

# RECONNECTING OUR COMMUNITY PHASE 1 REPORT

FULL REPORT

A COMMUNITY-ENGAGED INITIATIVE TO RECKON WITH  
THE INNERBELT'S PAST AND IMAGINE A HEALED FUTURE






# Reconnecting Our Community - Phase 1 Report

A community engaged initiative to reckon with the Innerbelt's past and imagine a healed future


**By Studio O**  
**December 2023**



Stories are sacred.  
They need to be  
***TOLD, HELD,  
AND HONORED.***

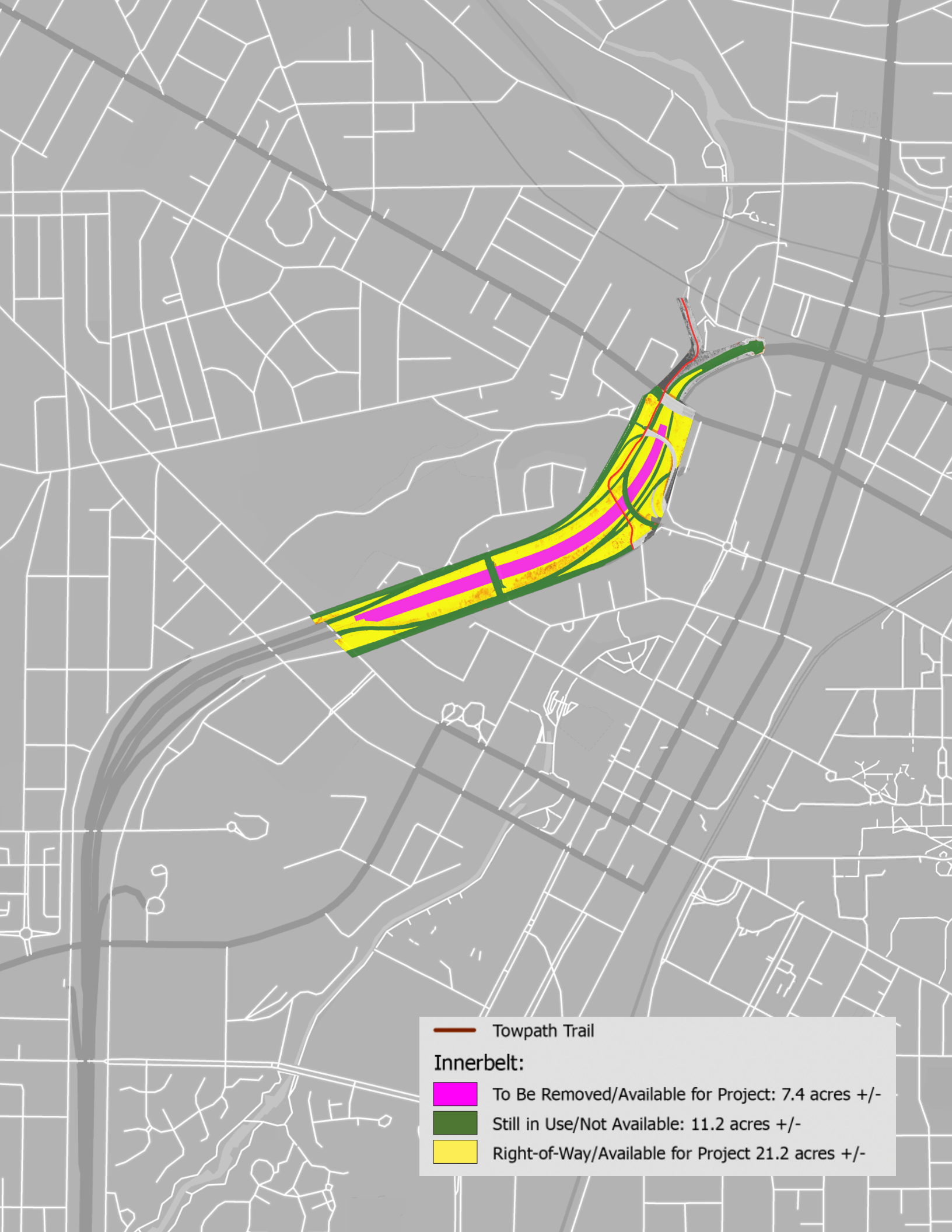
*- Former resident*

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
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\* This report is also available as a shorter executive summary, which can be found at [akroninnerbelt.com/report-summary](https://akroninnerbelt.com/report-summary)



 Towpath Trail

**Innerbelt:**

-  To Be Removed/Available for Project: 7.4 acres +/-
-  Still in Use/Not Available: 11.2 acres +/-
-  Right-of-Way/Available for Project 21.2 acres +/-

# INTRODUCTION

## *Rethinking the Innerbelt*

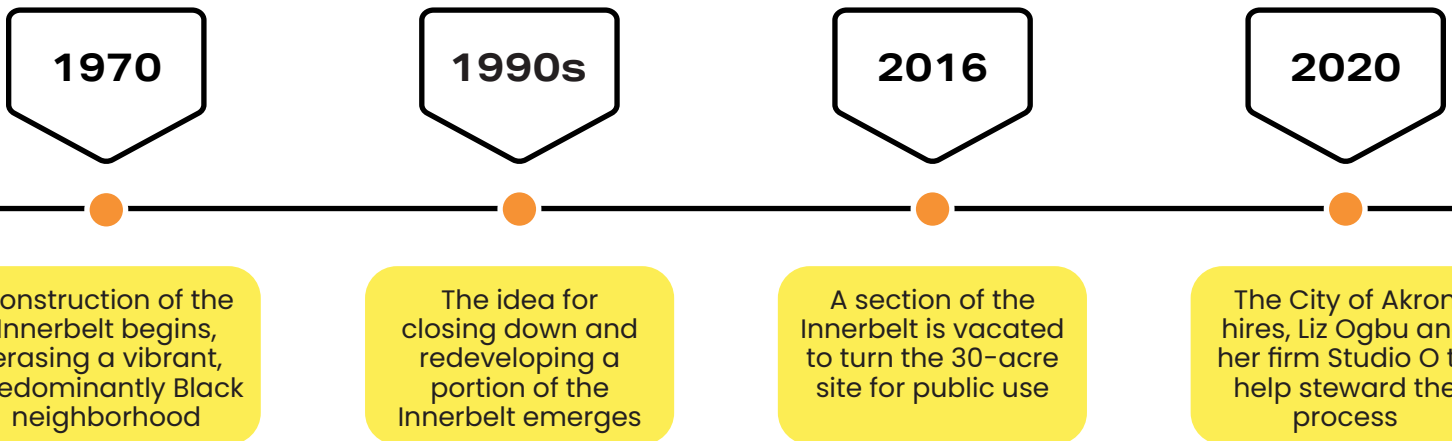
The Innerbelt, or State Route 59, is a 4 mile 6-lane highway spur that cuts through central Akron, Ohio. For some Akron residents, it represents a formidable barrier, almost akin to a moat, separating Downtown from West Akron. Tragically, its construction in 1970 came at a great cost, erasing a vibrant, 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 and leadership to scaffold a thoughtful and inclusive community-engaged process that could identify community preferences for the future of this section of the Innerbelt.

## *The Innerbelt Timeline*



# Starting with the Past



Credit: Akron Beacon Journal

Too often, the idea of acres of available real estate adjacent to a downtown immediately sparks thoughts of a blank slate on which to create future visions that represent bold aspirations. But such thinking tends to negate and devalue all those who once called that land home. It's impossible to determine what's next for the Innerbelt without also acknowledging the history of the land on which it sits. That history includes the thriving community that the highway displaced and the enduring legacy of the harmful impacts of that displacement.

As detailed further in the History section of this report, the Innerbelt decimated a predominantly Black neighborhood in West Akron. Though an accurate count remains challenging, it's estimated that over 700 households, more than 100 businesses, and a number of houses of worship and sociocultural institutions were displaced. It's clear from conversations with Akron residents impacted by the Innerbelt's original construction that its creation left not only physical scars but also economic, social, and emotional ones, from insufficient compensation to disrupted social networks. The harmful impacts persist, with losses in generational wealth, insufficient resources, and access to employment and social/cultural amenities among descendant communities and in the surrounding neighborhoods.

***“You have to have some place that anchors you, that centers you, that holds you. And I believe that neighborhood gave me a center.”***

*- Former resident*

**+700**



households displaced

**+100**



businesses displaced

**MANY**

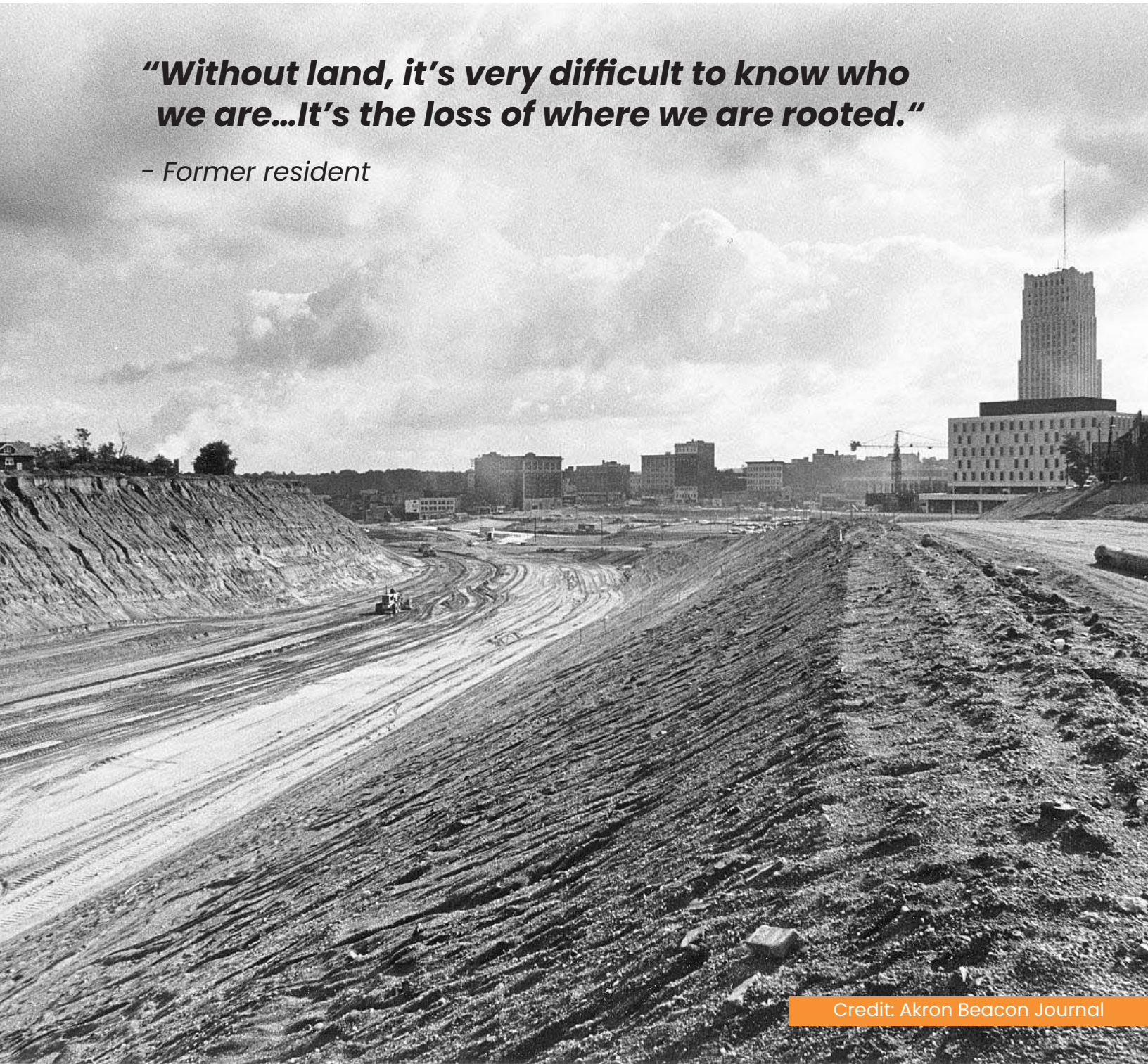


houses of worship and sociocultural institutions displaced

For some Akron residents, this story might feel like part of a distant past. But for others—especially within Akron’s Black community—it remains an open wound. From the very beginning of this effort, my conversations with those most affected by the Innerbelt’s original construction made this clear. To them, treating the site as a blank slate erases their experiences and legacy as well as those of their families and their community. And when conversations about the site’s future don’t acknowledge and accommodate this past, there’s a genuine fear that redevelopment may lead to increased gentrification and further displacement. These concerns bring to mind the words of Chicago-based activist and author Charlene Carruthers: “When we tell incomplete stories of who we are and where we’ve been, we have incomplete solutions.”

***“Without land, it’s very difficult to know who we are...It’s the loss of where we are rooted.”***

*- Former resident*







Credit: Akron Recording Company

## ***Reconnecting Our Community***

Informed by these conversations, the process of the past 2+ years, which became christened by the project Advisory Group as the “Reconnecting Our Community” initiative, has moved forward as a community-engaged initiative to reckon with the Innerbelt’s past and imagine a healed future. Advisory Groups are a mechanism that I use in my work. The group’s role here has been to serve as a thought partner, providing high level insight that can help shape and guide the overall process. Its members helped to provide me with grounding in the Akron context as well as advice and connections for the public engagement. The group serves only in an advisory capacity and has no decision-making authority over the site’s future. Nor does it replace or outweigh input from community members.

The 14-person group is made up of a diverse group of stakeholders ranging from the City Council president to nonprofit leaders to downtown and business community representatives.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, nearly half of the group once lived in or have strong family ties to the neighborhood displaced by the construction of the Innerbelt. Members have helped with holding the process and the City accountable. And they have been committed to ensuring that the process is mindful of the past as it looks towards the future.

The strategies for public engagement have been varied, from an oral history effort recording the stories of former residents to engagement stations at events around Akron to events on the Innerbelt to digital and paper surveys around potential uses. In deploying a diversity of methods, the goal has been to have a citywide conversation that holds the truth of where Akron has been in concert with dreams of an equitable vision for its future.

This understanding of the past and future is helping to shape ideas for how the site can be used in the short term and a master planning process for its long-term transformation. It also is informing recommendations for what strategies are needed beyond the physical transformation to support healing in the present and the journey to come. This is a different and more expansive process than many residents may be used to but its use here is intentional. Developing a future vision for the Innerbelt that is equitable and just, requires understanding who has been harmed or left behind, what has been the scale of impact, and what is the mix of new programs and places needed to support everyone –

<sup>1</sup>A complete list of the Reconnecting Our Community Advisory Group members can be found in the appendix.

## What's on the Horizon

In February 2023, the City of Akron was one of 45 applicants across the country and the only one in Ohio to be awarded one of the Biden Administration's Reconnecting Communities grants via the US Department of Transportation (USDOT). The goal of the Reconnecting Communities Program is to reconnect communities by addressing infrastructure like highways that have had harmful impacts and continue to create barriers to community connectivity and equity. The City will receive a \$960,000 planning grant and together with matching funds from philanthropic sources will undertake a master planning effort that will engage Akron residents, particularly formerly displaced residents, in developing a long-term plan for the future of the site. A master plan is a robust, long-term design and policy document that provides a long-range vision for a site. It can provide a tool for a community to have conversations about its vision for itself prior to the development of more specific building and landscape designs. Beyond articulating a community-driven vision for the future, the plan will also set up the opportunity for the City to apply to the Reconnecting Communities Program again (tentatively in 2025) and other state and federal programs for funds to pay for the capital improvements that are essential for any redevelopment.

After the release of this report, the next milestone in this process will be the release of a national Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for a consulting team to undertake a master planning process. The RFQ requirements will be informed by USDOT, Akron's Reconnecting Communities grant application, and this report. The tentative

***I don't know how you do it, but there needs to be something. So we don't forget. It's easy to forget these people and their lives and just go forward and ignore the irreparable damage and harm."***

*- Former resident*

timeline for the release of the RFQ is the first quarter of 2024. More information about the RFQ content, selection criteria and process, and timeline will be shared early in the new year. Once the master plan team is on board, the next stage of the community planning around the future of the Innerbelt will commence. (To keep abreast of future conversations and activities connected with the short- and long-term future of the Innerbelt, visit [akroninnerbelt.com](http://akroninnerbelt.com) and sign up for the project mailing list.)

The federal Reconnecting Communities funding is helpful and can build upon the momentum created by the initial engagement work and exploration. It will support development of a tangible product (master plan for the site) and an opportunity to build accountability in the next stage of planning. Moreover, the timing of this effort is opportune, aligning with concurrent planning and development endeavors in adjacent neighborhoods—the Downtown Plan Update and the West Akron Neighborhood Plan as well as the ongoing work of Akron Civic Commons. As noted in both the Engagement Summary and Recommendations sections of this report, the Innerbelt's

extended beyond its immediate footprint, significantly influencing surrounding areas. Likewise, any redevelopment of the site will reverberate far beyond its boundaries. In other words, any project here should not be treated as an isolated development. Through its transformation, the Innerbelt has the potential to become a bridge—physical, economic, and social—instead of a divider.

Achieving this outcome also requires a vision and decision-making framework that consistently and intentionally centers equity and accountability. If the redevelopment of the Innerbelt is not in sync with equitable economic development, cultural preservation, social connectivity, and inclusive placekeeping + placemaking, what gets built will likely repeat the past rather than repair it.

Akron's high competitiveness in the inaugural round of the federal Reconnecting Communities program was likely due in part to including this kind of thinking in its application. Being successful in seeking additional funding from the program to make capital improvements, will likely be based in some part on this approach being deeply embedded in the master plan.

It's also crucial to recognize that long-term redevelopment remains several years away. Considering the likely timeline for the master plan process and acquisition of additional funds for the capital improvements, it's estimated to take another 5-7 years before any construction commences on the Innerbelt. But the 30 acres are vacant now. They can start to be repurposed in ways that provide community benefits sooner. Temporary activation and site

improvements can facilitate events and uses that offer those near-term benefits, serve as a platform for site-based community engagement during the master plan process, and explore potential long-term use cases. The City has asked for this to be explored as part of my scope and so recommendations related to it are also included in this report.

Finally, although the effort to date – in concert with several organizations in Akron – have taken some meaningful steps to unearth and uplift the stories of the lives that once thrived on this land before the Innerbelt's construction, there's still a long road ahead in advancing that work. In particular, there's a need to support those who had deep connections with the neighborhood in the process of coming to terms with and moving through their grief. It's a necessary part of the continued work ahead and recommendations related to this can also be found in this report.

# About this Report

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 more than two years of conversation and engagement behind us and the potential short-term actions and long-term planning 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 report 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.

There is also an appendix with supplemental information, including a glossary of terms, acknowledgements, precedent case studies, and quantitative data that informed some of the report's takeaways and recommendations. The report is intended to serve as a compendium<sup>2</sup> 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 helping to achieve a vision for a vibrant place that reconnects communities and honors both what once was here and future aspirations for what Akron can be.

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**Liz Ogbu**

**Designer + Spatial Justice Activist**

**Founder + Principal, Studio O**

<sup>2</sup> A shorter Executive Summary document containing the highlights of the report can be found [here](#).

Credit: Ron Kuner, Akron Beacon Journal



# HISTORY OF THE INNERBELT

## *Indigenous Legacy*

In talking about the history of the land on which the Innerbelt sits, one of the important takeaways is to hold space for the histories 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.

Given the Innerbelt's proximity to Summit Lake and the Portage Path between the Cuyahoga and Tuscarawas Rivers, it's likely that a number of indigenous groups using the path would have passed through or spent some time in this area. The original inhabitants of this part of Ohio were here until the mid-1600s. The land was abandoned of permanent residents for about a

century, with more active settlement not happening until the 1730s. The new inhabitants included a mix of peoples, including French and English settlers and traders as well as Native Americans, often pushed westward from locations on the east coast. The Native American groups tended to be small, hailing from various tribes. 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.

## *A Vibrant Neighborhood*

In more recent history, prior to the Innerbelt's construction, this land was home to vibrant and robust communities. Benefiting in large part from an influx of workers for the rubber industry, the neighborhood was home to a significant percentage of Akron's African American population. And before it was a predominantly Black neighborhood, it was a robust Jewish neighborhood. As the neighborhood's demographics transitioned, some businesses – like Saferstein Grocery – remained a valued part of the fabric of this richly varied community.

Those who grew up in the neighborhood in the 1950s and 1960s reminisce about it as being deeply interconnected. It was a place where neighbors looked out for one another. Given Akron's location between Detroit and New York, the city was a popular stop for national talent like Ella Fitzgerald and Count Basie. Howard Street became iconic for its jazz clubs. Neighborhood businesses like the Matthews Hotel, one of the few on the cross-continental rail route that served African Americans, contributed to the neighborhood being a thriving cultural and economic hub. At one point, it was even called "Little Harlem."

But all that came to an end because of urban renewal and the construction of the Innerbelt.

