Learnings Report: Power Building for Equitable Federal Funding in New Orleans

BY: Aarti Sharma for the Southern Economic Advancement Project, in collaboration with Committee for a Better New Orleans and The Workplace Justice Project

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This learnings report chronicles and synthesizes the work of the Building Equity Collaborative in New Orleans, LA from 2022 through 2024. The report offers lessons learned and a roadmap for coalitions working to put equity front and center in funding discussions and decisions in their communities.

ABOUT SEAP

SEAP is your partner and resource. We amplify the efforts of existing organizations and networks that work towards broadening economic power and building a more equitable future. Broadening economic power brings attention to how race, class and gender intersect social and economic policy in the South. We explore policy ideas designed to address these connections directly. SEAP focuses on 12 Southern states and marginalized/vulnerable populations within the region. This effort is part of SEAP's Our Dollars, Our Dreams campaign. To learn more, contact liza@theseap.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pursuing change for vulnerable populations is Aarti Sharma's passion. She is a lawyer who started her career teaching and working in the juvenile system. That passion led to working for the Georgia Department of Education, Stacey Abrams' gubernatorial campaign, and redefinED atlanta, overseeing growth and policy initiatives. She consults on issues related to organizational strategy, policy and research, and leadership.

THE HISTORY: INEQUITABLE INVESTMENTS

New Orleans' equity statement reads, "Equity is achieved when identity, status, and ability no longer predicts a person's quality of life in our City." Yet it is clear from past responses to weather and climate disasters and continued, deficient infrastructure that New Orleans has severely underinvested in critical infrastructure and climate resilience projects in an equitable manner, causing the displacement, death, and destitution of thousands. New Orleans' position below sea level and on the Gulf of Mexico has made it the frequent target of powerful storms such as Hurricanes Katrina (2005) and Ida (2021), which both decimated the city in recent years, resulting in lasting damage and ongoing impacts.

Post Katrina, the federal government spent $76 billion in New Orleans, and yet, almost twenty years out, there is broad consensus the results have not been equitable.[1,2] The money was largely taken by developers that conducted numerous community listening sessions, creating community engagement plans only to sit on shelves. And long before Katrina, New Orleans had seen infrastructure projects negatively impact historically Black neighborhoods such as the Claiborne corridor, which bisected a thriving and bustling Black-owned business corridor with a freeway as part of the federal government's 1960s highway program.

This historical context has current consequences with many community members reticent to provide input or believing community input sessions are insincere. Additionally, the long history of racism and classism in New Orleans creates a dynamic where community trust with infrastructure projects and government spending is severely eroded.

THE OPPORTUNITY: IIJA, JUSTICE40, IRA

When President Biden announced The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), and Executive Order 14008 instituting Justice40, a group of New Orleans based non-profits thought the laws presented an opportunity for New Orleans to set a new path towards equitable and resilient infrastructure. As one early convening attendee stated, "We cannot afford to miss out this time."

These laws will invest over a trillion dollars into clean energy, infrastructure projects and high quality jobs. The IIJA's emphasis on correcting for past inequitable investments and investing in infrastructure in the face of climate change, makes New Orleans an ideal target investment zone for the federal government. Justice40 mandates that forty percent of the benefit of federal funds go to historically disadvantaged communities and requires government agencies to implement certain principles in their grant funding, including: transparency, data usage, cooperative agreements and equitable procurement practices.

[1] https://www.nola.com/news/120-billion-in-katrina-federal-relief-wasnt-always-assured/article_338b3dd9-30e5-576d-b52a-d91ee07a499a.html
[2] https://www.newsweek.com/15-years-after-katrina-what-do-we-have-courage-change-opinion-1528428

THE BUILDING EQUITY COLLABORATIVE

A group of nonprofits, spearheaded by the Committee for a Better New Orleans (CBNO) and the Workplace Justice Project (WJP), formed the Building Equity Collaborative (BEC) to build community power and consensus around federal funding and the equity principles laid out in Justice40. BEC convened community listening sessions, engaged city officials, and more deeply researched these laws to better understand the opportunity for New Orleans. In community sessions, people expressed wanting real mechanisms and tools to hold public officials accountable, including consistent and clear data reporting from the local government. The BEC grew to encompass more than 30 nonprofits and 13 government agencies committed to making New Orleans more competitive in securing federal IIJA grants.[3] The following highlights the journey with links to agendas, research documents, draft rubrics, and more.

