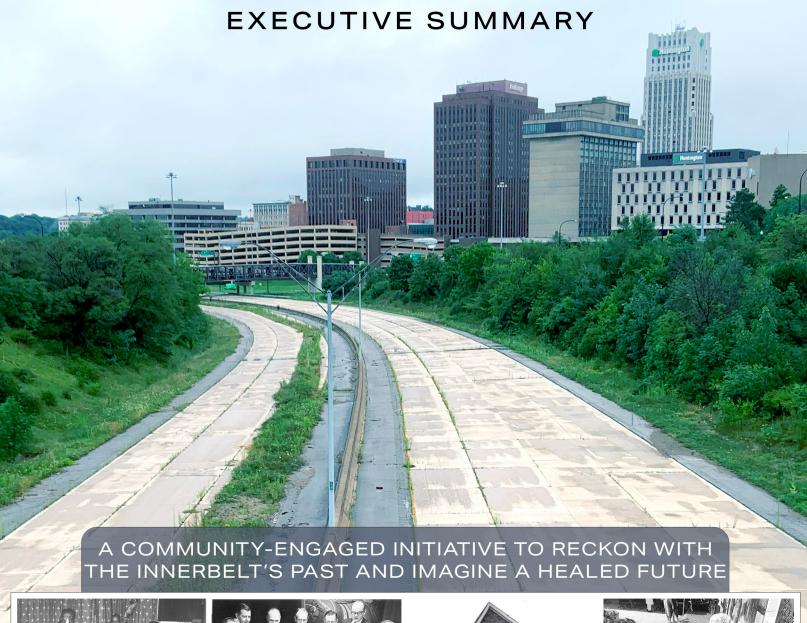
# RECONNECTING OUR COMMUNITY PHASE 1 REPORT













## INNERBELT REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## About This Executive Summary

The Reconnecting Our Community - Phase 1 Report documents the work of the initiative's first two years, the goals of which have been to reckon with the Innerbelt's past and begin to work with Akron residents to imagine a healed future for it. This Executive Summary provides a condensed overview of the full report. While this Executive Summary stands on its own, we encourage you to read the full report in its entirety if you are interested in learning the complete context of the Reconnecting Our Community initiative, our analysis of 2+ years of engagement data, precedent case studies, and more.



## INTRODUCTION

## Rethinking the Innerbelt

The Innerbelt, or State Route 59, is a 4 mile 6-lane highway spur that cuts through central Akron, Ohio. For some Akron residents, it represents a formidable barrier, almost akin to a moat, separating Downtown from West Akron. Tragically, its construction, which began in 1970, came at a great cost, erasing a vibrant, predominantly Black neighborhood and displacing many residents and businesses. That erasure also had harmful impacts to both Downtown and West Akron, cutting off their connectivity, disrupting commercial corridors, and displacing people who helped fuel the vitality of both neighborhoods.

The idea for closing and redeveloping a portion of the Innerbelt emerged in the late 1990s with then-Mayor Don Plusquellic. The City chose to focus its efforts on the north end of the highway, which in itself represented 30 acres and a sizable redevelopment undertaking. It had the least number of homes when the site was a neighborhood, but this section of road was reaching the end of its lifespan and in need of repair. Given its adjacency to downtown, it was also seen as the area most likely to attract the resources needed for redevelopment. In 2016, the Ohio Department of Transportation vacated the section of the Innerbelt between Main St. and Exchange St and worked with Mayor Dan Horrigan and his staff to turn over the 30-acre site to the City for public use.

Mindful of the historical significance and legacy of this site, in late 2020, the City of Akron hired me, Liz Ogbu, and my firm Studio O to help steward a process in which community preferences for the site's future could be identified and inform a future master planning process. I'm a designer and spatial justice activist with over 15 years of experience in projects across the country that engage in a deep understanding of ways to address spatial harm and catalyze community healing. For the past 2+ years, I have worked with City staff, which has become known as the Reconnecting Our Community initiative, and leadership as well as a community advisory group and local organizations to scaffold a thoughtful and inclusive community-engaged process that could identify community preferences for the future of this section of the Innerbelt.