# Urban Renewal and the Innerbelt

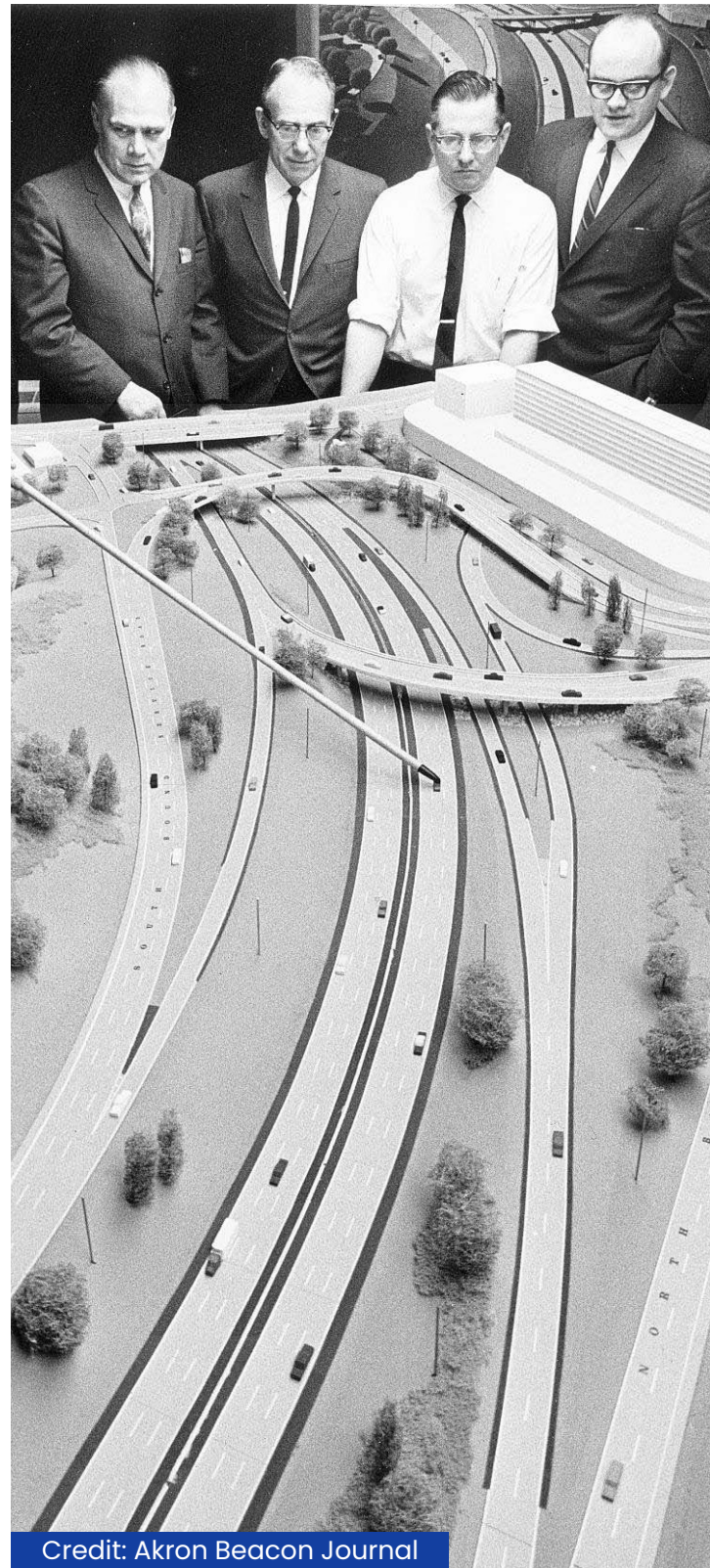
## Urban Renewal and the Innerbelt

The idea of the Innerbelt emerged in 1962, spurred in part by federal funding to expand the interstate highway system. As urban renewal projects broke ground across the country, they often targeted areas deemed to be “slums.” These projects were intended to redevelop what was considered to be blighted areas in order to build new infrastructure. However, what we now know is that these projects often did more harm than good and primarily targeted and displaced communities of color, particularly Black communities. And due to the historic practice of “redlining” – the effects of which are still being felt today – many predominantly Black communities were valued at substantially lower figures as opposed to white neighborhoods.

Infrastructure projects like highways became prominent vehicles for redevelopment, spurred in part by federal funding. They often followed the patterns of other urban renewal projects in what and who they displaced. Between the 1950s and 1980s, it’s estimated that anywhere from 500,000 to over a million people were displaced because of highway

***“You were not only displaced from the neighborhood, but you were displaced from friendship and familiarity with people that you were accustomed to being around and seeing.”***

*– Former resident*



projects across the nation.

The Innerbelt was one of several large urban renewal projects planned and initiated in Akron that was catalyzed by the federal funding. Throughout the 1960s, two other urban renewal projects (Cascade and Opportunity Park) focused on Downtown Akron. The Innerbelt's construction was a key component of both of these earlier urban renewal projects. It was seen as something that would help revitalize the Downtown by linking the new offices and industrial areas to the rest of Greater Akron and siting uses deemed more complementary to supporting Downtown's economic growth. Both the Cascade and Opportunity Park urban renewal projects also entailed the widespread demolition of existing houses, and the relocation of predominantly Black and lower-income residents to make way for new

offices and industrial parks. So when the construction of the Innerbelt came a few years later, some residents displaced by the highway's construction had already been displaced by one or both of these earlier projects.

Acquisition through eminent domain of hundreds of homes and businesses in the path of the Innerbelt began in the late 1960s, and construction of the highway began in 1970. Originally envisioned to connect the west (I-76/77) and north (State Route 8) legs of the Akron expressway system, the highway's connection to I-76 was not completed until the mid-1980s but the north-south connection to Route 8 was not, meaning the Innerbelt was never completed as originally planned. It also only ever saw about 15% of the daily volume of 120,000 cars that it was originally built to accommodate.

## *A Legacy of Impact*

With the first public conversation happening in the early 1960s, initial construction not beginning till 1970, and overall construction taking close to 15 years, the development process itself had an emotional and physical toll on those who lived and worked in the neighborhood. Ultimately, those who called the area home had no choice but to move. Compensation for homeowners was often inadequate and there was little to no support for the many families that rented. The construction also displaced businesses, houses of worship, and other cultural organizations. An accurate count of the displacement of these uses has been difficult to ascertain. What is clear is that the cumulative displacement of households, business, and sociocultural institutions disrupted the neighborhood's tightly knit social networks.

The impact was felt not only on those who left, but also for those who remained. Residents and businesses whose properties were not needed for the highway's construction lost their neighbors and customers, experienced a significant decline in their property values and business income, and found dead-end streets where once vibrant residential and commercial corridors once stood.

In short, the Innerbelt devastated a community and it stripped many of their wealth and livelihood. The impacts of which are still being felt today.



# *Moving Beyond the Highway*

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Innerbelt was used as something other than a highway from time to time, including the City's annual fireworks show which occurred over the Innerbelt for several years and is a shared memory for many Akron residents. In the late 1990s, then-Mayor Don Plusquellic suggested vacating and redeveloping the portion of the Akron Innerbelt immediately adjacent to Downtown. This portion of the highway, between Market and Exchange Streets, was vacated in 2016, and now-Mayor Dan Horrigan successfully worked with the Ohio Department of Transportation to return the vacated land to the city for public use.

Over the past 10 years, the city has received ideas for the Innerbelt. There also have been conversations to discuss its future, ranging from the artist Hunter Franks' "500 Plates" event on the highway in 2015 to a design exercise by a team at Kent State in 2016 to higher level assessments by a national team of experts via the Mayors' Institute on City Design in 2018. These efforts have had varying levels of public engagement but didn't yield definitive conclusions about uses for the land.

Figuring out a clearer path informed by community input and representing an inclusive vision is where we stand now.

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*This brief historical summary was derived from conversations with community members and the following sources:*

[\*Akron Beacon Journal series on the Innerbelt's history\*](#)

[\*Akron Beacon Journal: "What Should Happen to the Innerbelt?"\*](#)

[\*City of Akron's Department of Planning and Urban Renewal's Report \(1963\)\*](#)

[\*"Effects of Transportation Planning on Urban Areas" \(1977\)\*](#)

[\*Los Angeles Times: Freeways Force Our Residents in Communities of Color - Again\*](#)

[\*Innerbelt History Collection on Summit Memory Website\*](#)

[\*"The Portage Path: Akron's Connection to America's First People"\*](#)

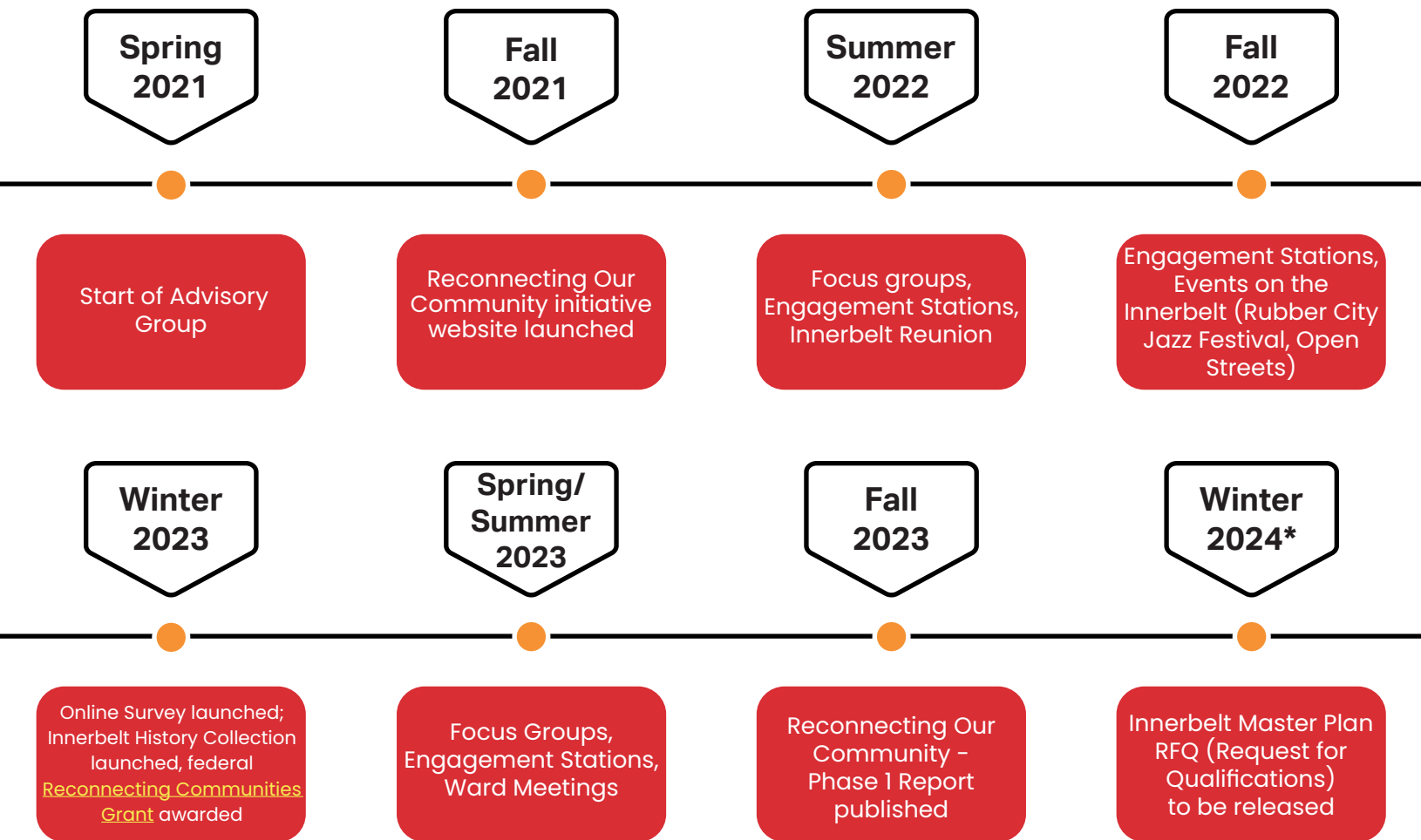




# SUMMARY OF ENGAGEMENT

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 reparative engagement processes that recognizes that communities are the experts in their needs and dreams, meets people where they're at, and lets 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.



\*Tentative schedule

# Engagement To Date

- + Engaging with community members began in 2021, first through conversations with the Advisory Group made up of representative stakeholders, including former residents. To date, the group has met 24 times.
- + Starting in 2022, a broader citywide engagement began:
- + Not including the website visitors, over 1,000 people were directly engaged through the initiative's engagement efforts

<b>1</b> historical archive to preserve the stories of the old neighborhood	<b>1</b> virtual panel to discuss the history and stories of the old neighborhood	<b>1</b> reunion event for former residents of the neighborhood
<b>1</b> presentation to the City Council's Planning and Economic Development Committee	<b>2</b> events on the Innerbelt	<b>5</b> City Council Ward meeting workshops (with materials distributed at others)
<b>13</b> focus groups (including several with former residents of the old neighborhood)	<b>18</b> engagement stations at events around Akron	<b>25</b> oral history interviews (14 of which are currently in the Innerbelt Collection)
<b>600+</b> participants in a citywide survey (online and paper)		<b>8400</b> total visitors to the project website (akroninnerbelt.com)

# Engagement Activity Types

**Engagement Stations** - Activations at existing community events

**Focus Groups** - Facilitated conversations with specific groups to understand priorities, concerns and perspectives

**Civic Meetings and Presentations** - Formal project presentations and workshops at City-organized meetings

**Innerbelt Reunion** - A gathering of former residents who were displaced by the original construction of the Innerbelt

**Innerbelt Events** - Temporary activations and community-centered events on the Innerbelt

**Surveys** - In-person and online questionnaires used to collect qualitative and quantitative data

**Website** - The digital home base for the Reconnecting Our Community Initiative

**Dedicated Mailing List** - Project updates and relevant event promotional details are emailed out to the mailing list periodically

**Innerbelt History Archive** - A digital collection which includes an oral history collection of stories from displaced residents, a grief primer and photographs and maps relating to the history of the neighborhood

\*Please see Appendix for more detailed descriptions of each of these activities types



Credit: Akron Recording Company

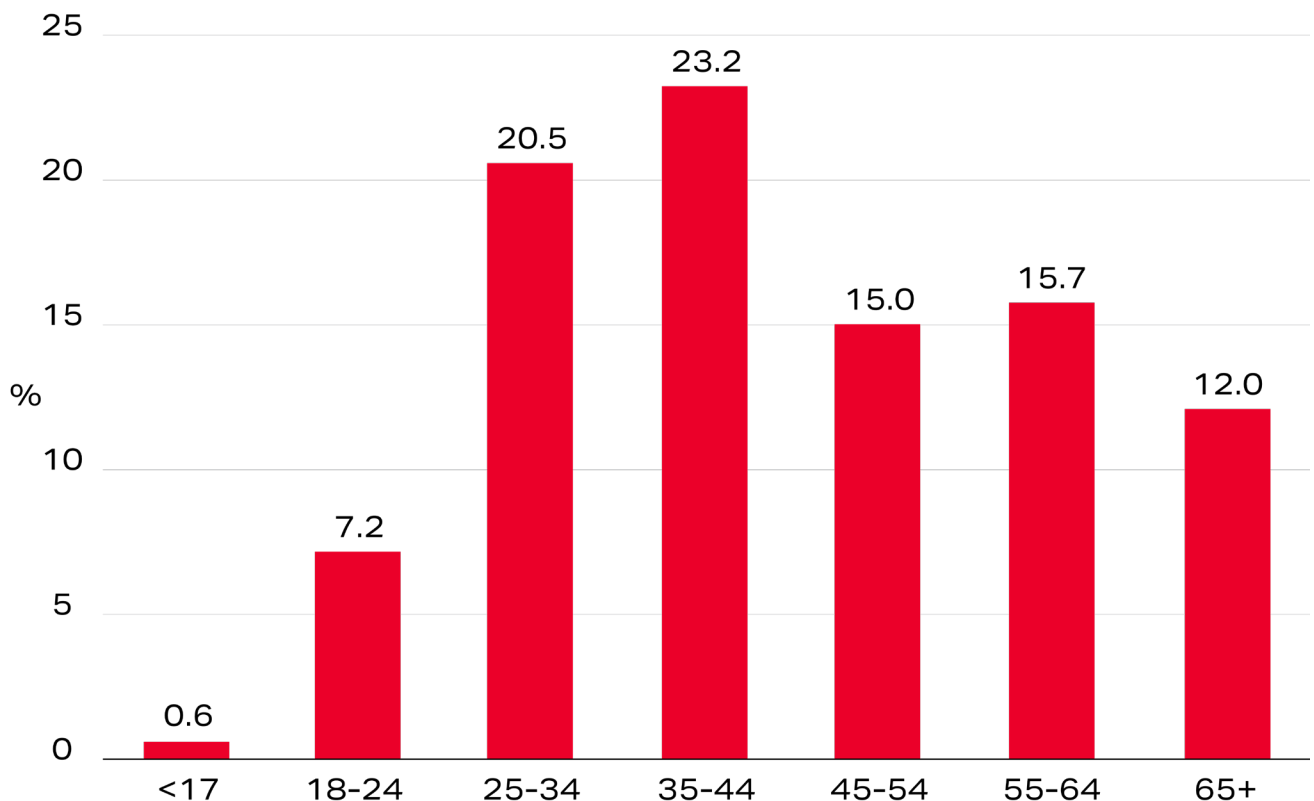
# Who We Heard From

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 Akron's 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.

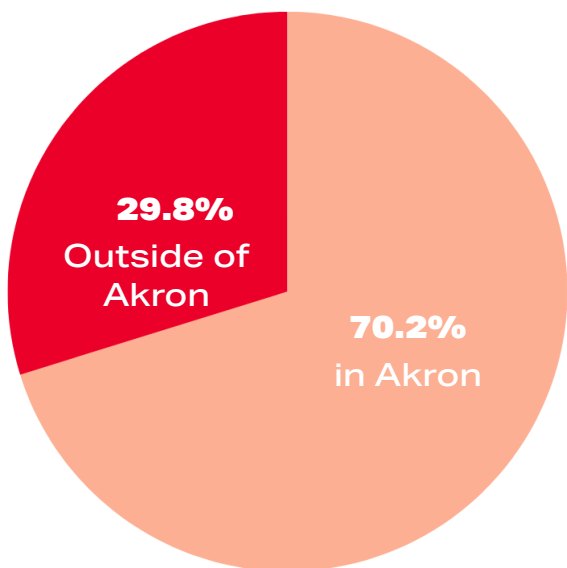
*These graphics do not reflect those who attended focus groups and ward meetings but did not fill out a survey.*

**Figure 1: How old are you?**



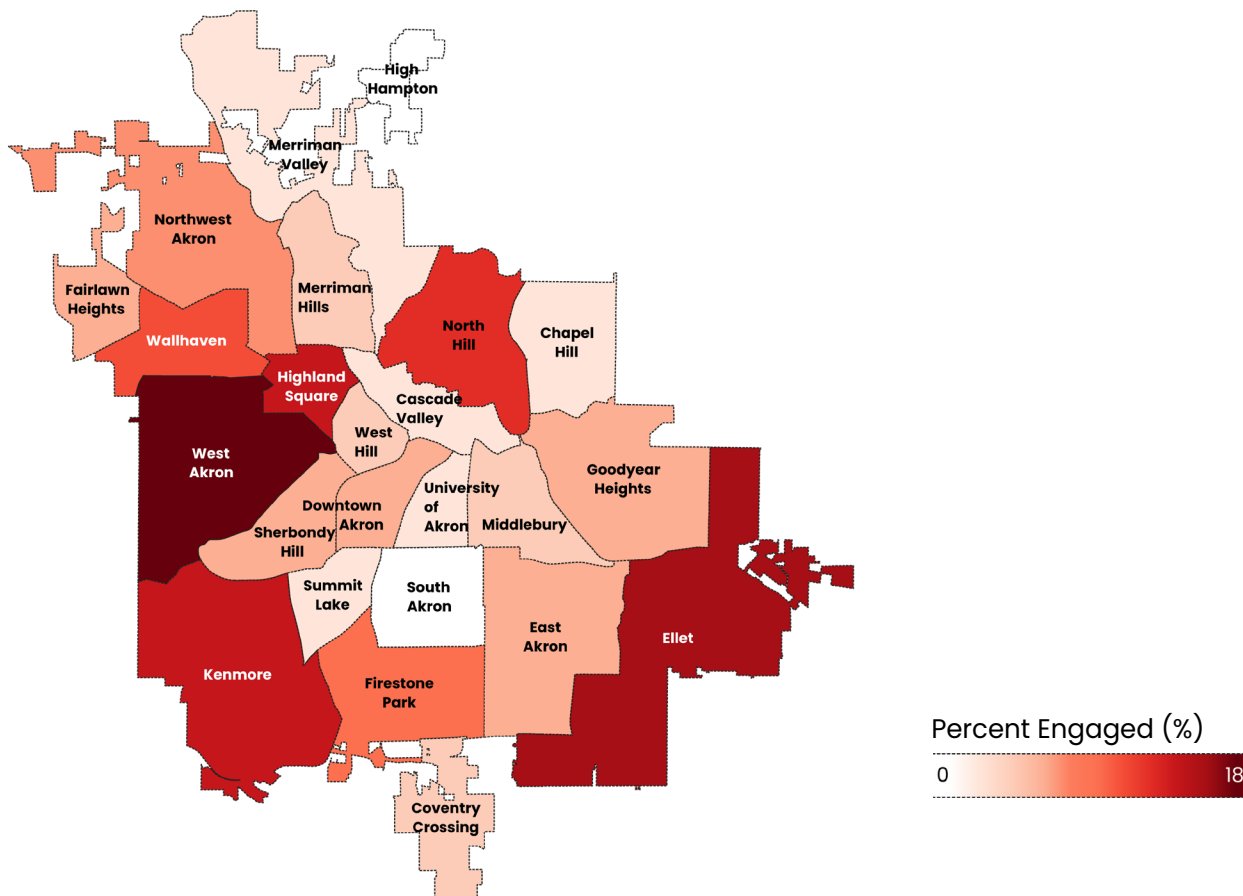
Source: Innerbelt Reconnecting Our Communities Survey, Innerbelt Project Survey, Open Streets, and Online Survey

Figure 2: Where do you live?



Source: Innerbelt Reconnecting Our Communities Survey, Innerbelt Project Survey, Open Streets, and Online Survey

Figure 3: Engagement by neighborhood



Source: Innerbelt Reconnecting Our Communities Survey, Innerbelt Project Survey, Open Streets, and Online Survey



## 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. Where appropriate, the perspectives of specific constituencies have been highlighted.

### Neighborhood Memories

When former residents speak of the neighborhood that the Innerbelt displaced, they speak with great fondness of a place that felt like “a village.” Neighbors looked out for one another, children played safely in the streets, and people felt a deep sense of safety and belonging.

The neighborhood was vibrant and walkable. There was relatively easy access to life’s basic needs, including places to get food and supplies, do shopping, and repair things. Many of the shops were Black-owned, but there were also businesses leftover from when the neighborhood was a Jewish community. All were an integral part of the neighborhood fabric. People spoke fondly of Wooster Avenue and Howard Street as meccas of activity, resources, and culture.

Food was an important element of the neighborhood’s life. Places like Sparkle Market, the Custard Stand (debates still reign about the best flavor!) and Margie’s (with its legendary barbecued pig’s feet!) were beloved spaces and featured prominently in a number of recollections. There were stories of fertile backyard gardens and lush street fruit trees. All maintained by residents and often sources of abundant food sharing. There were many successful people who called this place home or were born here and went on to do great things.



Credit: Bill Samaras, Akron Beacon Journal

***“I know it was a magical moment and I wanted my grandkids and to have that same moment that we had, to feel safe where you are.”***

*- Former resident*

They were politicians, influencers, business owners, and pastors. It was a neighborhood rich in social and cultural wealth.

***“But the actual day to day putting it [moving] together was was stressful. Not only the move itself but moving away from your support systems that had been in place for so long.”***

*– Former resident*



Credit: Akron Beacon Journal

## ***Innerbelt Construction***

For many former residents, there's deep sadness, anger, and grief at the destruction of the neighborhood. Many stories were shared about the lack of choice about leaving, the hardship of that departure, and the inadequate funds that people received in return for their property. In one poignant story, a former resident talked about watching people come before the houses were knocked down to remove and take away the woodwork and other valuable materials. None of which was compensated for.

