



US DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

THRIVING COMMUNITIES PROGRAM

OMAHA'S NORTH FREEWAY
COMPLETE TRANSIT-ORIENTED NEIGHBORHOODS
FINAL REPORT



US Department of Transportation
Contract # 31000469
May 2025

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Thriving Communities initiative for Omaha's North Freeway provided targeted technical assistance and capacity building to the North Omaha community to lay the groundwork for future infrastructure improvements and economic and community revitalization. This initiative was a collaboration between the USDOT Thriving Communities Complete Transit-Oriented Neighborhoods Cohort led by the Capacity Building Team of WSP and AFA to support the Omaha Community Team Lead, MAPA, and their partners City of Omaha, Spark, Metro Transit, and One Omaha.

The technical assistance and capacity building process for North Omaha had three steps:

- Organizational Assessment
- Community Engagement and Education
- Project Development and Application

This report outlines the ways in which the Capacity Building team provided targeted technical assistance to the Community Team and summarizes the outputs of the Thriving Communities work program in North Omaha.

Before providing any technical support, WSP hosted a kick-off call with the Omaha Community Team members to overview the program, share and confirm their takeaways from their letter of interest, define the outcomes they would like from the program, and then began an open discussion to listen to the community lead and partners to discuss their goals, priorities, and technical assistance needs through the program. Additionally, WSP hosted an in-person kick-off with the Community Team and other key stakeholders at the Revive Center at 24th & Lake Street.

1.1 COMMUNITY PROFILE

The project area was once home to the "Black Belt," where black professionals operated successful businesses and residents invested in churches and social halls throughout the area starting in the late 1800's. North Omaha was redlined in the 1920s and by the 1970's the community was bisected by the North Freeway which displaced thousands through right-of-way acquisition, significantly diminishing population density, and inhibited growth and opportunity in adjacent neighborhoods.

The project area is bordered by the Sorensen Parkway/Storz Expressway to the North, I-480 to the South, and extends one-mile east and west of the North Freeway. The project area includes corridors adjacent to the Fort Omaha Campus of Metropolitan Community College. A map of the project area is included on the following page.

The legacy of the North Freeway resulted in adverse conditions in the project area, which impacted the trust of residents in their local officials. Poverty persists in the area, especially among Black residents. Of the approximately 28,000 residents in the area, nearly 43% identify as Black (38% as white; 11% as Hispanic), 32% of residents live in poverty, where 51% of those in poverty are black. About 15% of households do not own vehicles, making it especially difficult to access economic opportunities with a low performing transit network (transit score 4.7 out of 10 transit score -- the combination of low transit trips per week and number of jobs accessible by transit

enable few to take transit to work¹). Approximately 31% of residents have a disability, 16% are senior citizens, and of the 61% households renting in the area, 58% are house-burdened, making it difficult for an average citizen to prosper given existing conditions. Although local activities have slowly revitalized nearby corridors, residents remain fearful of displacement. A history of disinvestment and ongoing limitations in transportation and economic opportunities make it difficult for the community to trust in promises associated with new infrastructure projects.

Adjoining corridors have experienced significant activity in recent years. The City of Omaha and Omaha Housing Authority secured the North 30th Street Choice Neighborhood implementation grant in 2015, an area inclusive of two public housing sites being transformed into mixed-use, mixed-income neighborhood centers. Metro Transit recently received a RAISE grant to evaluate bus rapid transit or transit enhancements along 24th and 30th Street. The City of Omaha created the Forever North plan, which created a housing and transportation strategy for the 24th Street Corridor. MAPA led the Highway 75 Corridor and Freight Strategy along the roadway corridor that serves as the main street to the Florence neighborhood. However, throughout these efforts, the North Freeway corridor has largely remained understudies and unevaluated for changes that can mitigate negative impacts in the community. MAPA hoped to receive technical assistance to align their regional planning processes with community decision-making.