In February 2023, this effort experienced 2 significant milestones. The Innerbelt History Collection, a digital archive intended to collect and memorialize the neighborhood that preceded the Innerbelt, was launched on the Summit Memory website in collaboration with the Akron-Summit County Public Library. And the City of Akron was awarded one of 45 inaugural Reconnecting Communities grants by the US Department of Transportation to support a formal master planning process for the Innerbelt. That process, which will build on the work to date, will begin in early 2024.

At this critical juncture, Akron is at an inflection point in its efforts to heal the wounds of the past and reimagine the future of the Innerbelt. With two years of conversation and engagement behind us and the potential short-term actions and long-term visioning ahead, it's a good time to take stock of what community members have shared, what opportunities exist, and what challenges should be understood. To that end, this executive summary includes:

- A brief History of the Innerbelt, tracing its origins and the neighborhood that preceded its construction.
- A Summary of Engagement, detailing the process and activities undertaken, a summary of the gathered data, and the key takeaways drawn from it.
- **Recommendations for Action** that articulate short- and long-term opportunities derived from the conversations and research conducted to date.

A more expanded version of each of these sections can be found in the full report. The full report also contains an appendix with supplemental information, including a glossary of terms, acknowledgements, precedent case studies, and quantitative data that informed some of the report's key takeaways and recommendations. A more limited appendix can be found at the end of this document. Overall, this report is intended to serve as a compendium for what has been learned so far and a roadmap for moving ahead in a way that is intentional, tangible, equitable, and perhaps most importantly, healing.

Thank you to all who shared their stories, insights, and labor to support the efforts over the course of the past two years. Building upon the invitation on this effort's website, whether your family once called the land on which the Innerbelt sits home, you live or work near the Innerbelt, or you're an Akron resident interested in what's next, let's all continue to engage in this important conversation.`

May the information here do right by what has been shared and make a meaningful contribution in supporting a vision for a vibrant place that reconnects communities and honors both what once was here and future aspirations for what Akron can be.

Liz Ogbu

Designer + Spatial Justice Activist

Founder + Principal, Studio O

## HISTORY OF THE INNERBELT

The area where Akron's Innerbelt now stands has a history rooted in vibrant cultures. In talking about that history, it's important to hold space for the stories that have not been as widely discussed from its more recent history as a largely African American neighborhood to its preceding life as a predominantly Jewish neighborhood to the Native American tribes that lived in this general area hundreds (and for some, thousands) of years earlier.

It's likely that a number of indigenous groups using the Portage Path would have passed through or spent some time in this area. The Native American groups that were here in the 18th and 19th centuries tended to be small, hailing from various tribes, often pushed westward from locations on the east coast. It's difficult to know exactly how many made their home here, but among the tribes present at some point were the Ohio Iroquois, the Ottawa, the Wyandot, the Lenape, and the Ojibway.

For a period of time, the Portage Path served as a boundary between native settlements to the west and US territory to the east. But as the US continued its westward expansion, native tribes were steadily and forcibly pushed out of this area and their lands were absorbed.

In more recent history, prior to the highway's construction, the community was dynamic, filled with both strong social networks and a lively cultural scene, including iconic jazz clubs that attracted renowned artists. It was home to a significant percentage of Akron's Black population, though it also contained visible and valued traces of the vibrant Jewish neighborhood that preceded it.



However, the start of the Innerbelt project in 1970 marked a significant shift. It was driven by federal funding and urban renewal which often aimed to expand the interstate highway system and redevelop areas designated as "slums" around the country. Unfortunately, in many cities – including Akron – these endeavors disproportionately impacted Black communities, intensifying the consequences of racially harmful policies like redlining and furthering socioeconomic disparities.

In Akron, the acquisition of hundreds of properties through eminent domain—a power that governments have to take private property, pay the property owners, and convert it into a public use—in the late 1960s and the Innerbelt's construction in the 1970s led to the displacement of people, homes and

businesses. Though originally intended to rejuvenate downtown Akron by linking offices and industrial areas to the rest of Greater Akron, the Innerbelt fell short of its anticipated capacity, left enduring marks on the adjacent neighborhoods, and disrupted close-knit ties between residents displaced to make way for the highway.