Residents were not the only ones who faced relocation challenges. Many business owners struggled to relocate and reopen successfully, meaning the displacement from the neighborhood often meant the end of their business. Cultural institutions, like houses of worship, also report receiving inadequate funding to relocate.

There was and continues to be a deep sense of grief about these losses. For some, it was engaging in this process that opened the door to engaging with that grief. And for many, the grieving process remains incomplete. A key piece of that incomplete grieving is the feeling that there is insufficient knowledge and records about the scale and nature of the loss. Throughout the Reconnecting Our Community outreach, there has been a consistent desire expressed, especially from those with ties to the neighborhood, to have a fuller accounting of what was lost.

In conversations with the broader public, it was clear that knowledge about the Innerbelt's history was uneven. The knowledge increased over time thanks in part to things like this effort and the Akron Beacon Journal series (Feb 2022). Many people seemed to appreciate the opportunity to learn more about this past, and responded best when they could engage with materials that told the story of the old neighborhood and its destruction.

## *Legacy of the Innerbelt*

It was clear that for many former residents, the legacy of the Innerbelt is wrapped up in a sense of stolen opportunities and unacknowledged harms. And while it would be easy to focus on just those who were displaced, several displaced residents said that it was just as important, if not more, to look at those “who were left behind.” Residents and businesses whose properties were not needed for the Innerbelt also experienced a loss of their community as well as the enduring physical, economic, social, and health impacts. Yet, they wouldn’t have received any compensation for those losses. Displaced residents want to know what can be done for that group. Ideas offered ranged from direct compensation to access to funding for

home repair/restoring home equity to targeted investments in the surrounding neighborhood. There was also a deep desire for an acknowledgement of what was done and meaningful action to transform these areas from places that were left behind to models of the City’s commitment in investing in community healing and thriving.

Among all who were engaged, there seems to be a continuing question about the fate of the entire Innerbelt. For some, there were questions about (and desires for) closing the whole thing and returning the land to the community. But there were also some who wanted to see the full highway, including the portion vacated, return to being a highway.

Credit: Bill Samaras, Akron Beacon Journal



***“We are telling the stories of our families and my grandparents aren’t here to tell their story, but we are here to tell their story. And I really like that. Their lives had purpose. They worked hard for those homes.”***

*– Former resident*

## ***Healing + Repair***

For many former residents and their family members, this effort – and other acts to engage with the history of this neighborhood over the past 2 years – is the first time in over 50 years that they have thought and talked extensively about the old neighborhood. While reminiscing about what once was brought up a lot of joyful memories, there was also a lot of unprocessed grief around the loss. There are many, particularly in the Black community, who see the Innerbelt as a physical and emotional scar that doesn’t just require reinvestment and reimagining but also reckoning. In the words of one resident, “Geography is critical to repair.”

Throughout the engagement process, there has been a strong call for a full accounting of the impacts of the Innerbelt’s original construction (e.g., the number of homes and businesses lost, the economic impact on adjacent areas, the generational wealth impact, etc.). If anything, that call became louder in the aftermath of the killing of Jayland Walker in June 2022. For many Black residents in particular, the tragedy poked a wound that had never healed.

Despite the City’s commitment to engage in an inclusive process around the Innerbelt’s future, there were doubts and concerns expressed about the willingness to do the hard work of healing this wound. There were also fears that enough time, energy, and money wouldn’t be allocated to support that. There was a strong desire from former residents for there to be an explicit apology from the City. And the topic of reparations, or finding ways to “make people whole,” was brought up in several different forums. Addressing economic development opportunities and generational wealth for the Black community was frequently tied to this.

The idea of healing and repair was not limited to conversations with former residents and the Black community. A number of people noted that this isn’t just the story of Akron’s Black community; it’s the story of Akron. There was a strong desire to make sure that the story continues to be told and that future visions for the site are more inclusive and healing. That being said, there were some who were either neutral or not as invested in this part of the project.

# *The Innerbelt & Surrounding Neighborhoods*

For those who were able to access the Innerbelt during one of the onsite events, there was general excitement about being able to be on there. For some, there was a strong positive response in being able to connect to the history of the site. Others were more interested in the physical experience, which felt unique. Across all groups, physical access to the site was oftentimes challenging. Sometimes, it was the biggest barrier for those who didn't attend events.

Importantly, it's worth noting that we also heard that for some in the former resident community, they couldn't attend events on the Innerbelt because they still felt overwhelmed by the grief of being on that land.

The major physical marker that exists to mark the old neighborhood is the green door monument commemorating the Matthews Hotel. While it was a notable undertaking by the late local artist Miller Horns, the nature of its location and context don't do justice to it or the thing it seeks to commemorate (the neighborhood's jazz history). Some people knew about the connection between the monument and the neighborhood, but there were many others who didn't know what it was or hadn't noticed it before. For some former residents, it doesn't feel like a meaningful enough tribute to a place that was so beloved.

Residents living in neighborhoods surrounding the Innerbelt talked of the challenges of the dead-end streets, particularly on the West Akron side, and the lack of nearby amenities that could support a more livable neighborhood. There was lament that Vernon Odom Boulevard (formerly Wooster Avenue)

and Howard Street never recovered, but also concern that whatever redevelopment happens on the Innerbelt might decimate them further and cause gentrification and displacement, thereby repeating the harmful patterns of the past.



Credit: Akron Recording Company

***“You divided a neighborhood. You left the hood and the people here, and did nothing for them.”***

*- Former resident*

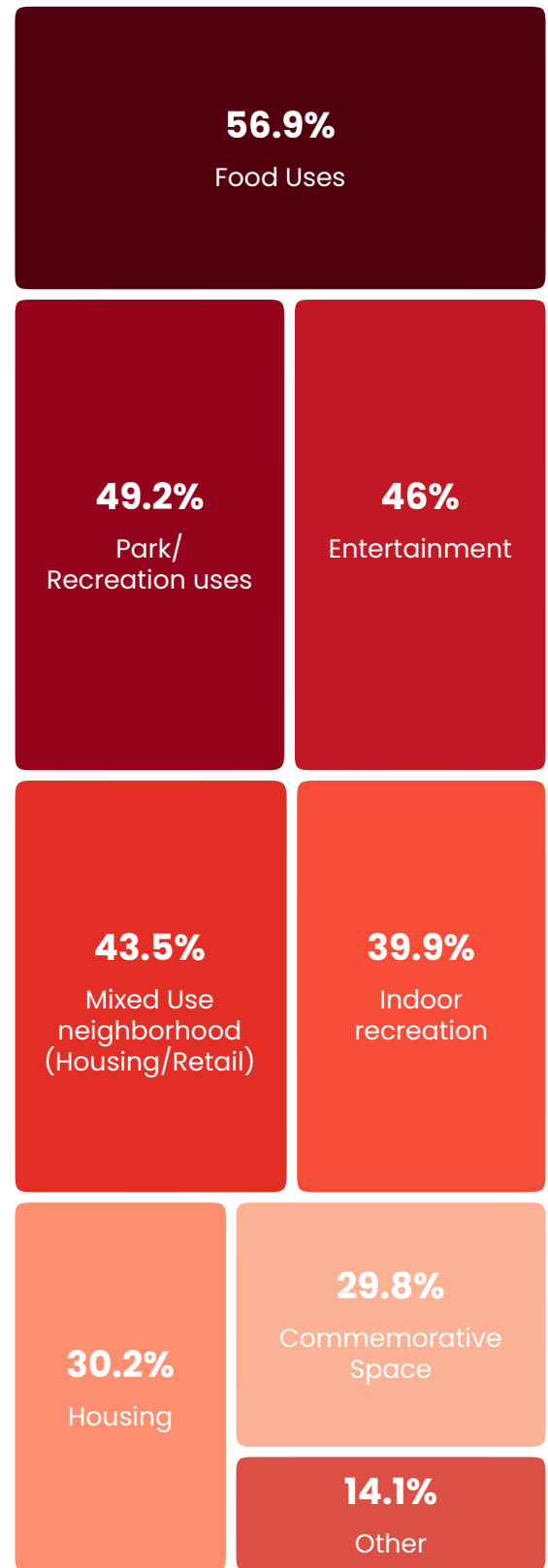
# Vision for the Future

Across all groups engaged, a common question about the future vision is *who is it for?* There was a perception among some, especially former residents and the Black community, that the City already has a plan and that those negatively impacted by the decisions of the past, will lose out again. A number of people asked how the plan would be accountable to being inclusive and healing. A few even suggested not building anything at all out of respect for what once was there and/or concern for what could be built in the future.

Among former residents, there were desires for commemoration of the past, benefits accruing to those who experienced losses of generational wealth, and a commercial and cultural corridor that prioritized Black businesses and provided entrepreneurship support for them. “Bring back Wooster Ave” was a frequent refrain. Across all groups, when retail was mentioned, it generally was for affordable neighborhood-serving retail.

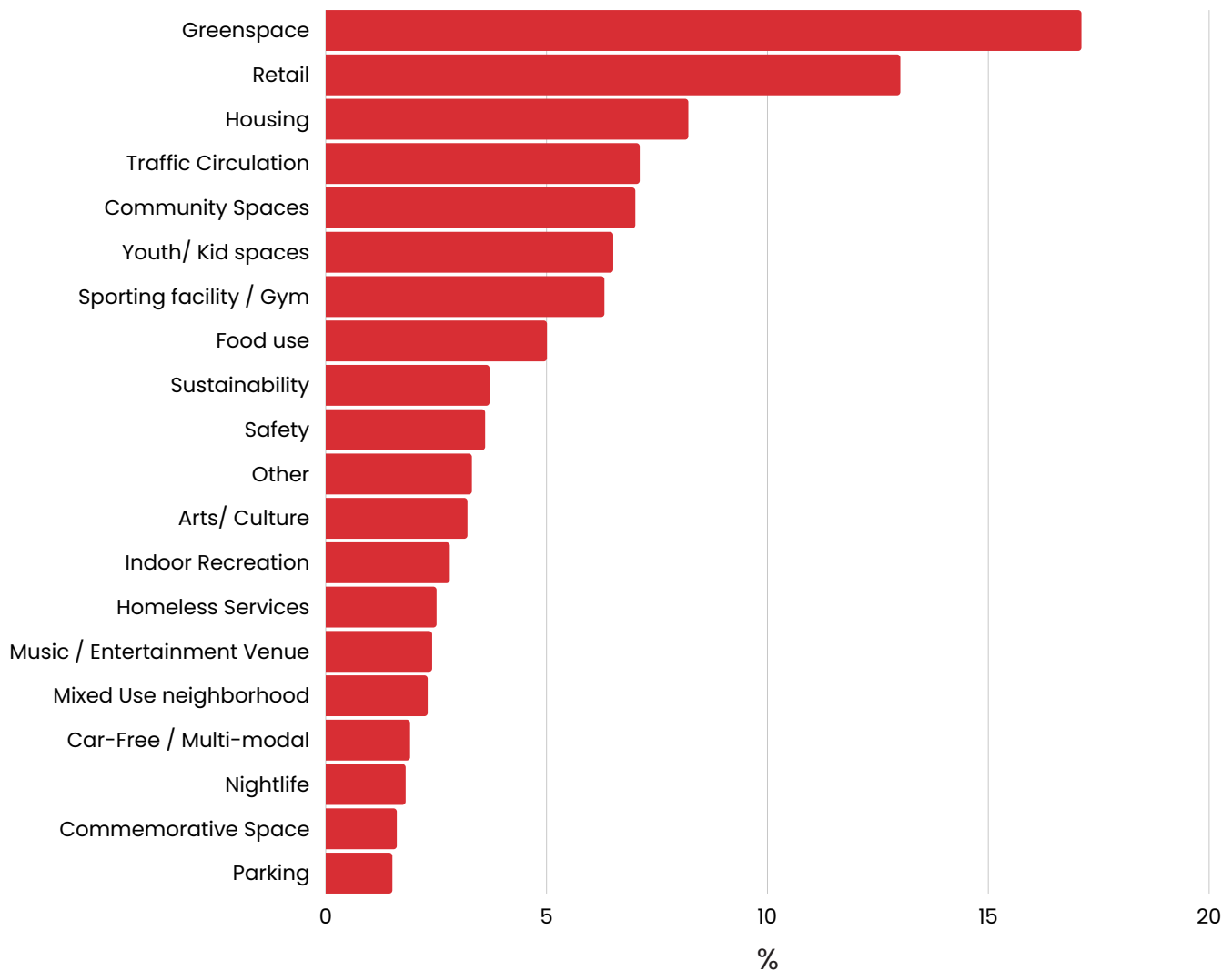
A future vision that provides young people with opportunity was also a desire expressed across all user groups. Young people (ages 14-35) were primarily engaged via three different focus groups. The teen focus groups expressed a strong desire to have more activities to do, particularly ones that don’t cost money. When polled around specific uses, entertainment, indoor recreation, and food uses ranked high. They also expressed a desire for things that allowed for multigenerational interaction, supported the community, and shared the history.

Figure 4: What are some uses you would you like to see on the innerbelt?



Source: Innerbelt Project Survey

**Figure 5: Are there amenities, resources, or spaces that you think Akron needs?**



Source: Innerbelt Reconnecting Our Communities Survey, Innerbelt Project Survey, Open Streets, and Online Survey

In the young professionals focus group, their concerns and interests echoed some of the things heard from former residents in terms of accountable visions that are intentional in their benefits and an interest in local and culturally relevant businesses (businesses that transform cultural skills, knowledge, and ideas into economically productive goods and services). They also expressed a concern about gentrification.

Gentrification also emerged as a concern for nearby residents. They asked not to be forgotten in the planning and noted that their neighborhood needs basic amenities, like a grocery store, that are physically and economically accessible. This was shared by the seniors living in nearby housing developments in particular.

# “The Innerbelt is a possibility to do something different.”

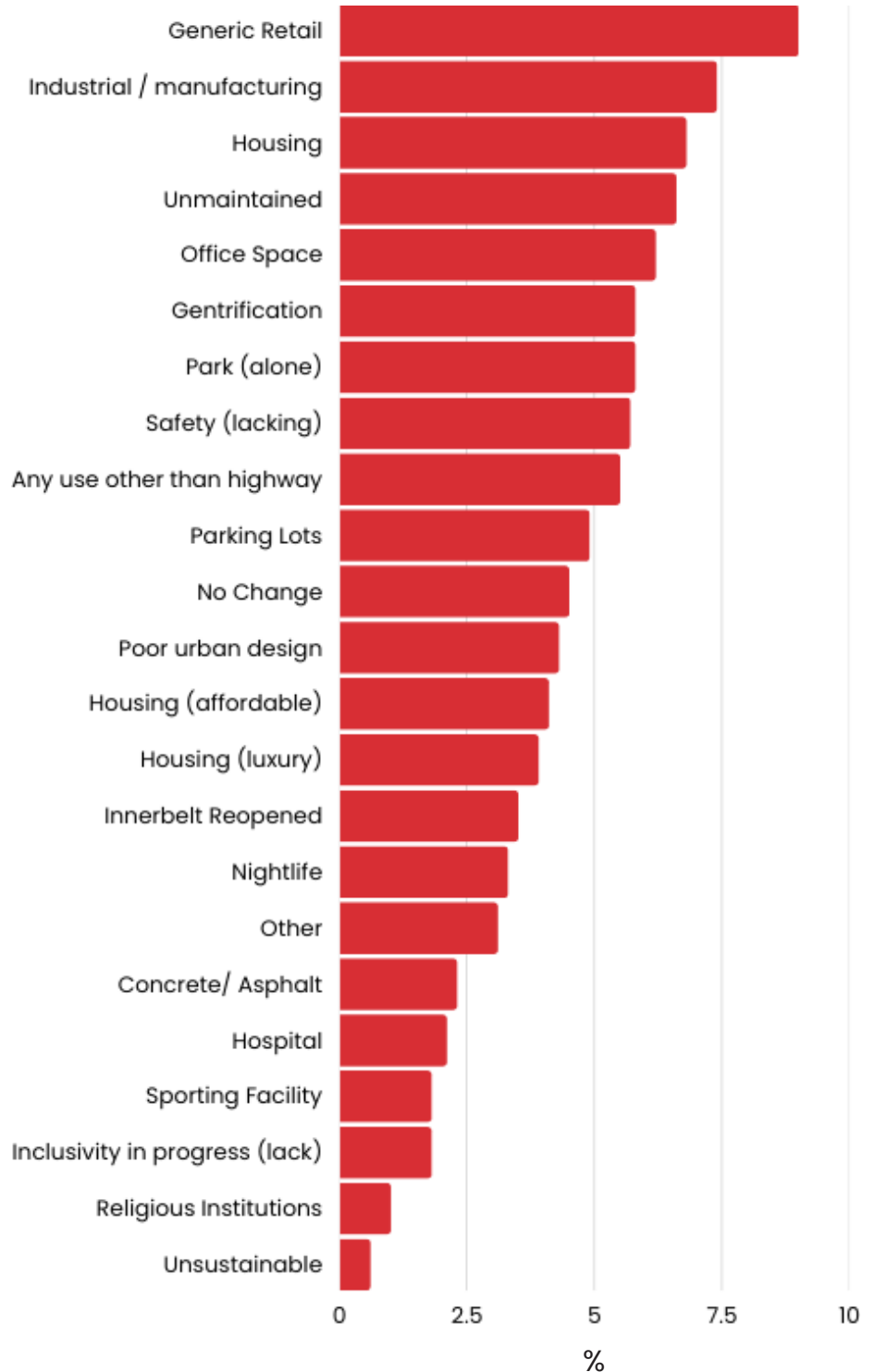
- Advisory Group member

Across all groups, in addition to the retail use mentioned above, food uses (grocery store, community garden, food hall, and farmers market), indoor and outdoor recreation, and park, ranked high. Housing also ranked high, particularly in focus group conversations. There were varying opinions about type of housing, but low to mid-rise housing and affordable home ownership came up frequently in discussions. There was a general dislike of high-end housing.

There was also a strong desire not to see a “developer giveaway.” Conversations often focused on a desire for high-quality investments that “lift the community up” and ensuring that some of the economic benefits generated by development support the equity aims of the project.

There wasn’t a particular use that was overwhelmingly rejected though in addition to high end housing, there wasn’t much love for industrial uses, office towers, or big box retail/malls.

**Figure 6: Is there anything that you would NOT want to see here?**



Source: Innerbelt Reconnecting Our Communities Survey, Innerbelt Project Survey, Open Streets, and Online Survey





Credit: Liz Ogbu

## *Process and Engagement*

Process, engagement practices, and communication came up in the Advisory Group meetings as well as many of the focus group and ward meeting conversations. There were strong desires for not letting outside voices or an arbitrary schedule (including, but not limited to, election cycles) drive the process, but rather taking the time to do it right. At the same time, there was also the sense that there can be a lot of talk with nothing actually happening; tangible actions were highly valued. There was some wariness across several constituencies about the City's commitment to a long-term public process. People want any process to have deep and intentional engagement, reach a broad constituency but with a clear priority on those who have been or will be the most impacted, and have an explicit accountability practice.

The call for accountability was particularly strong. It was tied to requests for clear expectations, ongoing frank conversations, and transparency about how and when decisions are made. There were also requests for moments of pause and reflection where processes (and decisions) can be recalibrated if needed.

There's interest in seeing what has been done in similar cities around this issue.

But that was also balanced by wanting to make sure that the ideas proposed are not cookie cutter, but rather, specific to Akron. In other words, look at examples in terms of what could Akron learn about what went right, what went wrong, and how the City can improve upon those examples.

When it comes to continued efforts around the Innerbelt, there was a clear desire to have a comprehensive engagement process as part of it. Some people expressed worry about the process to hire a master planning team and future businesses (e.g., contractor) to work on the project. They wanted to make sure that the City didn't place cost – rather than the capacity to do the work in the right way – as the primary driver for selection. There were also requests for equity to play a role in the selection.

Healing and repair also factored into conversations about the process and engagement. While figuring out the physical future of the Innerbelt is important, a number of people wanted to make sure that there's a process in place and actionable efforts to continue to provide space to address grief and healing. They also want an understanding of the past to continue to be a vital part of envisioning the future.

# Key Takeaways

The data described in *What We Heard* 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.**

Previously, former residents often didn't talk about the history of the neighborhood, so the conversations set up by this and related processes over the past two years have been the first time in decades that some of these stories are seeing the light of day. There's a lot of unprocessed grief connected to that harm. If that grief isn't considered or honored, it will cause more harm, erode project support, and impair future opportunities. Any visioning process needs to operate with an understanding that that will impact the perspectives, concerns, and desires that people show up with. An inclusive and healing vision of the future should include funding and access to tools and programs that can support people to process and heal that grief.

## **2. More work is needed to socialize the Innerbelt's past.**

Because this is a story that isn't necessarily deeply known/held within the broader Akron community, it's important to find ways to anchor it as part of the collective story of Akron. This is more than just the story of those who were displaced or Akron's Black community. Furthermore, the story needs to be the starting place for continued conversations about the future of the Innerbelt, regardless of the constituency that is engaged. Otherwise, healing and landing on a collective vision will be extremely difficult.

## **3. Fully accounting for the past is seen as an essential part of moving forward.**

Early in the research for this project, it became clear how little broadly accessible documentation about the neighborhood (and the Jewish neighborhood that preceded it) was available. For former residents, that gap feels like a proxy for how their community was not valued. It's hard to be explicit about the repair if we can't be explicit about the harm. Starting to create platforms for reconstructing this history and documenting what was lost have resonated with former residents because these feel like tangible acts of repair. There's a clear hunger for those efforts to continue and intensify.



Credit: Liz Ogbu

#### **4. The harm is generational so the healing must be too.**

It has been over 50 years since construction on the Innerbelt began. The impact, from the loss of generational wealth to the presence of generational grief, was not limited to the moment of displacement. Any efforts around healing need to take a holistic and generational lens. That lens isn't only about reflecting on the past and present but also the investment in the future. It's notable how many people – across all constituencies engaged – brought up the importance of creating a better (and healed) future for youth.

#### **5. The loss of the neighborhood deeply intersects with a loss of belonging.**

The neighborhood that the Innerbelt displaced was vibrant and community-centered. It contained many of the things that we talk about when we describe what a model neighborhood could look and feel like. When former residents reminisce about it, there's an underlying sense that it provided spaces where they felt seen and like they belonged. It was a poignant loss and rarely found again.

#### **6. Creating an inclusive neighborhood means being intentional and explicit about belonging.**

A place where you feel seen and like you belong is deeply desired by multiple constituencies. But there's also a fear from the groups who have been historically marginalized that the particular ingredients needed to support their sense of belonging (e.g., accessible opportunities for housing and entrepreneurship; culturally relevant businesses and institutions; and accessible programming that addresses some of the pain points or desires of their communities) will not be prioritized. It's clear that outcome would feel like pouring salt in the wound.

