COMPLETING THE CROWN
The Trail Towards Equity and Opportunity
About the Urban Land Institute

The Urban Land Institute is a global, member-driven organization comprising more than 45,000 real estate and urban development professionals dedicated to advancing the Institute’s mission of providing leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide.

ULI’s interdisciplinary membership represents all aspects of the industry, including developers, property owners, investors, architects, urban planners, public officials, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, and academics. Established in 1936, the Institute has a presence in the Americas, Europe, and the Asia Pacific region, with members in 80 countries.

More information is available at uli.org. Follow ULI on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram.

About ULI Cincinnati

ULI Cincinnati is a non-profit real estate and land development organization. We provide our members with independent forums for discussion and debate about city building issues and best practices. ULI Cincinnati is the region’s thought leader in promoting sustainable thriving communities. ULI Cincinnati pursues its vision by –

• Engaging people through active dialogue;
• Delivering unique experiences to a diverse membership;
• Capitalizing on ULI’s global resources; and
• Building strategic relationships with regional stakeholders and leaders.

ULI District Council Leadership

Chris Dobrozsi
District Council Chair, District Council

Jim Zentmeyer
Chair for Mission Advancement, District Council

Debbie Dent
Executive Director, District Council
About the ULI Curtis Infrastructure Initiative

The ULI Curtis Infrastructure Initiative aims to build a movement to promote infrastructure solutions that are equitable and resilient and that enhance long-term community value. By creating new global and strategic partnerships, providing technical assistance, building capacity at the local level, and acting as a feedback loop to promote the most innovative and effective best practices, the Curtis Infrastructure Initiative will ensure the success of ULI’s mission to positively shape the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide. A thoughtful approach to infrastructure planning and implementation addresses the pressing needs of today and improves diverse communities for the long term.

A building block for communities everywhere, infrastructure encompasses transportation, critical utilities, and the means of communication. But beyond these foundational physical and digital structures and facilities, infrastructure broadly includes the key spaces that build community—anchor institutions, the civic commons, and housing. Because infrastructure provides the means for connection, creative placemaking, and opportunity, smart infrastructure investment is an imperative for our cities now and in the future.

Together we can build the future of equitable and resilient communities. Learn more about the Curtis Infrastructure Initiative at uli.org/infrastructure.

ULI Advisory Services: District Council Programs

The goal of the ULI Advisory Services program is to bring the finest expertise in the real estate field to bear on complex land use planning and development projects, programs, and policies. Since 2010, the ULI Cincinnati’s technical assistance panel (TAP) program has assembled nearly 20 ULI-member teams in service if ULI’s mission to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. Drawing from its local membership base, ULI Cincinnati conducts one-day TAPs offering objective and responsible advice to local decision-makers on a wide variety of land use and real estate issues ranging from site-specific projects to public policy questions. The TAP program is intentionally flexible to provide a customized approach to specific land use and real estate issues. In fulfillment of ULI’s mission, this TAP report is intended to provide objective advice that will promote the responsible use of land to enhance the environment.

An additional local offering is the project analysis forum, which offers a shorter format for district councils to employ local member expertise to address regional land use challenges. Panelists are land use professionals uniquely positioned to address the specific challenges at hand, and provide in-depth, project-specific, and pragmatic recommendations. The intimate, conversational format encourages creative thinking and problem solving between the panel and the sponsor.

Learn more at https://cincinnati.uli.org/get-involved/cincytaps/

“The purpose of [the Curtis Infrastructure Initiative is] to contribute toward the building of a better future by providing resources of inspiration, discovery, and innovation.”

—James J. Curtis III, ULI Life Trustee
Acknowledgments

On behalf of ULI Cincinnati, this series would like to thank those involved at all levels for their support. Special appreciation goes to the Curtis Infrastructure team at ULI for their work in preparation, support, and coordination leading up to and during this year-long series.

The District Council would also like to thank the many presenters, panelists, facilitators and guests from across the country who shared their perspectives, experiences, and insights with the series’ attendees.

In addition, ULI Cincinnati would like to thank The Carol Ann & Ralph V. Haile, Jr. Foundation and Taft Stettinius & Hollister LLP for their financial and engagement support.

About the 2020–2021 District Council Infrastructure Grant Cohort

The Curtis Infrastructure Initiative has partnered with six ULI district councils across North America to provide technical assistance as part of a cohort to help build capacity to reconnect divided communities—physically, socially, and digitally. This cohort of ULI members and staff, local leaders, and other global experts meets regularly over the course of a year to identify key issues, share best practices, and provide updates on projects to support each other in addressing complex infrastructure challenges.

18-Hour Cities Series Participating Organizations

Participating Organizations

Tri-State Trails
Ohio River Way
Wasson Way
Mill Creek Alliance
Murray Path
River West Working Group
City of Cincinnati
SORTA
Cincinnati Parks
Great Parks of Hamilton County

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A abandoned historic building looms over the proposed trail corridor.
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A view of the Mill Creek corridor from Lick Run.
This report cites strong justification for the City of Cincinnati to control and/or purchase the CSX Railroad Rights-of-Way along the western edge of the Mill Creek. Acquiring this corridor can lead to completing the last remaining stretch of the 34-mile urban trail loop called the CROWN (Cincinnati Riding or Walking Network) in one single phase. The right-of-way extends 3.8 miles along the west side of the Mill Creek from Millvale in the north to Lower Price Hill in the south.

