



# Leveraging community leadership to build better-connected communities

The U.S. transportation system is built on inequity. The location, creation, and justification for much of the infrastructure that gets us all from place to place each day—especially the interstate highway system—was created to be explicitly racist and classist. These roads cut through, and in many cases outright razed Black, Brown, and low-income communities. Many of these motivations are gone, but the impacts of the system and projects they created remain. Air, soil, water, and noise pollution from congested, high-capacity roadways disproportionately fall on marginalized communities. Roadways that divide communities depress economic activity for those communities as well. As SGA’s Dangerous by Design report found, Black and Brown pedestrians are more likely to be killed or injured on America’s roads than white pedestrians.

Today, a grassroots movement—and massive federal funding—rises to demand that projects meant to connect places no longer separate Black and Brown communities.

## Key discussion points



- 1 For the first time, the federal government is enacting programs and policies to rectify the harm caused by transportation infrastructure.** Congress recently passed legislation creating the Reconnecting Communities Program (RCP), a small, but potentially transformative program, that aims to stitch together communities that were disconnected by highways. Implementing the program will require diligent public engagement. As Veronica P. McBeth said, public officials and advocates should focus on “building trust with people who have historically been wronged by transportation projects.”  
*“Transit is about more than connecting to jobs and services. It is crucial to maintaining connection to community.”*  
- **Veronica P. McBeth**, Senior Advisor, Federal Transit Administration
- 2 Efforts to equitably reconnect communities should include not only transportation infrastructure, but housing policy and anti-displacement strategies.** Some transportation officials have a narrow vision of equity that doesn’t focus on community needs when directing investments. Meaningful community engagement, however, is a key component of equitable project planning. Keynote speaker Scott Kratz asked the audience at the Equity Summit, “How do we make sure our transportation infrastructure is not just an anchor of economic growth, but also equitable and inclusive growth?”
- 3 Anyone can be a freeway fighter and a community connector.** While this work can sometimes seem daunting, you already have the tools to be successful and make change. As Adah Crandall, a climate advocate opposing highways in Portland, mentioned during the 2023 Equity Summit, “You don’t need to be an expert to be involved in these things. Your story and your lived experience is enough. If me and a bunch of middle schoolers can make a big impact by standing outside a government building with signs every week, you can too.” Everyone deals with the harms of car-centric infrastructure, so everyone has the ability to take a stand.

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# Questions to ask

- 1 What is the most significant impact freeways have on you and your community? Is it noise or air pollution? Danger to vulnerable road users? Making your city hotter and more vulnerable to climate change?
- 2 How could transportation planners and engineers engage your community in a way that would build trust and spark a community dialogue?
- 3 Who are the most trusted community leaders in your area? How can they be engaged in the planning (initial) stage of transportation projects?

## What to do next

- Government agencies:** Using a racial equity lens, critically examine your past projects and the policies that allowed those projects to be implemented. Publicly discuss what harm your agency has caused with community members and ask them what would repair that harm.
- Policymakers:** Direct funding to projects that equitably reconnect communities. Examine the equity track record of the agencies over which you have oversight (e.g., local/state departments of transportation, metropolitan planning organizations, and planning boards). Find ways to ensure that those agencies prioritize the needs of marginalized communities in future activities.
- Community Orgs/Advocates:** In addition to halting projects that pose immediate threats, be sure to look to the future. If officials are planning a new freeway expansion that has the potential to harm marginalized communities, you can help to stop inequitable projects in their tracks. SGA's program Transportation for America can provide strategic advice to help influence your region's long-range planning and project selection. Get in touch with us.

## Recommended reading



**Freeway Fighters Network website:** The Freeway Fighters Network is made of grassroots groups across the country working to oppose freeway expansions and remove existing freeways that divide communities. [Read more>>](#)

**The Insane Highway Plan That Would Have Bulldozed DC's Most Charming Neighborhoods:** The story of a remarkably successful, grassroots freeway revolt in Washington, DC in the 1960's. [Read more>>](#)

**Greenville, SC:** Out with the cars, in with the people: T4A's case study of a successful reconnecting communities effort in Greenville, South Carolina. [Learn more>>](#)

**How Baltimore Engaged Disenfranchised Communities In Its Transportation Planning:** Veronica McBeth's blog in Next City about her work engaging disenfranchised communities in Baltimore. [Learn more>>](#)

**Can Anacostia Build a Bridge Without Displacing Its People?:** New York Times story on the anti-displacement work being done by Scott Kratz and the 11th Street Bridge Park project. [Learn more>>](#)

**The long fight for connectivity in Milwaukee:** T4A's case study of a successful freeway fight in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. [Read more>>](#)

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