

The Northside Greenway: Building a Community-Engaged Outreach Campaign for a Proposed Greenway

Summary of Work Completed through the Active Living for All Initiative

In 2011, a group of North Minneapolis residents working with the nonprofit Twin Cities Greenways expressed interest in converting a section of low-traffic streets in their neighborhood into a greenway, a stretch of land that can be used for walking, biking, and other recreational purposes. Since then, the project has grown from an idea to a more fully developed proposal encompassing priorities around community and space and shaped by resident input.

In 2013, the greenway project, led by the City of Minneapolis Health Department (MHD), Public Works, and the Alliance for Metropolitan Stability (the Alliance), was one of nine proposals that received funding from the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (the Center) through the Active Living for All (ALfA) initiative. Funding supported a multi-year community outreach process to gather resident input and determine technical feasibility of the project. This process was designed as a response to historic actions by municipalities in communities of color, where residents' voices have not been included in planning efforts.

This summary describes work completed through the ALfA initiative during the past five years, including accomplishments, factors that contributed to the project's success, challenges, and plans for the future.

Key milestones

Because changes in transportation infrastructure can have a significant impact on the physical, economic, and social characteristics of a neighborhood, the organizations involved in leading the project sought input from residents through a multi-year engagement process. This project has also involved partnerships across city agencies and local organizations, and the development of a resident-led steering committee. Over time, leadership shifted to the committee to ensure the project was community-driven. In each phase, the organizations and residents considered whether there was support among community members to continue moving the work forward.

Project origins. The idea for the Northside Greenway initially came from residents involved in Twin Cities Greenways, an all-volunteer nonprofit organization focused on greenway development.

In 2012, the MHD recognized the potential of the greenway project to advance health equity by increasing opportunities for biking and walking in North Minneapolis. Between 2012 and 2013, MHD created a steering committee, held a series of community meetings and open houses, attended events, and surveyed Minneapolis residents to gather input. A survey of residents showed people preferred a full greenway over two other design options (a half-greenway/half-street design or a bicycle boulevard) and helped define the route (see Figures 1 and 2). However, the survey did not collect demographic information beyond residence, and project partners felt more information was needed to ensure they were hearing from a representative sample of North Minneapolis residents.

1. Proposed design options for the Northside greenway



2. The proposed route for the Northside greenway



Proposed Greenway Route with Intersection Treatments
NORTH MINNEAPOLIS GREENWAY

Funding for this project is provided in part by the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota. March 4, 2014



The project receives funding through the ALfA initiative. In 2013, MHD and Public Works received funding from the Center to explore the technical feasibility of the project and to conduct a more extensive engagement campaign that would address some of the limitations of earlier efforts. The city departments also invited the Alliance, a nonprofit coalition whose mission is to advance racial, economic, and environmental justice in growth and development patterns in the Twin Cities, to support the outreach campaign. In October 2014, these three partners convened a Greenway Outreach Steering Committee, comprised of residents and representatives of local organizations, to support and guide the outreach efforts. In this summary, these four entities are collectively referred to as the “key partners.”

2014 outreach efforts. In 2014, the key partners contracted with 13 community-based organizations to administer a survey and build awareness about the greenway concept. A committee of Northside residents, steering committee members, and additional organizational partners selected these organizations. The survey results showed a majority (70%) of North Minneapolis residents who completed the survey supported the greenway concept.¹ That same year, Public Works convened a Technical Advisory Committee and hired a consultant to complete a feasibility study of the proposed greenway to better understand potential use, traffic and parking impacts, and construction costs.



Gathering resident input on the proposed Northside greenway

The Northside Greenway Council is formed. In late 2014, the steering committee ended and a more autonomous Northside Greenway Council (NGC) was established. The NGC created by-laws and elected chairs with the goal of ultimately shifting leadership for the project from MHD and the Alliance to the council.

¹ A full report of findings from the survey can be found at [City of Minneapolis report \(http://www.minneapolismn.gov/www/groups/public/@health/documents/webcontent/wcms1p-144926.pdf\)](http://www.minneapolismn.gov/www/groups/public/@health/documents/webcontent/wcms1p-144926.pdf)

2015 outreach efforts. The key partners expanded and deepened their 2015 outreach efforts in multiple ways. They prioritized outreach with residents who had not been reached by earlier efforts, gathered qualitative information to better understand residents' questions, concerns, and desires for the greenway, and began outreach efforts to explore resident interest in extending the greenway south of Plymouth Avenue. The key partners sub-contracted with 17 local organizations, eight of whom had participated in the outreach process in 2014, to gather feedback from community residents. They also piloted a "community connectors" program that trained and supported six community residents to do targeted outreach with populations who had been less represented in previous outreach efforts (i.e., African American and Asian residents, people with disabilities, renters, and transit riders). Through these efforts, the key partners were able to hear more about residents' concerns for the project, especially around public safety, cost, and gentrification.