In 2016, the Ohio Department of Transportation vacated a portion of the highway between Market and Exchange Streets and returned it to the City for public use. Though several initiatives over the years have explored the land's future with varying levels of community input, none have led to definitive conclusions. Figuring out a clearer path informed by community input and representing an inclusive vision is where we stand now.



## SUMMARY OF ENGAGEMENT

My process is rooted in the concept of *spatial justice*. It's a term that means that justice has a geography and requires equitable access to resources, opportunities, and outcomes. I often work on projects that seek to transform spaces that have caused harm in the past into platforms for healing. Accomplishing this means creating visions that are inclusive and equitable. And achieving those visions means having engagement processes that recognize that communities are the experts in their needs and dreams, meet people where they're at, and let those most impacted by the past take the lead in determining the terms and conditions of repair. It also means taking time to build relationships and understand people's lived experiences.

This approach has framed this effort's engagement process. The following pages detail the activities that I, the project team, and community partners undertook as part of this effort, what we heard from community members, and key takeaways from those conversations and engagements.

## Engagement by the Numbers

1	1
virtual panel to discuss the history and stories of the old neighborhood	reunion event for former residents of the neighborhood
2	5
events on the Innerbelt	City Council Ward meeting workshops (with materials distributed at all others)
18	25
engagement stations at events around Akron	virtual panel to discuss the oral history and stories of the old neighborhood
	the history and stories of the old neighborhood  2 events on the Innerbelt  18 engagement stations at events around

600+

participants in a citywide survey (online and paper)

8400

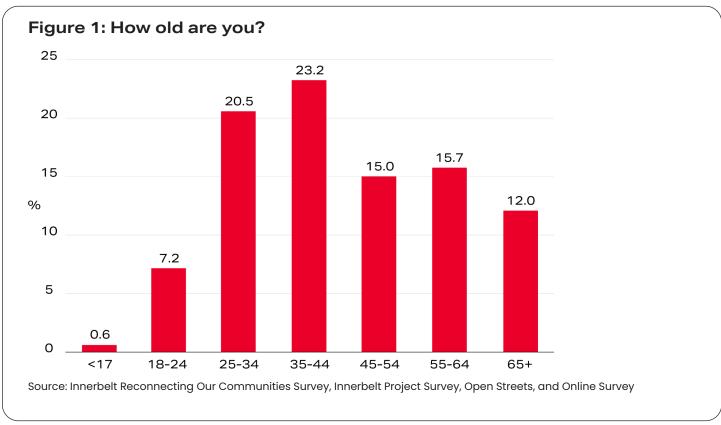
total visitors to the project website (akroninnerbelt.com)

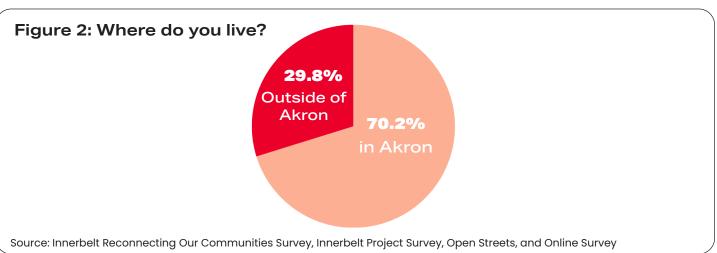
<sup>\*</sup> Not including the website visitors, over 1,000 people were directly engaged through the initiative's engagement efforts