Across all constituencies, there was a desire for inclusive spaces. People sometimes assume that addressing a particular group's needs causes segregation and exclusivity. But in truth, when we're intentional about making sure we create something that works for the group that has been most impacted (marginalized or harmed), we generally create something that works for all.

## **7. Let shared values and equitable outcomes drive the conversation on use.**

In general, people seemed open to multiple uses for the site. That seems appropriate given the scale of 30 acres. What stood out more than specific uses were the values and principles that should govern future efforts (e.g., economic restoration and equity, reckon and reconnect) and outcomes (e.g., address generational wealth losses, create platforms for youth opportunity). By being clearer on shared values and equitable outcomes, there can be a framework that enables decisions that are intentional and responsive.

## **8. The City needs to be more vocal about its stance on the Innerbelt.**

The decision to vacate a portion of the Innerbelt wasn't always widely known, understood, or bought into. Comments, particularly on some of the project surveys, ranged from why it was closed at all to why wasn't the entire thing closed. The gap of time between when the vacation happened and when this engagement process began likely played a role. Having more active and consistent communication from City officials about its intentions, commitments, and activities could help.

## **9. Community engagement requires moving at the speed of trust.**

Trust around processes like this was a very sensitive topic. Because of the Innerbelt's past and other events in Akron, there was often a trust deficit that this process had to navigate and that any future work will also have to confront. Any process will need to calibrate to where people are at and keep in mind that consultation without accountability only deepens the trust gap. There's a deep interest in processes that don't feel like transactions, maintaining ongoing and transparent communication, and having explicit clarity around decision-making and accountability.

## **10. Community engagement also requires being mindful of context and nimble in approach.**

In trying to construct an engagement process for a site with such a contested history and varied constituencies, it became clear that a distributed and intentional engagement approach was necessary. It was important to identify priority groups for more targeted engagement, diversify engagement channels (e.g., not relying solely on community meetings), and leverage the networks of Advisory Group members and community partners. Evaluating who was engaged and who was missing at regular intervals greatly helped inform adjustments in the process, but there were also some communities that would benefit from more explicit engagement in future phases (See Recommendations).

Credit: Liz Ogbu



# 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 two years by the teams working on those efforts.

Because engaging with this kind of site and this kind of project is new to Akron, some examples of precedents have

also been included in this section. That being said, there is no such thing as a perfect precedent. If anything, it's just as important to learn from what *isn't* working as well as what is with the case studies provided. Finally, several of the recommendations are intended to serve as ideas for exploration, meaning that there's further work needed to make them actionable. Their inclusion here is to support a common understanding of what could happen, and a jumping off point for:

Engaging further in healing and reparative efforts

Developing relevant strategies, policies, and partnerships

Seeking funding

Engaging a master plan team and developing the master plan for the site

Creating implementation and accountability frameworks

To support moving forward, an [implementation matrix](#) containing initial thoughts on potential next steps and partners for these recommendations can be found in the Appendix.

# 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

### 1. An apology from the City would help advance the healing process.

A frequent desire expressed from former residents was for an apology for what was done. Though the Innerbelt and other urban renewal projects occurred long before the current administration, any administration inherits some of the legacy of its predecessors and has a role to play in reconciliation. The apology would not be a panacea, but it could be essential to building trust in the process. It has helped move the needle in cities as varied as St. Paul, Minnesota and Knoxville, Tennessee.

#### Precedent: Knoxville City Resolution

RESOLUTION NO. R-367-2020

**RESOLUTION**

A RESOLUTION OF THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF KNOXVILLE TO ACKNOWLEDGE AND APOLOGIZE FOR PAST ACTIONS HURTING AFRICAN AMERICANS AND TO ADDRESS EQUITY RESTORATION

RESOLUTION NO: R-367-2020

REQUESTED BY: Vice Mayor McKenzie

PREPARED BY: Council

APPROVED: 12-15-2020

APPROVED AS AN EMERGENCY MEASURE:

MINUTE BOOK: 84 PAGE

Image Credit: City of Knoxville

**Location:** Knoxville, TN

**Year:** 2020

**Partners:** African American Equity Resolution Task Force; City of Knoxville, TN

**Key takeaways:**

Resolution with a formal apology & Dedicated fund to repair harm

#### Summary:

This resolution proposed by then Vice Mayor Gwen Mckenzie and unanimously approved by the City Council contains a formal apology and a commitment to raise and invest \$100 million over a ten-year horizon in Black neighborhoods that were affected and destroyed by urban renewal projects. The funding has yet to be identified but will come from local, state, federal, and philanthropic sources. The resolution also establishes the African American Equity Restoration Task Force as an oversight body to the funds. The 11 taskforce members include leaders in business, education, community development and other sectors.

## 2. Provide tools to support impacted communities with their grief.

There's a clear need among those impacted by the Innerbelt's original construction for support in holding and processing their grief. Events like the Innerbelt Reunion were helpful and should continue to be invested in. Working with grief specialists to think through additional tools, events, and rituals such as healing circles will be useful. This might be an effort best undertaken by community organizations but processes like the development of the master plan will need to be mindful of and at times intersect with these activities.

## 3. Undertake a more comprehensive effort to document the loss.

Transforming what preceded the Innerbelt from a forgotten history to an honored one feels critical to creating a future vision rooted in healing. But the gaps in knowledge about what once was there and what was lost remain a barrier. This includes not only the neighborhood's Black history, but its Jewish and indigenous roots as well. Investment should continue in efforts like Innerbelt History Collection. An impact study should be undertaken to quantify the loss more accurately (e.g., number of homes, business, and institutions displaced; property value depreciation; amount of generational wealth loss).

### Precedent: ReConnect Rondo – Past Prosperity Study



Image Credit: Design by Melo and Visuals by James

**Location:** St. Paul, MN

**Year:** 2015 – Present

**Partners:** ReConnect Rondo, Yorth Group, City of St. Paul, US DOT Reconnecting Communities

#### **Key takeaways:**

Equity in Historic Context & Guiding Principles for Restorative Development.

#### **Summary:**

The construction of the I-94 freeway began in 1956 ripping through Rondo, the largest Black neighborhood in St. Paul and taking 700 homes with it. As part of the ReConnect Rondo project, a Past Prosperity Study was completed. This report quantifies the scale of loss the Rondo neighborhood and its residents bore—namely in homeownership, home equity, and intergenerational wealth—as a result of the highway.



#### 4. Launch a parallel reparative process.

Reparations can be a complicated and controversial topic but it's one that was brought up in a number of conversations, focus groups, and ward meetings. Some type of repair is needed as part of the healing process. It should look beyond just financial redress and look at issues of physical space, physical and mental health, housing and education policy, etc. What was done in the past can't be undone, but there can be an intentional community-engaged process to think through how we can support those impacted by the past harm to be whole. It's possible that any redevelopment plan might lack support from key constituencies if this reparative effort is not also undertaken. Create a working group that can start to think through what this might look like.\*

*\*While there are a couple of cities that have implemented reparations-related policies (e.g., Evanston, IL and Portland, OR) and others that are in the midst of thinking through the policies and process (e.g., Asheville, NC, Knoxville, TN, and San Francisco, CA), it's still fairly new both in conversation and implementation. There's no one example of a city that has yet achieved a model reparations framework. In some respects, this is because despite dealing with a systemic issue, what constitutes repair is a very localized question. Some categories of issues that need to be addressed include understanding the spectrum of time to be covered by the process; identifying the types of harm to be covered by the process; documenting the scale and legacy of the harm; identifying how to determine who was impacted or whether to create different levels of impact; articulating what does redress (direct forms of amends), reconciliation (citywide education and engagement in the grieving, reckoning, and healing), and repair (long-term policy and systems change) look like; and creating an infrastructure for implementation and accountability.*

##### Precedent: Evanston Local Reparations Fund

### City of Evanston Local Reparations: Restorative Housing Program

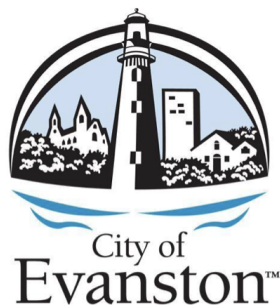


Image Credit: City of Evanston

#### Key takeaways:

Value capture and redistribution & Restorative Housing Program Guidelines

**Location:** Evanston, IL

**Year:** 2019 - Present

**Partners:** City of Evanston

#### Summary:

Passed in November 2019, this is considered the first governmental reparations program for Black residents in the United States. The program was developed by an appointed Reparations Committee and seeks to repair harm faced by Evanston residents (and/or their direct descendants) who lived in Evanston and were impacted by discriminatory zoning and housing policies enforced by the City between 1919 and 1969. Funded through donations and revenue generated from taxes on the sale of cannabis and real estate transfers, eligible residents may receive up to \$25,000 to be used to purchase a home, on home improvements, or towards mortgage assistance. In 2023, and in response to advocates concerns, the program was expanded to include an option of direct cash payments. As of August 2023, over \$1 million in reparations with more than \$400,000 pending in mortgage assistance and/or construction costs has been awarded to program beneficiaries.

## 5. Anti-Displacement efforts need to be in place before construction.

Gentrification was mentioned as a fear across most constituencies engaged. If future uses trigger displacement, it would be a tragic repeat of the past harm. And support for any future plan will be hard if people feel this potential is not meaningfully addressed. Planning for the Innerbelt should intersect with the Downtown Plan Update's equitable planning effort and the West Akron Plan's stabilization and revitalization efforts. The City should also implement a program geared explicitly at the surrounding neighborhoods that monitors changes, raises and earmarks funds for stabilization support (e.g., property tax relief, home repair or business investment grants or zero interest loans, homebuyer coaching for renters, and community land trusts), and collaborates with local organizations to support anti-displacement goals.

### Precedent: Atlanta Beltline

The Atlanta BeltLine Partnership facilitates the construction of more parks and trails, engages the community for public support, and empowers residents by connecting them to resources to help them live, work, and thrive in BeltLine neighborhoods.

Learn more and apply at [beltline.org/retentionfund](http://beltline.org/retentionfund).

Questions? Call (404) 418-7846.

Connect with us! Email: [info@atlblp.org](mailto:info@atlblp.org) Phone: (404) 446-4404 Website: [beltline.org](http://beltline.org)

**PROPERTY TAX HELP**  
Legacy Resident Retention Program

"The Legacy Resident Retention Program means peace of mind for our family. It's an opportunity for us to remain in our home as the BeltLine and all the community changes, and allows us to have a safe and stable future."  
-Tanika Hester, South Atlanta neighbor

With mounting concerns about rising home values and property taxes, the Legacy Resident Retention Program is a resource to cover current homeowners' property tax increases through the tax year 2030.

You may be eligible:

- Is your annual household income below 100% of the area median income (AMI)?
- Do you own your home and live in a property that meets Upper Moretta/Westside Park, RDA/Cascade, and The Heritage Communities of South Atlanta?
- Have you lived in the home before March 2022 and are you currently living there?

Years of property may be eligible, as long as they meet all other qualifications.

Special thanks to our program supporters:

- ROBERT W. WALKER TRUST FOUNDATION
- GEORGIA POWER
- AMERICAN EXPRESS
- TALL FRUITLANDS, INC.
- AARP

Image Credit: Atlanta Beltline

### Key takeaways:

Legacy Resident Retention Program

**Location:** Atlanta, GA

**Year:** 2005 - Present

**Partners:** Atlanta BeltLine Partnership; Atlanta BeltLine, Inc

### Summary:

A 22-mile loop trail largely built atop a former railroad right-of-way that connects 45 Atlanta neighborhoods. The public investment has spurred mixed-use private development along the project footprint unprecedented in the City of Atlanta. As part of the project, a Legacy Resident Retention Program was launched which provides property tax relief through 2030 for residents living in Beltline adjacent neighborhoods in south and west Atlanta. Program seed funding was provided by philanthropic donations and it is estimated that \$12.5 million in relief will be provided to residents over 10 years. It is worth mentioning that the LRRP was established in 2020, 15 years after the release of the initial Atlanta Beltline Redevelopment Plan, partly in response to gentrification pressures.

## 6. Connect what happened/is happening here to Akron's story of itself.

The year 2025 marks Akron's bicentennial. It's important to mark all that make Akron what it is, both the highs and lows. The story of this neighborhood should be incorporated into the bicentennial storytelling, events, and assets (e.g., the History Center). There also need to be efforts to support the next generation to know this history. Create partnerships with Akron Public Schools to incorporate it into the local history curriculum.

## PROCESS + ENGAGEMENT

### **1. Link up with like-minded cities to participate in a community of practice.**

Akron is learning how to do this work differently. It doesn't have to do this alone. Seeking out the other Reconnecting Communities Program grantees or joining existing groups like the High Line Network would be helpful to the process here. The team that participates in the network should be a mix of City staff and community partners so that the knowledge gained and shared is more reflective of the collaborative effort needed to do this work. Reimagining the Civic Commons is a good model for what this could look like and its benefits.

### **2. Create a more consistent communications framework.**

Continuing to keep momentum around people's interest, engagement, and trust in the Innerbelt redevelopment process requires having regular and consistent communication, not just milestone updates. Develop a staffing plan to update the website regularly, release a bimonthly or quarterly digital and print newsletter, and issue an annual "State of the Innerbelt" report.

### **3. Hire a master plan team with deep engagement capacity.**

Recent community-engaged efforts in Akron, including this one, have had to incorporate more varied, nimble, and dynamic engagement activities to gain traction. The next phase of the Innerbelt work will require even more of this. It needs a project team with a demonstrable and successful track record of creative and inclusive engagement in relevant contexts.

### **4. Adapt the Advisory Group process to better support the ongoing process.**

The Advisory Group has been essential in supporting the process so far to be responsive to the Akron history, context, and engagement needs. It is a significant asset and should continue as this work moves into the next phase. Adjustments are needed to strengthen its capacity and to enable a broader set of people to engage with it. Its membership needs to expand to include representatives of currently underrepresented voices (e.g., younger residents, immigrant communities, and historically marginalized entrepreneurs) and key institutions and services (e.g., youth serving organizations, adjacent healthcare institutions, and parks and transit organizations). There also needs to be more public-facing work. The group should start having quarterly public meetings and share updates on their work in the project newsletter. To better engage with Akron youth, it may also be worth creating a separate Youth Advisory Group that meets on a quarterly basis.

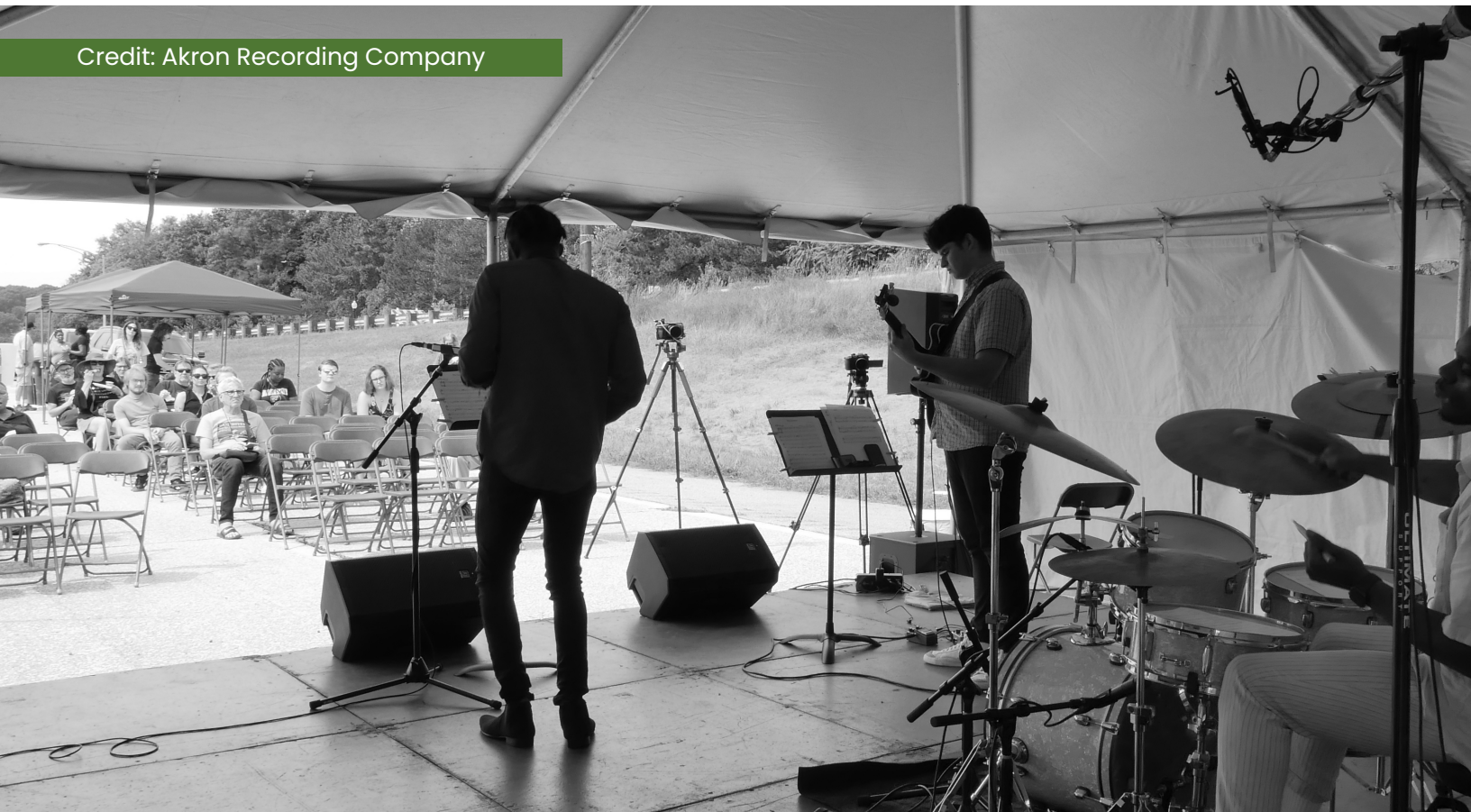
## **5. Partner with youth and their advocates to advance a youth engagement strategy.**

There was strong desire across all age groups for whatever happens on the Innerbelt to include activities that can engage and support youth and young adults. Young Akron residents know best the types of activities and spaces that address their needs and desires. Being intentional about involving them in all stages of planning and implementation of on-site activations, programming, and future planning related to the Innerbelt will help ensure that the preferences and perspectives of young people are reflected. Additionally, meaningfully involving youth in these processes allows them an opportunity to build an exciting destination for themselves in Akron. AmeriCorps VISTA, FUSE Executive Fellowship, or similar programs may provide opportunities to increase staffing capacity with a position dedicated to youth engagement and in a way that can be more financially viable for the City of Akron or a strategic partner.

## **6. Leverage events as a channel for master plan engagement.**

Beyond community meetings, focus groups, ward meetings, and digital platforms, events can be a great opportunity for engagement, especially since residents who were displaced by the Innerbelt (and earlier urban renewal projects) were displaced all over Akron. But it's also a helpful way to connect with a broader cross section of Akron residents, including those who are time poor. Use events as ways to connect with people about the master plan effort. Examples of events include neighborhood celebrations and markets, Downtown events, events on the Innerbelt, cultural celebrations, and events by nonprofits and houses of worship.

Credit: Akron Recording Company



## INTERIM USE

### 1. Develop an Interim Use strategy.

Interim use, or temporary activation, programming can be used to activate the Innerbelt and provide a community benefit in the short term. But to be successful, it needs a thoughtful and intentional framework that operates under a clear set of values and equitable principles as well as has an operating budget and dedicated and skilled staff, partners for community programming, a communications strategy, and a design strategy that addresses issues of access, mobility, aesthetics, and safety. Examples of potential uses that could work include recreation, food and cultural markets, art and history installations that showcase and commemorate the past, and community gardens.

#### Precedent: NOW Hunters Point



Image Credit: Anne Hamersky

#### Key takeaways:

Interim use community engagement strategy & Phased construction

**Location:** San Francisco, CA

**Year:** 2013

**Partners:** Studio O; Envelope A+D; RHAA; Pacific Gas and Electric

#### Summary:

Transformation of a 31-acre former power plant site into a community asset in the historic African American neighborhood of Bayview Hunters Point through a multi-year, deeply community engaged interim-use strategy. Immediate site improvements included soil remediation, an asphalt cap, and site upkeep all underwrote by the utility. Some of the temporary activations and site improvements included an annual circus, an annual back-to-school event, a shipping container turned into a story collecting booth, and food distribution and COVID testing during the pandemic. These efforts also helped inform the design of the first permanent piece of the long-term redevelopment, a shoreline park along the edge

### 2. Keep the site safe and open without being exclusionary.

Develop rules and regulations for site use that are rooted in equity. Given that the short-term use of this space may share some similarities with outdoor open spaces, it may be worth partnering with Metro Parks to develop them. To help the rules and regulations demonstrate respect for the past, Advisory Group and former residents should also be consulted. Make the rules and regulations public so everyone is clear on expectations.

### **3. Outside uses should provide a benefit to the project and the community.**

The Innerbelt may be attractive for events outside of the official interim use program. A process for vetting these additional events should be developed as part of the Interim Use Strategy. Explore a usage fee for some types of uses (e.g., for profit uses). Fees generated should go into a targeted fund to support Innerbelt-related activation, engagement, and healing. (Refer to the Community Restoration Fund under Long-Term Recommendations for additional uses for these fees.)

## **PHYSICAL SITE**

### **1. Create an interim site improvement plan.**

Some clear improvements to the site are needed to support interim programming including improving site access, mobility, parking, and signage. Opportunities for where and how have already been identified through discussions with the City's Services team. Examples of opportunities include creating better onsite access near the north end and looking at pedestrian access near the Towpath Trail entrance. Improvements should also include longer term beautification efforts (e.g., wildflower planting and selective removal of the concrete pavement) and be informed by the Interim Use Strategy.

### **2. Deploy site investments smartly.**

Make improvements with an eye to the larger context. In other words, if there are improvement ideas that are experimental, think about placing them on areas that are likely to be torn up in the medium-term. Conversely, if there's an improvement that requires significant investment or will be an asset with long-term community benefit (e.g., community garden), place it on a section of the site that is likely to remain untouched or further out in the redevelopment timeline. Finally, make sure all improvements have a stewardship plan and budget.

### **3. Leverage the site to share the history.**

The site currently has nothing on it that tells the neighborhood history. There is the Matthews Hotel monument nearby, but its effectiveness is compromised by its location and surrounding context. And since its intent was to commemorate Akron's jazz history, it was never set up to tell this wider story. Work with artists, former residents, and youth to create dynamic installations of visual storytelling that tell the broader history.

