



Community Engagement in Transit-Related Planning in the Twin Cities

Summary of 2014 Final Report on Strategies, Impact, and Potential Sustainability

From 2011 through 2013, Corridors of Opportunity (CoO) was a broad-based initiative to accelerate the build-out of a regional transit system for the Twin Cities in ways that would advance economic development and ensure people of all incomes and backgrounds could share in the resulting opportunities. CoO was supported by funding from two national initiatives as well as local sources, and was governed by a 26-member policy board made up of top leadership from government, philanthropy, non-profit and private sector interests. Focused on seven corridors in the metro region, CoO supported nearly two dozen planning and implementation activities that promoted: transit-oriented development; affordable housing; small business support and investment; demonstration projects, tools, and policy studies; and community engagement and outreach.

Under the guidance of a Community Engagement Team (CET) made up of three local organizations with strong relationships with community-based organizations (CBOs), \$750,000 was dedicated to engage historically underrepresented populations. Through a community-driven process, the funding was re-allocated in two rounds of sub-grants to 19 grassroots organizations. Engagement work for the CoO also included significant support and leadership activities on the part of the CET and a Community Engagement Steering Committee initiated by the CET and made up of interested leaders from a diverse array of CBOs.

This summary highlights key findings contained in *Community Engagement in Transit-Related Planning in the Twin Cities: Final Report on Strategies, Impact, and Potential Sustainability*. It is based on two cycles of interviews with grantee organization leaders and community participants, public agency staff who worked with grantee organizations, and “community observers” who have a variety of perspectives on community engagement in the region. It is also based on grant reports, multiple interviews with CET leaders, other initiative documents, and data collected as part of the overall CoO evaluation.

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What is the CET's model of engagement, and how is it similar to / different from previous work in the region?

The CET's model is similar to previous community engagement models in its purpose of helping to bring grassroots perspectives into public sector decision-making on issues that affect their communities. The distinct elements of the CET's model are:

- **Regional work to coordinate many separate efforts through a common approach and focus.** This preliminary work drew together diverse partners, including public agency, philanthropic staff, and community members, to prepare for the national PolicyLink 2011 Equity Summit, attend it together, and debrief afterwards about how to apply what they learned. This shared work helped “prepare the field” to be more fertile for grantees’ efforts and new public agency practices and supported a new framework for dialogue about equity and equitable development.
- **Facilitate new connections between community-based organizations and public agency representatives,** educate each group (community members and public sector) about the processes that are essential to the other, and facilitate trust through time, transparency, and accountability to support work in partnership with (or not in opposition to) the public sector.
- **Intentional efforts on the part of the CET leadership to “model the model” of authentic engagement at all times.** Among other examples, this meant that in all their actions, including the development of the initial CE work plan, they sought guidance from grassroots perspectives and community input into the design of processes as well as information materials. In this way they demonstrated the “democratization of expertise”

that recognizes that community members are the true experts on their own issues and perspectives, as well as using feedback and reflection to constantly refine and strengthen the work.

- **Provision of individualized and group technical and strategic advice** to public agencies as well as community organizations, to teach this model of engagement, build community capacity to carry it out, and seek, deploy, and coordinate needed resources.

Underlying all of the CET's efforts is the goal of changing the way planning is done to be more equitable and inclusive of historically underrepresented communities, resulting in more democratic and transparent processes that lead to more beneficial outcomes for these communities.

Were the CET and Steering Committee effective in their work?

Not only was the CET successful with their bold decision to redistribute the grant funds to community-based organizations via a diverse selection committee, they have also been effective in changing the dialogue to incorporate and imbed the principle of equity and community engagement into many aspects of the planning process across a variety of agencies, organizations, and tables. As a participant at the leadership table of the CoO, they helped bring about a clear shift where equity went from being a difficult topic and only listed as one guiding principle among many for the CoO work, to having others at the table bringing up equity on their own in a wide range of conversations and decisions, thus becoming an internalized value and one of two core outcomes of the overall CoO work.

