



Streets for Pandemic Response & Recovery

GRANT PROGRAM

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the staff in the ten grantee cities for your dedication to completing bold projects in just three months, and for being teachers and learners with your peers in that time.

Thank you to the embedded partners who have been working tirelessly to support your communities long before the pandemic arrived and have adapted quickly to this year's extreme challenges.

Thank you to transportation justice experts Tamika L. Butler and Naomi Iwasaki, who contributed invaluable thought leadership and support to NACTO staff and the grantees throughout this project.

And thank you to Bloomberg Philanthropies for your generous funding to make this initiative possible.

About NACTO

NACTO is an association of 87 major North American cities and transit agencies formed to exchange transportation ideas, insights, and practices and cooperatively approach national transportation issues.

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Foreword

With a mind-numbing 15 million cases of COVID-19 and almost 300,000 deaths in the United States, the last nine months of 2020 have posed questions that none of us who work in transportation could have contemplated in 2019. How can transportation be part of the national response to the pandemic and support the recovery? How can we create space for people in cities to be outside safely without at the same time encouraging unsafe gatherings? How can we keep our transportation systems running and people moving without jeopardizing the health and safety of the transit crews and bus and train operators who make that movement possible? Most importantly, how can we seize the moment to create new transportation possibilities and avoid reverting to the danger, inefficiency and inequity of the past?

Over the last 100 years, we have turned our streets over to cars and turned our backs on walking, biking, and the vibrant street life that were present in our cities at the turn of the 20th century. The result was painfully predictable: Cities built for cars became congested, polluted, and resulted in millions of fatal and serious car crashes that still claim the lives of more than 36,000 people a year. When I served as the Commissioner of Transportation in New York City from 2007-2013, it was already clear that the status quo was no longer—and never was—something to be maintained. It was something to be dismantled. Designing streets that worked for people required radical imagination and a willingness to upend entrenched ways of doing business. The answer wasn't in wishing away car-dominated streets; it required systematically reallocating street space from cars for bike lanes, pedestrian space and bus lanes.

It is no surprise that this same strategy of radical reclamation has been the strategy of first resort for cities during the coronavirus outbreak. Faced with health and economic crises, cities everywhere immediately reimagined the public right-of-way. The first wave brought bike lanes, expanded sidewalks, and streets opened for people to walk and roll. The next wave saw cities across the world turning their streets into COVID-19 testing sites, outdoor classrooms, and open-air marketplaces. Streets are enabling protests, outdoor voting, and civic engagement.

The 10 grant recipients recognized in these pages have met this moment with new strategies, reimagined their streets, and let community voices drive decisions. Their stories provide lessons for all cities as we work together to build a future that is truly sustainable, equitable, and inclusive for all.



Janette Sadik-Khan

Principal, Bloomberg Associates; NACTO Chair

Background

At the beginning of 2020, COVID-19 began spreading to nearly every corner of the planet. As of the writing of this report, COVID-19 has infected more than 67 million people and taken the lives of 1.55 million people worldwide. The United States has recorded 15 million cases and 284,000 deaths, and in April recorded a 14.7% unemployment rate, the highest the country has seen since the Great Depression.

As schools, offices, and entire sectors of the economy closed their doors, cities took immediate action to respond to the crisis. Within days of the first known US infections, transit agencies began rigorously disinfecting high touch surfaces in stations and on transit vehicles, and by a few weeks later, many of the same agencies suspended fare payment to protect passengers and drivers. With traffic volumes dropping to record lows, cities closed motor vehicle lanes—and entire streets—to allow residents to walk, bike, roll, and queue safely and distantly.

NACTO shifted gears along with our member cities and agencies. Over two months, our staff built a COVID-19 Transportation Response Center to serve as a clearinghouse of emerging response practices, hosted webinars, and conducted audio interviews to share insights from cities all over the world. By then, many cities were exercising their authority over the right-of-way by creating spaces for open-air shopping and dining to support local businesses, calming traffic to mitigate high speeds on empty streets, and enabling physically distant activities like biking, walking, and learning.

On May 25, George Floyd, a Black man, was killed by a white police officer in Minneapolis after allegedly using a counterfeit \$20 bill to buy cigarettes. Witness videos captured the police officer kneeling on George Floyd's neck for an agonizing eight minutes and 46 seconds, while three other officers stood by and watched. Over night, city streets became places for protest. They became places for collective grieving, anger, and outcry.

George Floyd's murder came at a moment when the disparity between white people and people of color in the US—especially Black people—had been laid painfully bare. Across the country, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous COVID-19 cases and deaths far exceed those communities' share of the population. Meanwhile, the growth in the unemployment rate among Black Americans during the pandemic has outpaced the unemployment rate growth among white Americans, resulting in the largest unemployment rate disparity between the two populations in five years.

The pandemic threw fuel on an already-roaring fire of policy-induced inequity across the US. Historically, the planning profession has excluded people of color—especially Black and Indigenous people—from decision-making about the communities where they live, learn, work, and play. Whether through intentional racial hostility, institutional neglect, or both, generations of planning and policy decisions damaged the well-being of Black and Brown communities across the US—before the pandemic ever hit. COVID-19 exposed and amplified existing fault lines; it took advantage of policy decisions and took a devastating toll on historically disenfranchised communities across the country.

About This Project

In April, NACTO began to translate the lessons learned from our member-sourced Transportation Response Center into a rapid implementation playbook for cities to respond quickly and equitably to the COVID-19 pandemic. The resulting resource, *Streets for Pandemic Response and Recovery*, mapped out a series of key design principles that cities could use as a model to inform ongoing COVID-19 response strategies:

- Support the most vulnerable people first;
- Amplify and support public health guidance;
- Create safer streets for today and tomorrow;
- Support workers and local economies;
- Partner with community-based organizations; and
- Act now and adapt over time.