## FUTURE PLANNING SUPPORT

### 1. Release RFQ for master plan team with experience that aligns with key issue areas identified in this research.

Hiring the team that will develop the master plan is the next major milestone in future planning of the site. Beyond a team skilled in equitable community-engaged processes, it will be important for the team to also have demonstrable and successful experience in restorative efforts involving contested or urban renewal sites, creative and equitable economic strategies, and high-quality design interventions informed by an equity lens.

### 2. Design a transparent and community-engaged selection process.

Trust is a marathon not a sprint. There will not be trust in the master plan if the process of selecting who works on it isn't clear to the public. Socialize the RFQ process and timeline as well as selection criteria. A best practice would be to provide an opportunity for community members to weigh in. Some possible strategies for that include having a couple members from the Advisory Group review applications and/or serve on the interview team. A more robust community-engaged selection process could also include narrowing the applicants into a final shortlist and having an event in which those teams do public presentations about their previous work and proposed process. Those presentations would then get scored by the community members in attendance and factored into the selection decision.

Credit: Akron Recording Company



# 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.

Existing vacant parcels near the Innerbelt or some parcels of land created through redevelopment could become part of a community land trust. This could help create a foothold of affordability and could be explored alongside home buyers' clubs and other affordable homeownership programs. It doesn't need to only be focused on residential; commercial community land trusts should also be explored.

### 2. Explore creating a Community Restoration Fund.

The impacts of displacement were widespread. One strategy for repair is to create a fund built in part through philanthropic sources and economic capture of a percentage of the developer fee or other onsite transactions. Funding can be made available to constituencies impacted by the Innerbelt and uses could range from college tuition grants to business startup grants to down payment assistance. The reparative process mentioned in the Short-Term Recommendations should inform the goals and look of this and identify other community initiatives – like BEWCA (Black Economic and Wellness Coalition) – that could be partnered with.

#### Precedent: Percent for Art



**Year:** Various

**Location:** National

**Partners:** Various

**Key takeaways:**

Value capture and redistribution

**Summary:**

A fund development strategy that dedicates a small percentage (1-2%) of a capital project's budget to public art. The works of art commissioned are typically coordinated by an arts organization, include community involvement, and are created onsite or in some cases developers may pay into a fund for works to be created within a designated district. Percent-for-Art programs can be applied to public and private development. Knoxville, Oklahoma City, Philadelphia, Tampa, and the states of Ohio and Minnesota all have active Percent for Art policies and programs.

*Note: The City of Akron formally established a Public Art Program in 2020 that includes a 1% for art funding policy.*





### **3. "Bring back Wooster Avenue."**

Across engagement activities this was a frequent refrain, which reflects both a desire to see a nexus of Black-owned and Black-centered businesses that was articulated by some and a desire for a walkable retail district that was articulated by a broader set of respondents. A trip to North Hill provides an opportunity to experience businesses connected to some of Akron's immigrant communities regardless of who you are. An entrepreneurial zone that prioritizes Black businesses could do the same. (Activities related to this recommendation should be undertaken in tandem with the implementation of the West Akron Plan and Downtown Plan Update to create strategies and programs that are complementary to concurrent efforts to support existing and new Black-owned and Black-centered businesses and commercial corridors in this area of town.)

## PROCESS + ENGAGEMENT

### **1. Build a long term accountability structure for the Innerbelt redevelopment.**

At 30 acres, the Innerbelt is a significant redevelopment undertaking. The master plan should explore what is the appropriate stewardship vehicle for redevelopment (e.g., Office of Integrated Development, Elevate Akron, or a separate special purpose district). Whatever route is taken, it should be transparent to the public, grounded in equitable principles, and not a duplicative of or competitive with an existing structure. There should also be a formalized set of commitments co-created with community members that articulate a shared vision, set of values, and accountability process that will govern redevelopment.

### **2. Create equitable rules and conditions for developer engagement.**

The scale of the site means that developers will need to be engaged as partners in redevelopment. For community members to trust the process, there needs to be more explicit consultation and information about what's allowed for development and a clear public development and approvals process that aligns with equitable development practices. Incorporating the City's business/supplier diversity policies and establishing a baseline set of equity commitments that developers must meet would also be helpful. These could be developed as part of the master plan process as well as be informed by the equitable development strategies being explored by the Downtown Plan Update.

### **3. Use a phased approach for redevelopment.**

The Innerbelt redevelopment will be a huge and complex undertaking in a dynamically changing economic and social environment. As the urban renewal legacy has shown, basing redevelopment on a singular vision immune to changing conditions can be detrimental. The master plan and other connected efforts will need to think about a phasing strategy with internal and external reflection points and decision frameworks.

### **4. Consider what may be possible with more of the highway decommissioned.**

The master plan will focus on the area currently vacated, but it should also include an additional study area that includes the active highway. While the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) doesn't control what happens on the already vacated portion of the Innerbelt, they do control the land of the still functioning roadway south of Exchange Street. Any future vacation is at their discretion. There are no guarantees that additional stretches of the highway will be vacated, but it would be good to be prepared should this opportunity become viable.

## LONG TERM USE

### 1. Think neighborhood, not just a singular use.

The scale of the site is such that it would be hard for a long-term singular use, including a park, to be successful. Across all the groups engaged, people often named multiple uses that they wanted to see. Outdoor and indoor recreation was often in the mix, but food uses (grocery store, farmer’s market, and community garden), neighborhood retail, and entertainment also ranked high. Housing was mentioned a lot anecdotally. In short, many of the uses are what you would find in a neighborhood. The site has the size to accommodate that level of development. It should be noted that there wasn’t a consensus about undesired uses, though big box stores, high end housing, and office towers were generally disliked for the site. As potential long-term uses are considered, the ability of potential uses to create equitable outcomes for the groups impacted by the historic harm (displaced and impacted residents and the Black community) should be factored into the decision-making.

#### Precedent: I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement Project

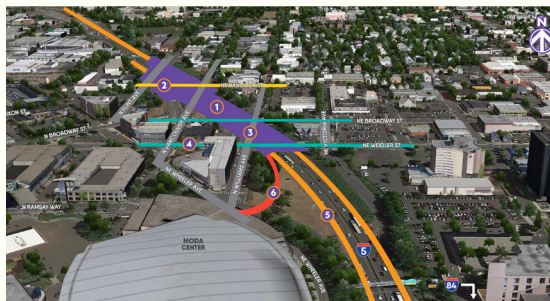


Image Credit: Oregon Department of Transportation

**Location:** Portland, OR

**Year:** 2017

**Partners:** Albina Vision Trust; Portland Bureau of Transportation; City of Portland; ODOT ; US DOT Reconnecting Communities

**Key takeaways:** Highway cover/land bridge with development on top & Safety and congestion improvements

#### Summary:

A 1.8-mile project area which proposes a new highway cover that reconnects the urban fabric, a Green Loop bike connection, and multimodal street improvements. The project seeks to award \$250 million in contracting opportunities to Disadvantaged Business Enterprises. Notable here is that the Albina Vision Trust, a nonprofit community development organization, was awarded \$800,000 through the Reconnecting Communities grant while the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) proposal was unsuccessful. Advocates point out that while both proposals involved a land bridge over the I-5, ODOT’s proposal would have ultimately expanded the freeway and only called for open space above.

## 2. Compliment, not compete with adjacent neighborhoods.

Active large-scale planning or development processes are happening in several adjacent neighborhoods, including Downtown and West Akron. When the Innerbelt was built, its impact was not limited to its physical boundaries. Any redevelopment will have a similar scale impact. Creating a more healed vision means looking at a development strategy that bridges the divide the highway caused and works in concert with – not against – adjacent revitalization efforts. This will be particularly important when considering potential uses, zoning, infrastructure, and physical connection points.

## 3. Honor the site (and its past) as sacred.

Although commemoration did not rank high on surveys, it's clear from conversations that former residents in particular want some sort of robust and permanent commemoration integrated into the future of the site. This can be done in a variety of ways, from a specific memorial to art installations and murals that speak to the cultural history and is integrated more broadly into the design to a museum celebrating Akron's Black culture and that could serve as a physical home for the Innerbelt History Collection. The master plan should think of commemoration both as a jumping off point for design inspiration as well as identify some potential strategies/locations for this to occur.

### Precedent: Seneca Village Outdoor Exhibit



Image Credit: Central Park Conservancy

#### Key takeaways:

Interpretive signage (digital and physical) & Commemoration

**Location:** New York, NY

**Year:** 2019

**Partners:** Central Park Conservancy; Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History; Conservancy and Hunter Research, Inc.

#### Summary:

Seneca Village was the predominantly Black neighborhood which was cleared between 1855 and 1857 to make way for the construction of Central Park. Before the Civil War, Seneca was the largest community of Black American homeowners in the state of NY. Project partners have collaborated to reintroduce the history of Seneca Village to Central Park visitors through interpretive signage, events, and ongoing site research including excavations and sharing of found artifacts.



#### 4. Create an African American Cultural District.

Although there are several neighborhoods in Akron that have a strong presence of the Black community, there's not one that has a distinction as a defined cultural district. Given the history of this area, this could be an ideal location to do that. Like the Wooster Avenue recommendation above, this isn't about creating a place of exclusion but one of pride and an invitation to celebrate one of the cultures that makes Akron what it is.

##### Precedent: Black Cultural Zone



Image Credit: Amir Aziz

##### Key takeaways:

Collective impact network approach involving 50+ community and faith based organizations

**Location:** Oakland, CA

**Year:** 2014

**Partners:** EastSide Arts Alliance (ESAA)

##### Summary:

50 square blocks in East Oakland where an arts and culture strategy is utilized for activism and neighborhood stabilization and preservation. The Black Cultural Zone has an articulated focus on countering disparate impacts, decades of disinvestment, and the threat of displacement of Black residents of East Oakland. Current work includes advocacy for flexible spaces for emerging entrepreneurs, a vacant building intervention, and the creation of a community development corporation.

*Note: Knowing that there is still a vibrant African American identity in West Akron, this should be developed to work in tandem not as a replacement or erasure of efforts there.*

## PHYSICAL SITE

### 1. Explore strategies that restore the street grid.

Akron's topography means that it has a geography of "sunken" places (e.g., Lock 3, Lock 4), But the conditions around the Innerbelt make its sunken nature isolating. And responding to the desires for reconnection that have been expressed, restoring the grid in some part feels essential. Strategies that seem viable are partially filling in the highway, constructing a land bridge, or regrading the site. Given the site's scale, it's likely that deploying some combination of these strategies will be the strongest direction. Whatever new land is created to reconnect the grid will need to support buildings, not just open space. As noted elsewhere, the design and development framework that governs this new land should be governed by equity goals and policies.

#### Precedent: I-490 Inner Loop



Image Credit: Stantec

#### Key takeaways:

Below-grade freeway removal & Phased approach in removing segments of the Inner Loop

**Location:** Rochester, NY

**Year:** 2012 - 2018

**Partners:** City of Rochester; NYSDOT; Stantec Consulting Services Inc.; Catco Construction

#### Summary:

A 1.5 mile section of below-grade freeway was vacated, filled in, and replaced with an at-grade boulevard freeing up to 9 acres of land for redevelopment. Maintenance of the Inner Loop would have been more expensive than creating the at-grade boulevard. Some neighbors and advocates see this project as a missed opportunity, saying that what once was a moat is now a wall of new, high-end apartments without open space or neighborhood connectivity. There are also community concerns around pedestrian safety due to the width of the new Union St. corridor and traffic speeds. Since 2021, the City of Rochester has been planning similar improvements for the Inner Loop North segment which could claim up to 22-acres of developable land and parkspace.

### 2. Rethink the surrounding roadways.

The network of streets surrounding the Innerbelt contribute to the isolation of the site. The flyover ramps that connect Mill and Glendale should be removed. Dart and Rand should be studied for either rerouting or conversion into signalized, two-way, pedestrian-friendly streets. Prioritize reducing some of the dead-end streets on the West Akron side. As the grid is restored, create pedestrian-friendly throughways between Downtown and West Akron where possible.

### 3. Embrace the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail as a connector.

The number of parks, public spaces, and trails that Akron has are noteworthy. And likely, there will be a signature park as part of the Innerbelt's redevelopment. The Towpath Bridge, which is an important connective thread to the Ohio and Erie Canal Towpath Trail and Akron neighborhoods, cuts through the heart of the site. It's an asset that should be incorporated into the site's reimagining.

### 4. Don't forget about sustainability.

Climate responsive solutions should be an important consideration in what gets created and aligned with other initiatives in the city. Make sure climate-related investments also integrate an equity lens. For example, look to see if some of the infrastructure investments needed for Innerbelt redevelopment can also support the increased sustainability of nearby neighborhoods or if training programs for "green" jobs generated by redevelopment can prioritize people from historically marginalized communities.

Credit: Tom Marvin, Akron Beacon Journal





## 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.



# APPENDIX

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# 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

<b>NAME</b>	<b>COMPANY/ ORGANIZATION</b>	<b>TITLE</b>
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 Bennett Williams (Akron Children's Hospital).

# RECOMMENDATION IMPLEMENTATION MATRIX

## *Healing and Repair*

Recommendation	Suggested Next Steps	Timeline	Lead Partners
An apology from the City to help advance the healing process	Consult other cities that have done an apology process like St. Paul and Knoxville; Advance conversations internally and with key local partners that are needed to reach this decision	Short (1-3 years)	City
Provide tools to support impacted communities with their grief	Look at grief support infrastructures created or amplified in the aftermath of Jayland Walker's killing; Identify any that could be expanded or engaged to support this constituency; Identify what resources are needed to enable this	Short (1-3 years)	Faith-based organizations, Local Nonprofits, Philanthropy Sector
Undertake a more comprehensive effort to document the loss	Develop a working group that can be tasked with undertaking this work; Identify potential sources of information; Continue investing in the development of the Innerbelt History Collection	Short (1-3 years)	City, Akron Summit County Historical Society, University of Akron
Launch a parallel reparative process	Develop a working group that can look at reparative or reparations processes in other cities, identify a scope and infrastructure appropriate for Akron, and propose a process and timeline	Short (1-3 years)	City, Faith-based organizations, Local Nonprofits, Philanthropic Sector, ROC Advisory Group
Anti-Displacement efforts need to be in place before construction	Look at other cities that have undertaken comprehensive antidisplacement studies; Undertake or engage a consultant to undertake one (if study is undertaken for the entire city, make sure there's a particular focus on the at-risk communities adjacent to the Innerbelt and downtown)	Short (1-3 years)	City, Philanthropic Sector

Connect what happened is happening here to Akron's story of itself	Connect with the teams working on the Freedom Trail and bicentennial efforts and identify ways to incorporate the Innerbelt History Collection content in their work; Explore partnerships for incorporating the Innerbelt History Collection content in local school curriculum	Short (1-3 years)	Akron Summit County Historical Society, Akron Public Schools,
Turn over some city-owned land into a Community Land Trust	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief; Connect with the equitable economic development activities happening as part of the Downtown Plan Update	Long (6+ yrs)	City, Elevate Akron, Downtown Akron Partnership, ROC Advisory Group
Explore creating a Community Restoration Fund	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief; Connect with the equitable economic development activities happening as part of the Downtown Plan Update implementation	Long (6+ yrs)	City, BEWCA, Philanthropic Sector, ROC Advisory Group
"Bring Back Wooster Avenue"	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief; Connect with the equitable economic development activities happening as part of the Downtown Plan Update implementation	Long (6+ yrs)	City, Elevate Akron, Downtown Akron Partnership, Bounce, ROC Advisory Group, Black

# Process and Engagement

Recommendation	Suggested Next Steps	Timeline	Lead Partners
Link up with like-minded cities to participate in a community of practice	Identify a representative from the City and from the ROC Advisory Group that can be engaged in these forums; Join the Highline Network	Short (1-3 years)	City, ROC Advisory Group
Create a more consistent communications framework	Develop a communications plan for the Innerbelt work	Short (1-3 years)	City, ROC Advisory Group
Hire a master plan team with deep engagement capacity	Use report findings to refine master plan RFQ; Develop and publicly socialize selection criteria that gives high value for this skill set; Develop and socialize a selection process that includes community	Short (1-3 years)	City, ROC Advisory Group
Adapt the Advisory Group process to better support the ongoing process	Develop an updated structure and public engagement plan for the Advisory Group based on report findings	Short (1-3 years)	City, ROC Advisory Group
Leverage events as a channel for master plan engagement	Develop a master plan engagement plan that incorporates broad event outreach	Short (1-3 years)	Master Planning team, City, ROC Advisory Group, Downtown Akron Partnership, Ohio and Erie Canalway Coalition
Build a long term accountability structure for the Innerbelt redevelopment	Have master planning team incorporate this analysis as part of their brief; Connect with the equitable economic development activities happening as part of the Downtown Plan Update implementation	Long (6+ yrs)	City, ROC Advisory Group
Create equitable rules and conditions for developer engagement	Have master planning team incorporate this analysis as part of their brief; Connect with the equitable economic development activities happening as part of the Downtown Plan Update implementation	Long (6+ yrs)	City, ROC Advisory Group, Downtown Akron Partnership

Use a phased approach for redevelopment	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief	Long (6+ yrs)	City, ROC Advisory Group
Consider what may be possible with future vacation	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief	Long (6+ yrs)	City, ROC Advisory Group

## Interim Use

Recommendation	Suggested Next Steps	Timeline	Lead Partners
Develop an Interim Use strategy	Develop a formal plan for how the site can be used in the short term, including a vision for activities, rules for use, funding and resource needs, and communications/ outreach plan	Short (1-3 years)	City, ROC Advisory Group, Downtown Akron Partnership
Keep the site safe and open without being exclusionary	Identify - as part of the Interim Use Strategy - whether the site will be available for use by the general public outside of specific events, what uses will be allowed, what requirements and rules public users must adhere to, and a clear process to obtain approval to use the site (if needed)	Short (1-3 years)	City, ROC Advisory Group, Downtown Akron Partnership
Outside uses should provide a benefit to the project	Identify - as part of the Interim Use Strategy - whether the site will be available for large scale use by organizations or businesses, what uses will be allowed, what requirements and rules they must adhere to, and a clear process to obtain approval to use the site (if needed)	Short (1-3 years)	City, ROC Advisory Group, Downtown Akron Partnership

## Long Term Use

Recommendation	Suggested Next Steps	Timeline	Lead Partners
Think neighborhood, not just a singular use	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief	Long (6+ yrs)	City, ROC Advisory Group, Master Planning team
Compliment, not compete with adjacent neighborhoods	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief	Long (6+ yrs)	City, ROC Advisory Group, Master Planning team
Honor the site (and its past) as sacred	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief	Long (6+ yrs)	City, ROC Advisory Group, Master Planning team, Former residents, Arts Community
Create an African American Cultural District	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief	Long (6+ yrs)	City, ROC Advisory Group, Master Planning team, Cultural Organizations, Arts Community

## Future Visioning Support

Recommendation	Suggested Next Steps	Timeline	Lead Partners
Release RFQ for master plan team with experience that aligns with key issue areas	Use report findings to refine master plan RFQ; Develop and publicly socialize selection criteria that gives high value for these skill sets	Short (1-3 years)	City, ROC Advisory Group
Design a transparent and community-engaged selection process	Develop and socialize a selection process for the master planning team that includes communication to and participation from community members	Short (1-3 years)	City, ROC Advisory Group



# Physical Site

Recommendation	Suggested Next Steps	Timeline	Lead Partners
Create an interim site improvement plan	Identify - as part of the Interim Use Strategy - physical improvements needed to make the site accessible and supportive of programming	Short (1-3 years)	City, ROC Advisory Group, Downtown Akron Partnership, Philanthropic Sector
Deploy site investments smartly	Identify - as part of the site improvement plan - which areas of the site should receive which level of investment based on an understanding of potential short and long term site needs	Short (1-3 years)	City, ROC Advisory Group
Leverage the site as a way to share the history	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief	Short (1-3 years)	City, ROC Advisory Group, Akron Summit County Historical Society, Arts Community
Explore strategies that restore the grid	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief	Long (6+ yrs)	City, ROC Advisory Group, Master Planning team
Rethink the surrounding roadways	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief	Long (6+ yrs)	City, State, ROC Advisory Group, Master Planning
Don't forget about sustainability	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief	Long (6+ yrs)	City
Embrace the Towpath as a connector	Have master planning team incorporate analysis of this as part of their brief	Long (6+ yrs)	City, County, ROC Advisory Group, Ohio Erie and Canalway Coalition

# Glossary of Terms

*Some of the terms used in this report may not be familiar to everyone reading it. In an effort to increase accessibility and a common understanding, here are definitions for several key terms.*

## **Accountability**

Willingness to accept responsibility and make amends for harmful past actions or mistakes made by an individual, organization, group, or a governmental body.

## **Belonging**

The state of feeling valued and welcome in a place.

## **Displacement**

The act of having limited or no choice but to permanently leave one's home, place of business, or community due to either direct (e.g., through the confiscation, inhabitability, or destruction of one's property) or indirect (e.g., through inability to keep up with rising costs as a neighborhood changes) causes.

## **Eminent Domain**

A governmental power which allows for the taking of private property--with compensation and without consent of the owner-- for a public use. In the case of the Innerbelt, homes, businesses, and places of worship were seized and demolished in order to build the highway.

## **Equitable Outcomes**

A results-based approach that goes beyond solely looking at economic output or real estate development as the measure of success and instead focuses on achieving just and fair impact for historically disadvantaged people, groups, and communities as a key metric of success.

## **Equity**

Just and fair access to resources, application of public policy, and opportunity to thrive. Equitable processes take into account historical exclusion and differences in power between groups of people when determining a path forward.

## **Generational Wealth**

Valuable items such as residential property, businesses, cash investments, or other financial assets that are passed down within a family.

## **Gentrification**

A form of neighborhood change where a neighborhood transitions from low economic value to higher economic value via changes in population, housing stock, resources and amenities. The way that it typically manifests is with wealthier new residents moving into poorer, historically disinvested neighborhoods taking advantage of lower property values (and often proximity to urban centers) while propelling new higher-end development which raises costs for longtime residents. Gentrification has tended to cause displacement of vulnerable residents and businesses as well as both cultural and economic erasure.

## **Grief**

Deep sadness after a significant loss. Although our society typically associates grief with the loss of a person or relationship, it can also be connected to the loss of a place.

## **Healing/Repair**

The intimate relationship between race and space means that there are often unprocessed emotional, economic, and physical wounds from previous planning and policy decisions (regardless of whether they are from the distant or recent past). Healing those harms and reimagining a more just future requires a commitment to collective and place-based repair in how projects are undertaken, how policies are created, and how decisions are made.

## **Inclusive Process**

A project approach which invites, acknowledges, and meaningfully involves the voices and perspectives of those who are directly impacted and groups like BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities, low-income residents, youth, and others who are not typically involved in planning efforts.