The creation of the Community Engagement Steering Committee (Steering Committee) helped to further model the democratization of expertise that is at the

heart of this model. The Steering Committee, a coalition of grassroots leaders from underrepresented communities, developed strategies based on their shared experiences and knowledge to strengthen regional policies on community engagement. Furthermore, the Steering Committee is continuing its efforts beyond the CoO grants. It is currently working with the Metropolitan Council to co-develop an agency-wide policy that ensures their communities will have a role in securing equity and community representation in decision-making processes into the future.

Furthermore, the grantee organizations would not have been able to be as successful without the support of the CET throughout the process. Community observers, public agency representatives, and grantees all agreed that the CET has been effective in supporting all aspects of this work with their comprehensive model, by creating alliances, linking CBOs and public agencies, influencing the dialogue, and shaping the principles. The CET helped bridge sometimes very large and contentious divides between some communities and public agencies, creating a space for dialogue, and bringing people to the same table. Grantees frequently mentioned that the **bridging work** of the CET to help establish positive relationships, as well as their **technical assistance and expertise**, were some of the big reasons they were able to be effective in their work.



What were the most effective strategies of grantee organizations?

Although all the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Sustainable Community grants included funds for community engagement, the Twin Cities was unusual in its decision to re-grant those funds to community-based organizations to engage communities around transit and transit planning processes. This enabled the engagement efforts that resulted to be more adaptive to the local context, responsive to each community's needs and priorities, and innovative in approaches to educating and involving community members in these processes than if the work had been done in a more uniform, centralized approach.

The goals of both rounds of grantees generally shared some core components:

- Educating community members about transit and transit planning processes
- Engaging residents to advocate to decision-makers for plans that benefit their community
- Holding public officials accountable to the community's needs and priorities
- Building leadership capacity of the residents to continue these efforts moving forward

To achieve these goals, grantees used a myriad of approaches to engaging their target communities in the most contextually and culturally appropriate ways for each community. At the core of grantees' successful engagement strategies were relationship- and trust-building with community members, meeting them where they were at in a culturally appropriate manner, and building and leveraging their community's power to effectively understand and advocate to policymakers their community's issues and priorities. The results of these activities speak to the success of these nuanced, community-based approaches to engagement around

transit development and planning. Some of these results include:

- Changing community members' sense of their own ability to be informed and impact policy and planning outcomes (see pages 5-6)
- Becoming trained in effective organizing and community leadership (see pages 5-6)
- Sitting on decision-making committees (see pages 5-6)
- Meeting with public officials (see page 6)
- Directly impacting policy outcomes (see pages 8-9)

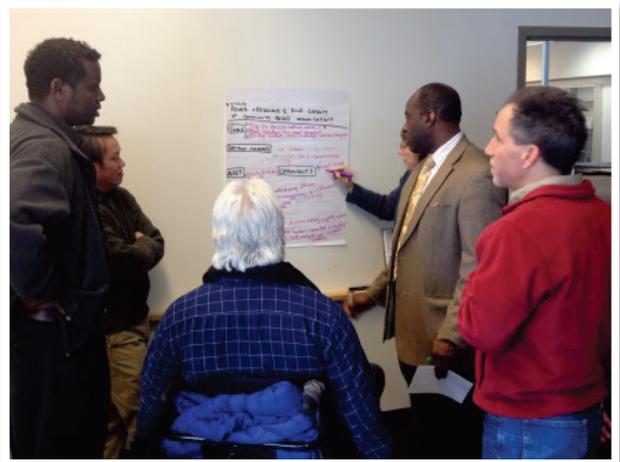
What evidence is there that new relationships were built between community members/CBOs and planning agencies?

Grantees, the public agency staff they worked with, and community-wide observers all agree that relationships were built and/or strengthened in a variety of ways.

- Nearly all of the community engagement (CE) grantees indicated that they have developed new relationships or strengthened existing relationships with public agencies as a result of their grant-related work. Furthermore, nearly all grantees said they think public agencies are now more aware of what is important to their community.
- 13 of the 15 interviewed second round grantees said they are now able to work with public officials better than they could a year ago.
- 16 of the 25 public agency counterparts reported that their agency's relationship with the grantees strengthened either "a little" or "a lot" from the year prior to the grant work—the remainder of the second round interviews reported their relationships as "staying the same."