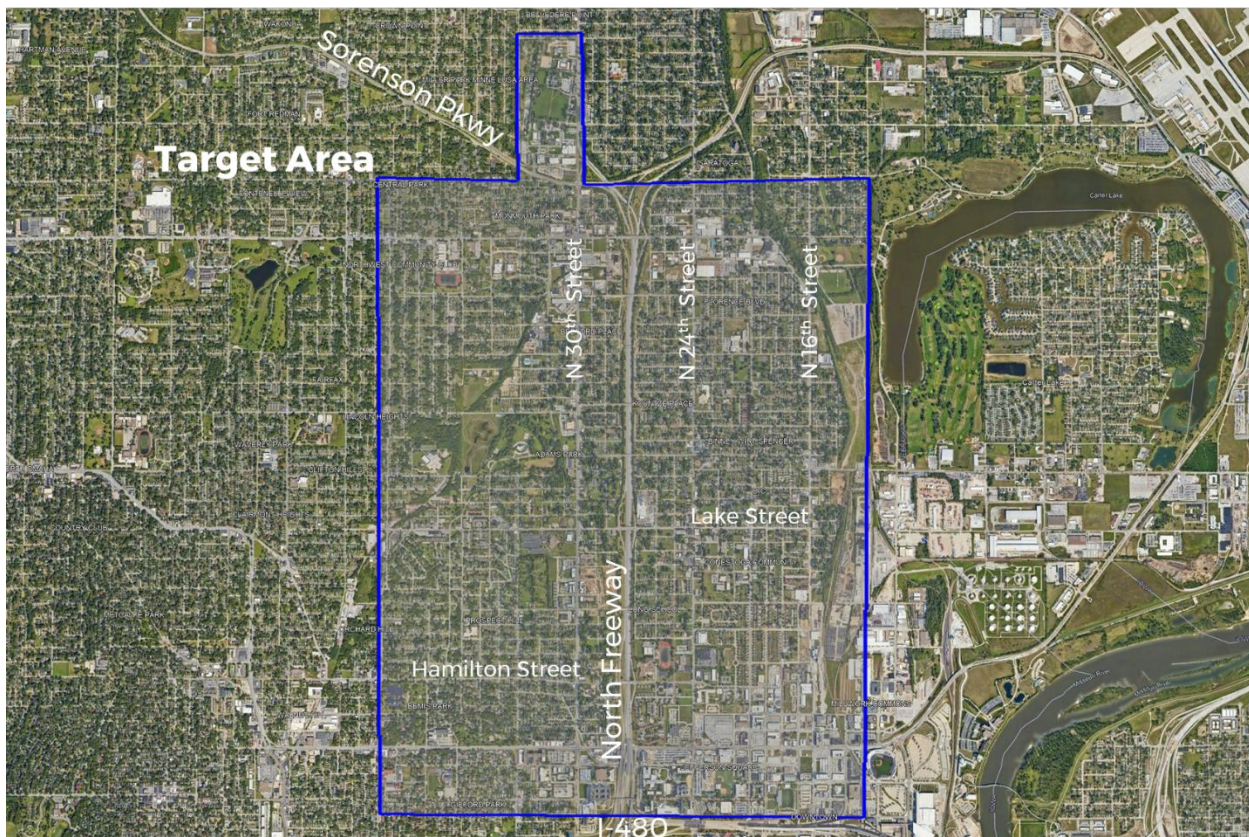


Figure 1 - Project Area

¹ <https://alltransit.cnt.org/metrics/#economy>

1.2 PROJECT VISION AND GOALS

The aim of the Thriving Communities Program was to assist MAPA and its partners in restoring the North Omaha community's trust in transportation decision making, championing community engagement, and realizing positive change along the North Freeway corridor. By collaborating with the City of Omaha, Metro Transit, and Spark, MAPA sought to build on their past activities to emphasize access to opportunities, economic growth, protection against displacement, and active community participation. Overall, MAPA hoped to complete this work in ways that builds the community's power and places them at the forefront of decision-making for transportation projects.

- **Restoring Trust:** Sought technical assistance for an approach that enhances community power and restored trust in the transportation decision making process.
- **Community Engagement:** Created discussions around the historical context of the North Freeway and enacting change through urban planning/design.
- **Addressing Past Harms:** Discussed, studied, and evaluated changes to address the impacts of the North Freeway corridor on the surrounding neighborhood.
- **Securing Future Investment:** Leveraged the opportunity presented specifically by USDOT's Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Grant and other prospective public and private funding sources for the enhancement of the North Freeway corridor.

2 ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT

The Organizational Assessment for Thriving Communities, completed in the fall of 2023, served as a tool to document and understand the existing capacities of organizers involved in the Thriving Communities Program. The assessment aimed to align groups by establishing a common understanding of their goals. This is crucial for identifying critical elements necessary for the program's success, and its results can inform training needs and capacity-building workshops.