2022: EARLY GATHERINGS AND "NERD OUTS"

CBNO and WJP hosted monthly meetings beginning in 2022 with members from city departments, such as the Mayor's Office of Community Engagement, the Office of Economic Development, the Office of Sustainability, and with nonprofits working on issues ranging from the environment to criminal justice, labor unions and university groups. Additionally, they began hosting "nerd outs." These gatherings were opportunities to research core questions the group identified in larger meetings. As the group became more formal, the larger group broke out into working groups, which identified specific research questions and problems.[4]

2023: RESEARCH TO SUPPORT AN EQUITY FRAMEWORK

Through the "nerd outs," the early coalition compiled a list of research needs that would drive the work in 2023. The coalition secured research support from the Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP) as part of its "Our Dollars, Our Dreams" campaign, designed to help southern communities take ownership of public dollars through securing federal grants, expanding equity practices, and engaging in local budgets.

SEAP worked with CBNO, WJP, and coalition members to create a body of research to inform an equity framework and its applicability in infrastructure projects, and ultimately, to increase New Orleans' access to IIJA funds. The research was a means to better understand IIJA, its potential for New Orleans, and how the coalition could influence the City to utilize stronger methods when applying for federal funds like those emphasized by Justice40, including public-private partnerships, community benefits agreements, workforce development, and others.

The research focused on:
- New & expanded federal opportunities for building capacity in equitable planning, transparency, procurement, support for Disadvantaged Business Enterprises, and workforce development.

[3] See appendix 1.
[4] See appendix 3.

- Peer city case studies. Examples of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion strategies, transparency, fair pay, local hire and novel workforce development programs from other Southern cities with similar demographics to New Orleans.
- Equitable outreach and engagement practices. Examination of what has worked in other cities and how to ensure all communities are being engaged in an accessible way (language barriers, ADA considerations, a variety of scheduled outreach events at different times, etc).
- Enforcement & governance controls of enacted equity practices from across the country, particularly for local governments in states prone to preemption.
- Workforce development and protections including Disadvantaged Business Enterprises, local partnerships including unions, and community benefits agreements.

The full body of research can be found [here](#).

PROBLEM STATEMENTS

The Building Equity Collaborative convened Working Groups in the summer of 2023 to establish the work plan that resulted in the draft Building Equity Framework. The problem statements were intended to be specific, and use the following format:
- The Problem is…
- This is a problem for…
- This is a problem because…

Prioritizing Projects: The problem is funding and infrastructure improvements have been distributed unequally. This is a problem for everyone, especially people in low-wealth and marginalized communities. This is a problem because more inequities means leaving resources on the table; and residents in under-resourced neighborhoods are disproportionately affected.

Planning & Design: The problem is community engagement is largely too little, too late for community input, lacks accountability, and excludes important community stakeholders. This is a problem for residents because projects impact their quality of life, and the City, because poor engagement slows down progress.

Building: The problem is grant funds are not reaching local, disadvantaged businesses and are not creating good and sustainable careers in our communities. This is a problem for New Orleans local workforce, frontline workers, and the economy as a whole. This is a problem because our workforce and disadvantaged businesses rely on contracts to succeed.

Evaluation: The problem is there isn't a consistent tool to evaluate the impact of our projects relative to our equity goals. This is a problem for the City of New Orleans and residents of disadvantaged communities. This is a problem because Justice 40 and many federal grants require proof of successful equity strategies.