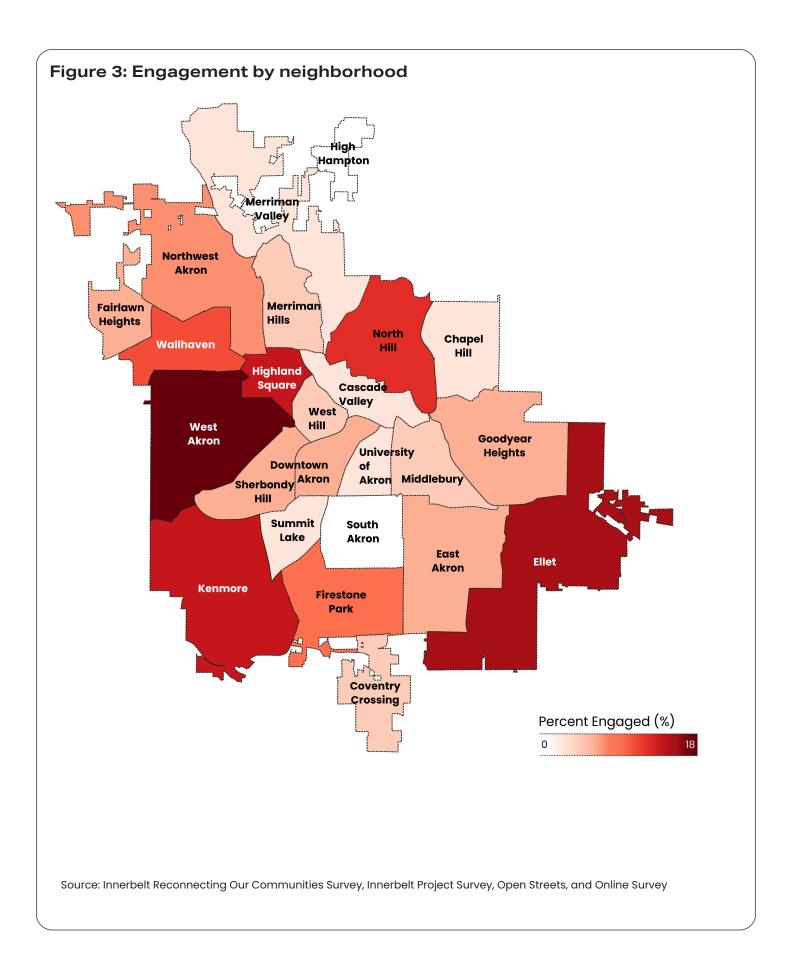
## Who We Heard From

To date, we have engaged a variety of people as we sought to understand what was once here, what is the current context, and what could be visions for the future. We did targeted outreach with key groups like former residents who were displaced, current residents living with the legacy of the highway's construction, younger Akron residents, and members of the Black community. We also conducted additional outreach with a broader cross section of Akron residents.

Where possible, we made use of surveys to track who we were talking to. The data on this page reflects that information in terms of age and location. Since surveys were not deployed at every engagement interaction and not all those who engaged with us filled out surveys (especially during focus groups and ward meetings), this data is representative of many, but not all, the people that were engaged as part of this process.





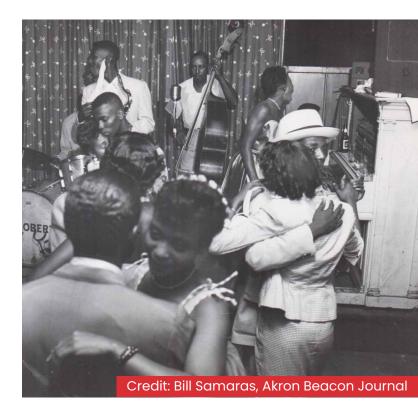


## What We Heard

Feedback from community members often fell into discrete categories. Because the research methods deployed included collection of both qualitative and quantitative data, the content in this section combines an analysis of both to give high level summaries of what was heard. For more comprehensive information on the data collected and its analysis, please refer to the <u>full report</u>.

#### **Neighborhood Memories**

- Former residents have fond memories of the former neighborhood, which had a strong sense of community and safety with neighbors who looked out for one another.
- The neighborhood was vibrant and walkable, offering easy access to basic needs, with a mix of Black-owned and Jewishowned businesses.
- The neighborhood produced many successful individuals across various fields, all of whom contributed to its social and cultural richness.



