



Addressing Inequities in Our Streets

Community partnerships leading recovery and planning.[nd R](#)

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After a draining and daunting 2020, many of us were ready to enter 2021 with a long-missed feeling: hope. And we hold hope for many things. A vaccine for the worst public health crisis in a generation has arrived. A fresh wave of elected leaders are moving into local and national positions of influence. Many people are already thinking about how to get back to 'normal' or build back better. Beyond just catchy slogans, the Biden-Harris Administration has nominated a number of historical firsts for positions in their cabinet. One of those historical appointments is for Secretary of Transportation. As mainstream transportation organizations have hailed the nomination as a breath of fresh air and something new, we hope that in looking forward to the promise of this new year and new leadership, the lessons of 2020 are not forgotten.

For many, 2020 unveiled inequities never before seen. Yet, for many of us it felt like a year where new people started to notice injustices that people from oppressed groups and marginalized communities have been fighting against since our country was founded by stealing land from Indigenous people. Inequity in the United States is not new. It is built into the very fabric of the tapestry of our culture, policies, and institutions. Often, as we saw with the seditious insurrection that took place in January at our nation's Capitol, whenever there is progress, those who benefit most from white supremacy do whatever they can to hold on tightly to the power they feel is slipping away.

During the Capitol riots, people have been glued to the news pondering if this is who we have become as a country. Some people have said, in horror, "this isn't who we are." But the reality is, while it may not be how some people want to view ourselves, it is exactly how many of us have been saying this country is all along. We can no longer watch the genocide of Black people for simply existing, and simultaneously ignore that white people storming the Capitol experience none of the law enforcement tear gas or rubber bullets we see at countless gatherings that simply ask for this country to value Black lives.

White supremacy, colonialism, and anti-Blackness are built into the very foundation of this country and if it takes an attempted coup at the Capitol and a losing politician to see what people will do for white power and proximity to whiteness, then you have not been paying attention or listening. We cannot change that without honestly confronting it. Continuing the fight against inequity, racism, and white supremacy in this country takes deep, transformative, ongoing work.

We wrote this report to memorialize lessons learned from transportation responses to 2020, which was full of suffering and loss. Rather than getting back to 'normal,' we hope that readers use this as a reminder that our country had a race and inequity crisis before COVID-19. Beyond performative wokeness for virtue signaling, votes, or donations, we urge transportation leaders to work throughout 2021 - and beyond - with a fortified commitment to lasting, impactful, and authentic action. We'll meet you there.



Introduction

In the summer of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic threw cities into upheaval, the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) published Streets for Pandemic Response and Recovery (SPRR), a compendium of strategies that cities across the world were using to leverage street space for pandemic response. With cities facing extreme budget shortfalls and increasing calls to do more with less, NACTO then launched a competitive grant program to support cities as they put the principles from SPRR into action. NACTO awarded funds to 10 city teams who were working in direct partnership with community organizations and community members to implement pandemic response projects in the public right-of-way. Three project types emerged from these 10 teams: outdoor dining programs, slow streets, community/mobility hubs. The specific challenge facing grantees was balancing rapid implementation of recovery efforts with meaningful, equitable community partnerships and shared program ownership. Naomi Iwasaki Consulting and Tamika L. Butler Consulting, LLC were hired to provide technical assistance and coaching for grantees. Below we share a short reflection on the new grant program, the critical work of the grantees, and the work still to be done.

The Moment

With COVID-19 ravaging the country, everyone is facing unprecedented challenges. Grandparents not knowing if or when they would see their grandchildren again. Parents lucky enough to still be working being unsure of how to balance paying the bills and educating their children. Countless frontline workers clocking in everyday risking exposure to serve and help others. The feelings of chaos, fear, anxiety, and uncertainty have seeped into every aspect of society and daily life. People working in local government have not been immune. As a public health crisis laid the path for an economic crisis, cities across the country were faced with never-before-seen challenges. With unpredictable length and severity, the pandemic created a strain on already strapped city budgets.