By June, as the demand for rapid response projects grew and city budgets shrank, NACTO launched a competitive grant opportunity to ten cities working to put the *Streets for Pandemic Response and Recovery* principles into action. We sought applications from city transportation agencies that, in partnership with community-based organizations, were reimagining streets, implementing ideas, and supporting ongoing community efforts that met the needs of populations disproportionately harmed by COVID-19.

Core to this program was the understanding that community partners play a critical role envisioning and implementing smart, equitable public projects and services. By working together, city agencies and community-based organizations are well poised to navigate the tension between the speed required for emergency pandemic response, and the thoughtfulness required to ensure that rapid project delivery doesn't further perpetuate inequity or harm communities most in need of support.

NACTO ultimately selected ten projects that embodied this spirit and responded to a clear need in a community disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Taken together, these projects have created space for learning and play, brought information about city programs and COVID-19 to the streets, provided opportunities to listen to the community, and enabled a shift in thinking about what issues people face in this moment—and how cities can wield their power to help identify and address them.



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Alexandria

Bridging the Digital Divide in Arlandria's Public Space



Top: Casa Family Programs Director Liz Wang keeps dry under the newly-installed canopy during a desk donation event (*Casa Chirilagua*). Bottom: A student works at a desk under the canopy. Casa will continue to use the space under the canopy for community programming (*Casa Chirilagua*).

Alexandria

Bridging the Digital Divide in Arlandria's Public Space

Partner: [Casa Chirilagua \(Casa\)](#)

When schools closed in the Spring and shifted to virtual learning, the City of Alexandria identified that 15% of Alexandria City Public School students did not have internet access in their homes. This problem was particularly stark in Arlandria, a predominantly Latinx community. Alongside community partner [Casa Chirilagua \(Casa\)](#), the City of Alexandria sought to build a WiFi-connected outdoor space for students to study adjacent to Casa's building. As a neighborhood organization that provides family support services, after-school tutoring, language programs, and computer literacy classes, Casa will utilize this new public space for safe outdoor programming.

Outcomes

Installed public space with wifi, shade, and seating.



Notable Strategies

Use data to identify a need. To understand gaps in students' access to at-home internet early in the pandemic, Alexandria staff created an internet access heat map. The map clearly identified that Arlandria had significantly less at-home internet access than most other Alexandria neighborhoods. These findings helped guide staff to work with embedded partner Casa, which in turn had a clear sense of community needs.

Narrow the project scope. Alexandria city staff kicked off project discussions with broad ideas. They narrowed the scope through internal conversations and collaboration with Casa, landing on a clear project with specific goals: create an outdoor community space with WiFi, shade, and seating.

Create a foundation of partnerships. Alexandria's pre-existing relationship with Casa was key to the success of the project. When the grant opportunity arose, and city staff decided to support internet connectivity, it was relatively straightforward to connect with a partner they already knew and had worked with, and to refine the project scope with Casa staff.

Atlanta

Pop-up Information and Public Health Resources Sharing



Top: CORE conducts COVID-19 tests at a pop-up site in a closed lane in Atlanta's Oakland City neighborhood. Bottom: Young people ride bikes on a shared street in Atlanta's Oakland City neighborhood. (Cary Bearn and Betty Smoot-Madison, Atlanta DOT)

Atlanta

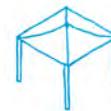
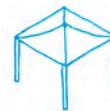
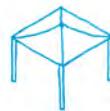
Pop-up Information and Public Health Resources Sharing

Partners: Georgia STAND-UP, TransFormation Alliance

In response to community demand for outdoor civic space and services, the Atlanta Department of Transportation (ATLDOT) partnered with [Georgia STAND-UP](#) and [TransFormation Alliance](#) to create three pop-up information hubs on city streets. The pop-up shared streets and lane closures in Sylvan Hills, Oakland City, and West End provided space for Georgia STAND-UP and TransFormation Alliance to do voter registration, COVID-19 testing by CORE, and food distribution, and created an opportunity for ATLDOT to connect with community members about the city's new Vision Zero program. All sites were set to be open for one-to-two weeks, but one site was so well-received that it will remain in place for 60 days.

Outcomes

3 pop-up sites



90 people registered to vote

201 people tested for COVID-19

70+ people had conversations with ATLDOT about the city's new VZ program

600 bags of food distributed

Notable Strategies

Take time to align goals. ATLDOT, a new city agency, worked on this initiative with two partners that were previously not well known to city staff, but deeply connected with many communities and community members. With disparate missions, it took time for city staff to align their goals with their partners' goals for the shared streets and lane closures. On rapid response projects, it can be challenging (or impossible) to invest time into redesigning more standard efforts to better align. However, the more coordination that is possible, the more a project feels cohesive and supported by everyone involved.

Give partners visibility. As embedded community organizations, Georgia STAND-UP and TransFormation Alliance lent critical comfort and credibility to the pop-up public spaces. The Community Organized Relief Effort (CORE), which administered COVID-19 tests at the pop-up sites, told ATLDOT staff that having those partners at the sites made the streets feel safer and more community-oriented than they would have otherwise felt.

Engage more stakeholders than just the formal partners. Even with pop-ups and rapid response projects, it is critical that community members and leaders, elected officials, and other key stakeholders have a clear understanding of the project, its goals, and its timeline to avoid miscommunication.

Denver

Patio Expansion Initiative for COVID (PEIC)

Partners: Denver Streets Partnership, BuCu West, Federal Boulevard BID, The Fax Partnership

After initiating a program allowing restaurants to extend outdoor seating into the public right of way, staff at Denver's Department of Transportation and Infrastructure (DOTI) found that few businesses in the department's defined equity areas had applied. In partnership with several advocates, Business Improvement Districts, and Development Associations, DOTI staff have focused their efforts on providing technical assistance and materials to support four businesses in Westwood and East Colfax to enhance or expand outdoor patios, while also documenting community assets, barriers, and potential solutions to inform future projects.



