



Using Public Engagement to Respond to Community Needs and Priorities: Rethinking I-94 and Reconnecting Communities in the Twin Cities

Challenge

In the 1960s, during a major national expansion of the United States Interstate Highway System, the Minnesota Highway Department (now Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT)) routed [I-94 through the heart of the Twin Cities](#) of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. As was the case in many cities where construction of an interstate highway and existing neighborhoods came into conflict, the process did not accommodate all communities equitably. One such community impacted by the construction of I-94 was the predominantly Black neighborhood of Rondo in St. Paul. In the 1940s, nearly 90 percent of Saint Paul's Black population lived in Rondo, making it one of the largest Black enclaves in the Midwest.¹ Despite community opposition to the highway, the Rondo community and dozens of others were divided by I-94. This action displaced hundreds of residents and businesses, disrupted social cohesion, reduced residents' ability to walk and bike, and initiated a period of economic and social decline for the community. These planning decisions also have resulted in residents' general distrust of road projects in underserved communities along the I-94 corridor. In 2015, Commissioner Charles Zelle of the MnDOT offered [an official apology and acknowledgement](#) for the unfair planning, project development, and delivery practices which devastated Rondo and other communities like it.

Today, the community has organized around its desire for highway investment as a catalyst for reparative action. Traditional environmental advocacy organizations as well as the community-driven [ReConnect Rondo](#) are advocating for solutions that center around those most impacted and harmed by past actions. The group is encouraging local and State officials to invest in solutions that create walkable, bikeable communities and include restorative actions focused on an African American Cultural District, such as a land bridge over the interstate. The Rethinking I-94 corridor is home to some of the largest Hmong and Somali populations in the country, as well as Latino and Black residents and businesses. The corridor also provides access to significant regional and Statewide destinations including numerous institutions of higher education, the State Capitol, and event centers.

MnDOT launched the [Rethinking I-94](#) project in 2016 as a “long-term effort to improve [the agency's] engagement and relationships with communities along I-94 between Minneapolis and St. Paul” and to shape future investment in the corridor.² Rethinking I-94 establishes a formal structure, the Livability Framework, to address input from community members related to connectivity, economic vitality, equity, health and environment, operational and public safety, sense of place, and establishment or reestablishment of trust between the agency and the community. The project focuses on the needs and voices of all community members to ensure future transportation investments support an economically strong, socially vibrant, and sustainable community. The effort will develop a framework for identifying and constructing transportation projects that prioritize the well-being of existing residents who live, work, and play along the corridor. It will also

¹ [U.S. DOT, Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program FY 2022 Award Fact Sheets, February 2023](#)

² [MnDOT, Rethinking I-94 Phase 1 Report, August 2018](#)

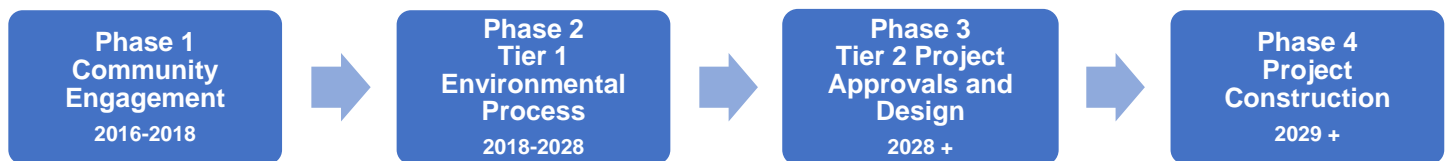


advance the goal of enhancing mobility, safety, and interconnectivity and leverage the transportation investment to meet community goals.

MnDOT is undertaking Rethinking I-94 at a time of significant national investment in transportation infrastructure. In 2021, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) was signed into law, providing billions of dollars in funding for transportation projects and establishing the [Reconnecting Communities Pilot \(RCP\) Program](#) to remove, retrofit, or mitigate transportation facilities, like highways or rail lines, that create barriers to community connectivity, mobility, access, or economic development. In February 2023, the U.S. DOT [announced \\$185 million in RCP grants](#) for 45 communities. Among these awards was [\\$2 million](#) to ReConnect Rondo to study the planning and development of an African American Cultural Enterprise District, including a land bridge over I-94 to restore and reconnect the neighborhood.

In 2022, the Inflation Reduction Act was signed into law, establishing the [Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant \(NAE\) Program](#) to connect communities by improving walkability, safety, and affordable access to transportation facilities through context-sensitive strategies, especially in disadvantaged or underserved communities. In August 2023, the U.S. DOT released a joint [Notice of Funding Opportunity \(NOFO\)](#) for a combined \$1.785 billion for the RCP and NAE programs.

This case study focuses on Phase 1 of the Rethinking I-94 effort, which conducted preliminary scoping and [community engagement](#) to establish the foundation for future planning and project work for the corridor.



Phases of Rethinking I-94 Project. Adapted from [MnDOT](#).

Solution

Phase 1 focused on seeking out, listening to, and understanding the diverse needs of communities along the I-94 corridor. This process served to inform the elements of the Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement that will identify and analyze broadly-defined alternatives that will be used for the development of specific projects that represent community priorities and reflect MnDOT’s commitment to equity and safety in the Tier 2 Environmental Impact Statement.