Public servants with a deep desire to improve the quality of life in their communities for all residents were left to scramble to creatively solve problems, provide resources, and keep people safe. Federal funding came, but not enough and not to all cities. NACTO and Bloomberg Philanthropies, leaders in thoughtful and proactive transportation planning, stepped in to support cities in need. With small, but critical grants, they were able to bridge funding gaps that allowed cities to implement inventive, rapid, and necessary programs and projects. With this funding, cities were able to work with community members and community-based organizations to innovatively and rapidly respond to the needs of this moment.

Our History

The challenges that COVID-19 presents are new, but the systemic racism and anti-Blackness that was pervasive throughout 2020 was always there--hiding in plain sight. Decades before the COVID-19 pandemic plowed through this country, modern American cities were built on foundations of discrimination, segregation, anti-Blackness, and racism. In the 1930s, the now-infamous practice of redlining blocked non-white residents from acquiring the financial capital and housing security of homeownership through geographic exclusion and denied finance services. Other common discriminatory practices in the built environment have bolstered the racist effects of redlining, such as exclusionary zoning, public disinvestment in community amenities and infrastructure, highway construction that destroyed neighborhoods, and food apartheid. These public policies, considered legal and instrumental to the status quo, set the stage for devastating racial disparities in economic opportunity, educational access, and community health.



Today we see new practices creating new disparities. The return of commercial and municipal investment in cities are creating market conditions attainable only to high-earning and wealthy residents. Long-time community members who were previously relegated to “undesirable” neighborhoods now find themselves priced out of residential and commercial opportunities in their own backyard, due to rising property values and no protections for low-income neighbors and small businesses. Even with seemingly progressive planning efforts such as development density incentives and community outreach programs, it is clear that many city decisions continue to be made through a lens that centers whiteness and wealth. Like many institutions and sectors, leadership in transportation departments and agencies often have good intentions, but are predominantly composed of white, cisgender, straight, able-bodied white men. The leaders are too often making decisions and allocating resources without incorporating or listening to the perspectives of Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color (BIPOC), their needs, their strengths, and their priorities. As a result, cities continue to uphold this status quo through processes and policies that prioritize and center whiteness. As, Robin DiAngelo describes in *White Fragility*:

*“Whiteness itself refers to the specific dimensions of racism that serve to elevate white people over people of color. This definition counters the dominant representation of racism in mainstream education as isolated in discrete behaviors that some individuals may or may not demonstrate, and goes beyond naming specific privileges (McIntosh, 1988). Whites are theorized as actively shaped, affected, defined, and elevated through their racialization and the individual and collective consciousness formed with it (Whiteness is thus conceptualized as a constellation of processes and practices rather than as a discrete entity (i.e. skin color alone). Whiteness is dynamic, relational, and operating at all times and my myriad levels. **These processes and practices include basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences purported to be commonly shared by all, but which are actually only consistently afforded to white people.**”*

By engaging in planning practices that center whiteness, officials may believe that they are planning in a way that includes basic perspectives and experiences when in reality they are planning based on experiences of place and space that are only afforded to those who are able to experience those places and spaces in white bodies.

History in this Moment

As the pandemic brought everything to a screeching halt, one thing that did not shut down was white supremacy. Centering whiteness and having racism built into our systems, policies, and procedures meant it was no surprise that when the worst public health crisis of our lifetime hit cities in the United States, systemic inequities and disparities across racial and class lines were ruthlessly laid bare. Communities of color have been disproportionately devastated from every aspect of the pandemic, including higher COVID-19 infection and

death rates, higher rates of unemployment, lower rates of digital access, and greater risk of becoming unhoused. Without strong federal leadership to provide guidance, cities sprang to respond on a local level to the widespread health and economic harm caused by COVID-19. Leveraging their purview over the public right-of-way, many cities fast-tracked programs and projects hoping to ease the challenges of demand shock to retail and restaurant industries or provide open space in the street for people cooped up in their homes. However, like city planning processes have been for decades, these solutions were also primarily developed through a lens of whiteness and wealth with those most impacted by the decisions being excluded from the decision-making process.