#### **Innerbelt Construction**

- Former residents express deep sadness, anger, and grief over the destruction of their community, the lack of choice in leaving, and the inadequate compensation for their properties.
- Business owners faced challenges relocating and reopening, often leading to the permanent closure of their businesses. Cultural institutions, such as houses of worship, reported insufficient funding for relocation.
- Within Akron, public awareness of the Innerbelt's history, including the neighborhood and its demolition is uneven.
- There is a strong desire, especially among those with ties to the neighborhood, for a comprehensive account of what was lost.

#### Legacy of the Innerbelt

- Former residents of the neighborhood feel a sense of stolen opportunities and unacknowledged harms.
- Individuals whose properties were not needed for the Innerbelt also experienced the loss of their community and enduring physical, economic, social, and health impacts, but without compensation.
- There is ongoing uncertainty and discussion regarding the fate of the entire Innerbelt. Some advocate for closing the entire highway and returning the land to the community, while others wish to see the full highway, including the vacated portion, continue to function as a highway.

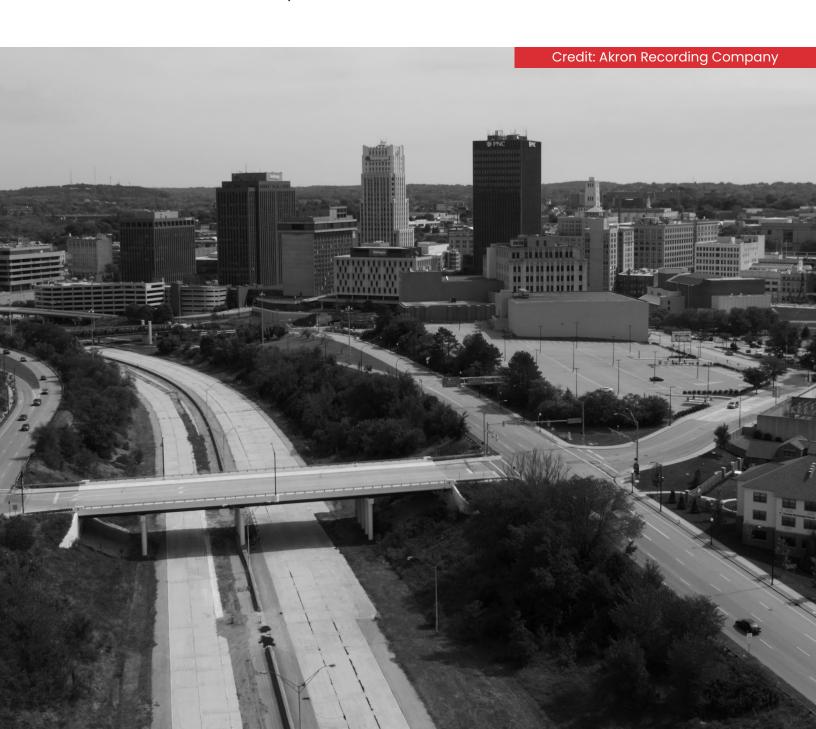


### **Healing + Repair**

- Engaging with the history of the Innerbelt neighborhood for the first time in over 50 years has brought both joyful memories and unprocessed grief for former residents and their families.
- There is a strong call for a full accounting of the Innerbelt's impacts, including the number of homes and businesses lost, economic consequences on adjacent areas, and generational wealth impacts.
- While the City has committed to an inclusive process, a number of residents still have doubts about its willingness to undertake the challenging work of healing the community's wounds.
- Former residents desire an explicit apology from the City as well as economic development opportunities. Addressing the need to repair the generational wealth loss within the Black community was also frequently mentioned.

#### The Innerbelt and Surrounding Neighborhoods

- Access to the Innerbelt during onsite events generated excitement among participants, with some connecting emotionally to the site's history and others enjoying the unique experience. However, physical access to the site was often challenging and served as a barrier for those unable to attend events.
- The primary physical marker of the old neighborhood, the green door monument by Miller Horns that commemorates the Matthews Hotel and the Howard St jazz history, was not widely known or appreciated. A number of former residents want to see a more comprehensive memorial.
- Residents in surrounding neighborhoods, particularly West Akron, mentioned the challenges caused or magnified by the highway's presence, including dead-end streets and a lack of nearby amenities.