The questions were designed to understand MAPA's organization and gain insights into its partners. The assessment encompassed eight criteria categories: Governance; Organizational and Workforce Capacity; Processes, Goals, and Tools; Systems of Accountability; Partnerships; Federal Compliance; Equity Centered Approach; and Community Engagement. Within these categories, participants rated a series of statements on a scale of 1 to 5, with the total representing the average rating. Each section concluded with an open-ended question for additional feedback.

Participants in this assessment included representatives from the City of Omaha, the Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (MAPA), and two local non-profit partners, representing organizations ranging in size from 6 to over 31 people.

Respondents to the assessment ranked each criterion at or above a 3.20 score, showing broad confidence in MAPA and the team's organizational preparedness for the program. Respondents noted that MAPA acts as a great convener of regional stakeholders but does not have authority beyond administering federal aid in the region. Policy is handled by the City of Omaha and local jurisdictions generally have implementation powers. While MAPA is well staffed, respondents stated there is a need for additional support for larger projects; non-profit partners stated an interest in professional development to enhance their capacity to support said projects.

A key takeaway from the Governance criteria revealed that cross-disciplinary and inter-agency roles and responsibilities lacked clear definition. MAPA was positively perceived as well-structured, data-driven, and transparent with local partners and the community. However, it was noted that MAPA lacks the local authority to implement policy and programming decisions.

Regarding organizational and workforce capacity, participants generally strongly agreed that MAPA is organized, diverse, and well-staffed. There were some disagreements about the agency having a clear vision and goals and possessing the necessary tools and resources to achieve the Thriving Communities goals.

Regarding systems of accountability, a challenge was the public's lack of awareness of MAPA as an organization or when the public is engaged, they were not informed or engaged in a way that enables them to comment substantively on activities. Several respondents noted that residents confuse MAPA and the City with one another, revealing a need for better public messaging about the organizations and their responsibilities. Overall, respondents rated MAPA highly. The statements that were ranked the lowest were "The lead agency has full authority and autonomy to implement policy and programming decisions" and "the public knows how the lead agency uses their input to influence decision making." This suggests a need to educate the public and improve transparency in decision making and engagement.

The Organizational Assessment results can be found in **Appendix A**.