An economic impact analysis shows that the corridor could generate $575 million in investment along the route and create over 2,200 jobs with the addition of over 1,300 new residential units on undeveloped land within a five-minute walk from the corridor. Cost of acquisition, design and construction of the Mill Creek Greenway range between $22-$25 million. The city should begin negotiating with CSX to acquire the right-of-way in early 2022 with the potential trail to be designed and constructed within two years using funding from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

**Introduction**

The content of this report encapsulates a year-long ULI Cincinnati 18 Hour City Series program funded by the Curtis Infrastructure Grant. Local participants and national organizers of the grant identified and discussed the primary objectives that led us to this strong recommendation:

1. Advancing completion of the 34-mile CROWN will be a national model for urban trails because it capitalizes on local expertise, learnings, and successes from trails across the US.
2. Delivering community revitalization focused on equity, access and affordable housing will lead to unparalleled economic development of the underserved Mill Creek Corridor.

Participants from Greater Cincinnati, Atlanta, Washington D.C., and Indianapolis discussed the need to be intentional around access to jobs and ensure diversity in housing with a goal of economic revitalization for five neighborhoods along the Mill Creek Corridor. Other discussion items focused on ecological, mental and physical health, and educational objectives. Workshops of experts established short term and long-term goals:

**The Goals**

1. **Buy/Control Railroad Right-of-Way (R.O.W.):** Determine location for the trail that generates desired community and transportation benefits. Create a clear and powerful recommendation for the purchase of the Mill Creek Corridor R.O.W. utilizing the success of, Wasson Way, and Oasis rail purchases as precedent.
2. **Form a Steering Committee:** Convene stakeholders, community groups, and influencers for a collaborative effort to make progress towards Goals. Build a case for the use of Federal Infrastructure Funds to complete the trail in one phase because of the projected economic and community development.
3. **Acquire/Hold Real Estate:** Purchase vacant lots and buildings to secure sites for residential development before publicity on CROWN Mill Creek Greenway Trail and prioritize the best sites for commercial, industrial, and public development for job creation.
4. **Ensure Equitable Revitalization:** Develop a model for neighborhood development that includes the correct mix of affordable workforce and market-rate housing that becomes a vision for equitable community revitalization. Identify commercial districts, parks, greenways, and trails connected to the neighborhood to create community amenities, health, and education projects.
The Process

Since 2018, ULI-Cincinnati has hosted a series of events every other month called the 18-Hour Cities Series. The events are often panel presentation discussions on different topics pertaining to city growth and development. They have ranged from discussing E-commerce hubs to urban retail and land use policy.

In 2020, ULI-Cincinnati applied for and received the Curtis Infrastructure Grant to focus on accelerating the completion of the CROWN trail network. The first four events were designed to focus on panel presentations and discussions around different aspects of trail development, design, and challenges. The final two sessions focused on evaluating and developing goals and theme action items for the report. A summary breakdown of each event is included later in this report.

The CROWN TRAIL

Developed in 2015 by regional advocacy group Tri-State Trails, the CROWN is a 34-mile trail loop that incorporates several existing and planned trails within Cincinnati and beyond. They include the Ohio River Way, Oasis Corridor, Wasson Way, and Mill Creek Greenway among a variety of shorter paths and connection points.

About 70% of the loop is constructed or in the planning, design, or acquisition phases of the implementation process. The Mill Creek Greenway Trail is the last major component of the trail network to be developed and the most economically challenged. Listed as number ten on the map to the right, it will extend from Mill Creek Road in Millvale south to connect to the Lick Run, the Western Hills Viaduct and through Lower Price Hill to the proposed site of Price Landing Park.
Above: A map of the CROWN Trail system. Below: A screen capture of an 18-Hour Cities Series session.
Escalating Economic Impact

The proposed Mill Creek Greenway corridor passes through five Cincinnati neighborhoods: South Cumminsville, Millvale, North Fairmount, South Fairmount, and Lower Price Hill. Within these neighborhoods, a diverse community of 7,100 lives and works. The average household size is 2.4 people, slightly higher than the Cincinnati average of 2.1. The median age of a resident is 29 years old, lower than the city average of 33. Children and youth (0-19) make up roughly 39% of the population along the corridor versus the citywide percentage of 25%. The majority of residents are Black (80%), and 16% are White. 84% of households in these neighborhoods have an income under $50,000. The median household income is $16,162, which is less than half of the city median income ($43,585). The poverty rate is twice that of the city, at 55%. 71% of children in the area live below the poverty line. In addition, 2/3 of residents are renters, and 1/3 are homeowners. 22% of community residents do not have a high school degree. However, 35% have completed some college, and 8% have received a bachelor’s degree. Of those working, 24% are under 30 years old, 52% are 30-54, and 24% are over 55. 30% of the properties are vacant along the proposed trail corridor, and 20% are tax delinquent. A study conducted by Urban Fast Forward of the four neighborhoods north of the Western Hills Viaduct found that there is a total of 2,419 vacant parcels within the neighborhoods analyzed. Add the additional 131 structures from the City of Cincinnati VBML database, and the total vacancy number is 2,550 properties.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Above: Neighborhood demographics from the Beekman and Queen City Avenue Strategic Guidebook. Below: A breakdown of occupied housing in Hamilton County from the 100% Housing study.
Vacant land along Beekman Street which runs adjacent to the proposed trail.