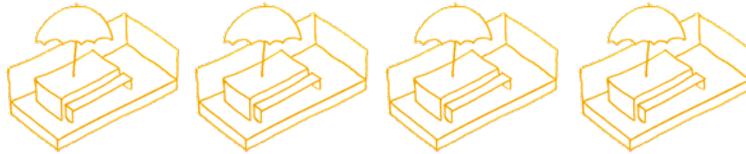
Amid a rush for outdoor furniture during the pandemic, DOTI staff and partners helped businesses procure furniture like picnic tables to use in enhanced or expanded patio spaces. *(Denver Department of Transportation & Infrastructure)*

Denver

Patio Expansion Initiative for COVID (PEIC)

Outcomes

4 patio expansions built



These four businesses will serve as a local model in their own neighborhoods, in turn encouraging more business owners to consider these permits as both a realistic and culturally relevant tool for success. With this experience as a baseline, City of Denver staff are allocating an additional \$435,000 of CARES funding to reimburse businesses for expenses related to outdoor dining, relying on the city-community partner model, and prioritizing funding and technical assistance to businesses in neighborhoods that have been hardest hit by COVID-19.

Notable Strategies

Evaluate and document lessons learned. To build impact beyond just this grant, DOTI staff and partners directed time and resources to document barriers and potential solutions. DOTI developed a guidebook where businesses can easily find information on obtaining patio expansion permits through the winter, next year, and beyond. Staff also developed an internal report documenting equity considerations and recommendations on how to make the patio permitting process more equitable and easier for businesses in future projects, programs, and funding decisions across the department.

Rely on community expertise and cross-sector partnerships. Many city agencies have a narrowly defined area of expertise, but a complex program like this one involved up to a dozen various agencies and community partners at any given time. When coupled with budget cuts, hiring freezes, and other city processes that can be challenging to navigate, having a wide range of partners and collaborators isn't just helpful, it's critical for the success of the project. DOTI staff leaned into this dynamic, working collaboratively to define the overall strategy and funding parameters for the initiative early on, and then allowing community partners on-the-ground to connect with local businesses and move the strategy forward on their own based on actual needs and reasonable timelines for each small business owner.

Detroit

Streets for People, Streets for Learning



Top: Volunteers make local artist Joey Solomon's mural come to life on 3rd Ave. & Hazelwood St. in Detroit's North End. Bottom: Young people paint a street mural designed by Phil Patrick on Mullane St. & Homer St. and in Detroit's Southwest neighborhood. (Chisara Brown, Detroit Department of Public Works)

Detroit

Streets for People, Streets for Learning

Partners: Urban Neighborhood Initiatives (UNI), Brilliant Detroit

Experiencing an early spike of COVID-19 cases, the City of Detroit has been hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic. With students across the city attending school online, the City of Detroit partnered with two community-based organizations to temporarily close streets and create outdoor hubs for young people near schools and parks in four neighborhoods: Southwest, Cody Rouge, East (Osborne), and the North End. The embedded community partners—[Urban Neighborhood Initiatives](#) and [Brilliant Detroit](#)—are programming their own spaces tailored to the needs of the specific community where they are based, with an emphasis on space for learning, childcare, enrichment activities, and art.

Outcomes

4 streets closed for learning & play



Notable Strategies

Divide and conquer. Detroit Public Works staff made an early and conscious decision not to micromanage their partners' plans and programming efforts. This decision enabled the partners to program the streets in direct accordance with community needs, and freed up city staff to manage the interagency coordination and city processes that they are best positioned to navigate.

Build on existing programs. Rather than creating entirely new programs with new materials, Brilliant Detroit and Urban Initiatives worked with the City of Detroit to support their existing programs in a new setting. This framing allowed the partners to stretch the funding further and support more community members.

Anticipate the unpredictable. As summer turned to fall, the weather in Detroit became increasingly unpredictable, creating delays and setbacks. Building flexibility into plans and timelines can ease stress for city staff and partners, and ultimately results in better, longer-lasting projects.

Durham

Calles Compartidas / Shared Streets



Top: SpiritHouse Program Manager Aidil Ortiz gathers input from residents on Alma St. about what they want to see on their Shared Streets (*City of Durham Department of Transportation*). Bottom: Volunteers paint a mural designed by local artist Candy Carver in a resident-requested traffic circle on Spruce St. (*Bryan Miller*).

Durham

Calles Compartidas / Shared Streets

Partner: SpiritHouse

When Durham's Stay-at-Home order went into effect and advocates called for outdoor public recreation space, the City turned to their Equitable Engagement Blueprint to guide their efforts to create Shared Streets / Calles Compartidas. Community partner [SpiritHouse](#) collaborated with city staff to engage residents of East Durham, asking residents to describe what makes a Shared Street feel safe and inclusive to them. Based on input from the community, the five Shared Streets / Calles Compartidas incorporate art, culture, recreational equipment, and signage, and provide a safe environment for residents to walk, bike, and roll.

Outcomes

5 shared streets implemented



9 traffic safety improvements installed

60+ community volunteers involved in planning, design, and implementation

\$8,000 in economic activity sparked among local non-profits, Black-led businesses, and street champions

Notable Strategies

Keep an open mind. The City of Durham and their partner SpiritHouse set out to understand what residents wanted from open streets. They found that for most residents, traffic safety was a much more pressing concern than space for safe recreating. Based directly on resident input, the Shared Streets installations included previously unplanned traffic calming elements such as traffic circles and curb cuts to manage speeds.

Create a foundation of partnerships. The City of Durham has a long-standing relationship with SpiritHouse. When the grant opportunity arose, City staff were able to work quickly with SpiritHouse to plan engagement events and translate resident feedback into street designs. SpiritHouse staff were instrumental in determining which streets to focus on, finding an artist to create designs for asphalt art, and working directly with residents to plan and implement the shared street designs.