- 16 of the 24 interviewed public agency counterparts reported that their relationship with **other** community-based organizations strengthened either "a little" or "a lot."
- In the two rounds of interviews with community observers, all but one (30) said that the relationships that historically underrepresented communities now have with public agencies as a result of CET's work and the grants are "a little stronger now" or "a lot stronger now" than they were before the grants.

Most grantees said that they focus on relationship-building with public officials/agencies in order to work successfully with them. Some also mentioned that it is important for them to have staff at decision-making tables alongside public officials and learn a bit more about the policy work process. When community observers were asked what grantee strategies they thought were most effective for building ongoing relationships with public agencies, they most frequently mentioned grantees attending meetings with public officials and maintaining a consistent presence in front of public officials. By being present, grantees were able to communicate the community's issues and priorities to policymakers and act as a bridge between public agencies and communities.



What evidence is there that the intended results are occurring?

To what extent have community members changed their perceptions of the potential threats and/or benefits represented by transit and its related development? Do they feel that plans reflect community priorities and values?

There are some clear short-term impacts that the grantees have had on their individual communities, and these lay the groundwork for possible longer-term impacts.

- First, community members reported having **increased levels of awareness and knowledge about transit-related issues in their community** (Figure 1).
- This increased level of knowledge was often coupled with **leadership and advocacy training** that gave the community members the skills to effectively organize their community and take action, often meeting with policymakers or sitting on local committees.
- This powerful combination of increased knowledge and ability to organize communities helped to strengthen and build relationships within each of the grantees’ targeted communities, often with community members reporting an increased sense of community identity and desire to work together to address issues.
- Finally, and arguably most importantly, community members report **a sense of empowerment from their work with the grantees**. Being informed about the issues, trained on how to take actions, and having the connections to meet with policymakers and decision-makers led them to feel more empowered to have a say in public decision-making that impacts their communities. This is particularly powerful because the CoO’s efforts

specifically targeted communities that have historically been underrepresented in public investments and planning.

1. As a result of [grantee’s] activities, how much did you learn about...

Coming changes and improvements to the transit system, including new transit lines that will be built and new development around transit lines? (N=34)



How new transit lines or the development around them could benefit you or your community, including opportunities such as new jobs or affordable housing? (N=34)



How your community can tell policymakers your opinions about transit changes and improvements? (N=33)



- Learned a lot about it
- Learned a little about it
- Did not learn anything new about it

Source: Community participant interviews, Rounds 1 and 2, 2013-2014.

Because of the scale of change in skills, expectations, and relationships, this re-empowerment is not likely to disappear. Coupled with new leadership and advocacy skills, knowledge, and connections to decision-makers, historically underrepresented communities are poised to be a potent force for bringing about positive long-term benefits for their communities, especially in light of changes in agency practices (see pages 7-8).

It helped me not feel so powerless – it feels better to participate than to always just react to decisions people make. I really built a strong network of people that can get things done. My support system is really huge. (Community member, Round 2)

I have learned to be more honest and I have more confidence to invite and talk to people. I have abilities to participate and be part of something. Raising and expressing my voice makes a difference and people do listen to you. (Community participant, Round 2)

Most grantees were able to mobilize and train a highly engaged core group of community members to engage with at least one public official. Not only did grantees engage a substantial number of community members, but community members reported frequently meeting with public officials.

- 82% of the community participants who were interviewed reported that they had met with at least one public official (city, county, Metropolitan Council), and half of these said they attended two or three meetings.
- 42% said they attended four or more meetings with public officials.

Not only have community members frequently engaged with public officials, but they also report that they plan on continuing and even increasing their level of engagement following the year of the funded grant. Thus the grantees' approaches in training community members and bringing them together with public officials has taken on its own sustainability through the community members themselves.

The total engagement figures reported by grantees are as follows:

- **At least 40,000** people became more aware of transit-related activities and issues—this includes all those who received information from the grantees in some form (i.e., media, door knocking, events).
- **At least 12,000** people became actively involved in transit-related activities and issues —this includes all those who attended at least one meeting.

- **At least 250** people increased their capacity for leadership—this includes those who received some type of leadership training or took on a leadership role.

Are grantee organizations doing their work differently?