## **Interim Use/Temporary Activation**

Non-permanent, events, programs, structures and other improvements performed on a site while it awaits long-term redevelopment. When these activities are community-serving, they can offer an opportunity to engage community members on the actual project site, deliver near-term community benefits, and generate insights around how people use the site which can inform future permanent development.

## **Master Plan**

A robust, long-term design and policy document that provides a long-range vision for a site, neighborhood, or city. It can guide an understanding of the aspirational goals for a project, the constraints and opportunities to be negotiated by the redevelopment, potential transformations of the site, and the type of uses that are to be accommodated in the redevelopment. It also can begin to identify suitable locations for the variety of uses, from housing to commercial to open space. Once complete, a master plan enables an organization to have conversations with city staff about zoning and planning issues, regulatory agencies about policy issues, and financial institutions about funding needs. Most importantly, an ideal master plan provides a tool for a community to have conversations about its vision for itself prior to the development of more specific building and landscape designs.

## **Placekeeping**

Active preservation and stewardship of existing spaces and programs considered to be of cultural value by those who inhabit a local neighborhood.

## **Placemaking**

Creative community development strategy which seeks to revitalize underutilized spaces and turn them into neighborhood assets, often through art, cultural and social activities, and the physical infrastructure to support them.

## **Redevelopment**

Substantial renovation or construction of a new building, structure, park, or other land use usually after demolishing previously existing structures on the same site.

## **Redlining**

A New Deal era discriminatory urban planning practice where the federal government, via the Home Owners Loan Corporation, produced riskmaps of cities across the United States in order to determine loan worthiness. Neighborhoods were ranked and color coded from Blue (Best) to Green (Still Desirable) to Yellow (Definitely Declining) to Red (Hazardous) largely based on the concentration of Black residents, people of color, and low-income households.

## **Reparative Process**

A place-based project approach which seeks to center those who were previously harmed by or excluded from previous activities or development in future physical, programmatic, and policy development processes. The goal is to create outcomes that are both broadly inclusive and directly benefit that constituency, thus making them whole again.

## **Spatial Justice**

The idea that justice has a geography and that every human being deserves equitable access to the resources, opportunities, and outcomes that can support a thriving life.

## **Urban Renewal**

An infamous program, often motivated by the influx of federal funding and which was at its height in the 1950's and 60's, that aimed to demolish large swaths of cities that were deemed as blighted or slums. In many cities, Black neighborhoods were often most impacted, displacing thousands of residents, and wiping away memories, homes, businesses, houses of worship and social ties in the process.

## **Vacate (In the context of the Innerbelt)**

The act of terminating the existence or vehicular use of a road, street, or highway (completely or partially) so that it may be used for another purpose.

# Engagement Activity Types

*These are detailed descriptions of the various ways we engaged community members whose ideas and preferences about the future of the Innerbelt informed the development of this report.*

## **Engagement Stations:**

[Engagement stations](#) are activations that happen at existing community events in Akron. These pop-ups are opportunities to connect with and obtain feedback from a range of Akron residents who might not necessarily attend a Innerbelt-specific community meeting. They usually take the form of a table or booth and have materials on hand about the project. They are touchpoints for interactive data collection. These events encompass a mix of weekday and weekend events. Some past examples of engagement station events include: the Summit Lake Neighborhood Farmers Market, the Ohio and Erie Canal Park Community Concert Series, the Akron Sakura Cherry Blossom Festival, and the West Akron Parade.

## **Focus Groups:**

[Focus Groups](#) are dedicated stakeholder conversations held with a group of individuals who represent specific demographic populations within Akron. They were particularly effective in reaching elders who were former residents of the area. These in-depth, semi-structured conversations help to better understand the priorities, concerns, and perspectives of various groups with relation to the Reimagining the Innerbelt Initiative. Several focus groups were visited more than once over the past year, and repeat engagement is something that participants valued and was connected to trust in the process. Examples of focus groups include former residents who were displaced by the Innerbelt, seniors living in the Alpha Phi Alpha and AMHA properties near the Innerbelt, Akron Urban League Young Professionals group, high school youth, and Bible study groups.

## **Civic Meetings and Presentations:**

These are project presentations at City-organized meetings. The city council ward meetings were a particularly useful way to connect with a broad set of constituents. This form of engagement often involves a brief overview of the Reconnecting our Community Initiative, engagement with the stories of the history of the Innerbelt and the neighborhood that preceded it, and an opportunity for dialog. Examples of Civic Meetings that the team participated in include the Planning and Economic Development Committee of the Akron City Council, and meetings in Wards 1, 3, 4, 5, and 8.

## **Innerbelt Reunion:**

The 2022 inaugural Innerbelt Reunion was co-hosted by the Reconnecting our Community Initiative, the Akron Urban League, the Akron Beacon Journal and many other community and faith-based organizations. This event was centered on those who were directly impacted or displaced by the original construction of the Innerbelt and their relatives and descendants. Its goal was to hold space for harm and grief of loss while beginning the process of healing and future visioning. Some of the event activities included: crowdsourced historic photo identification, mapping businesses and streets that were demolished, speeches and commemoration, and an opportunity to record stories of the neighborhood that preceded the highway.

## **Innerbelt Events:**

These community-centered events involve temporary activations on the section of the Innerbelt that has been decommissioned and returned to the City of Akron. Usually taking place between the Towpath and Center Street Bridges, Innerbelt Events provided an opportunity to invite people to physically experience the Innerbelt in its current state and solicit feedback on potential future land uses for the site. It allowed us to prototype potential future uses on the site as well as gain vital learning experience around improvements needed to make site use viable. The two events held were the Innerbelt stage of the Rubber City Jazz Festival and Open Streets @ the Innerbelt (in collaboration with Akron Recreation and Parks division).

## **Surveys:**

Two different surveys were used during this phase of the project. An initial broad survey was deployed to get a basic understanding of potential desired and undesired uses. That survey was first deployed as a paper survey at in person engagements and then via an online survey through the Reconnecting Our Community website. A second later survey focused on getting greater clarity around preferred uses and was distributed at in-person engagements.

## **Website:**

The [Akron Innerbelt website](#) is a digital home base for the Reconnecting Our Community Initiative. On the site, visitors can sign up to the project's mailing list, view a gallery of archival photos of the Innerbelt, listen to oral histories, and learn more about the community engagement activities.

## **Dedicated Mailing List:**

The project [mailing list](#) has been developed over the last 2+ years and includes contact information for all those who signed up in-person or virtually to receive updates on the Reconnecting Our Community Initiative. Project updates and relevant event promotional details are emailed out to the mailing list periodically.

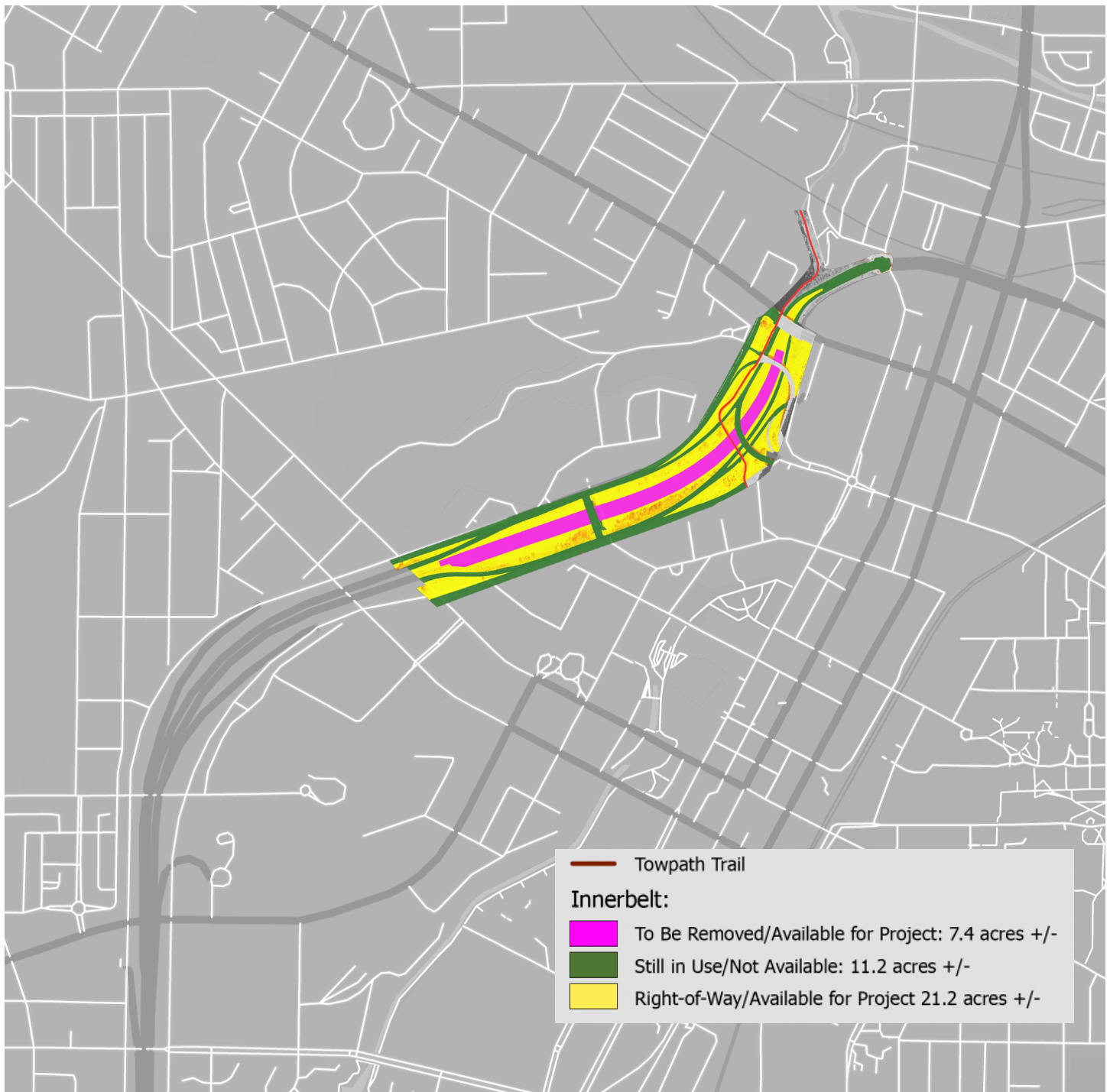
### **Innerbelt History Collection:**

One of the initial challenges of the project was an insufficient aggregation of materials about what existed prior to the Innerbelt. Having a collective sense of that history is vital for moving forward in a way that is healing and just. What's more, with many of those who lived in the old neighborhood now being elders, it became critical to assemble that history while they're still around to share their memories. The archive is a digital collection housed on [Summit Memory](#), a website stewarded by the Special Collections Division of the Akron-Summit County Public Library. The centerpiece of the archive is an oral history collection that illuminates both the joy of what once was there and the sadness of its destruction. The archive also includes other collateral including a grief primer and photographs and maps relating to the history of the neighborhood.

# Context Maps

## Project Site Footprint

The project area currently available for redevelopment is the stretch of the Innerbelt between Market and Exchange Streets. In addition to the actual roadway, the grassy areas on either side of the roadway are also available, bringing the overall land area to just under 30 acres. Rand and Dart Avenues, which border both sides of the highway, are currently still active roadways.

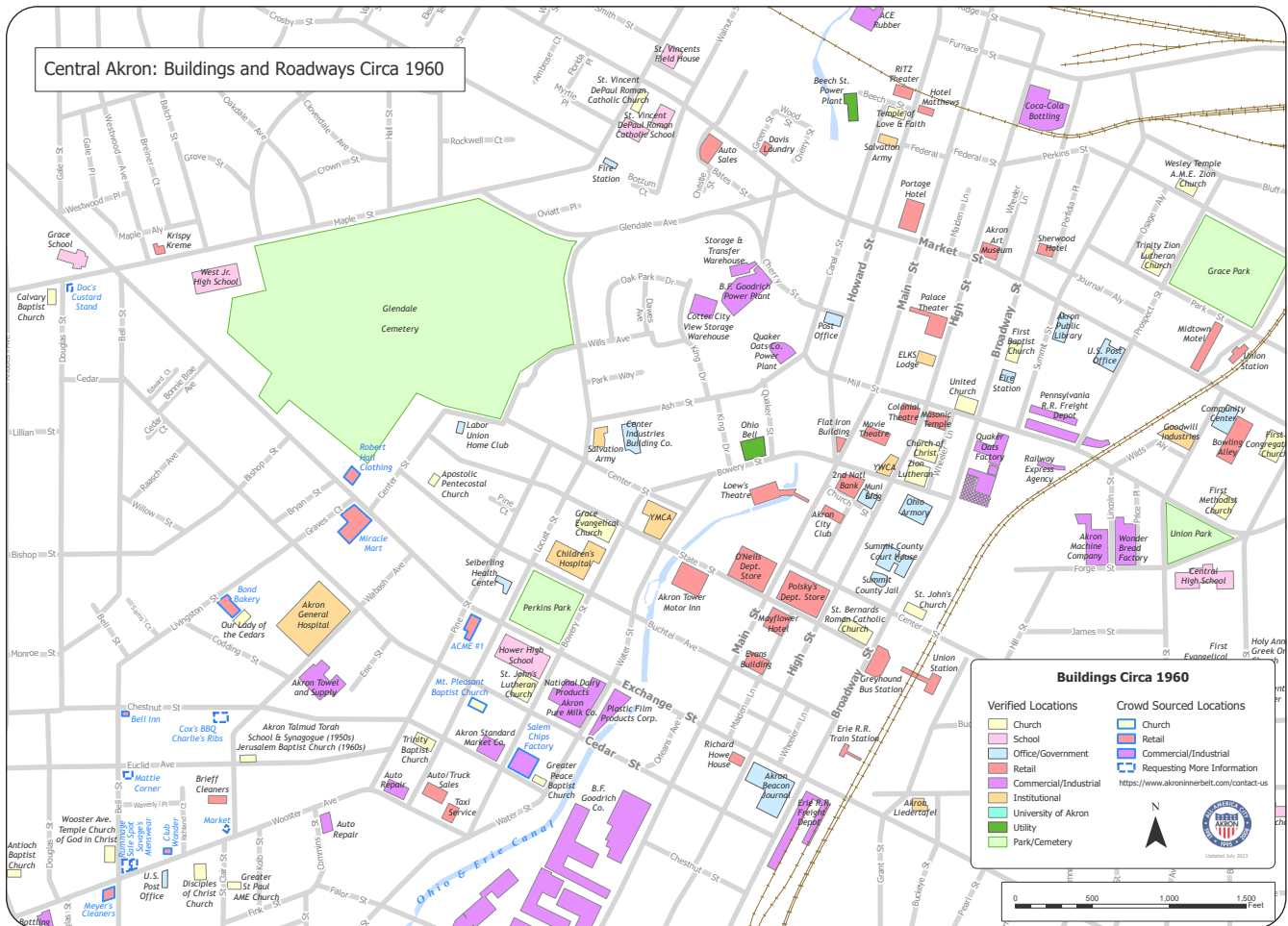


Source: City of Akron

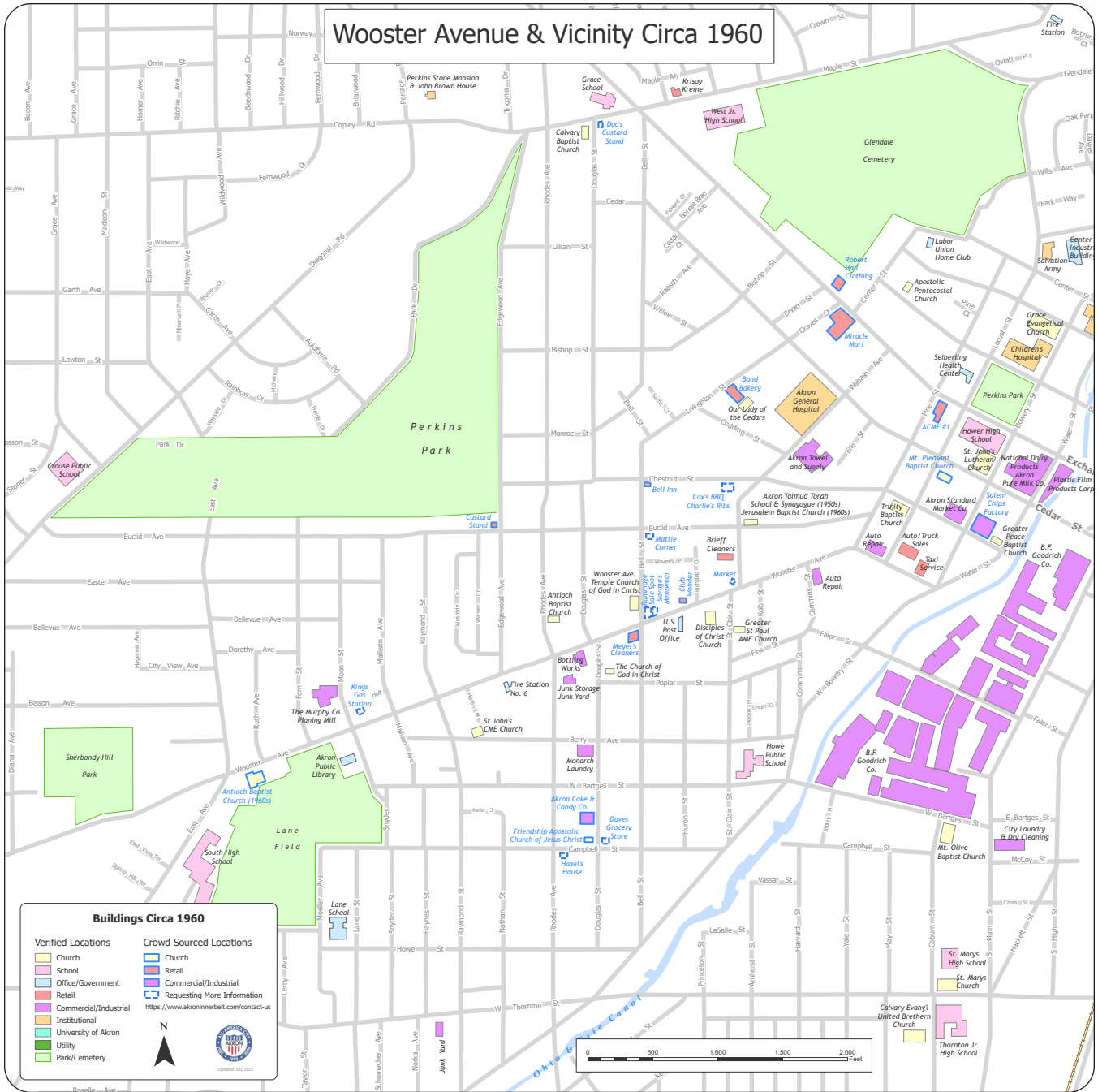


# Historical Neighborhood Maps

Part of the restoring a collective memory of the neighborhood that preceded the Innerbelt lies not only in gathering stories but also documenting places. These maps of the neighborhood were co-created with former residents. Leveraged as both a tool for documentation and engagement, these maps were a frequent presence at our engagement events. The locations where businesses, schools, houses of worship and other valued community spaces once stood were crowdsourced interactively to recreate the neighborhood fabric that the Innerbelt destroyed. The maps were later digitized by staff from the City of Akron's Office of Integrated Development.



# Wooster Avenue & Vicinity Circa 1960



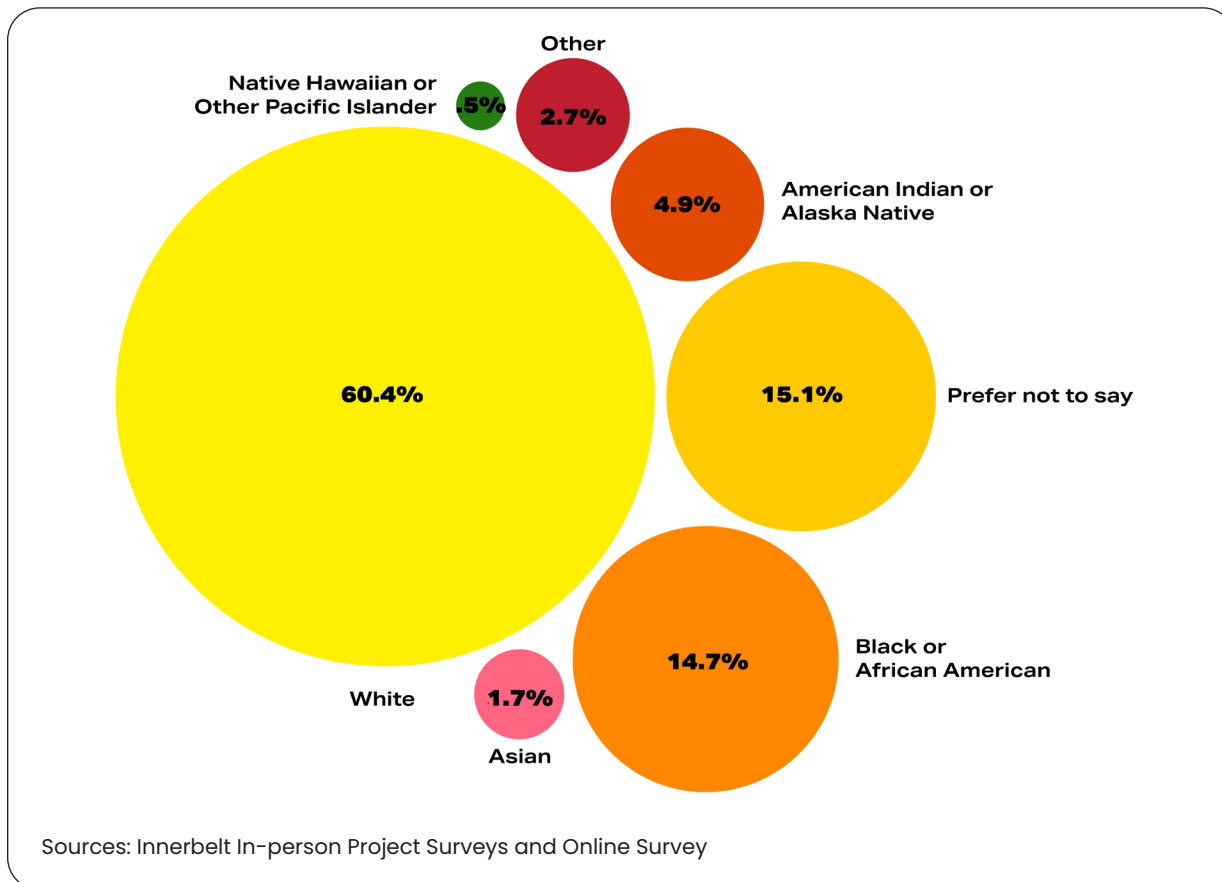
# Engagement Data Analysis

Over the course of this phase of research and engagement, quantitative and qualitative data was collected through a variety of sources including surveys, focus groups, ward meetings, and interviews. Qualitative data was used to provide nuance to some of the quantitative data and provide additional information when the quantitative data didn't have sufficient amount of insight from key constituencies.