This was not a new issue only presenting itself because of COVID-19. Too often, cities stymie engagement from communities by pointing to bureaucracy, procedure, and policy as reasons why things move at a snail-like pace in transportation planning. Yet, when communities and advocates try to participate in the process, they often hear that their participation is more expensive because it slows down the pace of the project too much to be feasible. Engaged community members and community-based organizations struggle with how both could be true. Rather than being included throughout a planning process, communities often experience frustration as they are informed of decisions after a project is much too far along to make meaningful equitable changes that can be built into the process. Only then do decision-makers try to retrofit equity into a process or project--often when their hand is forced or some problem has arisen in the project.

However, realizing equitable outcomes is not an exercise to be considered after problems and potential responses have been identified. Once solutions are identified, they cannot be dispersed or imposed in every community uniformly. Understanding equity requires the first step in and problem-solving exercise to be asking the community what they want and need and then listening to understand rather than to explain. Solutions are not universal and will not fit in all communities. Even when trying to expand resources to impacted communities, cities often demonstrate they lack the vision and flexibility (and sometimes trust) to effectively address challenges faced by the most marginalized. We can point to efforts to copy-paste COVID-19 responses across neighborhoods with very disparate root causes of COVID-19 impact.

Further, the government often tries to implement solutions and programs without acknowledging the barriers that historical--and often intentional--neglect and disinvestment have caused. For instance, a program for sidewalk dining may require that a restaurant get a permit and be located on certain types of roadways that fit the description of many Main Streets, USA. This may seem like a neutral policy, but planning work is not neutral. Cities must



understand that our work and policies can perpetuate generations of racism and harm or proactively seek to redress it. This policy of defining the type of roadway or business district is suitable for sidewalk dining and requiring a permit does not account for the many ways that society and systemic racism has afforded only certain types of business owners' access to the resources necessary to be located on Main Street and have the literacy of government processes to obtain a permit during a global crisis. These kinds of “neutral” well-intended policies too often result in failed attempts to achieve equitable outcomes, to the grave detriment of the communities needing the strongest recovery efforts.

Governing through Crisis

Serving the complexities of diverse, disparate, and disengaged communities is a huge challenge—even without a pandemic. Because residents and constituents are rarely given direct paths of access or abilities to change municipal services, litigious action is a common recourse for a city agency's perceived failure to meet the expectations of the public. So any city service might also be seen as a liability or endure continuous risk assessment. Bureaucratic processes are then implemented to offer buffers of protection and a division of responsibility. Further, limited municipal budgets can contribute to a “turf war” mentality where agencies jostle between themselves to prove their respective relevance and indispensability.

While these processes may be intended to limit, quantify, and organize liability, they can also create a bureaucratic culture of limited coordination (“stay in your lane”), rejection of new responsibility (“not my job”), and a focus on minimum requirements rather than customized approach (“check the box”). This approach, combined with the widespread implementation of policies that have traditionally excluded and segregated certain communities, has eroded community trust in local government.

As with any increase in pressure, this shaky foundation of civic process and engagement is exposed during a crisis. That is true during this pandemic. Siloed departments are expected to band together and instantly understand the needs of their constituents, per an emergency order. However, the very definition of a “crisis” has been typically applied to conditions that impact the wealthy and empowered as well as the poor and disenfranchised. The fact that every American city contains communities that have been systematically denied the same resources, opportunities, rights, and freedoms as others could very well be defined as a “crisis.” But it has not, making it unsurprising that during a global pandemic, these marginalized communities have been the hardest hit by COVID-19 and its impact on everyday life. This has to change.

Attempts in recent years to “incorporate equity” into city governance have shown a disconnect between the concept of restituting historical disenfranchisement and implementing decisions that will lead to equitable outcomes. The lack of a shared definition of equity as a responsibility of local government has allowed misuse and abuse of the term, often by districts and leaders conflating equity for “equality,” “fair share,” and other misnomers that divide resources evenly rather than by historic and contemporary need. Despite this and in some ways because of it, the NACTO SPRR grant program worked to embed equity into every part of the process and encouraged grantees to do the same.

In 2020 all sectors, public and private, issued emergency orders, expedited and approved accommodations, and found ways to circumvent previously arduous processes. What this demonstrated to marginalized communities, including people of color, poor and low-income communities, unhoused residents, and people living with disabilities, is that change to the status quo is possible during a “crisis.” More specifically, this signaled that systemic racism, income disparity, educational inequality, affordable housing, and ableist culture and design are decidedly not considered a “crisis.”