The majority of grantees reported making a lot of progress towards their goals or fully achieving the goals they set out for the grant. This level of success is supported by the community members who participated in their efforts, the public agencies they worked with, the community observers who saw “big picture” changes in the transit-planning landscape, and the leaders of the CET who worked alongside them. Interviews with all these different groups support the grantees' claims of success. Examples of accomplishments include (but are not limited to):

- New partnerships were formed amongst community-based organizations, and lasting relationships built between public agencies and communities/ community-based organizations
- Community-based organizations gained a better understanding of how to work effectively with public officials and agencies
- New lines of communication were opened and relationships built between community-based organizations and public agencies, with some historic mistrust being addressed and sometimes even being at least partially alleviated
- Community members developed a new level of expectation to be involved in planning and decision-making processes that impact them. In the words of one county official:

It's raised visibility, so that communities have a greater understanding about how the process works, and how they can engage with it. I think it lays out an expectation of government entities that they need to include and engage the community in order to make the best decisions about what development actually needs to take place, and how the development should take place, so that it benefits the community. (County official, 2014)

Are public transit and transit-oriented development (TOD) planning agencies doing their work differently?

Within the three years of community engagement work as part of CoO, there is ample evidence that agencies involved with transit-related and TOD planning and decision-making have changed how they perceive, understand, and involve historically underrepresented communities and their issues and priorities earlier in planning and decision-making processes. Further, the evidence generally shows that this change, begun by the end of 2012, was intensified during the last year of the initiative (2013). During this time, several large public agencies made institutional and policy-based changes to integrate equity and engagement into their planning processes and guiding principles moving forward. Moreover, the evidence suggests that the community engagement efforts have affected how public agencies do their work in several ways.

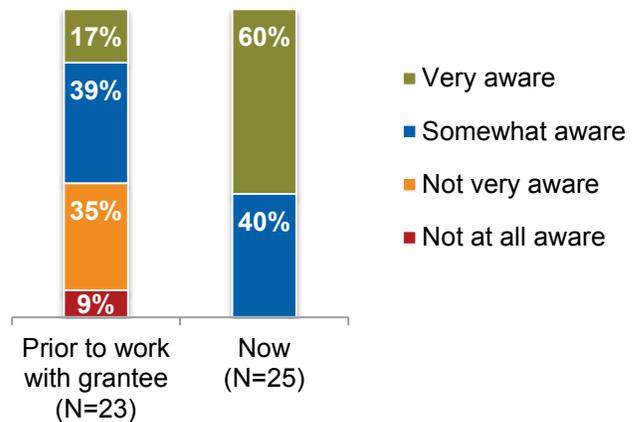
- Public agencies now see community engagement as **more beneficial for the success of planning outcomes**. It is more likely, then, that **public agencies will buy into and commit more to community engagement** if they see it as improving the quality of their planning. Therefore, this is an important impact that has the potential to be lasting.
- Stakeholders from different perspectives agree that many public agencies have an **increased level of awareness of the grantees' communities' needs**

and priorities (Figure 2). In the first round of interviews, none of the public agency counterparts who were interviewed said they were “very aware” of the communities’ interests and needs prior to the grants. By the end of 2013, all agency counterparts from both rounds indicated they were either “somewhat” or “very aware” of community issues and priorities after the grants. This perception of change is supported by almost all community observers and grantees.

- Public agencies also have **made changes in how they engage with historically underrepresented communities**, as attested to by community observers, grantees, CET leaders, and the public agency representatives themselves (Figure 3). Changes include wanting to work with CBOs to reach out to communities and hear their input earlier in the planning process. Some agencies are also taking on their own proactive engagement and outreach efforts, having seen the benefit of doing so from this grant work.

2. Public agencies’ awareness of community perspectives

Public agency counterparts: How aware do you think your agency was/is of the perspectives and needs of the grantee’s community regarding transit and transit-oriented development?



Source: Public agency counterpart interviews, Rounds 1 and 2, 2013-2014.

Thus the evidence shows that a shift amongst public agencies has occurred at **three key levels**:

- Attitudes towards engagement
- Knowledge/understanding of community needs and priorities
- Engagement practices

3. Change in public agency engagement practices

Agency counterparts of grantees: How much has your agency changed how they involve members of the community? (N=23)



Community observers: How much have public agencies (in general) changed how they involve members of the community? (N=34)



- Significant changes
- Modest changes
- No changes

Source: Community observer interviews, Rounds 1 and 2, 2013-2014; Public agency counterpart interviews, Rounds 1 and 2, 2013-2014.