The Port provided additional information on tax delinquency within the study area. Based on total acreage, approximately 20% of properties are tax delinquent.

The corridor is within two miles of the region’s top two employment centers, downtown and uptown Cincinnati with access to over 100,000 jobs in addition to manufacturing and distribution hubs in adjacent Camp Washington and Queensgate. Along the entire corridor, there are just under 1,500 vacant properties within a five-minute walk (1,500 feet) of the trail. A brief economic analysis conducted for this report shows that investing in the corridor would generate at least $575 million in economic benefits for properties close to the route. That includes the construction of over 1,300 new residential dwelling units and the creation of over 2,200 jobs.

In addition, Urban Planning studios at the University of Cincinnati Design Art Architecture and Planning are engaged in multi-year design solutions for capturing social, economic, and environmental opportunities along the Mill Creek Corridor. The work highlights the rich history, landscape, and financial justification for improving access to and within the corridor.

"...investing in the corridor would generate at least $575 million in economic benefit for properties close to the route."
CASE STUDY: The Atlanta Beltline

The Atlanta Beltline is a 22-mile-long trail corridor that circles the core of Atlanta’s city neighborhoods. The trail consists of several abandoned railroads that used to run to the city’s urban center. Those lines include the Atlanta & West Point Railroad and the Georgia Railroad. The idea of the trail was first envisioned in 1999 by Ryan Gravel, a Georgia Tech student who envisioned the corridor as a bike trail and streetcar system that would provide transportation alternatives to nearby neighborhoods that had experienced significant decline. He founded the non-profit Friends of the Beltline and promoted the plan to two dozen influential Atlanta leaders, including representatives on City Council.

Trail construction commenced in 2006, with the Western/West End Trail opening in 2008. Other sections such as the Northside, Eastside, and Southwest Connector have opened over the past decade. While significant parts of the trail system are coming together, there are still a few gaps, including a CSX rail yard, active freight rail lines, and existing bridges that lack room to support trail infrastructure, among others.

After construction of the initial route, redevelopment of the surrounding neighborhoods boomed with a direct economic impact of nearly $6.2 billion. According to Shelteforce.org, Atlanta Beltline Inc. had promised to create 5,600 affordable housing units along the route, but the organization has only successfully created just over 2,100 units of affordable housing. Development happened quicker than anticipated, and rising property values have encouraged the displacement of longer-term residents.

In March 2021, Atlanta City Council approved the creation of a Special Service District that will assess a special tax on commercial and multi-family property owners within the Beltline Planning Area. Advocates expect the assessment to fund the completion of the Beltline mainline by 2030s and generate $50 million in funding for new affordable housing, among other community priorities.
Recommendations

Upon acquiring the land for the Mill Creek Greenway corridor, the City, community stakeholders, advocates, and other area stakeholders should focus on implementing the following recommendations related to revitalizing and growing communities along the trail route:

**Design:** Focus on overcoming challenge points and creating crucial connection points to the adjacent neighborhoods.

**Leadership:** Develop a steering committee to advance community and economic development goals along the trail corridor and build trail branding and identity.

**Prepare for Development:** The Steering Committee should coordinate regional and neighborhood development organizations acquiring and assembling key sites to achieve community goals. Recalibrate city land development regulations to assist in promoting desired development patterns.

**Equity:** Develop and incorporate policy and programs that preserve opportunity and equity for long-term residents to stay in the community and share in its growth and revival with the existing development community, an active and invested partner.

These four main recommendations reflect the broader themes of the four goals outlined for this report. They encompass more detailed recommendations outlined in the following report. Now is the time to move forward on initiating this critical step in propelling these five neighborhoods, the city and its region towards a more equitable and prosperous future. Complete the CROWN!
CASE STUDY: 11th Street Bridge Park

The 11th Street Bridge Park project is one built out of aspirations for community connection around civic infrastructure. In Washington D.C., the Anacostia river bisects the planned grid of the city and a predominantly African-American community on the opposite side of the river. Significant redevelopment projects have taken place along the riverfront over the past decade. Additionally, the City replaced the old 11th Street Bridge with a new bridge adjacent to the old one.

The non-profit organization Building Bridges Across the River led the effort to build a park on top of the piers of the old bridge, turning it into an elevated civic destination for healthy recreation, environmental education, and the arts. Construction started on the bridge, and it is slated to be completed by 2024.

A significant component of the bridge project planning and implementation has been the attention paid to equitable development. Project planners engaged existing residents in developing a plan that focused on workforce development, small business enterprise housing, and arts and culture. This collaborative initiative has already started to pay off with more than $60 million invested for equitable strategies to address the needs of low-income families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Investments also include helping over 80 families buy homes, 185 young people receiving construction training, and over 200 small businesses receiving technical help and loans.

