narrative.
- Applications for [Multipurpose Grants](#) will be evaluated with an eye to "strong community engagement." These grants are available for brownfields projects identified in partnership with communities and for additional community engagement and planning to implement these projects. Applicants are also required to discuss "how the community has been involved/engaged in…efforts to address the brownfield sites" and to identify specific community groups that will be involved in "performance" of the project, including names, points of contact and specific roles.
- In addition, applicants to the Multipurpose Grant Program must discuss how they "plan to communicate project progress to the local community, the local organizations/entities/groups that will be involved in the project, and residents/groups" that are close to the target area. This includes "the frequency and…method(s)" to be used and "how input will be solicited, considered, and responded to."

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- Applicants to the [Revolving Loan Fund](#), the [Assessment Coalition Grants](#) and [Clean Up Grants](#) are subject to provisions that are largely the same as those applicable to the Multipurpose Grants.

Federal Administrator Contact: [EPA Regional Brownfield Program Contacts](#)

Program Name: [Pilot Program for Transit Oriented Development (IIJA)](#)
Federal Agency: Federal Transit Administration (FTA)
State and/or Local Agencies: States, localities
Community Engagement Expectations: [Program materials](#) state that—
- An applicant must address "the historic displacement of historically disadvantaged populations and how it seeks to mitigate the displacement or improve the conditions for populations at risk of displacement, if possible."
- Applications must also outline how the work will "include community engagement, especially [of] those that have been historically excluded."
- When reviewing applications, FTA will assess the "Extent of Partnerships," including how community stakeholders will "engage and consider the needs of those traditionally underserved by existing transportation systems, such as low-income and minority households, who may face challenges accessing employment and other services."

Federal Administrator Contact: Office of Planning and Environment

Program Name: [Strengthening Mobility and Revolutionizing Transportation (SMART) Grants (IIJA)](#)
Federal Agency: U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)
State and/or Local Agencies: States, Tribes, metropolitan planning organizations, public transit agencies and authorities, public toll authorities
Community Engagement Expectations: [Program materials](#)state that—
- DOT will assess the extent to which an applicant's "proposed solution demonstrates a community-centered approach that includes meaningful, continuous, accessible engagement with a diverse group of public and private stakeholders." In addition, DOT will assess the degree to which "the proposed solution articulates strategies to provide access to persons with disabilities and limited English proficient individuals."

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- DOT will also assess whether "the application shows plans to build sustainable partnerships across sectors and governmental jurisdictions and collaborate with industry, academia, and nonprofits, such as community, workforce development, and labor organizations."
- Those applicants that are selected to receive Stage 1 grants must submit Implementation Reports that speak to "distribution of benefits and negative impacts across the community, including Historically Disadvantaged Communities [and] meaningful community engagement efforts, including strategies to provide access to persons with disabilities and limited English proficient individuals."

Federal Administrator Contact: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Research and Technology

Program Name: [Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant Program (IIJA)](#)
Federal Agency: U.S. Department of Energy (DOE)
State and/or Local Agencies: States, localities, Tribes
Community Engagement Expectations: [Program materials](#) state that—
- Projects funded under this program "should include stakeholder engagement plans or reference past engagement, in order to ensure work completed under this grant aligns with the most pressing needs of community members."
- Applicants are required to submit a Concept Paper that discusses how they will "engage the community, labor, and other stakeholders, including community-based organizations, utilities, foundations, or private companies, and labor unions." Applicants must also describe which project elements will be "co-created with community members or partners."
- In addition, applicant Concept Papers must describe how the applicant's proposed work would "provide direct benefits to community members and how it contributes [or] will contribute to the Justice40 Initiative goal that 40% of the benefits of certain Federal investments flow to communities including disadvantaged communities."
- The Full Application must include a "Community Benefits Plan: Job Quality and Equity" that must describe "the applicant's actions to date and future plans to engage with stakeholders, such as labor unions, academic institutions, foundations, states, other local or Tribal governments, and community-based

- organizations that support or work with underserved communities, including Disadvantaged Communities as defined for purposes of the Justice40 Initiative."
- These provisions are reflected in the criteria for application review.