(See Appendix 3 for background on these problem statements)

2024: A FULL COLLABORATIVE TAKES SHAPE AND DEFINES AN EQUITY RUBRIC AND CHECKLIST

Based on the research from 2023--particularly the City of Austin's Community Climate Plan Equity Tool--an initial rubric with seven themes was created to evaluate the equity of proposed projects. These themes and the rubric were vetted at the first full Collaborative Convening in January 2024 with 30 organizations and 5 city offices represented. Participants provided feedback, then a facilitated discussion identified main ideas and trends for the larger group. Following the discussion on trends, breakout groups were created to discuss the suggestions moving forward for the phases of an infrastructure project– prioritizing, planning and design, building, and evaluating. Feedback from this session was directly incorporated into the framework.

Attendees of the convening also spoke about the power of partnership between the city, community-based organizations, and community members. Community organizations, government offices, and unions learned more about IIJA, IRA, and Justice 40, the potential impact on New Orleans, and the context for ongoing collaboration. From that initial convening, the team determined that it was necessary for the community to have multiple touchpoints with the framework to provide input and build buy-in. These convenings occurred monthly, alternating between in person and virtual.

As the community identified the need for broader engagement on federal funding opportunities, the February session focused on garnering feedback and thoughts on the coalition applying for the Environmental Protection Agency's Community Change Grant. This grant program provides an opportunity to secure funding that would scale up the educational and community outreach activities of the coalition by further dismantling existing barriers between community and government.

From there, the Collaborative pivoted to practical implementation of the equity-focused rubric. March's session focused on implementation of an equity rubric within city government by thinking through specific problems both the city and community are facing. The goal of the session was to help answer the question, "how could an equity lens be applied to solving these problems?" This looked like members dividing into subgroups based on their involvement or investment in an infrastructure project, and answering questions regarding the framework's practical application. One suggestion coming out of the March gathering was that the framework be viewed as a rubric that exists in a broader context within New Orleans. The word "framework" implied that the city had signed onto this document as a tool to use across the City's entire operations. By hosting and facilitating a series of convenings, smaller and more detailed conversations gave way to insightful recommendations that better clarified ways to practically implement an equity rubric that could be used by city government and help to ensure their buy-in.

In April, the Collaborative examined the report coming out of the initial January convening and problem statements from the working group committee meetings to determine desired actions from city government and possible barriers to action. Coalition members had a period of individual reflection to add potential problems or solutions via post-it notes to problems or solutions previously identified by the committee. These problems and solutions involved technical aspects of implementing an equity-focused rubric, such as addressing the procurement system to make it more accessible for typical small businesses. Within this conversation, the Collaborative identified individuals within the City to address the problems. Based on this input, the Collaborative better prepared CBNO and WJP for conversations with the City, which helped push the need for IIJA funding and specific grant applications within the city.

In May and June, the Collaborative worked to finalize the rubric by applying it to actual proposals before the city and prioritizing them using the rubric. They worked with the New Orleans Office of Resilience to get sample projects for stormwater mitigation. Using these case studies, the Collaborative advocated for a different use of the rubric altogether and to create case-specific versions that can be applied in different contexts. For example, coming out of these conversations, the Collaborative created a checklist version of the rubric that can be used by entities applying to the city for funding in public infrastructure. An example of this would be, contractors applying to remediate stormwater flooding in a specific neighborhood. This checklist can also be used as a technical assistance tool for the City to aid in getting better, more equity-focused proposals.

See the agendas and discussion documents here: January, February, March, April, May.

INTEGRATION WITH THE CITY

Throughout this process CBNO and the Workplace Justice Project worked diligently to integrate the City of New Orleans with the coalition's work. In December 2023, CBNO held a briefing with the City to help explain the relevance of the Coalition and the need for an equity framework to secure federal funding. People in attendance included representation from Downtown Development District, Greater New Orleans Housing Alliance, HousingNOLA, Office of Economic Development, Office of Resilience and Sustainability, District A Council Member Joseph Giarrusso's Office, Louisiana Green Corps, District 3 Louisiana Public Service Commissioner's Office, Sewage and Water Board, and Thrive New Orleans. The City of Austin was used as an example of what strong equity collaboration could look like.[5] While January saw some City engagement, future convenings saw even more, with some meetings consisting of a majority of city representation. This representation was cultivated outside of the convenings, through constant communication and dialogue. City involvement also required listening to city staffers driving city-based work about what was feasible and applicable.