This approach, outlined in the 11th Street Bridge Park’s Equitable Development Plan, emphasizes the need to start early, build partnerships and measure successes as key elements in building equitable wealth. It is worth looking towards to guide development and its impacts along with the development of the Mill Creek Greenway Trail.
In depth recommendations developed for this report are below. The primary recommendation, to acquire the trail corridor, is included below in more detail.

**Design: Acquire the Right-of-Way and Build the Trail in One Phase**

**Negotiate the Purchase of Land from CSX**

Site control is often the best way to control the destiny of a community project or development. To build the Mill Creek Greenway Trail, the City must own the land. Currently, the land is owned by CSX Railroad. The rail line, which is mostly abandoned through the study area, now serves as a general access path for MSD. There are several sewer overflow points located on the west side of the Mill Creek which the organization requires access to. These are supported by easements granted by CSX on the land. While there is an opportunity to improve the current gravel path to pavement under existing terms, CSX generally does not allow recreational use of its right-of-way and the access easement agreements with MSD may not address that activity.

The city will need to negotiate with CSX to purchase the necessary right-of-way to construct the trail. However, the purchase of the land, while the most important and pressing challenge to trail construction, is not the only logistical obstacle.

“To build the Mill Creek Greenway Trail, the City must own the land.”

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*Track terminus within the Metropolitan Sewer District facility in Lower Price Hill.*

PHOTO BY AUTHOR.
Resolve Design Challenges and Create Connection Points

There are a series of potential design challenges that the city, community stakeholders, and leaders will need to address once the right-of-way is secured for the trail. These concerns include the potential impacts a nearby Fire Department Training Facility would have on the trail. They also include securing or demolishing an abandoned grain silo, buffering from adverse uses like junkyards, and negotiating a potential route through Lower Price Hill to connect the trail to Price Landing Park and parts of the Ohio River Trail West.

Additionally, the proposed trail right-of-way for the Mill Creek Greenway mostly runs between the Mill Creek and a series of old industrial buildings and uses. To facilitate community connections and increase the utilization of the trail, key connection points must be developed.

There are opportunities between existing industrial buildings that share common driveways to the rear of their properties along the section of trail between Hopple Street and Mill Creek Road.

Another access point is at Hopple, where an abandoned pedestrian access along the south side of the viaduct still exists and can be improved.

An obvious access point is to utilize the eastern stub of Queen City Avenue as a connection point to the Lick Run Trail system which will connect the trail further westward through the city.

The rebuild of the Western Hills Viaduct is another potential access point that will loop the trail back east into downtown Cincinnati via the existing protected bike lanes along Central Parkway. Currently, the proposed bridge incorporates a shared-use pathway along the span. Bicycle access and pedestrian safety should be primary considerations in evaluating the preferred design for the viaducts approach.

Finally, connection points should be considered for the Lower Price Hill section of the trail. There is an opportunity to connect the trail to the proposed 8th
Street bike lane extension in the neighborhood. This connection will provide alternative access to downtown and the Lower Price Hill business district along State Avenue.

Secure Infrastructure Funds for Trail in Phase One

Project leaders should aim to design and construct the 3.8 mile trail in one phase. While most trail projects are completed in phases, there is a combination of momentum, opportunity and funding that if successfully executed can result in the trail’s completion as a single project. Potential funding includes federal funding from the recently passed Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act as well as the traditional state and federal formulas which allocate funds through metropolitan planning organizations such as the Ohio Kentucky Indiana Regional Council of Governments (OKI), which covers the Cincinnati region.

Leadership: Develop Awareness and Support

Create a Steering Committee to Guide and Focus Initiatives

Acquisition of the trail right-of-way should be the first step in the broader efforts outlined in this report. Once the corridor is acquired by the city, a steering committee should be formed to coordinate the broader goals of this report and address challenges. That committee should include members from the following organizations:

- The City of Cincinnati:
  - Department of Community and Economic Development
  - City Planning and Engagement
• Department of Transportation and Engineering
• Department of Sustainability
• The Port
• Tri-State Trails/Green Umbrella
• CROWN
• Working in Neighborhoods
• Price Hill Will
• Other or new CDCs that may operate within neighborhoods along the corridor
• Representatives from neighborhood community councils
• ULI-Cincinnati
• Metropolitan Sewer District
• Mill Creek Alliance
• Others as determined by the committee

**Build a Branding and Identity for the Corridor**

While the overall branding of the 34-mile trail network works on a regional scale, individual routes, such as the Mill Creek Greenway need to have their own identity. A good brand helps tie unique assets together into a theme that interplays with trail users throughout the route. It connects the five communities along the greenway to the trail and celebrates the heritage of the communities, the former railway and natural assets such as the Mill Creek.

Branding, once developed should feature prominently as gateway markers, wayfinding signage, benches, trash cans and lighting among other potential integrations.
Prepare for Development: Acquire Key Sites

Empower Community Development to Lead in Developing Key Locations

A Community Development Corporation (CDC) serves as the neighborhood’s developer. They are non-profit organizations led by a citizen board that works to acquire and guide development around the goals of the community. In the Mill Creek Greenway corridor there are two CDCs in current operation, Working in Neighborhoods (WIN) and Price Hill Will.