The definition and urgency of a crisis seems to change when those suffering are not part of racialized or oppressed groups whose everyday existence requires them to confront and push through suffering with resiliency. When those with privilege and power feel that they are experiencing or being forced to confront parts of society that they have previously not had to think about, the “crisis” at hand becomes even more urgent. A searing example of this social ranking came in Fall 2020 when upscale restaurants in Manhattan were allowed to provide tented “pods” for dining customers on adjacent sidewalks, while the tents and possessions of unhoused residents continue to be criminalized and displaced. These pods were not part of the SPRR program, but do reflect the blatant and disparate values that civic leadership assigns to different members of its constituency.

Incorporating Equity through Partnership

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, and even more so since, community partnerships provide cities with an ability to do their work in a more equitable, people-centered way. Grassroots organizations and their members have often established more community trust and have been working to build relationships and “systems” for years or even generations. They have a solid understanding of the concerns, joys, and values of marginalized communities because of having to hustle for limited resources and capacity, grassroots organizations also value



and invest in partnerships of their own. Further, many grassroots and community-based organizations understand that not every signal of progress can be quantified or measured with traditional metrics often used by the public sector and its funders.

Ideally, partnerships between city agencies and community organizations would be complementary and elevate each other's functions. Community partners could leverage local expertise to highlight issues and community assets. Agencies could provide potential solutions via design, services, or information. However forging these partnerships remains a challenge in cities across the country. During our time supporting the inaugural NACTO SPRR grant program, we were fortunate to witness strong examples of community-city partnerships.

SPRR Partnerships

Even during a pandemic, where some processes might be expedited or barriers removed, nearly all the grantee teams found challenges to working with community partners and responding nimbly to shifting needs of targeted communities. While nearly all projects were implemented or expanded, results of successfully strengthening community partnerships were varied. The partnership types within the SPRR program mostly fell under three categories, described below.

1

*Strong
community
partner models
+ strong
interdepartmental
coordination*

The most successful partnerships between community organizations and city agencies were supported by strong interdepartmental coordination and/or the ability of city staffers to leverage their position internally to reduce bureaucratic barriers. This orchestration allowed community partners to lead the vision, set outcomes, and develop a project that would meet the needs of community members. While some relinquishment of control or status quo procedures were supported by city leadership, some staff took it upon themselves to act first and “ask for forgiveness rather than permission.” This tactic may be effective at demonstrating community organizations are effective, and in some cases more adept, at leading projects transforming the public realm, but moreover it reveals a systemic failure of cities to be adaptive and provide services for their constituents during a global public health crisis.

Overall, the combination of trusted partnerships and alignment between city agencies led to two general successes: relevant projects that benefitted intended community members, and building further trust and belief in the idea that community organizations can have a meaningful role in civic engagement.

2

*Strong
community partner
models + weak
interdepartmental
coordination*

Other partnerships demonstrated a strong connection between community members and city government staff but were not able to overcome bureaucratic challenges to support community partners. This tension mostly came when departments within the city were not in agreement about certain goals or methods in achieving citywide goals. Barriers were sometimes found at the department or elected leadership level, but in many cases the resistance to coordination came from middle-level management with long tenures in their respective departments. Trepidation from these civil servants could derail community-led efforts at key project points, including but not limited to, permitting, maintenance, procurement, or general operations. Project process was also strained from this lack of coordination, resulting in issues such as rigid emphasis on funder- or city-defined outcomes rather than progress important to community members, lack of city maintenance in newly programmed public space, and further deteriorated community trust in local government.

3

*Lack of strong
community
partnerships*

Though a significant criteria for applicants of the SPRR Grant program was demonstration of strong community partnerships, some awarded grantees still struggled with their engagement efforts. While grantees referred to mapping exercises and equity analyses of their cities, the proposals that struggled to see equitable outcomes manifest in their programs were the ones lacking a grounded community partner with authentic ties to “equity communities.”