[5] The City of Austin was used as an example because of its public partnership resulting in an equity tool that was then adopted by the city and utilized across eight different departments. https://services.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=309466

EQUITY CHECKLIST

Accessibility

Accessibility: Strategy increases access to jobs, housing, transportation, funding, education, healthy foods, daycare, utilities, ADA accessibility, and a clean environment for low-income communities and BIPOC communities. Strategy removes barriers through city infrastructure, policy, and investments.

Does the proposed action expand access to healthy, clean, safe, and effective transport systems, such as walking paths, bike routes, and public transit to access essential services (hospital, school), amenities, and/or jobs?

Does the proposed action improve amenities and essential services in traditionally underserved geographies/ neighborhoods? Essential services: hospitals, schools, housing, and groceries; Amenities: parks / green spaces, access to businesses

Does the proposed action remove any barriers that might prevent individuals in low income communities and BIPOC communities *(consider language, gender, socio-economic status (SES), digital inequality, LGBTQ status, (dis)ability, employment status, immigration status, education level, geography, environment, religious beliefs, culture, history of incarceration, etc.)* from benefiting fully if this strategy were implemented as written?

Accountability

Accountability:
- Strategy ensures that low-income and BIPOC communities and labor unions can hold governments and institutions accountable for equitable implementation.
- Strategy elevates the voices of low-income and BIPOC communities by developing and strengthening the skills, abilities, and resources that a community needs to survive, adapt, and thrive.

Does the proposed action have provisions to ensure ongoing collection of data (that can be disaggregated by race/ethnicity/income) and public reporting of data? Can this data be validated qualitatively by community members?

Does the proposed action have clear markers of short and long-term success as well as timelines for meeting markers of success? If so, what are the mechanisms we will utilize to ensure that goals are met (successful implementation and enforcement)?

Does the proposed action address consequences if goals are not met? Is there a process for those impacted by the policy to express grievances or satisfaction and to ensure that concerns are met?

Is the proposed action adequately funded to achieve its designed goals?

Affordability

Affordability: Strategy lowers and stabilizes costs related to basic living needs (housing, food, utilities, healthcare, transportation, childcare, etc.) for low-income communities and BIPOC communities.

Could this project prevent resident and small business displacement when surrounding property values rise? If not, are there mechanisms in place to limit resident and small business displacement?

Does the proposed action reduce cost burden (as defined by the federal government) and the number of families that are cost-burdened by housing (including utilities), transportation (45% or more on transportation and housing combined)?

Does the proposed action generate burdens (including financial, health costs, or others), either directly or indirectly, to BIPOC or low-income communities? If yes, are there opportunities to mitigate these impacts?

Community Engagement

Community Engagement: Strategy incorporates community voice and choice at every stage, including prioritization, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Voice is incorporated in ways that prioritize those who have been historically marginalized and allows for various modalities for incorporation.

Does the proposed action engage and continue to empower BIPOC communities and low-income populations in a meaningful, authentic and culturally appropriate manner? Does it respect community-based knowledge and is it based on community identified needs and input/feedback?

Does the proposed action help build community capacity through funding, educational opportunities, and/or other resources?

Does the proposed action help foster the building of effective, long-term relationships and trust between diverse communities and local government? (by leveraging resources and building collaborative partnerships) Does this action strengthen community relationships and partnerships?

Does the proposed action include adequate funds for community engagement?

Does this action strengthen community relationships and partnerships?

Did this proposal originate from or with community based entities or individuals? Has the community already been involved in this proposal? Community engagement methodologies can and should vary based on the project.