It is essential that the Steering Committee works with CDCs and neighborhood community councils in implementing these recommendations. The community, municipal, and regional organizations must coordinate, partner, and communicate with each other to move forward on implementing these goals and in navigating the concerns that come with community change.

The community and its partners must also act as developer and work to acquire crucial sites along the corridor that present an opportunity to advance the neighborhoods goals. This is crucial for achieving goals around housing affordability and workforce development.

Funds already exist for development that neighborhood leaders can utilize, either through a CDC or the City. A list of some of those funds and incentives is in the Appendix of this report.

Put Zoning and Incentives in Place to Achieve Policy Goals

100% Housing, a 2018 study by LISC showed that there is a need of over 40,000 units in Hamilton County. That need is primarily concentrated within the city of Cincinnati. As previously identified, the Mill Creek Greenway corridor presents an opportunity to address these regional challenges. The Steering Committee and its partners should focus on the following land development policy changes:

Significant landmarks like the Paramount Building and an abandoned grain silo are located along the proposed corridor.
1. **Change the Zoning:** Current zoning along the corridor is primarily manufacturing. While there is opportunity to develop 21st century focused industrial uses such as logistics, robotics, 3D printing or medical research, the current zoning is restricted and does not allow the needed diversity in industrial, retail, commercial, or residential uses along the corridor.

2. **Remove required parking minimums near the trail and existing high-frequency transit:** Properties along the corridor have the benefit of plugging into the 34-mile CROWN network with access to several existing bicycle lanes. Transit improvements as a result of Reinventing Metro are also in the works. There are several existing bus routes at the intersection of the Western Hills Viaduct, the Lick Run, and the Mill Creek Greenway Trails, increasing access to downtown, uptown and other neighborhoods without needing access to an automobile. Space traditionally used for parking can be used for more productive uses. Other frequent transit areas like where the trail intersects 8th Street in Lower Price Hill should be considered.

3. **Relax density requirements to encourage ground level vibrancy:** Economic activity along the corridor will be dependent upon two things, residents and visitors. While there is plenty of opportunity to develop destination-based retail and other uses along the corridor, a density of residents is needed to lure resident-oriented service retail to corridor communities.

4. **Leverage Historic Preservation to Retain Community Character:** Communities have long utilized historic preservation as a tool to revitalize significant buildings and neighborhoods in older cities such as Cincinnati. While historic districts often mean stricter design standards, they also are an opportunity for utilizing historic tax credits. Tax credits could be useful gap financing tools for buildings along the corridor if they are in a district or designated a historic landmark. Currently, only Lower Price Hill has a historic district. Creating additional districts in North and South Fairmount could help preserve community character while also promoting building rehabilitation and restoration.

5. **Use Tax Code to Keep Long-Term Residents in Place:** Community leaders should consider a long-term residential property tax break to keep existing residents. Prior studies and engagements in communities along the corridor found that a sizable number of residents are long-term property
owners who have lived in their homes for decades. One recommendation from the 18-Hour Cities series sessions was for the city and county to work together to develop a program that may either award a property tax break or keep property taxes at their current levels for long-term residents living in communities along the corridor.

**Equity: Ensure Equitable Revitalization**

**Balance Equitable Growth and Community Character**

WIN has developed a development rubric for communities along the Mill Creek Corridor based on the Peaslee Rubric developed by the Peaslee Center in Over-the-Rhine. The rubric is a scoring matrix that evaluates development proposals in their alignment to community goals. Categories include hiring from construction workers or permanent employees from the neighborhood, LEED accredited construction, and having a percentage of units designated as affordable housing. Higher scoring proposals are seen as more likely to help the community. This rubric can serve as a framework for preserving neighborhood vision as development takes shape.

**Existing Residents Must Share in Growth**

Leaders should also consider opportunities for existing residents to have an equity stake in new development. One avenue to approach this is Land Readjustment. Land Readjustment is the idea that existing property owners and residents become equity partners in a redevelopment project. If that person lives on the site, they can be relocated during construction and then have a unit within the development. Additionally, they are part owners in the development and can
still grow wealth through that ownership. This gives existing residents an opportunity to share in the growth of the community along the Mill Creek Greenway. This concept is currently being implemented in the Cincinnati suburb of Silverton.

Involve Development Community in Achieving Goals

While a considerable amount of ink has been spilled regarding the need for community leaders, stakeholders and the Steering Committee to work together to address issues concerning the development of the Mill Creek Greenway and beyond, it is the development community that will build the places people will live, shop, work and play at. Communities need a balance of market and affordable housing to be healthy and this is where the development community can act as a partner in accomplishing goals along the corridor. To that end, the Steering Committee should work to ensure that developers are included in the crafting of policies, goals and most importantly, engagement with community stakeholders.