During Phase 1, MnDOT (supported by the FHWA Minnesota Division Office) hosted a peer exchange³ through FHWA’s Transportation Capacity Building Program to develop the framework for stakeholder and public engagement. This peer-learning opportunity helped set up MnDOT’s engagement efforts for success with guidance on communication and working with community organizations.

Methods and Approach

Over a span of two years, MnDOT conducted interviews, distributed surveys, held listening sessions, and gathered data about the communities which have been most impacted by the construction of I-94⁴. Several unique approaches to community engagement proved to be particularly important to understanding underrepresented parts of the I-94 community. First, MnDOT divided its study areas into six discrete stretches

³ [FHWA, Rethinking I-94: Minnesota DOT, A TPCB Peer Exchange Event, August 2017](#)

⁴ [MnDOT, Rethinking I-94 Phase 1 Report, August 2018](#)



of the interstate by broadly defining land use, culture, and needs of each area. This allowed MnDOT to focus on smaller areas of study for equity-focused analysis and development of traditional metrics such as travel time and vehicle use on the highway. This approach also promoted inclusivity by ensuring that survey responses were demographically and economically representative of each survey zone. Through Phase 1, over 2,000 surveys were conducted online and over the phone.



Map of Rethinking I-94 Project Corridor with Zones. Image source: [MnDOT](#)

MnDOT created a [profile for each zone](#), highlighting demographics, survey results, community organizations, events, local media, and elected officials. MnDOT also developed [community culture and history overviews](#) identifying cultural characteristics and the history of engagement in transportation and planning for various groups along the corridor. These profiles and overviews helped MnDOT develop tailored community engagement plans for specific I-94 projects.

MnDOT also engaged numerous community organizations and demographic groups in its work. Specifically, officials sought to involve communities unique to the area such as Hmong and Somali immigrants. MnDOT used employees' language skills and cultural knowledge to engage these groups in community meetings or over the phone and met with stakeholders and leaders from these groups. This effort moved the focus away from census-designated groups and tailored engagement efforts directly to the unique cultural composition of the I-94 corridor.

MnDOT's community engagement approach also evolved through the process, incorporating different engagement methods as needs were identified. For example, the project team developed an online interactive map to crowdsource feedback from the community after noting some of the limitations of meetings based on written comments. To better collect, manage, use, and share the information developed during Phase 1 of the project, MnDOT created a [public engagement toolkit](#). The toolkit outlines outreach activities from Phase 1 of the I-94 project as well as the research, literature review, and on-the-ground engagement with residents that occurred throughout the process. It also provides information about the methodology, challenges, benchmarks, and intended outcomes of the community outreach process.



Key Findings and Outcomes

Through early, innovative, and consistent public engagement, MnDOT identified themes from community input. MnDOT learned that the public felt socially and economically disconnected; had environmental and health concerns; worried about public safety; and desired improved multimodal transportation facilities.

MnDOT used the information gathered during Phase 1 to develop a [livability framework](#), which articulates a set of values for consideration by MnDOT in the development of projects within the Rethinking I-94 corridor. MnDOT is planning to expand the livability framework's use elsewhere in the State. The framework includes a commitment by MnDOT to be accountable and adaptable as projects progress. Community goals go beyond typical purpose and need development under NEPA. Evaluation criteria include equity measures (e.g., the potential of the project to enhance transportation choices for individuals) that surpass traditional environmental justice analysis.

Livability Framework Values

- *Connections*
- *Economics*
- *Equity*
- *Health and environment*
- *Safety*
- *Sense of place and legacy*
- *Trust*

These tools are helping MnDOT incorporate community input into the activities associated with the planning, design, and construction of the corridor as MnDOT progresses into the next phases of the NEPA process for this project:

- The [draft purpose and need](#) for the I-94 program describes how the livability framework will inform the NEPA process by helping to determine if there are ways to meet identified goals for the community that go beyond transportation needs to prioritize the well-being of those that live, work, gather, and play near the I-94 corridor.
- The [evaluation criteria for the Scoping Decision Document and Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement](#), developed as the first step of the [alternative](#) evaluation process, includes an equity criterion, “distribution of transportation resources across communities.” MnDOT will use this criterion to assess how well alternatives enhance transportation choices by supporting multiple travel modes, creating features that enhance connections between modes, expanding transit and non-motorized facilities, or improving transit service reliability.
- The [community histories](#) developed to inform cultural resource reviews required under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act focus on marginalized communities.

Conclusion

The Rethinking I-94 project is one of many projects around the country seeking to address the legacy of cumulative inequities and harm to communities divided by interstate highway construction and ongoing operations. Phase 1 of Rethinking I-94 serves as a model⁵ for demonstrating how to address challenges by using public engagement in ensuring transportation planning and project development is accomplished in line with the needs of impacted communities. Through this effort, MnDOT is working to overcome mistrust, manage engagement fatigue, and navigate stakeholder perspectives. To address these challenges, MnDOT is committing resources to improving its relationship with the community by providing early, timely, and relevant engagement and using innovative tools to manage and share community input.

⁵ [U.S. DOT, Promising Practices for Meaningful Public Involvement in Transportation Decision-Making, November 2023](#)