Procurement:

Procurement: Strategy allows for the BIPOC communities to participate in every phase of the project including the contracting process, including DBE's.

Does the proposed action make procurement processes more accessible for smaller, minority-owned businesses?

Does the proposed action increase access, training, or development of disadvantaged minority owned businesses?

Does the proposed action create transparency in regards to procurement procedures and processes?

Transparency

Transparency: Strategy increases community visibility into project's progress and outcomes. Empowers communities to understand and engage with the project's progress and end results.

Does the proposed action include mechanisms to increase public visibility into the progress and completion of the project? This data is consistently and publicly available.

Did the project utilize data in determining where to locate and include mechanisms for community input, including methods to prioritizing historically disadvantaged populations?

Does the project include mechanisms for making metrics of success public?

Workforce Development:

Workforce Development:
- Strategy elevates the voices of low-income and BIPOC communities by developing and strengthening the skills, abilities, and resources a community needs.
- Strategy includes opportunities for engaging and utilizing labor unions, developing skills and workforce amongst traditionally marginalized communities, and partnerships to upskill and re-skill workers.

Does the proposed action support BIPOC and low-income populations through workforce development, contracting opportunities or increase city staff's diversity? *internal*
or support training programs (including registered apprenticeships) prioritizing low-income and BIPOC communities? *external*

Does the proposed action create local opportunities for livable wage careers for low-income and BIPOC communities?

Does the proposed action include a community benefits agreement and a plan to actually benefit the local community?

Does the proposed action include input and collaboration from partner non-profits, labor unions, area colleges and universities, or apprenticeship programs? Are these programs supported by funding, transportation?

Are there long term jobs that continue after project completion, associated with the project that could employ residents?

CHALLENGES AND CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

Challenges emerged throughout the coalition process. The biggest challenge was prioritization and time. Nonprofits are frequently stretched thin in terms of capacity, particularly when the state legislature is in session and other large investment or policy priorities arise, and so it was hard to get consistent prioritization. Another huge barrier was time. It took significant time to get the rubric to a place where coalition members and other stakeholders could accept the final draft and agree to its utilization. In the meantime, federal grants are being released, and New Orleans is missing out on potential funding opportunities. Another significant barrier was keeping morale high. As mentioned earlier, the city and business community have failed at community input in the past. As a result, it took consistent, repeated and thoughtful engagement to keep up momentum.

Finalizing the equity framework has been an iterative process with several points of stakeholder input. Additionally, envisioning how the rubric is implemented and the context around it was equally important as the rubric itself. Throughout the process the question of "how" and "who would be using this?" was raised by both city and coalition members. To that end, the Collaborative worked with the city to develop case studies based on real life decisions the city was currently grappling with, to test the framework. Throughout the process, the infrastructure building process was broken into four stages- Prioritizing, Planning, Building, and Evaluating. The rubric was evaluated as a tool that could be potentially used at each phase of the project.

Additionally, there are various scenarios in which an infrastructure project may develop or receive funding in New Orleans. The coalition believes this rubric is relevant in any of these scenarios and can be used in flexible ways to gather more information, evaluate the equity of a project, or prioritize projects. Some examples of different ways that infrastructure projects develop or are funded in New Orleans include:

- **A nonprofit organization funds and builds a project.** A recent example of this in New Orleans was when The Greenway Plaza was built in 2020. Nonprofit organization Friends of Lafitte Greenway raised private funds to install green infrastructure, seating amenities and public art in the public park, and donated those amenities to the City of New Orleans.
- **An organization has an idea or capacity, but not the funding.** An example of this recently occurred where a nonprofit worked with the City and State to access funds to build community solar hubs at churches and community centers.
- **The community recognizes an issue but does not have a solution.** In these situations, the community is looking to the City for a solution.
- **The City directs the project and the proposed solution.** The majority of the City's infrastructure is bond funded, followed by state funding, and the smallest part comes from federal funding.
- **Maintenance, where the city is revising or maintaining an existing form of infrastructure.**

Application of the framework in various scenarios has required a creative approach. The steering committee believes that there are multiple ways the framework or rubric could be used to the City's benefit.