8 Ways to Get Involved

- Volunteer to be on CROWN Mill Creek Greenway Fundraising Committee
- Take a kayak trip on the Mill Creek
- Join the Mill Creek Alliance Board
- Volunteer for community cleanups and Spring in our Steps
- Contact the new Cincinnati Mayor and City Council in January to voice support for completing the CROWN and prioritizing the Mill Creek Greenway and Ohio River Trail West
- Make a donation at crowncincinnati.org
- Volunteer with Tri-State Trails
- Contact wade@tristatetrails.org
- Tell your friends, family, and neighbors about CROWN

Community members engage at a AIA charrette on the Lick Run Project, a connection point to the proposed Mill Creek Greenway.
The proposed Mill Creek Greenway Trail corridor passes through five Cincinnati neighborhoods: South Cumminsville, Millvale, North Fairmount, South Fairmount, and Lower Price Hill. An analysis of the four communities north of the Western Hills Viaduct by Urban Fast Forward found that within these neighborhoods, a diverse community of 7,100 lives and works. The average household size is 2.4 people, slightly higher than the Cincinnati average of 2.1. The median age of a resident is 29 years old, lower than the city average of 33. Children and youth (0-19) make up roughly 39% of the population along the corridor versus the citywide percentage of 25%. The majority of residents are Black (80%), and 16% are White.

84% of households in these neighborhoods have an income under $50,000. The median household income is $16,162, less than half of the city median income ($43,585). The poverty rate is twice that of the city, at 55%. 71% of children in the area live below the poverty line. In addition, 2/3 of residents are renters, and 1/3 are homeowners. 22% of community residents do not have a high school degree. However, 35% have completed some college, and 8% have received a bachelor’s degree. Of those working, 24% are under 30 years old, 52% are 30-54, and 24% are over 55.

30% of the properties are vacant along the proposed trail corridor, and 20% are tax delinquent.

“29.91% are properties coded vacant by the City’s Planning and Engagement Department.”

A breakdown of occupied housing in Hamilton County from the 100% Housing study.
Land Use

Prior plans conducted in the past few years reviewed existing land use in the five neighborhoods. It found that vacant land was the dominant usage at 36%, followed by Single-Family housing at 27%.

Zoning reflects the predominant single-family and industrial character of the five neighborhoods. A large part of Beekman Street is zoned Manufacturing General (MG), which allows for a wide array of manufacturing uses and limited residential usage. In Lower Price Hill, the zoning for the area is a mix of manufacturing, commercial and residential.

Vacancy

As highlighted in the land use and zoning sections, the highest percentage of land use is vacant land. 29.91% are properties coded vacant by the City’s Planning and Engagement Department.

A study conducted by Urban Fast Forward of the four neighborhoods north of the Western Hills Viaduct found a total of 2,419 vacant parcels within the neighborhoods analyzed. Add the additional 131 structures from the City of Cincinnati VBML database, and the total vacancy number is 2,550 properties.

The Port has also provided information on tax delinquency within the study area. Based on total
The proposed corridor overlayed on the regional job centers map.

acreage, approximately 20% of properties are tax delinquent.

While the degree of vacancy along the corridor north of the Western Hills Viaduct is striking, other essential factors are to note. First, the community’s surprisingly rural and forested nature was identified as an asset during public engagement. This rustic aesthetic is to some degree protected by extensive hillsides, which are essentially unbuildable. Moreover, some of the land coded as vacant is now part of the Lick Run Greenway.

Nonetheless, the percentage of developable vacant land along the corridor north of the Western Hills Viaduct is high, representing an appearance of deterioration and a challenge for the corridor and its constituent communities. The Hamilton County Landbank plays a vital role in the redevelopment of this area by targeting and assembling vacant parcels along the Lick Run Greenway and Beekman Street.

“The corridor is within two-miles of the regions top two employment centers, downtown and uptown Cincinnati with access to over 100,000 jobs...”
**Economic Impact Analysis**

The corridor is within two-miles of the region’s top two employment centers, downtown and uptown Cincinnati with access to over 100,000 jobs in addition to manufacturing and distribution hubs in adjacent Camp Washington and Queensgate. Along the corridor, there are approximately 1,500 vacant properties within a five-minute walk (1,500 feet) of the trail along the entire corridor. This report’s brief economic impact analysis shows that investing in the corridor would generate at least $575 million in economic benefits for properties close to the route. That includes the construction of over 1,300 new residential dwelling units and the creation of over 2,200 jobs.

In addition, Urban Planning studios at the University of Cincinnati Design Art Architecture and Planning are engaged in multi-year design solutions for capturing social, economic, and environmental opportunities along the Mill Creek Corridor. The work highlights the rich history, landscape, and financial justification for improving access to and within the corridor.

Through the ULI Cincinnati 18-Hour City Series, we discovered local and national resources are converging on the tremendous opportunity in Cincinnati’s Mill Creek valley. Now is the time to use such influence and available funding to complete the CROWN to improve underserved communities’ equity, access, and economic development while creating even more significant improvements across the region.