A sod block party developed by one of the subcontracted organizations as part of the 2015 outreach efforts

The temporary greenway is launched. By the end of 2015, the key partners felt that evidence in support of the proposed greenway provided a rationale to test the concept with a one-year demonstration project. In 2016, a temporary greenway² was installed along five blocks, with one block as a full greenway, three blocks as a bicycle boulevard with community spaces, and one block as a half-and-half greenway. Planters, benches, paint, signs, and barricades were also added. However, after vocal dissent from some residents, the design was scaled back on three of the blocks. Throughout the demonstration project, Public Works gathered data on snow removal, impacts on traffic in surrounding areas, and other factors. Toward the end of the demonstration project, the key partners worked with Wilder Research to survey residents living on the greenway and within one block of it. Findings showed the majority of survey respondents (73%) want some form of greenway on their street, and that more than half of residents living along the temporary greenway (57%) were interested in seeing a full greenway permanently installed.³ In 2016, the key partners worked with a student group from the University of Minnesota to complete a study of potential impacts on gentrification.

² The temporary greenway was funded through several sources, including the Center, the Minnesota Department of Health through funds from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the City of Minneapolis.

³ A full report of findings can be found at [City of Minneapolis report](http://www.minneapolismn.gov/www/groups/public/@health/documents/webcontent/wcmssp-212550.pdf) (<http://www.minneapolismn.gov/www/groups/public/@health/documents/webcontent/wcmssp-212550.pdf>)



The temporary greenway

Northside Greenway Now! is established. In 2017, Northside Greenway Now! was formalized as an initiative under Pillsbury United Communities. The organization was developed from the Northside Greenway Council, with more latitude to engage in advocacy efforts, shifting away from more neutral information gathering. A former Northside Greenway Council member was hired as the organization's lead, and the organization has continued to engage in advocacy and outreach for the project.

Factors that contributed to success

Working with local partners and using multiple outreach strategies was critical for hearing from the diverse population of North Minneapolis residents. The key partners reflected that working with local organizations and the community connectors helped build trust and interest in the project and helped reach the diverse cultural communities living in North Minneapolis. Organizations based in North Minneapolis seemed to be more effective than the culturally specific organizations that worked with North Minneapolis residents but that were based outside of the area. Likewise, community connectors were effective at reaching residents not engaged through earlier efforts.

The sub-contracted organizations and community connectors used traditional approaches, like surveying, as well as informal and creative methods to reach residents. The project team found that white residents predominately completed online surveys, while surveys completed through other methods (i.e., community events, door-knocking campaigns, informal one-on-one outreach, zines, and podcasts) increased response rates among culturally diverse residents, resulting in a sample that was more reflective of North Minneapolis.

I think with any outreach and engagement, it is really understanding your target audience. [...] Basically you are putting that community member at the center and approaching the outreach [or] engagement with that community member in mind, rather than a typical top down approach, where things may be created from the city level and then kind of trickles down to the community.

– Community connector

Collecting demographic information, including home address, helped make sure residents most impacted by the project were being heard. Throughout the project, the key partners remained committed to reaching as many people as possible and making sure they were hearing from those who might be most impacted. In 2014 and 2015, they did so by collecting information about race and ethnicity, language spoken at home, residence in relation to the proposed route, and homeownership status (to ensure they were hearing from both renters and homeowners). These data were compared to demographics for North Minneapolis to get a better picture of who to target for further outreach efforts. Likewise, surveying efforts at the end of the demonstration project were targeted toward those living on the five-block temporary greenway or one block away. The key partners were able to calculate response rates for each block to get a better understanding of who they had reached and how people living on different sections of the temporary greenway felt about the project. This information provided evidence that the majority of those living on block with the full greenway supported making a full greenway permanent.

Having data about resident support for the greenway also provided a broader picture of the levels of community support for the project. Opposition was sometimes quite vocal, and having a representative sample of survey data helped the key partners better understand the levels of support for the project, as well as where residents had concerns.

The key partners began with a multi-year community input process to make sure the project was community-driven. From the beginning, the key partners emphasized that the city would not move forward with the project without a strong mandate from the community. Efforts managed by MHD (in partnership with the Alliance and the steering committee, and later the NGC) focused on facilitating resident input rather than advocating for the greenway. Establishing a neutral position proved to be more challenging than the city anticipated; some in the community still felt that institutions with more power were forcing the project on them. However, the key partners tried to maintain neutrality until several rounds of surveying showed overall support for the project, which led to the creation of Northside Greenway Now! and a clear advocacy focus.