- **In cases where New Orleans is applying for federal funds,** especially under the IIJA and those where Justice40 applies, the City should consider using the rubric as part of its application process to the federal government. The rubric is grounded in IIJA and Justice40's requirements, and thus, largely corresponds to what federal departments are prioritizing in funding
- **In cases where the City is developing prerequisite plans for implementation funding** (the Safe Streets for All Action Plan, Comprehensive Climate Action Plan, regional transportation plans, etc.) and listing potential projects.
- **In cases where the City is evaluating** completed projects or prioritizing upcoming infrastructure projects the rubric could be used as a checklist.
  - In the example of prioritization, the checklist could be used in technical assistance opportunities, where the City works to help contractors and other applicants to build the rubric's elements into the initial application and conception of the work.
- **Additionally, a community advisory board that is diverse in skillset could ultimately oversee the rubric** ensuring that it continues to be responsive to community and city feedback and needs. This group could act as an evaluation body that also works to hold the City accountable to its equity commitment. This same board could also act to evaluate ongoing maintenance.

MOVING FORWARD

The Collaborative is working with the City and the Greater New Orleans Foundation to apply for a Track II Community Change Grant proposal. This grant is designed to use the same type of engagement the Collaborative has already engaged in at a more robust level. This grant would provide the Collaborative with funding to further engage in community dialogue and engagement for more equitable infrastructure for the city, including coalition meetings, advocacy, grassroots engagement, and community driven infrastructure applications.

It would also formalize the relationship between the City and the Collaborative to ensure work on infrastructure and equity issues continues. Ultimately, the Collaborative's goal was always to secure more funding for the City. With the Community Change grant, the Collaborative can ensure community is present as that process occurs and that there is more pressure to apply for these competitive funds.

Lastly, CBNO and WJP are working with the City Council to pass a [city ordinance](#) to enshrine Justice40 standards within the city's financing and execution of infrastructure projects in the event of policy or Executive Order changes at the federal level.

In conclusion, the coalition's strength has come from its commitment to an ongoing iterative process, where no one party is assumed to have all of the knowledge, and local government, nonprofit sector, and community stakeholders continually come to the table in the spirit of collaboration, equity, and progress.

PARTNERSHIPS & ORGANIZATIONS CONSULTED

* Indicates Steering Committee / Working Group Member

Advocates & Community Organizations

- 350 New Orleans*
- Alliance for Affordable Energy*
- Broad Community Connections
- The Collaborative
- Deep South Center for Environmental Justice
- The First 72+*
- Finance New Orleans
- Greater New Orleans Housing Alliance / HousingNOLA*
- Greater Treme Consortium
- Greater New Orleans Foundation*
- Healthy Gulf
- ISeeChange*
- Infinite Circle LLC
- Invest in Louisiana (formerly LA Budget Project)
- Louisiana Fair Housing Action Center
- LA Bucket Brigade
- Lower 9th Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development (CSED)
- Music and Culture Coalition of New Orleans (MACCNO)*
- New Orleans Complete Streets Coalition*
- New Orleans Workers Center for Racial Justice
- PolicyLink
- Sierra Club
- Step Up Louisiana
- Taproot Earth (Formerly Gulf South Center for Law & Policy)*
- Together New Orleans
- VERA Institute of Justice
- The Water Collaborative*
- Water Wise Gulf South
- Workplace Justice Project at Loyola Law School*

Research & Policy Strategy Support:

- Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP)

Labor & Workforce Development

- Thrive New Orleans*
- Louisiana Green Corps*
- Greater New Orleans Inc
- Downtown Development District
- Greater New Orleans Central Labor Council, AFL CIO /
- Southeast Louisiana Building & Construction Trades Council*
- Central South Carpenters Regional Council*
- LiUNA: Construction and General laborers local 99*
- UNITE HERE, Local 23
- IUPAT