Federal Administrator Contact: Office of State and Community Energy Programs

Program Name: Home Energy Rebate Programs (IRA)
Federal Agency: U.S. Department of Energy (DOE)
State and/or Local Agencies: States
Community Engagement Expectations: Program materials state that—
- DOE recommends states apply early administrative funds available under this program to engagement of "relevant stakeholders such as local government, community-based organizations, utilities, green banks, program implementers and existing state/federal programs to consider how and when braiding or other co-delivery of resources would be most effective."

Federal Administrator Contact: Office of State and Community Energy Programs

Program Name: Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Program (IIJA)
Federal Agency: U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)
State and/or Local Agencies: Eligible applicants vary by sub-program
- **For RCP-Community Planning Grants:** States, localities, Tribes, metropolitan planning organizations and nonprofits
- **For RCP - Capital Construction Grants:** Owners of eligible facilities proposed in projects, partnerships between facility owners and Community Planning Grant applicants
- **For NAE – Community Planning,** Capital Construction, and Regional, Partnerships Challenge Grants: States, territories, localities, Tribes, special purpose districts, public authorities, metropolitan planning organizations, nonprofits

Community Engagement Expectations: Program materials state that—
- Community Planning Grants may be used to cover the costs of public engagement activities, including community visioning or other place-based strategies for public input into project plans.

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- Applicants for all three sub-programs are expected to demonstrate "how meaningful public engagement will occur throughout a project's life cycle."
- DOT will rate proposals with an eye to how well they address—
  - Meaningful engagement of community members in planning, design, construction, operations, and related land use decisions as reflected in a Community Participation Plan. DOT will assess the extent to which the Plan engages "hard to-access community members and those most impacted by the existing facility through culturally appropriate and innovative practices that promote trust." The Plan is also expected to establish goals and measures for effectiveness."
  - DOT will also look to "formal partnerships, substantiated through signed commitment letters and budget" with partners such as "community-based organizations, anchor institutions, community development financial institutions, philanthropic and civic organizations."
  - DOT will also consider whether these Plans include a body such as a "representative community advisory group, advisory board, or other place-based management organization to oversee community-developed priorities and initiatives, including the use of a community land trust, community benefits agreement, or other community development activities to redress transportation-related disparities."
  - Capital Construction Grant applications and Regional Partnerships Challenge Grant applications with construction activities that have not sufficiently considered equity, community engagement, and safeguards to retain affordability for existing residents and businesses in project corridors and surrounding communities, as determined by DOT, must do so before receiving funds for construction.

Federal Administrator Contact: Office of the Secretary of Transportation

End Notes

1. Justice40 refers to the Biden administration's goal that 40 percent of the overall benefits of certain federal investments flow to disadvantaged communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution. See The White House, "Justice40: A Whole of Government Initiative," available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/environmentaljustice/justice40/.

2. See Emerald Cities Collaborative, "About Us," available at https://emeraldcities.org/about-us/.

3. See People's Climate Innovation Center, "Who We Are," available at https://www.climateinnovation.net/.

4. The term partner is meant to capture organizations that are not themselves frontline groups but provide a range of support for the work of organizations that are grounded in community.

5. See SEACA, "Our Mission," available at https://www.seaca-la.org/about-us/.

6. For more information, see the LA River Master Plan available at https://larivermasterplan.org/.

7. See Metropolitan Planning Council, "Our Work," available at https://www.metroplanning.org/work/index.html.

8. A metropolitan planning organization (MPO) is the policy board of an organization created and designated to carry out the metropolitan transportation planning process required by the Federal Transportation Administration. MPOs are required to represent localities in all urbanized areas with populations over 50,000, as determined by the U.S. Census. MPOs are set by agreement between the governor of a state and local governments. To learn more, visit https://www.transit.dot.gov/regulations-and-guidance/transportation-planning/metropolitan-planning-organization-mpo.