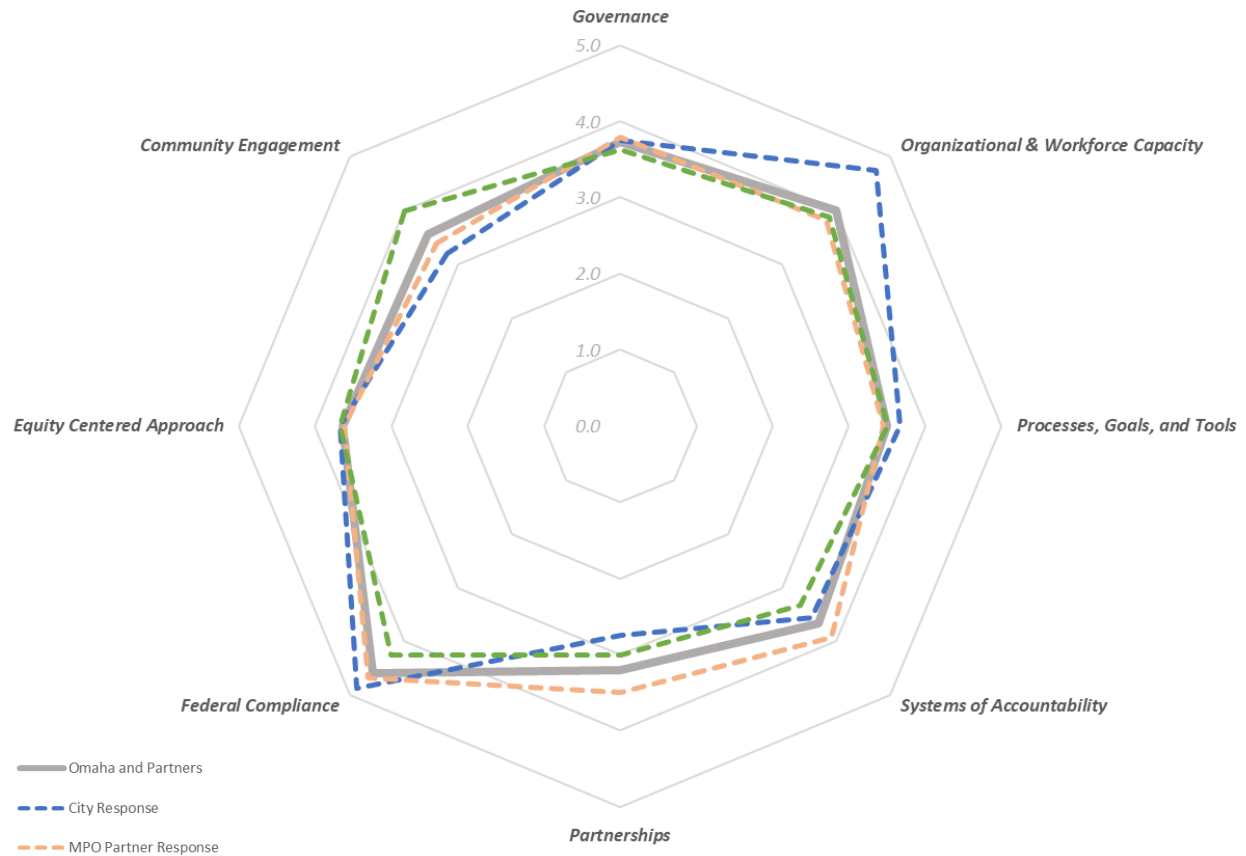


Figure 2 - Organizational Assessment Results

	Governance	Organizational & Workforce Capacity	Processes, Goals, and Tools	Systems of Accountability	Partnerships	Federal Compliance	Equity Centered Approach	Community Engagement
Omaha and Partners	3.73	4.00	3.50	3.67	3.21	4.59	3.64	3.57
City Response	3.75	4.75	3.67	3.56	2.75	4.88	3.67	3.20
MPO Partner Response	3.79	3.81	3.44	3.93	3.50	4.67	3.61	3.40
Non-Profit partner response	3.63	3.88	3.50	3.33	3.00	4.25	3.67	4.00

3 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & EDUCATION

Engaging the community fosters collaboration and a sense of shared ownership in initiatives. To effectively engage community members, One Omaha identified and involved individuals and groups with a vested interest in the project's outcomes. This entailed soliciting input from community members through surveys and open forums at community events. The information gathered through this engagement is shown in the Content Engagement Report in Appendix B.

3.1 COMPREHENSIVE AUDIENCE ASSESSMENT IN NORTH OMAHA

To ensure a holistic understanding and community-led decision-making in North Omaha, the team engaged a range of audiences. This involved compiling a comprehensive, categorized list of community groups, stakeholders, and residents in North Omaha, which can serve as a foundation for ongoing outreach and engagement efforts and served as the email list for invitations to the Community-Partner Visualization Workshop in Task 3.

The "Content Engagement Analysis Report" from One Omaha, reveals insights into community perceptions of the North Omaha Freeway (Hwy 75). The analysis is based on 118 total engagements from individuals ranging in age from under 18 to 65 and older, with the 35-44 age group being the most represented. Data was collected over August 6 to August 24, 2024 using in-person surveys.