A stagnantly bureaucratic civic culture leads to departments being siloed and unable or unwilling to coordinate with each other. Unfortunately, this practice can also be applied to a department’s inability to partner with community organizations or other external groups. If city staff are not able to include a grassroots perspective, particularly with deep knowledge or ties to the very communities that cities want to better serve, from the beginning of a project or program it is highly likely that these efforts will prove ineffective, unsustainable, or even harmful to marginalized constituents.



Conclusion

In 2020, city staff nationwide faced the unprecedented challenge of providing a service or project in-step with the urgent timeline of the pandemic while balancing a robust and meaningful community engagement process. This precarious balance is a result of very common challenges that local government agencies face: low trust with community members, bureaucracy burdens and lack of interdepartmental coordination, and a focus on implementation over impact.

Yet, what we saw from this cohort was that their commitment to making a positive impact never waned. Like many of us, these public servants faced unimaginable challenges and persevered. They never lost sight of who they were doing the work for or that the role of government to serve. Despite budgetary constraints, public health scares, and a general societal feeling of stress, 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.

While this project showed that meaningful community partnerships vastly improve traditional civic efforts, cities cannot rush to get back to business as usual. We should not rush back to a norm where community expertise and knowledge have historically been viewed as something to fear or under or devalued. City projects and programs would be more effective, more efficient, and more 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 added as a retrofitted accessory at the end.

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

DEFINING AND COMMITTING TO EQUITY YESTERDAY

While social equality may be a goal, equity is the tool. Cities and institutions cannot serve all equally if there is no consideration of the historical harm that has led to contemporary conditions. Past harms must inform any definition of equity, and any implementation of equity must prioritize communities and neighborhoods most afflicted by these harms for investment, protection, and healing. Further, process and progress must be uplifted as critical components along with outcomes and implementation. This also applies directly to public and private funding sources, which also tend to overemphasize implementation and finished products. Partnerships are never “complete” because they are dynamic and ever-shifting, but are just as valuable as outcomes.

IDENTIFYING THE PRESSURE POINTS

Since looking outside of the city to community members is a relatively new concept for most public agencies, this change is usually in response to something. Is an elected leader normalizing a new approach? Are community organizations calling for more equitable outcomes? It is important to understand the source of support for strengthening community partnerships to understand how sustainable its political and popular support may be. Just as important is to understand who might be able to derail such efforts, both internal city staff and external stakeholders.

NOT WAITING UNTIL A SO-CALLED “CRISIS” TO DEVELOP PARTNERSHIPS

COVID-19 has revealed many times over how ill-prepared our government institutions were to respond to a crisis of this magnitude. This country has not collectively managed to control safe behavior, and outbreaks, subsequently. Elevating community voice is just as important in good times as well as stormy days. In 2020, we were fortunate to witness the years of groundwork laid into organizing disenfranchised eligible voters in the state of Georgia. While organizers likely did not predict a global pandemic coinciding with a national election, the partnerships they developed beforehand sustained modifications and attacks to civic democracy and drove voter turnout to record numbers.

HAVING CAPACITY CONVERSATIONS UP FRONT

Community organizations and city agencies are not cut from the same cloth. Partnerships take time and thoughtful work. Beyond shared goals, cities must also take the lead to understand the language, expectations, assumptions, resources, timelines, and definitions of success and harm held by their community partners and people they represent. Just as a high-functioning team has clear roles and an honest understanding of each member’s strengths and weaknesses, partnerships between cities and community must begin with clarity about who can do what, when, and how.

POSITIONING COMMUNITY MEMBERS AS PROJECT AND PROGRAM LEADS--AND PAY THEM WELL

The simple phrase of “getting community buy-in” reveals that many city-managed projects center the project and not the people impacted. 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 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 better with partners is not a new crisis. However, it has now become unavoidable. We look forward to cities that are rebuilding and recovering because they have found ways to be stronger in partnership. We look forward to community partners who are positioned as leaders in this recovery. We trust that cities can find ways to let go of total control, be open to different outcomes than expected, 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.**

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Congratulations to the SPRR grantee teams who demonstrated strength and patience for their partnerships and projects, at a time that is testing everything we have. We learned so much from you. While we are still walking (and rolling) on the road to recovery, we hope that you have found community within your cities and with other cities across the country putting in similar good work. Thank you so much.

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