Is there any evidence that planning decisions are more beneficial for low-income and other historically underrepresented groups?

Though this is one of the core goals of the Corridors of Opportunity initiative, little change was expected within the first three years of focused efforts. Nonetheless, the evaluation found evidence that some planning decisions have been made that have the potential for longer-term benefits for low-income and historically underrepresented groups. Some specific examples of

impacts on planning decisions from the grantees' efforts that could also have long-term benefits include:

- Created better plans for bike/walk access to the Blake Road Station and a community park in the station area in Hopkins through the work of the Blake Road Corridor Collaborative
- Established better access for people with disabilities to Central Corridor during construction and light rail service, through the work of Advocating Change Together
- Created development guidelines for the Southwest Light Rail Transit (LRT) Town Center Station, developed by New American Academy in partnership with Twin Cities LISC, and accepted by Eden Prairie City Council
- Identified a vacant city-owned building in Eden Prairie as a possible site for a small business incubator for local entrepreneurs through New American Academy's work, as well as partnership with Neighborhood Development Center, Metropolitan Economic Development Association, and Hennepin County to pilot training and supporting entrepreneurs in three station areas on the Southwest LRT line
- Designed classes to support Brooklyn Park residents to prepare for jobs at the Target Brooklyn Park Campus on the Bottineau LRT line through the work of African Career Education Resource Inc., in partnership with Target Corporation and North Hennepin Community College
- Involved North Minneapolis residents in the Bottineau LRT Alternatives Analysis and secured a voting seat on the Bottineau Policy Advisory Committee, from the efforts of the Northside Residents Redevelopment Council through the Northside Transportation Network

- Formed a coalition of organizations of communities of color and four St. Paul District Councils called Fostering East Side Transit Equity Conversations through the work of Engage Eastside. This coalition involves East Side St. Paul residents in a comprehensive discussion of the transit planning for Gateway Corridor, St. Paul Street Car Study, and the Rush Line project

In addition to these grantee-specific outcomes, some broader policy and institutional impacts on the transit-planning and public decision-making landscape were achieved with the help of the CET, the Steering Committee, grantees, and related efforts:

- Hiring of community outreach and engagement staff by both the Metropolitan Council and Hennepin County, with the involvement of community-based organization representatives in the development of job criteria and hiring processes
- Decision by Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) to reach out to the CET for technical assistance and support for their own community engagement strategies, particularly in its partnership with the Northside Funders Group
- Assisting with the drafting the Public Engagement Plan for all Met Council program activities to replace the Public Participation Plan—which was applied to only transportation planning—by the Community Engagement Steering Committee

All these are examples of outcomes with the potential to have long-term benefits for historically underrepresented communities. Realizing the potential, however, will require ongoing commitment to equity and community input throughout ongoing and future planning and decision-making processes.



Challenges, lessons learned, and sustainability

Challenges and lessons learned

The table on the next page describes some of the key challenges encountered in the implementation of the community engagement efforts, as well as how these were addressed and what has been learned as a result.