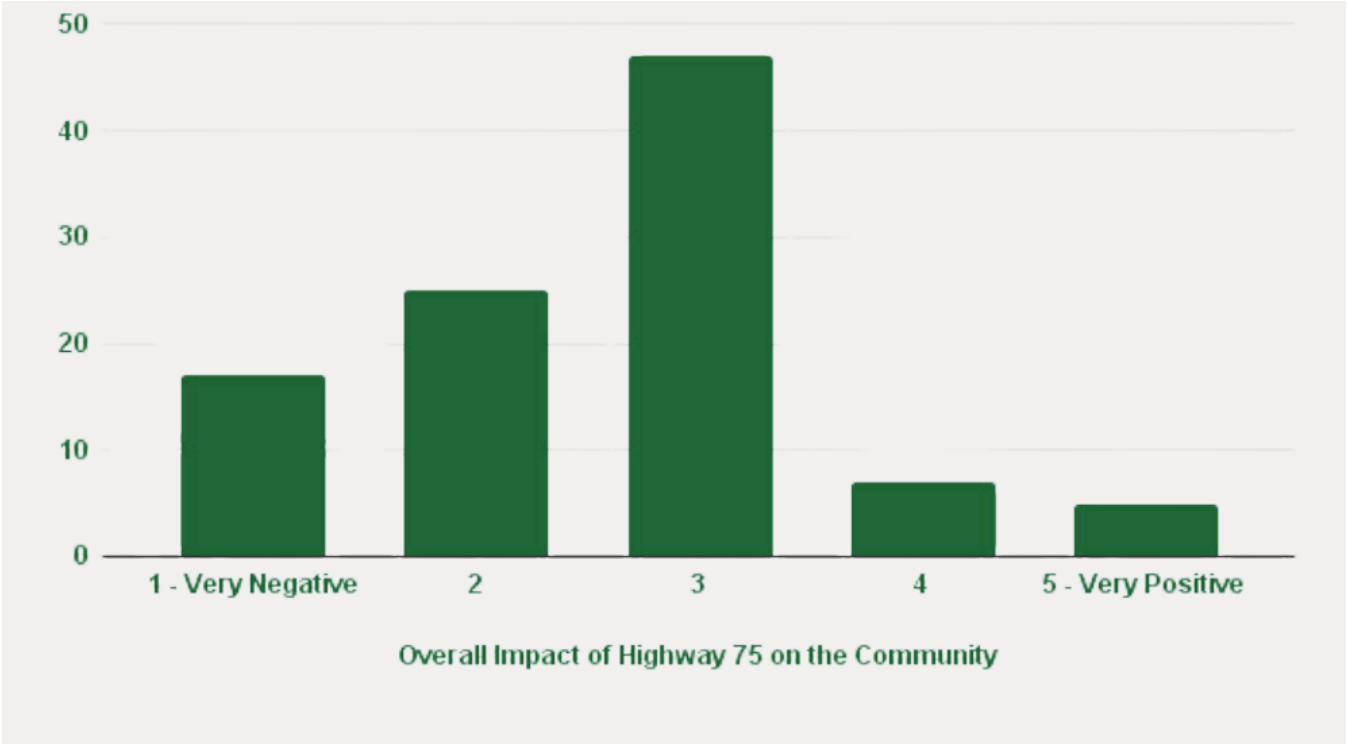
Most participants who provided demographic information identified as Black or African American (65 out of 118). Geographically, North Omaha had the highest representation, according to reported zip codes. Most respondents (54.5%) rent their homes.

The report highlights that the most common impacts of Highway 75, as perceived by the community, are the displacement of residents, increased traffic, noise pollution, air pollution, loss of local businesses, reduced property values, and increased commute times. Some positive effects noted were easier connections to work and potential benefits for businesses in midtown.