#### **Vision for the Future**

- Concerns about the future plan of the Innerbelt site include worries about inclusivity, accountability, and gentrification and further displacement, particularly among former residents and the Black community.
- Former residents desire commemoration of the past, compensation for generational wealth losses, and the development of a commercial and cultural corridor that supports Black businesses and entrepreneurship.
- Young people seek free or low-cost activities, entertainment, indoor recreation, and food options promoting multigenerational interaction and community history.
- Common preferences among all groups involve retail, food uses, indoor and outdoor recreation, parks, and various housing types, with a focus on affordability. Generally unpopular options include high-end housing, industrial uses, office towers, and bigbox retail.

### **Process and Engagement**

- Stakeholders emphasize the importance of a well-paced and community-focused process for determining the future of the Innerbelt. They want tangible actions to be prioritized.
- Participants stress shaping the Innerbelt's future requires Akron-specific solutions, prioritizing equity in the selection of planning teams and contractors, and emphasizing the importance of healing, grief, and a deep understanding of the past.
- Accountability and transparency are crucial. There is a strong desire for clear expectations and the ability to recalibrate processes and decisions as needed as the planning process moves forward.

## Key Takeaways

The engagement data lays out the core issues, opportunities, and challenges from the perspective of varied members of the Akron community. Based on an analysis of that data as well as expertise in spatial justice, grief and healing practices, and creative placekeeping and placemaking, there are some key takeaways worth noting and that inform the recommendations in the next section of this report:

- 1 It's critical to acknowledge and provide resources to support people's grief.
- 2 More work is needed to socialize the Innerbelt's past.
- Fully accounting for the past is seen as an essential part of moving forward.
- The harm is generational so the healing must be too.
- 5 The loss of the neighborhood deeply intersects with a loss of belonging.
- Creating an inclusive neighborhood means being intentional and explicit about belonging.
- 7 Let shared values and equitable outcomes drive the conversation on use.
- The City needs to be more vocal about its stance on the Innerbelt.
- 2 Community engagement requires moving at the speed of trust.
- Community engagement also requires being mindful of context and nimble in approach.

A more detailed discussion of these key takeaways can be found in the full report.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The Innerbelt's history, size, and location makes the vacated portion of the highway one of the most significant sites within Akron. How it's developed (and the process to get there) will speak volumes about the city and how it holds its past, values its present, and dreams of its future.

What follows are recommendations for future action. As with the Key Takeaways, the recommendations are based on over 2 years of engagement, analysis of the data, assessment of the site and other relevant context, and best practices in areas of spatial justice, grief and healing practices, and creative placekeeping and placemaking. The recommendations address both the physical site and the range of issue areas that came up during this effort. They are broken into two timescales:

Short Term (1-3 years) Long Term (6+ years)

This report does not include Medium Term (3-6 years) recommendations, though those will eventually be needed. Those strategies will be informed by implementation strategies developed after this report for the short-term recommendations and the policies and plans emanating from the long-term master plan process. With that in mind, it's recommended that the Medium-Term strategies be developed over the next 2 years by the teams working on those efforts.

More detailed descriptions of all of the recommendations shared on the following pages can be found in the <u>full report</u>.



### **Short-Term Recommendations (1-3 years)**



The northern end of the Innerbelt has been vacated for several years and any permanent transformation is still several years away. But there's a current momentum among residents around the Innerbelt and conversations around what Akron's future should be. It's important to sustain and nurture that momentum, so in the interim, it's possible to move forward in ways that feel tangible, build upon the efforts to date, and set up a more successful future.

#### **Healing + Repair**

- An apology from the City would help advance the healing process
- 2. Provide tools to support impacted communities with their grief.
- 3. Undertake a more comprehensive effort to document the loss.
- 4. Launch a parallel reparative process.
- 5. Anti-Displacement efforts need to be in place before construction.
- 6. Connect what happened/is happening here to Akron's story of itself.

#### **Process + Engagement**

- 1. Link up with like-minded cities to participate in a community of practice.
- 2. Create a more consistent communications framework.
- 3. Hire a master plan team with deep engagement capacity.
- 4. Adapt the Advisory Group process to better support the ongoing process.
- 5. Partner with youth and their advocates to advance a youth engagement strategy.
- 6. Leverage events as a channel for master plan engagement.