City of New Orleans

- CAO/Infrastructure oversightOffice of Resilience & Sustainability
- Office of Human Rights & Equity
- Department of Public Works & Project Delivery Unit
- Office of Workforce Development / Job1
- Office of Economic Development
- Office of Neighborhood Engagement
- Department of Procurement & Purchasing
- Department of Health
- Children & Youth Planning Board*
- City Planning Commision staff & Board
- City Council Offices
- Roadwork NOLA

COALITION & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT MEETINGS

Committee for a Better New Orleans is facilitating this initiative alongside Loyola University's Workplace Justice Project, in partnership with the City of New Orleans. We are guided by a diverse steering committee of advocates, community leaders, and residents. Steering Committee List

The **Steering Committee's responsibilities** include -
- **Meet monthly**
- Recruit organizations to participate
- Communications for the project
- Approve certain measures relevant to the mission as a whole
- Support the Working Groups

The **Working Groups responsibilities** include -
- **Meet monthly / as needed**
- Research and document - new & expanded federal opportunities & tools, national best practices, local programs & initiatives, & leading people in the Working Group's area of focus
- Synthesize convening notes & draft recommendations for adopting & implementing equity goals & practices in New Orleans re: the Working Group's specified area of focus

PUBLIC MEETINGS

- April 1, 2022: Launch of Steering Group
- April 7, 2022: Just Recovery Stakeholder Convening (Corpus Christi Community Ctr)
- April 18, 2022: Steering Committee Meeting
- April 22, 2022: WJP equity convening (virtual)
- May 11, 2022: Just Recovery Stakeholder Convening (Virtual)
- July 13, 2022: Stakeholder Meeting
- November 3, 2022: Stakeholder Meeting
- December 13, 2022: Steering Committee & Rebrand (ReFresh Community Room)
- January 10, 2023: Steering Committee meeting
- February 9, 2023: Steering Committee meeting
- March 9, 2023: Training on Justice 40 for City staff, in partnership with the Office of Human Rights & Equity, GNO Inc, and the Office of Resilience and Sustainability

- April 19, 2023: Project Why Lunch & Learn for City staff: Barriers to Equity
- April 24, 2023: Steering Committee meeting
- Summer: Monthly Working Group Meetings to review & compile research
- August 15, 2023: Steering Committee meeting
- September 5, 2023: Steering Committee meeting
- September 19, 2023: Steering Committee meeting
- November 13, 2023: Steering Committee meeting
- January 10, 2024: Building Equity Summit
- February 21, 2024: Coalition Convening
- March 26, 2024: Coalition Convening
- April 24, 2024: Coalition Convening
- May 23, 2024: Coalition Convening
- July 24, 2024: Coalition Convening

BACKGROUND: HOW WE ARRIVED AT THESE PROBLEMS

Working groups synthesized data from CBNO's stakeholder meetings, WJP's Equity Summit, personal & work experience, personal interviews with residents and City staff (CBNO Project Why 2021-2022), and interviews with community stakeholders (listed in appendix 2.) These are products of those initial conversations:

GENERAL
- New Orleans will not survive climate change's worst impacts without continued investment in resilient infrastructure
- Good infrastructure is among the reasons cities choose to do business in a City
- When infrastructure gets better, housing costs go up, and people get displaced
- All of this money has been spent here, but people are still poor.
- Local governments lack internal capacity
- New Orleans is vulnerable to weather-related damage
- Definition of equity varies widely, as does the experience of inequity

PRIORITIZING
- Poor neighborhoods don't get their fair share of investment
- Even with billions invested since Katrina, basic infrastructure is still failing New Orleans' most disadvantaged residents. (e.g. streets, flooding, clean energy, effective transit, bike/pedestrian safety)
- Even our least disadvantaged neighborhoods have major infrastructure issues
- The general public doesn't understand how projects impact them, how decisions are made, and why some projects get planned & built while others do not.
- Community infrastructure needs are unmet.
- Wealthier neighborhoods tend to get funded first & money gets spent before taking care of the most vulnerable
- Crime is higher in disinvested neighborhoods
- Residents in poverty are more vulnerable to financial ruin that comes from climate-related disasters