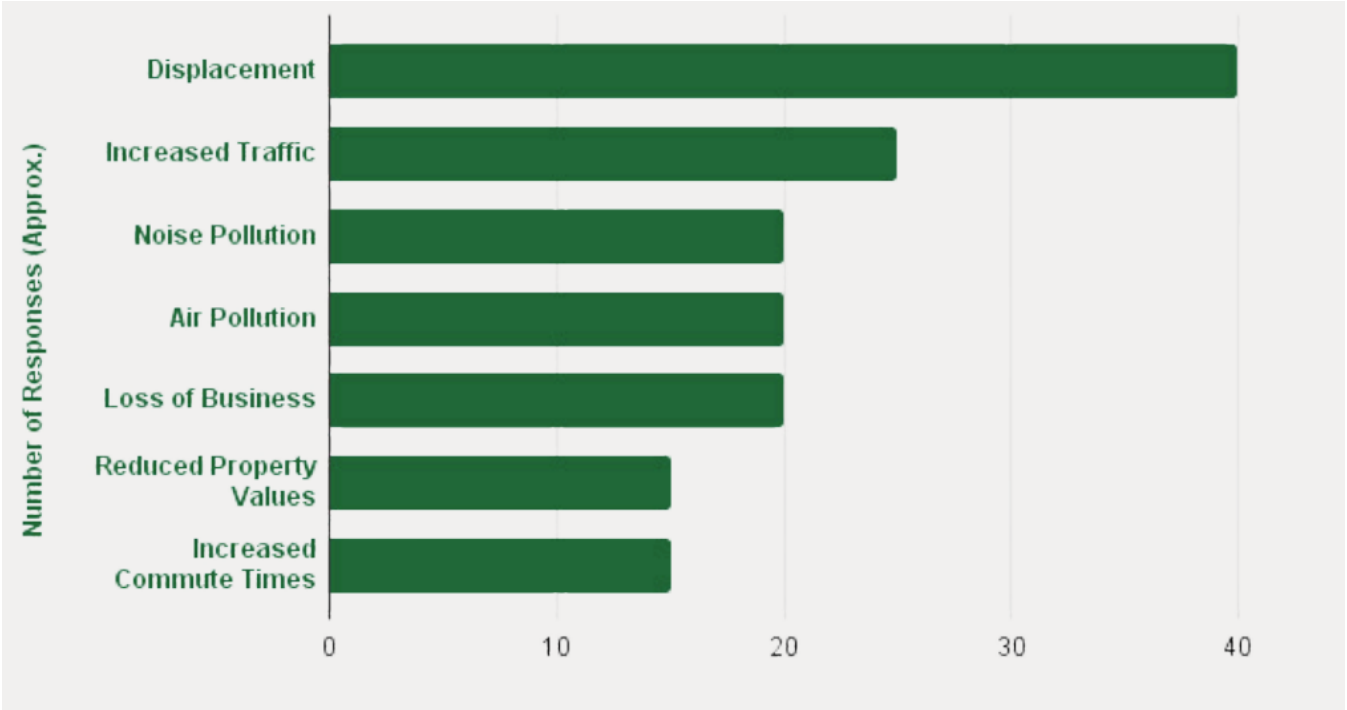
Overall, the community expresses that the construction of Highway 75 has predominantly negative consequences, particularly concerning displacement, increased traffic, and environmental issues. The report emphasizes anxieties about long-term disruption of residents and a deterioration of neighborhood stability and quality of life, including reduced property values, and loss of community identity.

The final Content Engagement Analysis Report can be found in **Appendix B**.

Community Survey Respondents' Views on the Overall Impact of US 75 (North Freeway)

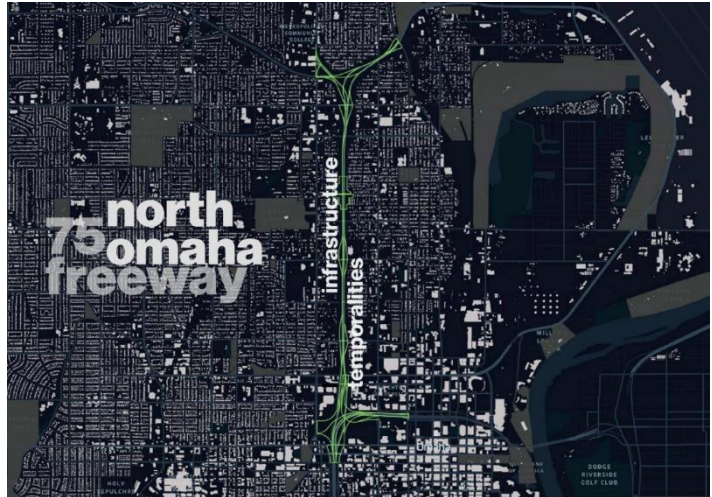


Impacts of Hwy 75 (North Freeway) Identified by Community Survey Respondents



3.2 INTEGRATED HISTORICAL REPORT

The Practice of Democracy developed the *Infrastructure Temporalities: North Omaha 75 Freeway*, an integrated historical report that is centered on the North 75 Freeway and its effects on North Omaha. The report employs a multidisciplinary approach encompassing planning analysis, historical research, and community engagement, with the intention of using this study as context for understanding current conditions and as a basis for informed, restorative action. WSP provided QA/QC review and comments on the draft report.



The report's analysis proposes a set of guiding practices grounded in long-term stewardship, inclusive design, and coordinated systems thinking, while aligning with the national Thriving Communities Initiative. The research, design framework, and policy analysis examine history, spatial justice, and collective agency, reflecting a fundamental belief that public infrastructure extends beyond mere roads, buildings, or policies.

Three specific focus areas on the North 75 Freeway were identified: The North Junction (the interchange of US 75 with Storz Expressway and Sorensen Parkway), Bristol Street Block (open space surrounding the freeway near Bristol St), and South Junction (the interchange of US 75 and I-480). Key corridor-wide goals include the reconnection of east-west pedestrian and bike networks, activating residual land through multimodal and cultural programming, embedding memory into the landscape through public art and oral histories, creating reparative land use strategies for displaced communities, and designing infrastructure with environmental resilience and health equity as primary considerations.