#### **Interim Use**

- 1. Develop an Interim Use strategy.
- 2. Keep the site safe and open without being exclusionary.
- 3. Outside uses should provide a benefit to the project and the community.

## **Physical Site**

- 1. Create an interim site improvement plan.
- 2. Deploy site investments smartly.
- 3. Leverage the site to share the history.

## **Future Planning Support**

- 1. Release RFQ (Request for Qualifications) for master plan team with experience that aligns with key issue areas identified in this research.
- 2. Design a transparent and community-engaged selection process.

## **Long-Term Recommendations (6+ years)**



Ultimately, the goal is to transform this land into something that acknowledges the past and supports a future that is economically, socially, and physically sustainable and just. Achieving that reality is not just about what buildings are erected here but also about implementing an interconnected system of programs and processes that focus on that future vision. Some of these recommendations may feel intimidating because of the scale of change or investment that they require, but they also tend to be the opportunities most tied to addressing the harm that has been done, breaking patterns connected to that legacy, and setting up the conditions that support future generations of Akron residents to thrive regardless of who they are.

#### **Healing + Repair**

- 1. Convert some city-owned land into a Community Land Trust.
- 2. Explore creating a Community Restoration Fund.
- 3. "Bring back Wooster Avenue."

#### **Process + Engagement**

- 1. Build a long-term accountability structure for the Innerbelt redevelopment.
- 2. Create equitable rules and conditions for developer engagement.
- 3. Use a phased approach for redevelopment.
- 4. Consider what may be possible with more of the highway decommissioned.

## **Long-Term Use**

- 1. Think neighborhood, not just a singular use.
- 2. Compliment, not compete with adjacent neighborhoods.
- 3. Honor the site (and its past) as sacred.
- 4. Create an African American Cultural District.

## **Physical Site**

- 1. Explore strategies that restore the street grid.
- 2. Rethink the surrounding roadways.
- 3. Embrace the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail as a connector.
- 4. Don't forget about sustainability.



## LOOKING AHEAD

While there has been considerable work undertaken over the past two years as part of the Reconnecting Our Community initiative, this report marks an early milestone, not the conclusion of this effort. It's important not to let the momentum of attention and intention generated by the work to date be lost. And the values and levels of engagement demonstrated thus far should continue to be a core practice of the work ahead.

The next year will be a particularly pivotal period as time sensitive opportunities exist from initiating a master planning process to continuing to document the old neighborhood while elders are still with us to connecting with implementation processes around adjacent neighborhood plans. The list of recommendations presented in this report are not easy but they are essential. And across Akron, there are a variety of stakeholders, from former residents to community organizers to business owners to project neighbors to City staff who have expressed readiness to help transform them from ideas into action.

A number of cities and communities around the country are starting to wrestle with the future of urban renewal infrastructure sites like the Innerbelt. The way that the process here in Akron has sought to hold space for the history and legacy of the Innerbelt and is seeking to frame future visions in the context of healing and equity can help it be a national model. And what continues to be done here has the potential to be a vibrant symbol locally for what it means to reckon with the past – both the joys and the sorrows – and work towards a future in which all Akronites can thrive. This is just a start, but an important foundation to build upon.

## Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to the efforts that supported the work in this report. First and foremost, thank you to the project Reconnecting Our Community Advisory Group who has met almost monthly for over 2 years. Their insights and support on understanding the Akron context, identifying community engagement needs and goals, and articulating ways to be in an accountable relationship with the community and the City have been invaluable. Particular thanks go to the members who are also former residents of the neighborhood that the Innerbelt displaced. They provided a needed voice that kept us grounded in the weight of both what was lost and what must be repaired. For a full list of Advisory Group members, please refer to the following section.