**CASE STUDY: Indianapolis Cultural Trail**

The Indianapolis Cultural Trail is often cited as one of the most successful urban trail projects in the country. The 8.1 mile long corridor consists of a loop that runs through the city’s downtown and three spurs that connect to the Fountain Square neighborhood, Massachusetts Avenue, and Capitol Avenue. The trail connects to a variety of destinations in the city including the Convention Center, Lucas Oil Stadium and the Indiana Central Canal. It also connects other regional trails including the Pleasant Run Greenway and the Monon Trail, a longer 24-mile trail that connects to Carmel and Westfield.

Envisioned in 2001, the trail is the result of a public-private partnership spurred by the donations of philanthropists Gene B. and Marilyn Glick. The $62.5 million trail opened in 2013. Construction of the trail through downtown resulted in the narrowing of several streets to accommodate the trail pathways.

A 2019 report by the Indianapolis Business Journal found that $863 million in development was generated within a half-mile radius of the trail. Other studies, such as one conducted by Indiana University Public Policy Institute in 2015 found that assessed values of properties withing 500 feet of the trail increased by $1 billion as well as heavy usage of the trail compared to others in the region.

The Indianapolis Cultural Trail with signage.
Session 1: Economic Development

January 14 – Creating Successful Urban Trails

Moderated by Wade Johnston, AICP, Director, Tri-State Trails
Panelists: Tyrone Rachal, President, Urban Key Capital Partners, and Ed McMahon, Senior Fellow, Sustainable Development, Urban Land Institute

Session 1 served as an introduction to the 18-Hour Cities series for the year. Wade Johnston from Tri-State Trails presented the concept of the CROWN trail system to participants and what potential the system could unlock for the Cincinnati region. He explored the opportunities and unique challenges of connecting Cincinnati’s current trail network and neighborhood communities to a 34-mile trail loop around the city’s urban core.

Ed McMahon, Senior Fellow of Sustainable Development for ULI, discussed the growth in shared-use mobility and how the explosion of trail infrastructure has led to greater use. In addition, he demonstrated how urban trails and metro-wide trails provide a high-level return on investment through increased tourism, property values, and development.

Tyrone Rachal, President, Urban Key Capital Partners, wrapped up the session with a focus on how public and private partnerships can help these projects come to fruition, showcasing lessons learned from the Atlanta Beltline on its successes as well as the need to be more intentional in addressing the threat of displacement during trail planning and ultimate development.

Session 2: Equitable Development

March 11 – Developing Affordable Housing Along Urban Trails

Moderated by John Yung, Senior Project Executive, Urban Fast Forward
Panelists: Rigel Behrens, Community Development Planning, Working in Neighborhoods, Adelyn Hall, Director of School Centered Neighborhood Development, Community Learning Center Institute and Lisa Gordon, President and CEO, Atlanta Habitat for Humanity

Leading off Session 2, John Yung, AICP, Senior Project Executive for Urban Fast Forward, presented an overview of the housing gap in Hamilton County utilizing data from the LISC 100% Housing report. He previewed the CROWN trail and its relation to the five neighborhoods on its western edge, South Cumminsville, Millvale, North and South Fairmount, and Lower Price Hill, where high concentrations of tax delinquent, vacant homes are documented.

Rigel Behrens, Community Development Planner for Working in Neighborhoods (WIN), highlighted housing affordability programs and other affordable income projects that the organization utilizes
to build equity in the communities along the trail’s west side. In addition, she discussed some of WIN’s work with National Church Residences and the impacts the trail will have on accessibility for these underserved communities.

Adelyn Hall, Director of School-Centered Neighborhood Development for Community Learning Center Institute, located within Oyler School in Lower Price Hill’s heart, gave a background on the neighborhood and the center’s work developing new housing and mobility access and their positive impact on children’s health and progress.

Lisa Gordon, President and Chief Executive Officer of Atlanta Habitat for Humanity, wrapped up the session with insight from her time as part of the Atlanta Beltline project. She highlighted missed opportunities in acquiring land and protecting designations for affordable housing. Attendees learned the challenges of bringing affordability back into a successful development project like the Beltline. She shared valuable early actions for trail projects in Cincinnati.

**Session 3: Funding the Trail**

May 20 – CROWN Strategy Including Funding

Moderated by Christine Russell, Vice President of Strategy, Northern Kentucky Tri-ED

Panelists: Kristen Baker, Executive Director, LISC of Greater Cincinnati, Wade Johnston, AICP, Director, Tri-State Trails, Clete Benken, Principal Owner, Benken & Associates, Pete Metz, Transportation Policy & Coalition Manager, Cincinnati Chamber USA and Philip Denning, Executive Vice President, The Port

Panelists agreed that the city needs a sustainable funding stream for bike and pedestrian investment. Panelists were asked, “What should be the criteria for prioritizing trails funding?” The responses include:

- Need
- Opportunity
- Capacity
- Connection to broader Network
- Requests from CDCs
- Quality of Experience
- Educated Policy Makers

The program’s primary area of focus is the Miami River/Mill Creek Trail on Cincinnati’s west side. Leaders and advocates should be pushing the City and other officials to secure the railroad ROW as soon as possible. This purchase is a critical first step and has precedent with Wasson Way and Oasis Trails. First cost funding is primarily the City, but funds for total completion can come from Federal sources, OKI, Brownfield funding, National Foundations, and even angel investors with a passion for this mission.