At its core, this project questions how infrastructure can equitably, sustainably, and intentionally serve both the public and its people. The research adopted a continuous learning approach, incorporating adaptive feedback through data collection methods such as interviews, surveys, and participatory mapping. It also establishes baseline conditions and longitudinal tracking, and reflective feedback loops that influence investment, design, and narrative.

The report provides a detailed exploration of how infrastructure has evolved in the United States from indigenous trails to modern-day advancements, examining cultural movements, policies, programs, and key influences, and their relation to the development of Highway 75, specifically highlighting the past histories of Nebraska and Omaha for greater context.

The report set up a spatial analysis model to represent different aspects that can help restore neighborhoods impacted by the North Freeway. It looks at elements like land, public space, residential and commercial assets, culture, mixed use development, green spaces, and more to build a framework of "cells". These cells are placed on top and next to each other, on a designated site, to reimagine the potential for the area. The process considers existing elements, and future innovations to come. Once these cells are layered, they provide a theoretical diagram of the potential future for areas along and bordering the North 75 Freeway.

The historical report is intended to be adapted into future interactive exhibits (potentially a temporary or permanent exhibition space). The Practice of Democracy conducted an initial investigation of potential spaces that could host such an exhibit as part of future efforts beyond the scope of this Thriving Communities initiative.

The *Infrastructure Temporalities: North Omaha 75 Freeway* report can be found in **Appendix C**.

3.3 URBAN DESIGN TOOLKIT & LEARNING SESIONS

Spark CDI created an Urban Design Toolkit, which consists of a handbook and a series of worksheets intended to be used in facilitating community-led design sessions. The Urban Design Handbook is intended as an introductory resource for individuals without traditional urban design backgrounds. It aims to guide readers through a brief overview of urban design, covering frameworks for understanding a project's role within its neighborhood, defining scope, goals, assessments, and metrics, establishing best practices in urban design, and concluding with common mistakes to avoid.

The Urban Design Handbook is accompanied by a series of worksheets that Spark intends to use as part of community-led design discussions. The worksheets are meant to be flexible and adaptable for different needs/projects.

WSP met with Spark at the outset of development of the toolkit to discuss their vision and goals for the toolkit and to help them ensure that it will support their work beyond the life of the Thriving Communities project. WSP also provided feedback on drafts of the toolkit.

Spark incorporated the Urban Design Handbook and worksheets into its ChangeMaker Academy in early May 2025, which involved educational sessions for community members aimed at enacting change in their own neighborhood. The ChangeMakers will complete place-based projects along the North Omaha Trail (which runs adjacent to the North Freeway) by the end of 2025. More than just equipping them with knowledge, these workshops fostered leadership qualities, encouraging and guiding attendees to emerge as change leaders who can champion and lead transformative urban design initiatives in North Omaha. The sessions were built around the idea of “train-the-trainers,” allowing for people to spread this knowledge among their own communities.

The Urban Design Handbook can be found in **Appendix D**.

4 PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND APPLICATION

Project development and application revolved around translating community feedback and ideas into actionable ideas. The primary objective ensured that the future of North Omaha is planned by using insights from its residents. Two main areas of focus were explored: "Best Practice Documentation of Thriving Communities," where lessons derived from similar communities that have thrived; and "Visualization of Transportation Alternatives in North Omaha," which aimed to picture potential changes, particularly around the North Freeway. In addition, the scope of work was amended to include technical assistance on MAPA's application for a Reconnecting Communities Grant. The grant application effort replaced

4.1 RECONNECTING COMMUNITIES GRANT APPLICATION

WSP assisted MAPA with drafting its application for a Reconnecting Communities grant to advance conceptual and preliminary engineering and design of potential improvements along the North Freeway. The \$1.5 million Community Planning grant was awarded in January 2025.

A copy of the grant application narrative can be found in **Appendix E**.