9. To explore this database, visit https://metroplanning.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=4cd4767b0fb344efaedcff1c50e0a402. MPC also conducted an analysis of which municipalities in the region have active transportation and transit-oriented development (TOD) plans and thus have a head start on writing grants. To view this database, visit https://metroplanning.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=66b0df7825614775b2d785841f83b503.

10. See Metropolitan Planning Council, "Transportation: Rethinking Investment Policies, Planning for the Region's Future," available at https://www.metroplanning.org/work/project/40; IL Department of Transportation, "Data Driven Decisions for Capacity Projects," available at https://idot.illinois.gov/data-driven-decisions.html.

11. See Social Justice Learning Institute, "Our Mission," available at https://sjli.org/who-we-are/#core-values.

12. See Inglewood Public Schools, "Inglewood Unified Receives First $10 Million Installment of $30 Million in School Improvement Funds from Los Angeles World Airports," available at https://www.inglewoodusd.com/apps/news/article/1137083.

13. See Measure J Re-Imagine LA Advisory Committee, "Spending Plan Recommendations for Year 1" at 4-5 available at https://ceo.lacounty.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/MeasureJ_YearOneSpendPlan-1.pdf.

End Notes

14. See id.
15. See L.A. County, "Transformative $187.7 Million "Care First Community Investment Spending Plan Invests in Equity and Community" available at https://ceo.lacounty.gov/2021/08/10/ati-newsroom/care-first-community-investment-spending-plan-invests-in-equity-and-community/.
16. See id.
17. See Los Angeles Unified School District, "Black Student Achievement Plan," available at https://achieve.lausd.net/bsa.
18. See BARHII, "Our Members" available at https://www.barhii.org/member-health-departments.
19. See BARHI, "Powering the Movement for Health Equity," available at https://barhii.org/.
20. See County of Sonoma, Office of Equity, "https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/administrative-support-and-fiscal-services/office-of-equity#:~:text=On%20Tuesday%2C%20the%20Sonoma%20County,outcomes%20for%20communities%20of%20color.
21. See County of Sonoma, Notice of Funding Availability, American Rescue Plan Act (Feb. 24, 2022) available at https://upstreaminvestments.org/Microsites/Upstream%20Investments/Documents/ARPA/ARPA%20Notice%20of%20Funding%20Availability%20%281%29.pdf
22. See County of Sonoma, "ARPA NOFA Application Process," https://upstreaminvestments.org/impact-make-a-change/arpa-community-resilience-programs; https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/initial-arpa-allocations-for-county-and-community; https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/Main%20County%20Site/Administrative%20Support%20%26%20Fiscal%20Services/CAO/Documents/Projects/Arpa%20Reporting/FINAL-SoCo-June-30-2022-Recovery-Plan-Performance-Report.pdf
23. See Section III(B) above.
24. See U.S. DOT, "Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program," available at https://www.transportation.gov/grants/reconnecting-communities.
25. See Metropolitan Planning Council, "Reconnecting Communities: Mitigating Community Harms of Transportation Infrastructure" (2023) at 2 available at https://www.metroplanning.org/uploads/cms/documents/reconnecting_communities_ada_compliant_updated_march_2023.pdf.
26. See id. at 29.
27. See id. at 44.
28. See Elevated Chicago, "About Us," available at https://elevatedchicago.org/about-us/.
29. NERA is based at BARHII. Zavala also participated in the conversation with Melissa Jones, discussed below.
30. See Chicago Department of Housing, "Chicago Recovery Plan" available at https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/chicago-recovery-plan/home.html.
31. See Center for Transforming Communities, "About Us" available at https://www.ctcmidsouth.org/.

End Notes

32. See City of Memphis, Division of Housing and Community Development, "Community Coalition Grant Pilot Program," available at https://www.memphistn.gov/government/housing-and-community-development/funding-opportunities/community-coalition-grant-pilot-program/.
33. See Georgia STAND-UP, "About" available at https://www.georgiastandup.org/about.
34. See Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, "About CMAP" available at https://www.cmap.illinois.gov/about.