The problem is funding and infrastructure improvements have been distributed unequally. This is a problem for everyone, especially people in low-wealth and marginalized communities. This is a problem because more inequities means leaving resources on the table; we're a large city with a small and shrinking population; our infrastructure isn't adequate to handle tourists

PLANNING & DESIGN
- Infrastructure projects are forced on the community without warning, and sometimes at great inconvenience
- One-way conversations at community meetings feel one-sided and frustrate people. Eventually they give up.
- Large infrastructure projects are often inconvenient for residents
- A lot of people don't attend public meetings about infrastructure
- Projects sit unfinished (i.e. JIRR) for long stretches of time
- Contractors don't always do their required community notices
- Most residents don't understand the value, impact, or importance of new infrastructure.
- Residents feel ignored.
- Residents are resistant to change.
- Residents feel the government is incompetent and corrupt
- systemic racism in our planning process leaves people out
- highly-impacted black and brown and poor resident voices are not respected or responded to
- City systems are complex and difficult to change. "This is the way we've always done things"
- Projects are planned with very little proactive community engagement.
- Grant timelines move too fast for the City to do effective community engagement before submitting a plan. Funding is better than no funding.
- Even when projects are planned with sufficient input from residents, they take so much time to implement that people move on or forget, and lose attachment to the community input done in the planning process.
- Residents and the City don't trust each other.

The problem is community engagement is largely too little, too late for community input, lacks accountability, and excludes important community stakeholders. This is a problem for residents because projects impact their quality of life, and the City, because poor engagement slows down progress.

BUILDING
- There aren't enough local businesses to fill all of the infrastructure contracts the City needs
- There aren't enough trained local workers to fill these jobs.
- There are many barriers to small & emerging businesses to access federally-funded projects
- There are many barriers to people of color and low income people to start a business: financing, training, incubators, scaling support
- DBE's aren't getting contracts, or only can get subcontracts
- DBE's with the qualifications they'd need to manage the contracts are hard to find, not enough applicants.

- Influxes of federal funds create a lot of jobs in a short period of time, and those jobs dry up with the funding
- Major investments don't always lead to good, fair paying jobs.
- State and local policies do not incentivize fair labor practices
- Poor coordination and unfinished projects leave vulnerable residents at risk of injury.
- Employees find employers as antagonist
- Poll findings show employers impede equity access
- Workplace most important social system
- New Orleans residents need and want sustainable jobs and a more racially and economically equitable city which can only be achieved if they are engaged in developing and executing infrastructure projects.
- We have to undo generations/years of dysfunction in award and execution of city infrastructure contracts (including many that are on-going currently);
- The city does not implement or enforce the policies that are currently in place
- There are so many challenges – education, housing, transportation, low wages – we need to build a lot to succeed
- We don't have the administrative infrastructure to take on many of these challenges

The problem is grant funds are not reaching local, disadvantaged businesses and are not creating good and sustainable careers in our communities. This is a problem for New Orleans local workforce, frontline workers, and the economy as a whole. This is a problem because our workforce and disadvantaged businesses rely on contracts to succeed.

EVALUATION
- We aren't measuring the equity impact of our projects
- The "good examples" of equitable infrastructure aren't getting the credit they deserve, and many people don't know about them.
- We don't have clear ways of knowing when previous projects have actually improved residents quality of life
- You can't manage what you can't measure.
- It's difficult for the general public to see the impact of infrastructure investments over time

The problem is there isn't a consistent tool to evaluate the impact of our projects relative to our equity goals. This is a problem for the City of New Orleans and residents of disadvantaged communities. This is a problem because Justice 40 and many federal grants require proof of successful equity strategies.