4.2 VISUALIZATION OF TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVES IN NORTH OMAHA

Transportation plays a pivotal role in defining a community's access, mobility, economic development, and overall quality of life. To visualize how transportation alternatives can better serve North Omaha, especially around the pivotal North Freeway, it is essential to consider various solutions that cater to the unique needs, desires, and aspirations of the community. To this end, WSP organized and hosted a half-day Community-Partner Visioning Workshop on February 13th at the Revive Center at 2401 Lake St in Omaha. The workshop focused on developing transformative ideas for the area along and surrounding the North Freeway. Invitees to the Workshop included representatives from the Omaha TCP Community Partners (MAPA, City of Omaha, Spark, Metro Transit) as well as a representative from the Nebraska DOT and various community members who are on the Stakeholder Database that was created as part of the Comprehensive Audience Assessment task led by OneOmaha. A total of 21 community partners and stakeholders were in attendance (not including 6 WSP staff).

Prior to the workshop, WSP produced a series of conceptual renderings of various freeway mitigation tools (placed in the generalized context of a "typical" condition along the North Freeway but not in any specific location) using both 2D and 3D renderings. These renderings provide a generalized toolbox of strategies to support redevelopment of land along the freeway. These visualizations were used in activities during the workshop and are also designed to be useful for further planning efforts that MAPA, Spark, or the City undertake beyond the TCP work program.

The Workshop began with an overview of the North Freeway Thriving Communities initiative as well as a round of introductions of those in attendance. Attendees also relayed why they are passionate about community revitalization efforts in North Omaha, and particularly their interest in the North Freeway corridor. This was followed by a discussion of the issues, goals, and attendees' vision for the North Freeway corridor. This included

polling participants to gather their ideas and gauge their overall sentiments toward the North Freeway and desired improvements they would like to see in the area. Following lunch, an interactive “Tools & Ideas” work session was held which involved working in two groups to discuss and develop an aspirational program of different highway mitigation tools (e.g. enhanced bridges, caps, trench & fill, or various removal and redevelopment alternatives) using cut-out diagrams of each “tool” and laying them along scroll maps of the corridor.



Overall, community stakeholders were optimistic about the future opportunities that a project to reimagine the North Freeway could offer. However, some participants were skeptical of the feasibility of completely taking away the Freeway, along with some of the other tools presented. Participants made it clear that they would like to see this be a North Omaha community-led effort. When asked about what concerns people have regarding a potential North Freeway project, participants expressed concerns about gentrification, displacement, and potential for a major project to inflict further trauma on people in the community.


The Workshop and the package of renderings of various highway retrofit and mitigation tools fulfill the “Visualization of Transportation Alternatives” task in the Work Plan. The materials from the workshops (including Menti poll results and the work session maps and “toolbox” of highway mitigation strategies) will be owned and hosted by Spark following the conclusion of the TCP work program. The materials have also been made available to MAPA and the City of Omaha with the intent that they can help to inform initial conversations and further planning efforts (such as the Reconnecting Communities Planning grant that MAPA was awarded for the North Freeway corridor, if or when that effort moves forward).

The workshop presentation slides and Mentimeter survey results can be found in **Appendix F**. Workshop notes can be found in **Appendix G**. The toolbox of visualizations of transportation alternatives can be found in **Appendix H**.

4.3 BEST PRACTICES COMPENDIUM

This compendium prepared by Accelerator for America underscored the significance of meaningful public involvement in transportation decisions. Key aspects involved understanding community demographics, building relationships, proactive engagement, responsive techniques, and documenting community input's impact. Developing public involvement capacity through resources, staff, and training was crucial, measured by influence, transparency, timing, inclusion, targeted engagement, and accessibility. Meaningful involvement methods were tailored to community needs and included both virtual and in-person options.

The document identified challenges like lack of trust, participation barriers (language, access), and financial limits. These issues contributed to the Conflict Cycle (tension, dilemma, injustice, confrontation, adjustments). Recognizing these stages enables targeted actions like public forums and collaborative discussions.



The document showcased successful community engagement strategies nationwide. St. Paul's Reconnect Rondo used the 4P Model to restore a highway-impacted neighborhood. Milwaukee's Park East Compact ensured local benefits from redevelopment. Tulsa's Kirkpatrick Heights-Greenwood Plan was a community-led revitalization emphasizing trust and inclusive decision-making.

Key opportunities to improve North Omaha's community engagement include ensuring access to information, responsiveness, and a solution-focused approach. Implementing these practices could build trust, promote inclusive development, and address historical injustices from the North Freeway.

The Best Practices Compendium can be found in **Appendix I**.