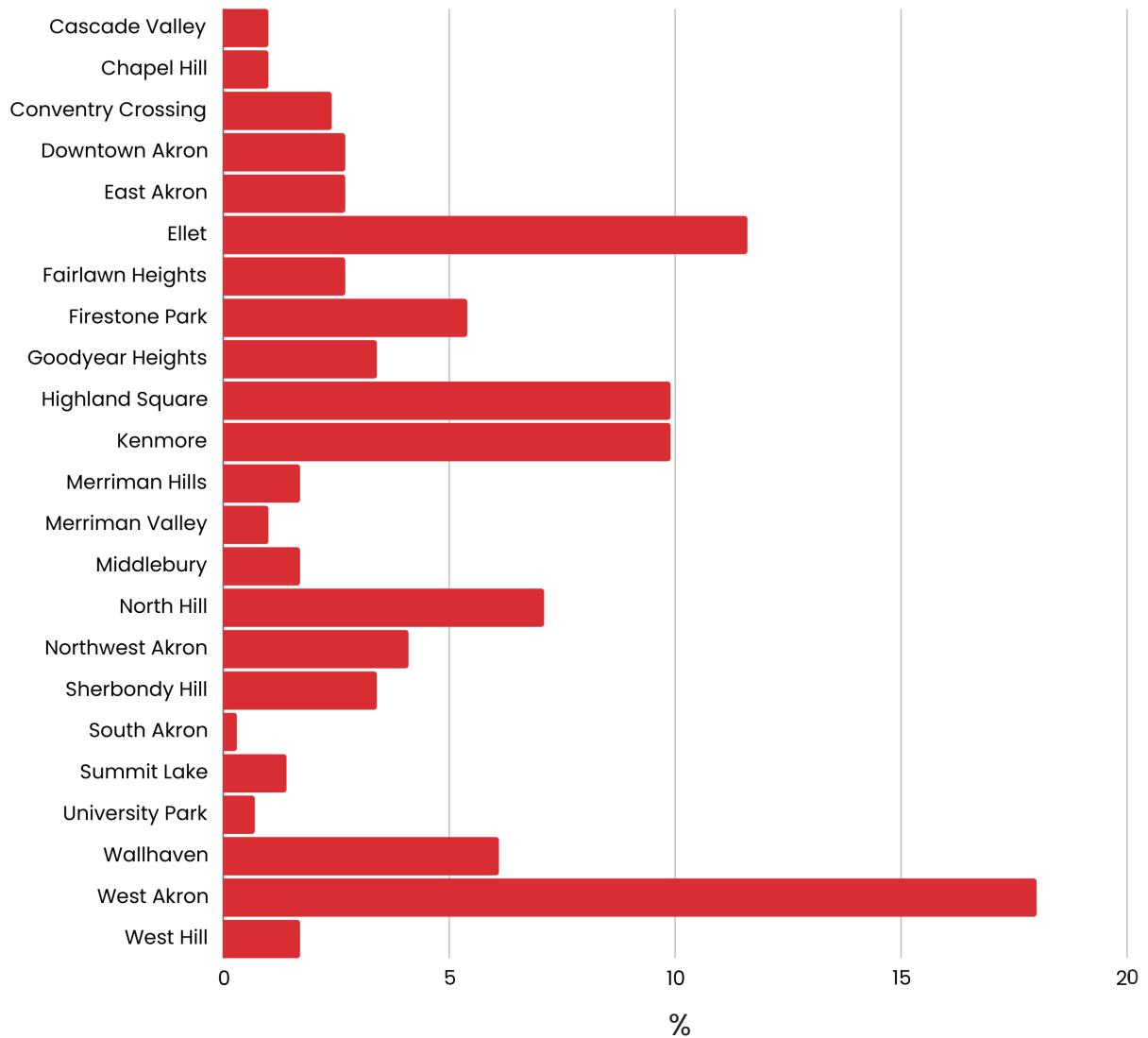
The results from the combined analysis are reflected in the insights and recommendations of the report. The charts in this appendix section are reflective of the quantitative data only.

Quantitative data was collected primarily through two different survey types. One was a general survey which assessed knowledge about the Innerbelt and collected open-ended ideas about what people were interested and not interested in seeing on the site. The respondents to this survey hailed from all over the city and filled it out either online or in person at an event between September 2022–February 2023. A second, more targeted “Potential Uses Survey” was distributed in-person at focus groups and Ward meetings throughout Spring 2023. Participation in the “Potential Uses Survey” was more heavily weighted towards key constituencies such as former residents, the Black community, residents living near the Innerbelt, and younger residents. Information about which source informed the data is listed below each chart.

**Figure 7:**  
**How would you best describe yourself**

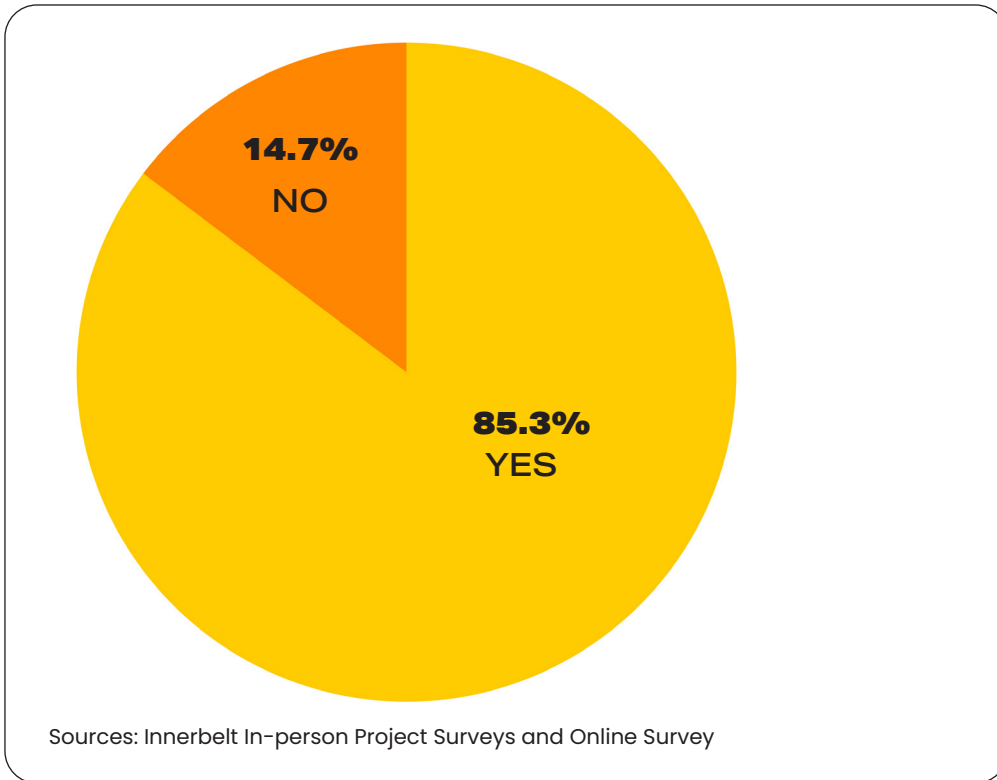


**Figure 8:**  
**If you live in Akron - Which neighborhood do you live in?**

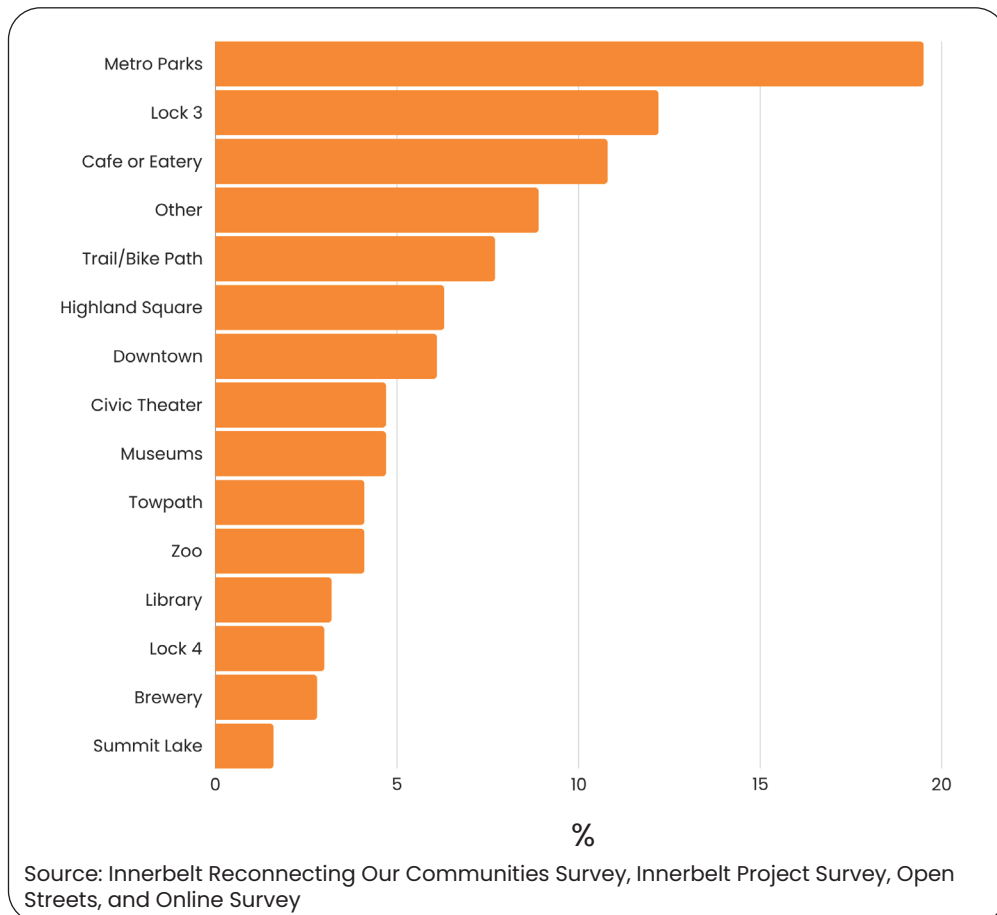


Sources: Innerbelt In-person Project Surveys and Online Survey

**Figure 9:**  
**Did you know a portion of the Innerbelt [Route 59] is permanently closed?**



**Figure 10:**  
**Do you have a favorite place that you love to go to in Akron?**



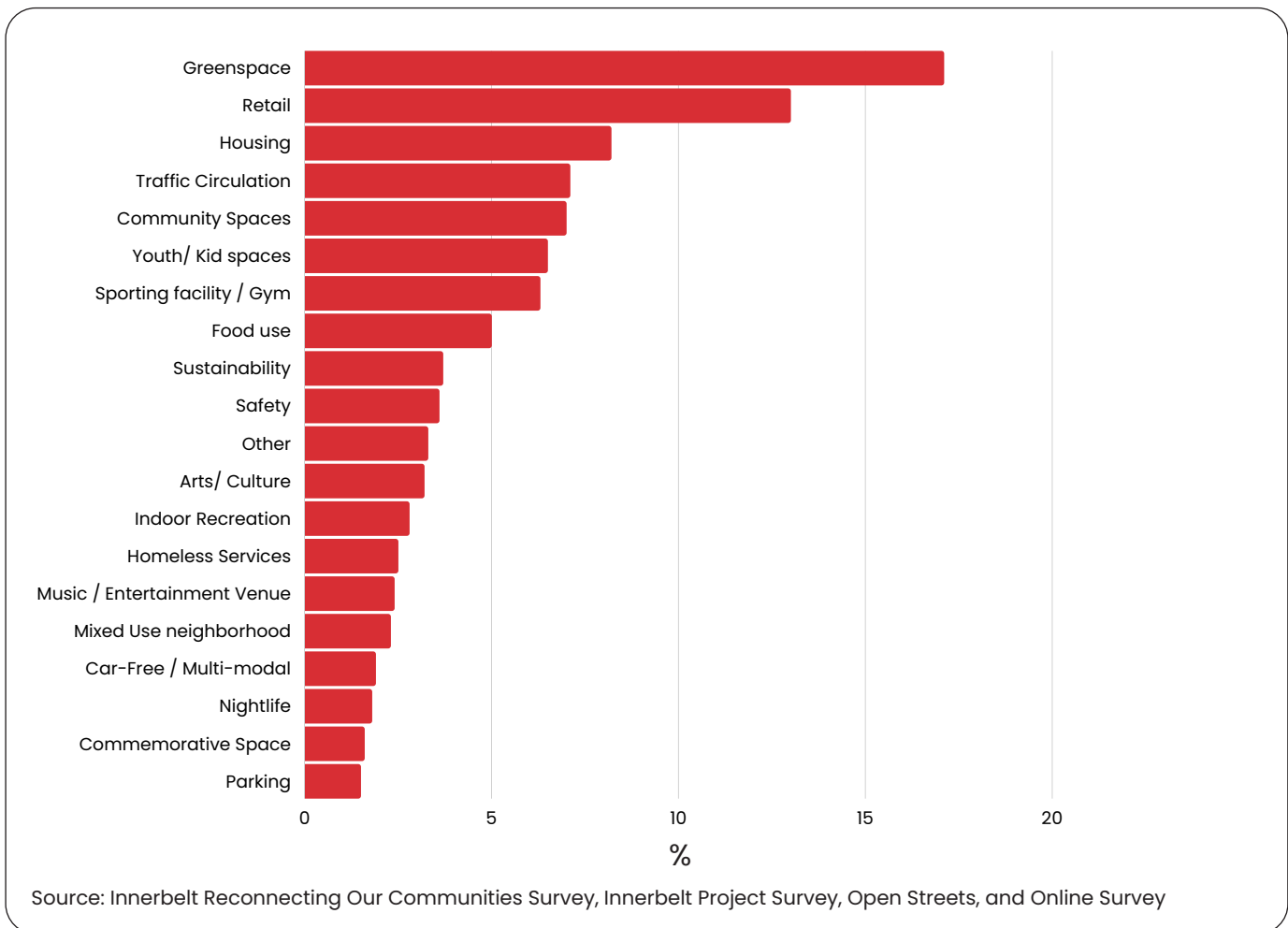
**Figure 11:  
Akron Favorite Places “Other” Responses**

<p>Sand run - get to explore the environment</p>	<p>The baseball field downtown. It's an affordable option and close</p>	<p>Ken Stewart's. My family and friends have been going there since it opened. I have a lot of great memories from there.</p>	<p>Stan Hywet gardens. Glendale cemetery</p>	<p>I love the University of Akron campus. It has an energy, is well kept in all seasons, provides safe walking and running spots. And great views of the city from the top of the Exchange Street parking deck!</p>
<p>Glendale Steps. Great example of WPA at work.</p>	<p>Where the blimp is its just cool</p>	<p>fun and food</p>	<p>Cascade plaza for summer concerts on Friday nights because it's a relaxed atmosphere and good music</p>	<p>Akron BMX, but it's too far away from downtown. We need more pump tracks in the downtown area.</p>
<p>Rubberducks baseball games</p>	<p>Cuyahoga falls, front street. It has been 100% turned around and made into a high end place to walk and shop.</p>	<p>Canal Park for Rubber Ducks games</p>	<p>Glendale Steps - it's so unique and feels like a secret discovery</p>	<p>My dogs and I love walking around the Miller South School campus. We live on Fern and walk over frequently. And of course I always pick up after them. From the refreshment stand building there's an incline to the parking lot that provides a quick thorough workout. And it's peaceful and safe, the campus is nicely kept/in good condition.</p>
<p>I love Stan Hywtt. I love the history!</p>	<p>Icons to be proud of, and social places for people to gather.</p>	<p>The Firestone Park area, because there is a business district but there is also a lovely park and a community center (which I have never visited).</p>	<p>Lock 15. Scenery and great local food and drink.</p>	<p>Akron Canton Regional Foodbank....helps to avoid food insecurities in local cities. Originally moved to its current location due to easy access.</p>
<p>Transit center really glad they built that.</p>	<p>Portage lakes peaceful, and lower crime</p>		<p>The Nature Realm, this is one of the best places in Akron due to the great gardens and the conservation.</p>	<p>Akron Aeros ball park for a sunny afternoon, at least an hour or two, relaxing with popcorn, a large diet drink and maybe a sausage or hot dog.</p>

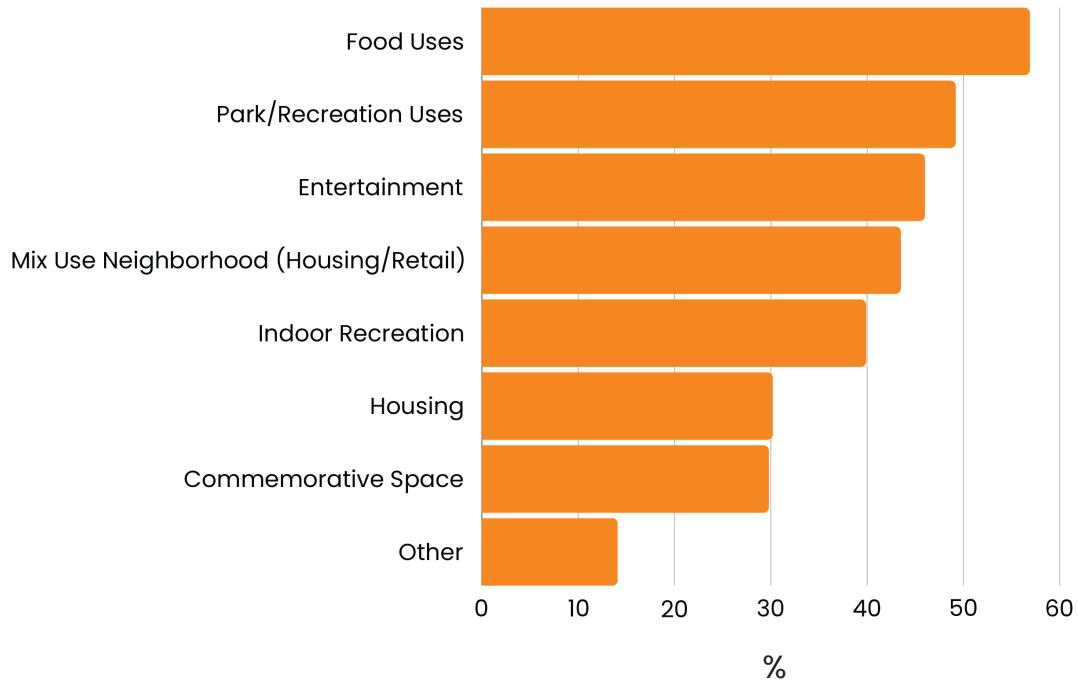
Northside Marketplace! The food is great, the shops are REALLY cool.	Northside district- good food and arts	3 lots skating rink, bumper cars. It's fun and entertaining. It brings out the fun.	The softball stadium in Firestone Park. I like to play	High St HopHouse; good venue and local ownership
The woods because we have no woodland areas	Nightlight and Hop House. It is one of the few places downtown with an actual "urban feel" in my mind.	The Northside Marketplace	Jilly's music room. It's a great place to hear live music with awesome food, drinks and staff.	Rubber Duck Stadium! Brings resources to Akron.
Northside Marketplace - the combination of small business incubator and community connection makes for a perfect place.	The Nightlight. I love the films they show, that allow me to experience other places, cultures and people around the world through film.	The gorge. I love water and it's calming.		