Long Beach

Mom and Pop Parklet Program



Top: Leo's Mexican Grill transformed angled parking stalls to create an extra-wide parklet in the Willmore neighborhood. Below: Pupuseria El Kiosco in North Long Beach utilized their corner location on a high-speed arterial to implement a parklet on the lower volume side street. (*City of Long Beach*)

Long Beach

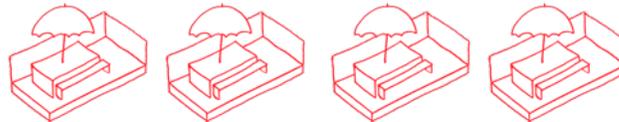
Mom and Pop Parklet Program

Partner: The Long Beach Conservation Corps

As California restricted indoor dining amid rising COVID-19 cases, the City of Long Beach rolled out a free parklet program to help restaurants remain afloat. But Long Beach staff found that most of the businesses taking advantage of the program were concentrated in affluent neighborhoods and areas with established Business Improvement Districts. In partnership with a local chapter of the [California Conservation Corps](#), City staff set out to conduct door-to-door and telephone outreach with businesses in four historically underserved communities. The outreach uncovered previously unknown hurdles for restaurants, and ultimately helped City staff reimagine their work with and support for these businesses.

Outcomes

4 parklets implemented in four high-need communities



>30 cold calls and in-person site visits

>250 door hangers in four languages distributed

Notable Strategies

Foster two-way communication. Long Beach staff initially focused their outreach on creating translated materials that business owners could look at on their own time. Finding that the effort drummed up little additional interest from businesses, city staff turned to cold-calls, learning much more about existing barriers to creating parklets.

Question assumptions. Long Beach staff approached this project assuming that businesses were unaware that the city would set up their parklets for free. Conversations revealed that concerns about things like liability and petty crime were a much more significant barrier for business owners than cost.

Support collective action. Businesses in lower income neighborhoods are less likely to be part of BIDs, which in well-resourced neighborhoods have played a critical advocacy and coordination role. Long Beach staff are now considering ways to support collective action among businesses in districts without BIDs.

Minneapolis

2020 Mobility Hub Pilot



Top: The Mobility Hub at 3rd St. & 12th St. is a gateway between the Stevens Square neighborhood and downtown Minneapolis. Bottom: Ambassador Partner Marc Woods distributes water and masks to people passing by. (*Minneapolis Department of Public Works*)

Minneapolis

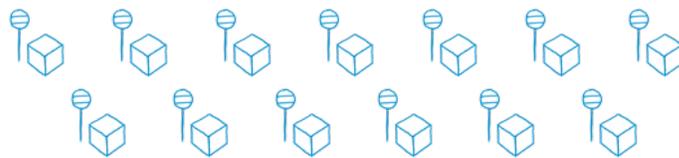
2020 Mobility Hub Pilot

Partners: West Bank Business Association, Marc Woods, Alexis Pennie, St. Anthony East Neighborhood Association, Native American Community Development Institute

The Mobility Hubs Pilot Program, which began with 12 pilot sites in 2019, originated with two core goals: provide a hub for transportation infrastructure; and create social spaces for community building. In 2020, staff at the Public Works Department expanded the vision to respond to evolving community needs in light of the pandemic and a summer of protests. The project team selected five community-embedded partners to identify community needs and create programming at the Mobility Hub sites to directly respond to those needs in neighborhoods disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and protests.

Outcomes

13 mobility hubs installed in 2020



5 community partners

3 intersections with safety improvements

Notable Strategies

Create a feedback loop. The community organizations that were a critical component of the 2020 Mobility Hub pilot enabled residents to provide feedback directly to embedded partners who in turn had an open line of communication with the project team. These staff were well positioned to adapt the project based on feedback. This cycle disrupts a historic pattern of top-down decision-making that is harmful to communities. In Minneapolis, the result of creating a feedback loop with room for iteration has been projects that better suit community needs and have more local support.

Start by building trust and aligning goals. Partnerships are best formed around shared goals and priorities. Using a short, flexible, and vision-driven application process to identify partners enabled city staff to easily see when a person or organization was a good fit. Co-creating the project details established mutual trust between city staff and selected partners. With implementation underway, this foundation enabled the city-partner relationship to thrive, especially in the face of 2020's many unexpected hurdles.

Minneapolis

West Bank Business Association

Marc Woods

Mobility Hub Partners piloted an Ambassador Program to test a community-based approach for fostering safety at mobility hubs, caring for the street furniture, and organizing a youth service-learning program.

Alexis Pennie

St. Anthony East Neighborhood Association

Engagement Partners engaged directly with community members who were using the space and who lived nearby about their transportation needs.

Native American Community Development Institute

The **Neighborhood Resilience Response Partner** connected with people at a mobility hub to conduct Census education and provide resources for safe voting.



“Trust within the community is a step towards unity. It’s helping the community and me with my future, being able to run things like this on my own.”

- Marc Woods, Mobility Hub Ambassador

Partnership Approaches

Build partnerships early. Working with the Musicant Group, Minneapolis created a competitive application process to select five community organizations as ambassadors and engagement partners for the 2020 Mobility Hubs. City processes can make identifying and setting up contracts with these organizations time-consuming and unpredictable. Laying the groundwork to solidify partnerships before being awarded the grant enabled the project team to quickly enter partnerships and build 25 Mobility Hub locations within a 3-month timeline.

Cultivate existing momentum. Much of the ambassador and engagement work that city staff envisioned for the Mobility Hubs was already occurring informally in the community. The formal partnership program aligned existing community wants and actions, and enabled partners to expand their work by compensating them for their time, attention, relationships, and insights.