Stakeholder	Challenge	Solutions/lessons learned
CET	Prior history of mistrust between communities and public agencies	Introduced public agency representatives and CBOs/community members with bridging meetings that brought them to the same table.
	Changing the frame of reference from conflict to partnership	Worked extensively to build relationships with communities, CBOs, public agency representatives, and other leaders and show where their priorities and interests could align and how to work together effectively to achieve better outcomes for all.
	The CET's position working between communities and public agencies, each with often different (sometimes conflicting) expectations for the CET's work and role	Educated public agencies and CBOs about how each of them functions and their processes, and begin to construct some shared language and expectations.
	"Building the field" and changing the dialogue around the ideas of equity and engagement amongst public agencies, transit planners, and community leaders	Organized convening of nonprofit and public agency leaders together around the ideas of integrating equity and engagement into the planning processes prior to the Equity Summit in 2011. Participated in the Policy Board and actively sought to integrate equity and engagement into the regular language and outcomes of the greater CoO initiative.
	Funding the CET's work after re-granting almost all the HUD funds to grassroots CBOs	Sought its own external funding to support its work throughout the three years of CoO.
Grantees	Funding limitations	Many sought out additional funding, and often leveraged the funding and relationships built from the community engagement grants to get additional outside funding to support their work.
	Public agencies' processes and decisions not aligned with the limited timeline of grant work	Needed to have both patience and flexibility, be prepared to maintain participants' interest, and to engage when the timing was right.
	Community mistrust of public agencies and officials	Needed to actively build relationships with public officials, and bring them out to community events.
	Maintaining community energy over time	Some described needing to build strong core groups of community leaders that were willing to commit to ongoing participation over time who could then mobilize other residents and catalyze that energy when necessary.
Public agencies	Getting community members to show up at meetings and communicating effectively with communities about transit issues	Often partnered with CBOs to most effectively engage and communicate with residents.
	Building trust with residents	Worked with the CET and CBOs to overcome issues such as outreach, communication, and other issues stemming from mistrust.
	Some grantees' "unrealistic expectations" of what public agencies could accomplish within the grant period	Helped to inform grantees of public agency processes by the CET and public agencies working with grantees over time.
	Lack of dedicated funding for community engagement practices	In response, some public agencies now have dedicated policies and funding for engagement practices.

Sustainability

Though there generally was optimism from community observers, grantees, public agency representatives, and community members that this engagement will continue into 2014 and beyond, the single biggest concern impacting its sustainability is **funding**—for CBOs to continue this work, for public agencies to continue integrating community engagement into their budgets and practices, and for intermediary organizations to continue. It is important to highlight that the McKnight Foundation decided to fund a third round of community engagement grants in 2014. However, ongoing commitment to funding community engagement work is critical to sustaining the progress towards equitable planning processes into the future.

Besides the need for funding, there are some positive outcomes from the two years of grant work that indicate some potential for sustainability:

- There have been tangible examples of public agency policy changes around engagement and equity, including the Metropolitan Council’s “Public Engagement Plan”; Ramsey County’s efforts to integrate community engagement into its RFPs and the equity plan for engagement that they are drafting; and Hennepin County’s creation of its “Community Engagement and Outreach” staff positions, which were created in partnership with community leaders who also participated in the hiring process.
- Community members now sit on committees and advisory boards that impact public planning, and frequently reported that they plan on continuing to lead organizing and engagement of their communities and public officials.

- Grantees have strengthened and/or built new relationships with public officials and other community-based organizations, and some have formed new partnerships and coalitions, such as the Blue Line Coalition. Most grantees said they had received additional funding for their work beyond the CoO grants.
- There has been a clear shift in the dialogue around equity and engagement amongst leaders and officials which appears likely to not go away with the end of CoO. This was evidenced by equity becoming embedded and internalized as a core outcome of the Corridors of Opportunity work, thus impacting the broader environment of actors involved in transit and public planning processes.
- The Community Engagement Steering Committee is positioned to continue on its own beyond the grant work, having been created to be self-sustaining beyond the CoO initiative. Additionally, the three organizations comprising the CET have worked out an agreement for continuing their partnership on community engagement.



Moving forward

During the three years of the CoO, a strong foundation has been laid by the CET, the Steering Committee, the grantees, and public agencies to strengthen community engagement practices in the region. From this base, much can still be accomplished to benefit and empower historically underrepresented communities and ensure equity is embedded in public planning processes and decisions.

It is important to keep in mind that although much has been accomplished and the energy and foundation has been built to carry equity and engagement into other areas beyond transit and beyond the grants, historical patterns of underrepresentation were not expected to be fully addressed or resolved as a result of this work alone. The resolution of long-standing inequities will likely require broader institutional change and commitment to addressing these issues, which have been adopted as part of the charge to the CoO's successor initiative, the Partnership for Regional Opportunity.

The evaluation finds evidence that the work to date has helped create significant energy and momentum to help sustain the work. The shift in dialogue around and integration of the principles of equity, inclusion, and engagement in planning processes and communities' increased capacity to influence planning have laid the foundation for potentially more equitable and beneficial outcomes for historically underrepresented communities moving forward. Sustained success demands continued institutional commitment, funding, and energy.

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Community Engagement in Transit-related Planning in the Twin Cities* final report.

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