Sources: Innerbelt Reconnecting Our Communities Survey, Open Streets, Innerbelt Project Survey, and Online Survey

**Figure 12: Are there amenities, resources, or spaces that you think Akron needs?**



**Figure 13:**  
**Potential Uses Survey Results:**



Source: Potential Use Surveys (All Participants)



**Figure 14:  
Potential Uses Survey - Additional Uses Desired**

Sports and recreation center	Restaurant not fast food	Restoration of Glendale Steps & Park there connecting West Hill to downtown	Job development	Year-round farmers market like the west side market in Cleveland. Combine this with community gardens
A place where small businesses can sell their wares	Much of above but more sustainable development	Fully walkable area/limited or no cars	Food trucks, wildlife sanctuary	Black historical museum for everyone to see including famous black figures
Fun hike events	No high rise housing	Tiny homes for the homeless and veterans	Playground	Black historical museum with Akron's history
Concerts	Housing for those displaced	Help the low income seniors with affordable spaces in the Innerbelt	Outlet Stores	Meso-urbanism development. Chicken N Pickle restaurant & pickleball court
Sensory Playground for autism population	Churches	Harm reduction centers	Shopping	No high rises. One story small house areas good for seniors & small families for co-housing. Only pocket parks
Gas and grocery store	New Stem High	Summer weekend flea market	Mall	Housing would be a great idea! However there lacks a space as a hangout. Homeless people are everywhere and hungry people too. So a place with food would be wonderful.
Floor plan of the old wooster	Museum & Public Garden	Food = Covered outdoor market for food, music & specialty	Swimming Pool (clean)	Things for teens to do

Source: Potential Use Surveys (All Participants)

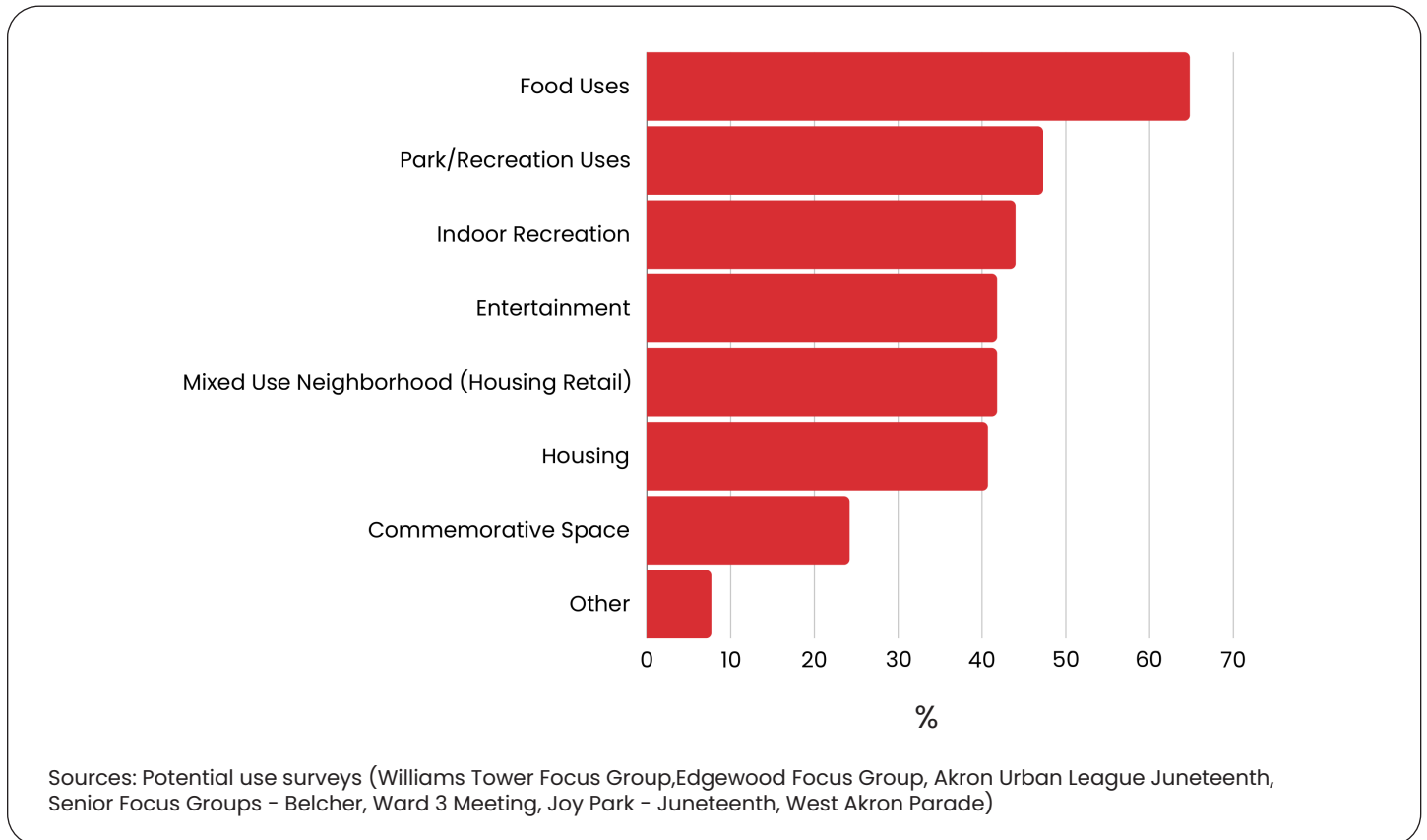
**Figure 15:**  
**Potential Uses Survey “Anything else you want us to know?” responses**

Make sure everything is eco friendly	Include community gardens	Affordable housing	Wheelchair accessible housing	Safe children events
I think that cleaning up is important. Please consider recycling/ compost.	2T wasn't (unreadable). 2t was full of flowers and fruit trees	Make it affordable	Affordable for the regular people	The area was once considered for a high chance for a movie
Something like music or festivals would be the best in my opinion	Establishing what was best will provide the best model for what should be remade	Affordable housing and retail	House for Council of Negro Women	More programs for youth and more funding for minority businesses
Celebrate Akron's history of rubber production	Do not close Miller school	Ethnic Food, Night market, Art/Theatre	Why is there no American Black museum in Akron? We are 30% of the population	All these spaces need to be available to the black community first especially for the ownership side!
In the community space - should include a black owned jazz room	Urban agriculture	Housing is good!	Not only apartments but houses for homeowners	Housing and reasonable food prices and something for family
Family fun center	Walkability & re-establishment of things that were beloved in the old neighborhood.	Greater transit access	A big box store like Walmart	Diversity, Transportation, Ecologically, Economically, Ages 8-80, Placemaking, Aesthetically, Usages, Sizes & shapes of Architecture but with standards so must be beautiful & sustainable. See Toronto's Green Plan.
Grocery	Connect Glendale to West Hill	Something similar to Westside Market in Cleveland	Bring back retail in the area so we don't have to drive out to get a 2x4 or other building materials	Water park or artwalk with a community water outdoor park feature that residents come splash around in

Create an archive link for residents to upload photos	Indian Casino & art is always a possibility	We want new leadership	Parking	It's a trench designed to be separated from adjacent communities. This was an irreconcilable issue coming out of past meetings. And funding wasn't available to spur private development under a cohesive, community driven plan.
I'm interested in helping out with the project. wittmansullivan@gmail.com	Do right by us	Tiny house resort		

Source: Potential Use Surveys (All Participants)

**Figure 16:**  
**Potential Uses Survey Results (Former Residents + Black Community 36.5% of total respondents)**



**Figure 17:  
Potential Uses Survey "Other" responses (Former Residents + Black Community)**

Restaurant not fast food	Shopping	Gas and grocery store	Sensory playground for autism population	Help the low income seniors with affordable spaces in the Innerbelt
Harm reduction	Mall			

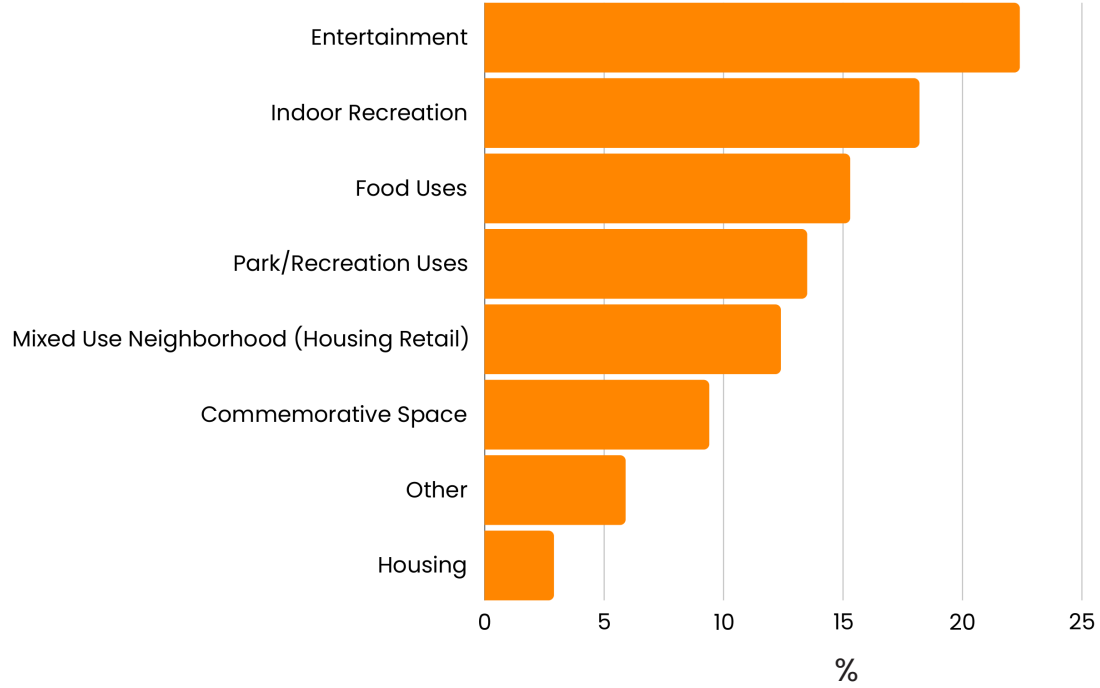
Sources: Potential use surveys (Williams Tower Focus Group, Edgewood Focus Group, Akron Urban League Juneteenth, Senior Focus Groups - Belcher, Ward 3 Meeting, Joy Park - Juneteenth, West Akron Parade)

**Figure 18:  
Potential Uses Survey "Anything else you want us to know?" responses (Former Residents + Black Community)**

In the community space - should include a black owned jazz room	Not only apartments but houses for homeowners	Greater transit access	Parking	All these spaces need to be available to the black community first especially for the ownership side!
Affordable for the regular people	A big box store like Walmart	Safe children events	Family fun center	Housing and reasonable food prices and something for family
House for Council of Negro Women	Tiny house resort	The area was once considered for a high chance for a movie	Things for teens to do	Bring back retail in the area so we don't have to drive out to get a 2x4 or other building materials
Why is there no American Black museum in Akron? We are 30% of the population	More programs for youth and more funding for minority businesses			

Sources: Potential use surveys (Williams Tower Focus Group, Edgewood Focus Group, Akron Urban League Juneteenth, Senior Focus Groups - Belcher, Ward 3 Meeting, Joy Park - Juneteenth, West Akron Parade)

**Figure 19:**  
**Potential Uses Survey (High School Youth 22.1% of total respondents)**



Sources: Potential use surveys (High School Surveys, STEM HS Focus Group)

**Figure 20:  
Potential Uses Survey "Other" responses (High School Youth)**

Sports and recreation center	Black historical museum with Akron's history	Food = Covered outdoor market for food, music & specialty vendors	Mall	Housing would be a great idea! However there lacks a space as a hangout. Like with snacks and such. Homeless are everywhere and hungry people too. So a place with food would be wonderful.
A place where small businesses can sell their wares	Restaurant not fast food	Floor plan of the old wooster	Swimming Pool (clean)	No high rises. One story small house areas good for seniors & small families for co-housing. Only pocket parks
Fun hike events	Much of above but more sustainable development	Outlet stores	Museum & Public Garden	Year-round farmers market (including food that is not seasonal) like the west side market in Cleveland. Combine this with community gardens (raised beds for environmental safety)
Concerts	No high rise housing	Fully walkable area/ limited or no cars	Job development	Tiny homes for the homeless and veterans
New Stem High	Housing for those displaced	Churches	Food trucks, wildlife sanctuary	Restoration of Glendale Steps & Park there connecting West Hill to downtown
Black historical museum for everyone to see including famous black figures	Summer weekend flea market	Meso-urbanism development. Chicken N Pickle restaurant & pickleball court	Playground	Shopping
Help the low income seniors with affordable spaces in the Innerbelt	Gas and grocery store	Sensory Playground for autism population	Harm reduction centers	

Sources: Potential use surveys (High School Surveys, STEM HS Focus Group)

# ADDITIONAL PRECEDENTS

Over the course of putting together this report, a number of potential case study precedents were identified. There was no one perfect precedent that was perfect for Akron. Instead, there are different precedents that align with different aspects of the conditions and vision in Akron. A few precedents have been incorporated into the report narrative beside relevant recommendations. This section contains additional precedents that may be worth referencing as the next phase of work moves forward.

## HEALING + REPAIR

### Precedent: Memorial to the Enslaved Laborers



Image Credit: Rick Stillings

#### Key takeaways:

Timeline of Enslaved Laborers at UVA & Engagement of Descendants of Enslaved Communities at UVA

**Location:** University of Virginia Charlottesville, VA

**Year:** 2007 - 2020

**Partners:** Division for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; Descendants of Enslaved Communities at UVA

#### Summary:

A monument and commemorative space at UVA which seeks to honor the lives and legacy of 4,000+ enslaved laborers who built and maintained the campus. A community-engaged process was utilized to involve various constituencies in the design of the memorial including the Descendants of Enslaved Communities at UVA, an organization of direct descendants helped shepard the project, and continue to play a role in research, activation and commemorative and educational programing at the memorial site. The names (occupations or relationships when names weren't known) of enslaved laborers were taken from UVA archives and inscribed on the wall of the memorial. The memorial also displays a timeline with a water feature running over it which is intended to represent the healing of past wounds.

### Precedent: District 6 Museum

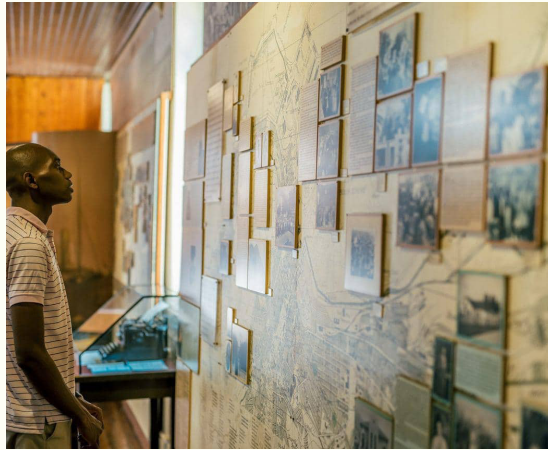


Image Credit: District 6 Museum

#### Key takeaways:

Permanent Exhibition: Digging Deeper & The Sound Archive

**Location:** Cape Town, South Africa

**Year:** 1994

**Partners:** District Six Museum Foundation

#### Summary:

District Six, formerly known as Kanaldorp, was a diverse port community that was destroyed because it broke the rules and vision of the Apartheid government. Over the next 20 years, more than 60,000 residents were forcibly displaced as their homes were bulldozed. Since its founding, the District Six Museum has focused on memory and storytelling on site and around the city alongside displaced former residents and those who have successfully returned.

## PROCESS + ENGAGEMENT

### Precedent: Witness Walls



Image Credit: Hood Design Studio

#### Key takeaways:

Witness Walls Lessons Plans & "My Witness" Podcast Series

**Location:** Nashville, TN

**Year:** 2017

**Partners:** Hood Design Studio; Metropolitan Nashville Arts Commission

#### Summary:

Located at Public Square Park—near the site of a 1960 protest which led to desegregation of lunch counters—this work of public art shines a light on Nashville Civil Rights activists. Beyond the art, project partners collaborated to record a podcast series featuring intergenerational interviews which paired local high school students with Civil Rights activists



## Precedent: NOW Hunters Point Youth Engagement

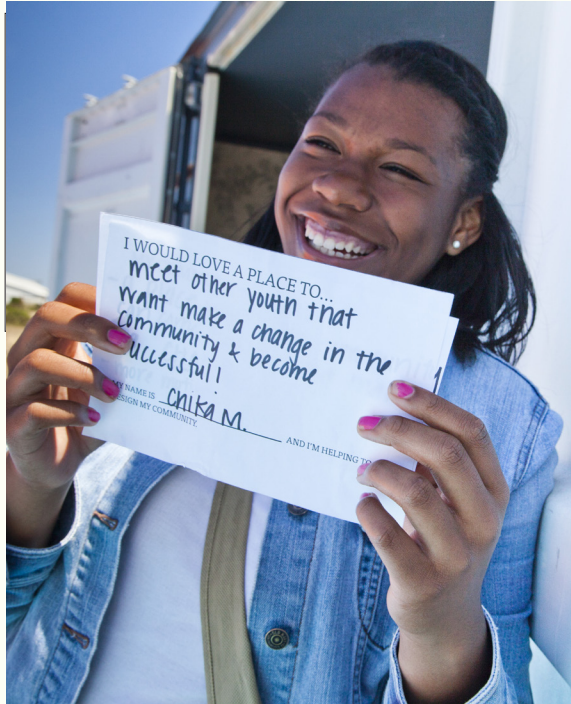


Image Credit: Anne Hamersky

### Key takeaways:

Youth engagement, workforce development

**Location:** San Francisco, CA

**Year:** 2013

**Partners:** Center for Youth Wellness; Young Community Developers, Inc.; 3rd St. Youth Clinic; Coleman Advocates for Youth and Children; Studio O; PG&E; Envelope A+D; RHAA

### Summary:

Youth engagement was a core element of the interim-use strategy at NOW Hunters Point. Youth were hired to help build out elements of the public event space and to serve as event staff. There was also significant youth-focused programming. Job training workshops introduced over 300 local young adults to careers in construction and community development. Through strategic partnerships with youth focused organizations such as the A. Philip Randolph Institute, young people were involved in various aspects of the project from co-design sessions, to the development of program, and on-site improvements.

## Precedent: 11th St Bridge Park



Image Credit: Building Bridges Across the River

### Summary:

An elevated public park being developed on a former road bridge that crosses the Anacostia River, connecting the wealthy, majority white neighborhood of Capitol Hill/Navy Yard with the mostly Black and historically under-invested neighborhood of Anacostia/Fairlawn. Years before construction began, an Equitable Development Plan (EDP) was developed and implemented to engage and support existing residents in Anacostia/Fairlawn to benefit from the project. The plan identified strategies in arts & culture, housing, workforce development, and small enterprise. The implementation budget for the EDP is \$88 million (the capital budget for the park is \$92 million). The EDP has received significant funding from public and private sources including the D.C. government (50%), philanthropy, and federal grants.

**Location:** Washington D.C.

**Year:** 2014 - Present

**Partners:** Building Bridges Across the River

### Key takeaways:

Equitable Development Plan and Implementation, Conversion of a former roadway

### Precedent: I-375 Reconnecting Communities



Image Credit: I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project

**Location:** Detroit, MI

**Year:** 2017

**Partners:** MDOT; City of Detroit

**Key takeaways:**

Below-grade freeway removal &  
Navigating stakeholder alignment

**Summary:**

130,000 residents of the mostly Black Paradise Valley and Black Bottom neighborhoods were displaced by the I-375 freeway (1964). This project will convert one mile of below-grade freeway to a surface road while reclaiming excess land for redevelopment. In 2023, this project was awarded \$105 million in federal funding from the INFRA Program. The USDOT noted that the project wouldn't have to go through additional review due to the robust community engagement the state DOT and City of Detroit preformed for their proposal. However, some community and city officials are concerned about the boulevard design. Some fear that its size will further divide adjacent communities. The final design is currently being developed by MDOT. Detroit officials anticipate construction to begin in 2025.

## INTERIM USE

### Precedent: The Underline



Image Credit: Robin Hill

**Key takeaways:**

Interim use & Phased construction approach

**Location:** Miami, FL

**Year:** 2014 - Present

**Partners:** Friends of the Underline; Miami-Dade County

**Summary:**

Redevelopment of 120 acres of land underneath Miami's Metro Rail as a linear park. Phase 1 (0.5 miles) opened in 2021 and Phase 2 ( 2.14 miles) is under construction and expected to open soon. Phase 3 (7 miles), must be built by the end of 2025 to meet a Federal grant deadline. Funding is through a public-private partnership utilizing federal, state, local and private resources. In 2019, interim uses on the site began with a \$500k Knight Foundation grant for a public art installation and the Miami Downtown Development Authority began to assist with general maintenance, services, and event staffing. Interim programming includes farmer's markets, yoga classes, and monthly tours.

## PHYSICAL SITE

### Precedent: Destination Crenshaw



Image Credit: Perkins & Will

#### Key takeaways:

Black Cultural Corridor, Commemoration

**Location:** Los Angeles, CA

**Year:** 2014–Present

**Partners:** Perkins and Will, City of Los Angeles

#### Summary:

A 1.3 mile long outdoor museum along the Crenshaw Blvd. corridor in South Los Angeles, which many consider to be the heart of Black L.A. The project is completely within the public right-of-way and includes more than 100 works of art by Black artists, 9 pocket parks, planting over 800 trees, outdoor furniture, and a 70% local hire requirement for construction. With large public and private investment along the Crenshaw corridor spurred by a recently opened Metro line, a key goal of the project is to prevent the cultural erasure that often comes with gentrification. There are some community concerns that the project and scale of new amenities will contribute to rising housing costs and displacement of Black residents. Destination Crenshaw is expected to open in early 2024.

### Precedent: The Stitch

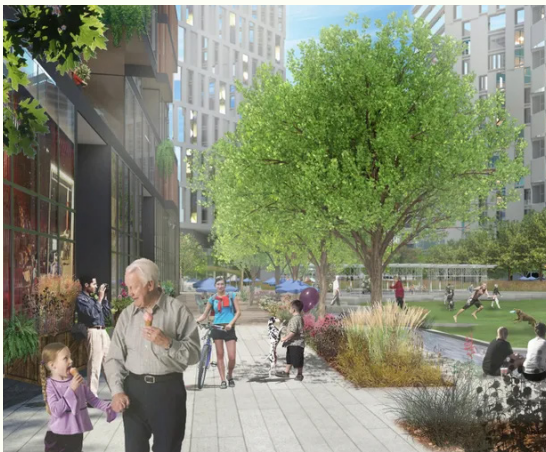


Image Credit: seviewparkhousing

#### Key takeaways:

Highway cover land bridge with development on top

**Location:** Atlanta, GA

**Year:** 2015 – Present

**Partners:** Atlanta Downtown Improvement District (ADID); Central Atlanta Progress (CAP); City of Atlanta, Reconnecting Communities

#### Summary:

This project seeks to connect Downtown and Midtown Atlanta via a 14-acre freeway cover landbridge above a below-grade segment of I-75/85. Early indications are that 14 million square feet of real estate could be created through the project, with mixed-use affordable housing being a priority use. The Stitch was awarded \$1.1 Million in 2023 through the USDOT's Reconnecting Communities Program. The project is in the early planning stage with engineering and design expected to begin in 2024. Construction activities will likely begin in 2026 with a 2032 completion date.

## FUTURE PLANNING SUPPORT

### Precedent: Making Our Own Public Space (MOOS)



Image Credit: Making Our Own Space

#### Key takeaways:

Youth Engagement, Co-Design

**Location:** Cleveland, OH

**Year:** 2015 – Present

**Partners:** Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, Kent State University

#### Summary:

An initiative of the Urban Design Collaborative, a center of the College of Architecture and Urban Design at Kent State University. MOOS engages middle and high school youth in the design, fabrication, and construction of temporary and permanent furniture and other amenities for public spaces. Each participant receives a stipend for their participation and MOOS partners with community based organizations, designers, graduate students, residents, and city officials to host workshops aimed at increasing youth exposure to the processes required to transform public spaces in their communities. Examples of previous projects include planter boxes, benches, playgrounds, and shade structures.

### Precedent: ReConnect Rondo

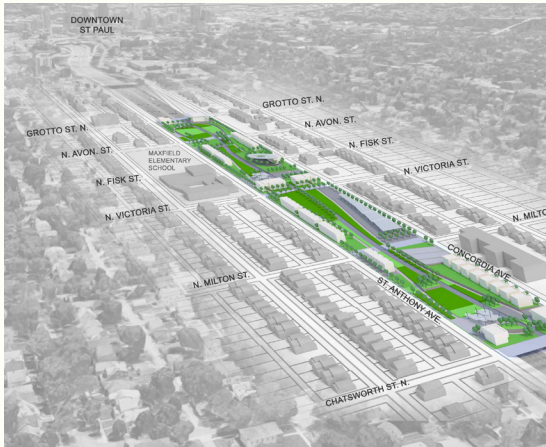


Image Credit: Design by Melo and Visuals by James

#### Key takeaways:

Highway cover/land bridge with development on top & Proposed African American cultural enterprise district

**Location:** St. Paul, MN

**Year:** 2015 – Present

#### Summary:

A proposed land bridge over half a mile in length, the proposed land bridge included that could allow for several new amenities in a neighborhood negatively affected by urban renewal era projects. The bridge will be constructed over a freeway still in use. In 2023 this project was awarded a \$2 million planning grant through the USDOT's Reconnecting Communities Program. It is estimated that up to 576 new housing units, 1,000 new residents, 1,872 new jobs, 130,000+ square feet of retail, nonprofit and institutional space, and up to \$4.2 million in new city revenue could be made available through construction of the land bridge and subsequent private development activities.

**Report by Studio O**

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**Designed by Poche Design Studio**