New York City

RISE for the Rockaways: A Rapid Response for an Equitable Recovery



Top: RISE utilized the transformed space under the elevated A train to set up an El-Box (black shipping container), and held a blueberry bush giveaway for local residents (RISE).
Bottom: Volunteers painted a street mural on “The Rockaway Wellness Way” to create a sense of place (Giles Ashford).

New York City

RISE for the Rockaways: A Rapid Response for an Equitable Recovery

Partner: Rockaway Initiative for Sustainability & Equity (RISE)

In Far Rockaway, Queens, which has the second-highest Coronavirus death rate in New York City, the COVID-19 outbreak arrived less than a decade after Hurricane Sandy ravaged the coastal neighborhood in 2012. Expanding upon previous projects to transform underutilized space under elevated transportation infrastructure across the city, the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT) partnered with the [Rockaway Initiative for Sustainability and Equity \(RISE\)](#) to create “The Rockaway Wellness Way” under the elevated A train. The revitalized space improves connectivity to the adjacent train station, includes a street mural for placemaking, and has enabled RISE to facilitate COVID-19 testing, information distribution, and food giveaways for local residents.

Outcomes

The Rockaway Wellness Way, which provides space for food distribution, outdoor COVID-19 testing, and information exchange



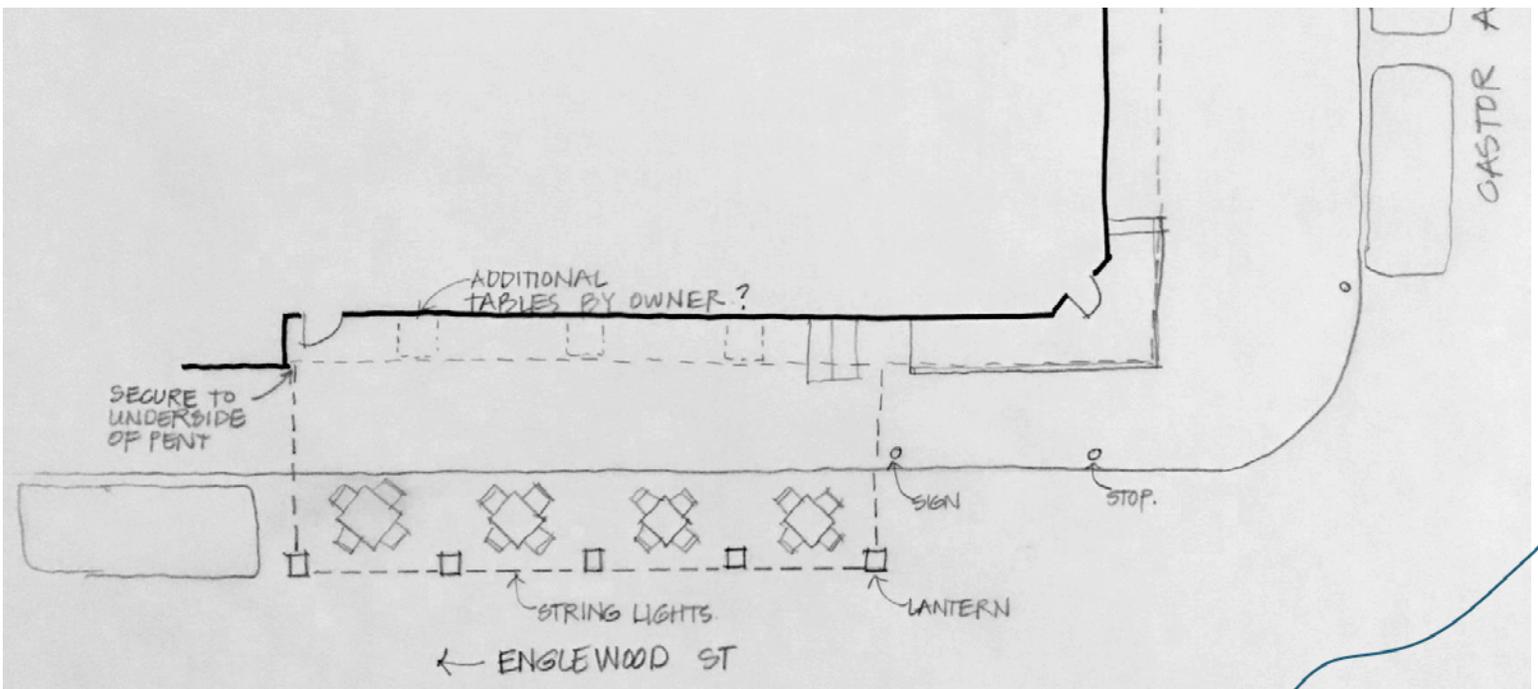
Notable Strategies

Create a sense of place. With the spread of COVID-19 still very much a concern, project staff were wary of activating the space for community members while ensuring social distancing protocols. But adding a street mural and multiple spaces for people to sit comfortably, and branding the space “The Rockaway Wellness Way” helped foster a sense of place and community where RISE could program COVID-19 testing, food distribution, and provide other information for local residents.

Be prepared, but flexible. NYCDOT has worked with many partner organizations to implement projects in recent years. Project staff were prepared for the high level of back-end interagency coordination required to make “The Rockaway Wellness Way” a success, and erred on the side of bringing more rather than fewer third parties into the planning process. This preparation also enabled project staff to shift plans based on collaboration with RISE, incorporating art, design, and other unanticipated programming into the site.

Philadelphia

Addressing Inequity in Philadelphia's COVID-19 Outdoor Dining Program



Top: Olympia House Seafood on Englewood St. is working with local partners to create an outdoor dining setup (*Lily Reynolds, oTIS*). Bottom: The Community Design Collaborative proposed a scheme for outdoor dining in the roadbed on Englewood St. (*Community Design Collaborative*).