Being responsive to those opposed to the project and giving people time to get used to the project helped build trust among community members. Actively listening and responding to concerns about the project helped the project partners demonstrate they were valuing all resident input.

Folks cared about what was going on in the community... Some people just had a different idea of what it should be. That is fair game in engagement. — Community connector

When some residents voiced strong opposition about some of the features of the demonstration project, the key partners adjusted the design on three of the blocks. Likewise, after the demonstration project, and while leadership for the project was transitioning to Northside Greenway Now!, there was a pause in activity as the new organizational structure was set up. A representative from Northside Greenway Now! noted that this pause helped ease some of the tensions that had built up during the demonstration project.

That cool-off period is also something I learned about engagement. Sometimes you have to throw everything out there and have people process it. I notice some of the people who were negative now are like, 'I want this option if we have one of them.' I would like more projects to have a cooling down period. — Northside Greenway Now! representative

The key partners remained committed to centering equity in all phases of the project. From the beginning, the greenway project was grounded in principles of equity and a belief that all people should have access to green space for walking, biking, and other physical activity. The key partners were committed to building in equitable processes, from sub-contracting with local organizations and community connectors to do outreach, to using multiple outreach and engagement strategies to ensure they were hearing from those most likely to be impacted. The steering committee guided the work, and over time, leadership for the project transitioned to the community-led NGC. Throughout the project, the organizations considered ways that the project could exacerbate or reduce economic inequities, gentrification, displacement, and health disparities. The key partners actively explored strategies to ensure that any economic benefits stayed in the community, such as through jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities or signing community benefit agreements with any contractors.

MHD's partnership with a community development organization helped increase its capacity for effective community outreach. The city began working with the Alliance in 2013 based on the Alliance's past experience leading community engagement efforts along the Green Line LRT through the Corridors of Opportunity project. The model used in the Corridors of Opportunity work, especially sub-contracting with local organizations to do outreach, informed many of the early outreach strategies for the greenway project. This partnership also led to the creation of the steering committee. A representative from MHD noted that this project increased their ability to do effective outreach, and increased commitment among city agencies for doing community engagement on future projects.

Challenges and lessons learned

Project stakeholders sometimes struggled to walk the line between outreach and advocacy. Before the project formally moved into advocacy in 2017, the key partners struggled with public perception that community input was not guiding the project, rather than city agencies and local advocates. NGC struggled with the perception that they were an advocacy group. Although the key partners tried to be clear in their messaging that no final decisions have been made, they acknowledged community members might experience the project differently. They suggested the disconnect stemmed from multiple factors, including the fact that in the past, decisions about their community have been led by outside agencies and advocates without resident input, the need for clearer communication about the project, and some blurring of the lines between building awareness for the project and advocacy by NGC members and other project representatives.

The key partners faced challenges engaging with residents who oppose the greenway. All outreach activities were intended to gather feedback from residents, including those who had concerns about the greenway concept. NGC also invited public participation in its monthly meetings to hear feedback from residents. The key partners noted that they invited residents who were interested in a constructive dialogue about their concerns, but struggled with how to respond to residents who were critical of the project and its engagement process. The partners found it particularly challenging to determine how to respond to comments posted on Facebook in ways that were both transparent and constructive.

Key partners had mixed opinions about whether enough engagement had been done to move forward with the project. Throughout the project, the key partners discussed whether enough residents had been heard, and if there was enough evidence of community support to move forward with the project. NGC revisited this question regularly. Some members felt the project was moving too slowly, especially given the longer timelines needed to secure funding and implement capital projects. Other members felt additional outreach was needed to ensure the project represented the interests of the community.

To me, personally, I feel torn between this obligation to reach people who haven't been reached, but an obligation to people who have and gave their opinion, almost two years ago now and said 'this is what I want.' We have to honor who we talk to. We are also honoring the fact that there are still people out there that need to be reached.

– MHD representative

Moving forward

Northside Greenway Now! is currently developing a steering committee and seeking funding sources to support the organization's administration. As the organization becomes more established, it will continue its outreach efforts to increase awareness and support for the project. The organization is also building relationships with local leaders, including city council members, park board members, neighborhood associations, and the city's Community Planning & Economic Development department (tasked with developing city master plans). In 2019, Northside Greenway Now! is also planning to ask the Capital Long-Range Improvement committee to recommend the project for inclusion in the city's budget as part of the 2020-2024 Capital Improvement Program.

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