Thanks as well to the staff at the City of Akron. This includes members of the core team, Summer Hall and Dylan Garritano. Thanks as well to past and present members of the City staff who provided support in some capacity for this effort including Mayor Dan Horrigan, Jim Aitkin, Jake Bell, Catey Breck, James Hardy, Chris Ludle, Stephanie Marsh, Mike Meyer, Kyle Reynolds, Jason Segedy, Marco Sommerville, Thomas Tatum, Helen Tomic, Tammy Tucker, Sean Vollman, and Frederick Wheat. Thanks as well to staff from Akron Recreation and Parks division who provided event support.

Thanks to the Akron City Council members who spoke with me, engaged with the project, and helped distribute materials about this project to their constituents. Additional thanks to Councilpeople Holland, Malik, Mosley, Neal, and Sommerville for hosting me and the community engagement team at their ward meetings.

Thanks to Rajan Hoyle and Rose Koppy, members of the Studio O team, who supported creation of this report and various components of this process.

Thank you to the Knight Foundation for the additional funding support. Thanks as well to partners that helped support Innerbelt related events, engagement activities, or engagement materials including the Innerbelt Reunion partners (Akron Urban League, Akron Beacon Journal, The Freedom BLOC, the Akron NAACP, City of Akron, Big Love Network, St. Ashworth Temple Church of God in Christ, African Rites of Passage Institute), Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, Akron Recording Company, Alpha Phi Alpha Housing, Chris Anderson, Art X Love, Theron Brown, Chill Ice Cream, Robert Dejournette, DJ Soul Child, Lloyd Ford, Hideaway Kitchen, Allen Jones, Deborah Lovelace, Pammies, Chareese Thompson, Thai Soul Infusion, TRIAD Communications, Inc., and Urban Gourmet. Additional thanks to the Akron Summit County Historical Society, Downtown Akron Partnership, and Ohio and Erie Canalway Coalition for consistently providing resource and capacity support for the engagement efforts.

Special thanks to Roger Riddle for his work as co-curator of the Innerbelt Neighborhood Stories Project, the oral history effort that is the foundation of the Innerbelt History Collection, now on the Summit Memory website. Thanks to Floco Torres for assisting Roger and for the music that helps to animate the stories. Thanks as well to the Akron-Summit County Public Library's Special Collections Division team, particularly Mary Plazo and Rebecca Larson-Troyer, for collaborating on and hosting the archive. And thanks to Bishop Joey Johnson for the wisdom around grief that is foundational to the collection's Grief Primer resource.

Finally, thank you to all the community members who have trusted the process enough to speak with me or members of the team. This document would not have existed without your input. What you've shared, both around your hopes and fears, has not only informed the content of the analysis and the quality of the recommendations made here, it will also help provide an important foundation and baseline accountability tool for the work that lies ahead. Thank you.

Liz Ogbu Founder + Principal, Studio O

## Reconnecting Our Community Advisory Group Members

NAME	COMPANY/ ORGANIZATION	TITLE
Albert "Al" Bragg	Alpha Phi Alpha Homes	Executive Director / Former Resident
Malcolm Costa	Akron Summit Community Action - Resident	President & CEO / Former Resident
Annmarie Ford	Park East- Civic Commons - Resident	Former Resident
Vera Parker	Akron Children's Hospital	Senior System Analyst / Former Resident
Catey Breck	inSITE Advisory Group / Welty	Manager of Economic Development
Brandyn Costa	Buckingham Law Firm	Associate Attorney
Suzie Graham	Downtown Akron Partnership	President
Leianne Neff Heppner	Akron Historical Society	President & CEO
Matthew Kolodziej	University of Akron	Professor
Teresa LeGrair	Akron Urban League	President & CEO
David Parker	Zion Faith Fellowship	Pastor
Don Pavlik	PNC Bank	Senior Vice President
Dan Rice	Ohio Erie Canalway Coalition	President & CEO
Margo Sommerville	Akron City Council	Council President, Ward 3 Representative
Caleb Thurman	Downtown Akron Partnership	Operations & Business Specialist

We'd also like to acknowledge the participation of former Advisory Group members: Ellis Polk (former resident), Karen Starr (Hazel Tree Interiors, former board member of West Hill Neighborhood Organization), Pat White (former resident), and Bernett Williams (Akron Children's Hospital).

Report by Studio O

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