Philadelphia

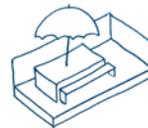
Addressing Inequity in Philadelphia's COVID-19 Outdoor Dining Program

Partner: Oxford Circle Christian Community Development Association (OCCDA), Community Design Collaborative

After initiating a COVID-19 Outdoor Dining Program to support restaurants, the City of Philadelphia recognized that restaurants in neighborhoods with predominantly non-white residential populations made up just 12% of approved permits, despite constituting roughly 62% of all active food preparation licenses in Philadelphia. The City held listening sessions and engagement events about barriers related to outdoor dining, and partnered with [OCCDA](#) to work directly with businesses. [Community Design Collaborative](#) provided design concepts for the restaurants, including furniture options and perimeter treatments. Since forming these partnerships, Philadelphia has registered 3 new businesses to permit outdoor dining, and OCCDA has purchased materials for each restaurant's outdoor dining area.

Outcomes

3 outdoor dining installations



Notable Strategies

Pivot if needed. Midway through the project, Philadelphia staff held a listening session with community based organizations that work closest with businesses about barriers they were experiencing with outdoor dining. One significant outcome of this session was learning that many restaurants needed outdoor furniture in order to expand their COVID-19 offerings beyond take-out. The City pivoted to furniture and light-weight barriers for side-walk level dining, rather than crash-tested jersey barriers for street-level dining. OCCDA and the Community Design Collaborative worked directly with local businesses on Castor Avenue to create a custom concept specified to each restaurant.

Work with an interdisciplinary team. Each partner and agency involved in the process had a unique and critical role: OCCDA enabled the city to better understand and respond to local business needs; the Community Design Collaborative supplied a landscape architect to recommend layouts and materials for each restaurant's outdoor dining setup; a local carpenter built the custom barriers and lighting installations; staff in State Representative Solomon's office supported all efforts and provided connections for partners; and city staff from many departments—Streets, Transportation & Infrastructure Systems, Commerce, Community & Economic Development, and Planning—worked together to shepherd the project to completion.

Portland

Black-Centered Spaces for Community and Business in Albina



Top: A sign welcomes patrons to Dream Street Plaza, a space set up to support vendors in Albina, Portland's historically Black neighborhood. Bottom: Local artist Mr. Bobby (red scarf and hat in wheelchair) speaks during an event at Dream Street Plaza. (PBOT)

Portland

Black-Centered Spaces for Community and Business in Albina

Partners: Soul District Business Association, Self Enhancement, Inc., Albina Vision Trust

Early in the pandemic, the Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) developed a Frontline Communities Partnership Program (FCPP) focused on engaging community partners to inform and strengthen PBOT's COVID-19 response. In partnership with the [Soul District Business Association](#), the Portland Bureau of Transportation expanded FCPP to create physically distant spaces for small businesses in Albina, a historically Black community and center of Black arts, small businesses, schools, and faith institutions. Amid a summer of wildfires and protests, the partners worked together to transform a street into a Black-centered public plaza in the heart of Albina. Over a series of weekend events, more than twenty vendors participated selling clothes, food, art, and other handmade goods in a safe, physically distant outdoor market. The plazas incorporated public art by local Black artists and have catalyzed a district-wide public art initiative to be designed by a group of nonprofits with their roots in Albina.

Outcomes

Dream Street Plaza



25+ vendors engaged

5 weekend markets

Notable Strategies

Pay partners upfront. PBOT paid all partners a small upfront flat fee before work began to ensure that the partners had cash on hand to spend time developing scopes of work and kicking off the project.

Be creative and leverage other resources. PBOT was able to use the momentum generated by the NACTO award to leverage additional funding and resources from Portland's Regional Arts and Culture Council, other city bureaus, and area small businesses and nonprofits that wanted to help support the goals of the project. These additional resources will help to expand the scope of this work, and in turn provide an opportunity to continue to build partnerships cultivated through this project.

Be flexible, and jump in where needed. In addition to navigating city processes, PBOT staff also rolled up their sleeves to support local partners with map-making and graphic design, building physical infrastructure, and promoting the space.

Portland

District Identity & Small Business Outreach

John Washington & Fawn Aberson

Soul District Business Association

John & Fawn worked closely with PBOT to convene area nonprofits and advocacy organizations to better understand opportunities for district-wide placemaking and small-business support.

Public Art & Marketplace Programming

Cole Reed

greenHAUS Gallery

Cole worked tirelessly to activate the Dream Street Plaza with vendors, neighborhood advocacy organizations, and create a vital public space where Black Portlanders felt welcome and valued.



Partnership Approaches

Meet each partner where they are. Capacity and funding vary widely from partner to partner, and defining roles and responsibilities can help set expectations. But even laying this groundwork doesn't eliminate all hurdles, so it's critical to remain flexible, be open to working with other partners, and be patient as the project evolves.

Build relationships through deep collaboration. PBOT is committed to being an anti-racist organization. And one of those first steps is to build and repair trust with Black Portlanders, a community that has historically suffered disparate impacts from transportation policies and projects. Through this project, strong relationships were forged through deep listening, leading from behind, and getting deeply involved in all aspects of the project from concept to delivery.

Reflections

At the outset of this project, NACTO sought input and guidance from [Naomi Iwasaki](#) and [Tamika L. Butler](#), leading experts on equity, diversity, and inclusion in the transportation planning field. Naomi and Tamika helped develop the grant application and select grantees. Together, they held multiple one-on-one coaching sessions with each of the grantees throughout the course of the project, providing technical assistance and expertise about community-centered planning and project design. Below are their reflections on the critical work of the grantees and the work still to be done.



TAMIKA L. BUTLER



NAOMI IWASAKI

In a matter of weeks, the COVID-19 pandemic threw lives across the world into chaos. Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color (BIPOC) have been disproportionately devastated by every aspect of the pandemic, including higher infection and death rates, higher rates of unemployment, lower rates of digital access, and greater risk of becoming unhoused.

These outcomes were to be expected in a country built on discrimination, segregation, anti-Blackness, and racism. Public policies like redlining, exclusionary zoning, and highway construction set the stage for devastating racial disparities in economic opportunity, educational access, and community health. Today, practices like urban “renewal,” which can price out long-time community members, intensify existing inequities, while also creating new ones. Transportation leaders—most of whom are white, cisgendered, straight, able-bodied men—often make decisions without incorporating or listening to the perspectives of historically oppressed people who have unique needs, strengths, and priorities. This approach fails to acknowledge the barriers that historical, often intentional, neglect and disinvestment have caused.

Unfortunately, when city transportation agencies fast-tracked solutions to open street space for alternative uses early in the pandemic, they again did so through a lens of whiteness and wealth with those most impacted by the decisions continuing to be excluded from the decision-making process. Take two examples that we’ve seen in cities and towns across the US during the pandemic: first, outdoor dining programs that require a restaurant permit and location on a street that fits the description of many Main Streets, USA; and second, safe / shared / slow streets programs that enable people to walk, bike, and roll in the roadbed.

These dining programs fail to account for all of the ways that BIPOC business owners have been denied access to the resources necessary to be located on a specific type of street and apply for a permit via a government system. The shared streets programs center a wealthy, white relationship with the public realm. Omitting racialized and

marginalized experiences in such a program is particularly glaring in a year where, among others, two Black men were killed while using public space: Ahmaud Arbery while jogging on a street in Georgia, and George Floyd, murdered by a police officer on a street in Minneapolis. These murders on public streets beg a question that many safe / shared / slow streets programs did not consider when launching: safe for whom? Planning work is not neutral. Cities must understand that our work and policies either perpetuate generations of racism and harm, or they proactively seek to redress it.

Incorporating Equity Through Partnership

To truly strive for equitable outcomes, the first step for every project and program must be to ask the community what they want and need, and then listen to *understand* rather than to explain. Community partnerships can enable cities to do this. Embedded grassroots organizations and their members have established trust within their communities, and deeply understand the concerns, joys, and values of marginalized people.

Ideally, partnerships between city agencies and community organizations elevate each other's unique opportunities and skills: embedded partners leverage local expertise to highlight issues and community assets, while agencies offer potential resources via design, services, or information. However, forging these partnerships remains a challenge in cities across the country.

Cities must understand that our work and policies either perpetuate generations of racism and harm, or they proactively seek to redress it.

While each of the grant recipients successfully implemented all or part of the project they set out to do, their experiences collaborating effectively with community partners varied widely. We identified three kinds of partnerships across the ten grant recipients, described below, in order of most to least effective.

Strong Community Partnerships + Strong Interdepartmental Coordination

Partnerships were most effective when trusted relationships between city staff and embedded community organizations were supported by strong interdepartmental coordination and/or the ability of city staffers to leverage their position internally to navigate bureaucratic barriers. This back-end orchestration allowed community partners to lead the vision, set outcomes, and develop a project designed to meet the needs of community members. As a result, the work benefitted intended community members, and built further trust and belief in the idea that community organizations can have a meaningful role in civic engagement. It is worth noting that city staff are too often put in a position to act first and “ask for forgiveness rather than permission” in order to navigate city processes. The need for this tactic reveals a systemic failure of cities to be adaptive and provide services.

Strong Community Partnerships + Weak Interdepartmental Coordination

When city staff had strong relationships with embedded partners, but were hamstrung by governmental processes, we saw frustrated staff who struggled to adequately support their community partners. This tension mostly arose when departments within the city could not agree on goals or processes. In many cases, resistance came from middle-level management with long tenures in their respective departments. Trepidation from these civil servants can derail community-led efforts at key project points (e.g., permitting, maintenance, procurement, etc.). And a lack of clear interagency alignment on project goals can result in issues like: rigid emphasis on funder- or city-driven outcomes rather than community-defined needs; limited city involvement to maintain newly programmed public space; and, ultimately, further deterioration of a community's trust in local government.

Lack of Strong Community Partnerships

Even when data demonstrated a gap or need in a hard-hit neighborhood, cities without grounded community partners who had authentic ties to those communities struggled to connect with residents and businesses and advance projects as intended. A stagnant, bureaucratic civic culture leads to siloed departments that cannot or will not coordinate with each other. Unfortunately this practice can also translate to partnerships with community organizations or other external groups. Excluding the perspectives of people with deep community knowledge and ties in project or program design almost always renders these efforts ineffective, unsustainable, or even harmful to marginalized constituents.

Conclusion

In 2020, city staff have had to balance the urgency of the moment with the need for meaningful engagement, a nearly impossible task in the face of entrenched distrust between government and community, bureaucratic red tape and insufficient interdepartmental coordination, and a focus on implementation over outcomes.

In this cohort we saw a true desire to do things differently and respond to the pandemic in creative and equity-centered ways that utilized, recognized, and elevated community expertise and partnerships.

Yet, in this cohort we saw a never-waning commitment to making a positive impact. These city staff persevered through unprecedented personal and professional challenges. They never lost sight of their role as public servants or of the communities they were serving. We saw a true desire to do things differently and respond to the pandemic in creative and equity-centered ways that utilized, recognized, and elevated community expertise and partnerships.

City projects and programs are more effective, efficient, and relevant when implemented in partnership with community organizations. But these partnerships must be well-supported, well-resourced, and built into the foundation of the initiative—not retrofitted as an accessory at the end.

To forge an effective partnership between city and community, cities can start by:

Defining and committing to equity

Any definition of equity must be informed by the historical harm that has led to current conditions, and implementation must prioritize the most harmed communities and neighborhoods for investment, protections, and healing. In striving for equity, leaders must uplift the invaluable process and progress in addition to outputs.

Identifying the pressure points

Understanding why and where there is support for strengthening community partnerships is important for evaluating how sustainable that support will be moving forward. Just as important is to understand who might be able to derail such efforts, both within city government and among external stakeholders.

Not waiting until a so-called “crisis” to develop partnerships

To cite a relevant example from 2020, we were fortunate in November to witness years of groundwork organizing disenfranchised voters in the state of Georgia pay off on Election Day. While organizers could not have predicted a global pandemic this year, the partnerships they developed beforehand sustained attacks to civic democracy and drove voter turnout to record numbers.

Having capacity conversations up front

Establishing and cultivating partnerships between community organizations and city agencies takes time and thoughtful work. Beyond shared goals, cities must initiate understanding their partners’ language, expectations, assumptions, resources, timelines, and definitions of success and harm. Partnerships between the city and community must begin with honest conversations about each party’s strengths and weaknesses so there is clarity about who can do what, when, and how.

Positioning community members as project and program leads—and paying them well

As the intended end-users of these projects, community members must lead and, as much as possible, cities must get out of their way. This includes positioning community members to set the timeline and define success, in both the short and long-term. Change moves at the speed of trust, not budget cycles.

As the pandemic rages on, the need for cities to work more effectively with partners has become unavoidable. We trust that cities can find ways to let go of total control, be open to new outcomes, and play their position on a team that wants to see every resident and stakeholder thrive. We still believe in local government; now we need government to believe in community partners.

Takeaways

Staff in each grant recipient city faced difficult challenges and rewarding successes at varying points along the project process. The takeaways below are NACTO's reflections on opportunities that cities have to succeed in project delivery in this moment and beyond.

Procurement and Contracting

All of the grant recipient cities faced procurement hurdles like long lead times to make small purchases and strict contracting rules that dissuade or disable small organizations from partnering with the city. As a result, nearly every city contracted with a firm or a CBO to receive all of the grant funding, either directly (i.e., NACTO sent the funds directly to the partner) or via an existing on-call contract.

While administering funds directly to a partner does enable the city agency to spend grant money down more quickly and flexibly, it also perpetuates problems that cities have long been trying to overcome. The most commonly cited issue was that because strict and cumbersome processes make it impossible to contract with small organizations directly, cities miss out on the opportunity to develop formal relationships with a wide range of embedded community partners.

Procurement restrictions are rooted in efforts to disable the nepotism that plagued city governments in the early 20th century. In the years since, additional measures have been layered on top to address other social issues like environmental sustainability, supporting local businesses, and contracting with Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprises. But without re-evaluating and reimagining how these procurement policies all fit together in today's cities, governments prevent themselves from being able to enter formal relationships with outside-the-box partners.

Reimagining rigid procurement and contracting policies, especially for smaller value contracts or for partners who are being paid for their ideas, rather than their outputs, will support city staff efforts to develop projects quickly and in partnership with individual community members and small organizations.

Relationship-Building

Among the grant recipient cities, several relied on existing partnerships or processes, while others established new partnerships at the onset of the project. For the most part, the cities that relied on existing partnerships or well-defined processes for formalizing new partnerships were more easily able to navigate and rely on the city-CBO relationship, including:

- Defining roles and responsibilities;
- Entering contracts; and
- Outlining a project scope and timeline.

Cities that formed new partnerships outside of an existing process for doing so expressed several challenges, including:

- Spending more time upfront to find and contract with partners;
- Needing more time to align goals and expectations; and
- Being unable to leverage the partner's unique relationship with the community.

Cities should invest time and resources into establishing relationships with embedded community members or organizations, especially in neighborhoods that have experienced decades of neglect and disinvestment. This relationship-building must be ongoing: before project ideas arise, while project planning is underway, and after projects are complete. Building these relationships will take time and energy, and cities should define clear, navigable, and flexible processes for entering formal partnerships so that doing so is easy once the groundwork has been laid.

Roles and Responsibilities

Every grant recipient city noted that their projects simply would not have been possible without their partners. While the specific division of roles and responsibilities varied from project to project, local partners were generally best positioned to:

- Plan and lead programming for community spaces;
- Get the word out about events; and
- Communicate directly with community members and local businesses.

Meanwhile, cities identified that they were best able to:

- Navigate city processes such as procurement and permitting;
- Deploy city-owned infrastructure such as barriers and signage; and
- Develop graphics and sketches such as maps and street design drawings.

City staff are well positioned to navigate city systems and processes, thereby clearing the way for knowledgeable community partners to plan and lead local programming. City staff can and should be on-hand to provide technical and staff resources when needed.

Dismantling the Status Quo

For many cities, the COVID-19 outbreak catalyzed a seismic shift in rapid project delivery. Open Streets, often treated as “special events” managed heavily by police departments and subject to regulation, popped up in a matter of weeks using makeshift signage and materials. Bike routes on key corridors were built overnight, separated from empty motor vehicle lanes with simple construction barrels. Parking spaces outside of grocery stores were repurposed for safe and physically distant queuing with water-filled barriers and caution tape.

This swift action demonstrated that a change to the status quo is possible. And the projects pursued through this grant program highlight that rapid response can happen with community members driving the process. But this program also showed that much of the bureaucratic red tape that disappeared in March and April has returned, preventing city staff from acting quickly and intentionally. Without dedication to changing the tide, cities risk returning to a “business as usual” approach, despite pleas from advocates, residents, and city staff for 2020 to be a turning point in how our public processes, policies, and programs are designed and implemented.

This year—marked by the intersecting crises of the coronavirus outbreak, systemic racism, and accelerating climate change—demonstrates that “business as usual” is no longer an option. Local government—of and by the people, in service of the collective good—is positioned to serve community needs and priorities. To embody the true calling of public service, city governments must continue to develop new muscles of creativity, flexibility, and experimentation, empowering and enabling staff to disrupt the status quo, adapting processes and bureaucracy to encourage and foster coordination, and building long-term collaborative partnerships with the people and communities they serve.



National Association of
City Transportation Officials