Concurrently, we should be acquiring rights of way and protecting opportunities for affordable housing. It’s not just funding but also neighborhood priorities. We need to keep an eye toward equitable development.

**Session 4: Design Challenges**

July 8 – Understanding Urban Trail Design Challenges

Moderated by Jim Zentmeyer, P.E., VACP, Vice President, Civil & Environmental Consultants, Inc.

Panelists: Chuck Flint, FASLA, Owner/President, Greenways Incorporated; Carl Kincaid, ASLA, Principal-in-Charge, Rundall Ernstberger Associates; Eric Oberg, Midwest Regional Director, Rails to Trails Conservancy; and Kevin Osburn, PLA, ASLA, Principal, Rundall Ernstberger Associates.

Session 4 focused on addressing the challenges of integrating trail projects into existing urban areas. The session focused on regional examples of rails to trails programs and common obstacles, including the acquisition of right-of-way from railroads as well as a look into some of the challenges of planning and design leaders found in building the Indianapolis Cultural Trail and sections of the Monon Trail in Indiana.

**Sessions 5 and 6: Engagement and Feedback**

Sessions 5 and 6 were conducted by the John Yung and Christine Russell as engagement and feedback discussion related to the findings of the first four sessions, potential recommendations for the report, and a further synthesis and feedback on goals and objectives.

The recommendations in this report reflect the feedback received from the final engagement session.
Potential Community Partners

Working in Neighborhoods

Working in Neighborhoods (WIN) has already developed extensive connections within the city and beyond. This organization is poised to take on the greater challenge of both the Beekman Street and Queen City Avenue corridors in implementing this plan. To succeed, WIN will need strong partnerships with the city, regional land development agencies, and non-profits with reach.

The City of Cincinnati

The City of Cincinnati can be a partner through its various departments. The Steering Committee and its partners can work with City Planning on zoning issues and the Historic Conservator on developing historic districts. They can also coordinate with DCED on available sites and potential developments.

The Port

The Port runs the Hamilton County Landbank and is skilled at land assembly and positioning industrial sites. Its neighborhood development arm has taken on developing mid-tier market-rate housing through the REACH program. Its ability to obtain delinquent property can open up opportunities. But even these tools have limitations. Large-scale industrial buildings with environmental contaminants such as Lunkenheimer are beyond the capacity of such an organization with a county-wide focus. Partnerships with experience and capability are necessary for getting these larger sites into the right hands.

Neighborhood Community Councils

Community Council support for initiatives can help build city buy-in for initiatives. They also offer an opportunity for community stakeholders to act in the community. These boards hold collective power with City Hall leaders.

Local Initiatives Support Corporation

Better known as LISC, this organization is an important support service aimed at low-income communities. Locally, LISC has helped direct funding to several neighborhoods within the city. They can be a resource for funding, developing infrastructure for opportunities, and placemaking.

Cincinnati Development Fund

Cincinnati Development Fund, the regional Community Development Funding Institution has the capacity to leverage gap funding for catalytic projects in communities such as those within the study area. The organization has received an almost regular allotment of New Market Tax Credits to help spur key projects through several revitalizing Cincinnati areas such as the Masonic Lodge project in East Price Hill.

Tools for Implementation

Neighborhood Business District Improvement Program

The Neighborhood Business District Improvement Program is a competitive bid program that allocates money from Cincinnati City Council to neighborhood projects. The projects can range from building renovation, developing a neighborhood space, wayfinding, planning, or programmatic initiatives.
Vision Zero Cincy

The Vision Zero Cincy program is only a few years old and has already been implemented near the corridor by WIN in South Cumminsville. It allocates a small amount of funding for tactical pedestrian safety projects. Colorful crosswalks, bike racks, temporary curb bump-outs and other initiatives have been funded through this program. While on its own, this program can have success, the Steering Committee should coordinate between the City’s DOTE and Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) on utilizing these funds in addition to potential funding from any Safe Routes to Schools grants for trail connections near Ethel M. Taylor School in Millvale.

Opportunity Zones

In 2019, the neighborhoods along the entire corridor were designated an Opportunity Zone (OZ) by the State of Ohio. Opportunity zones allow investors to deflect taxable profits from stocks and other assets into funds that support a variety of activities within the zone. Over time, funds are eligible for a tax reduction or elimination, depending on the duration of investment. Investors in OZs have to invest in an opportunity zone fund. Funds can be site or neighborhood-specific. In Cincinnati, the Hamilton County Development Corporation (HCDC) is coordinating efforts to market and invest in relevant areas.

Tax Incremental Financing Districts

In 2019 the city expanded the number of Tax Incremental Financing Districts (TIFs) within the city limits to include several communities along the trail corridor. Those districts encompass South Fairmount, North Fairmount, South Cumminsville and Lower Price Hill. TIF districts divert appreciated property values from development from general city funds into their own account. These funds can be used for public infrastructure improvements such as streetscapes, multi-modal infrastructure, or parking garages.

CDBG

Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) are annual funds delegated to cities and counties that can be used for community development activities including real estate acquisition, rehabilitation, demolition, etc. Eligibility is based on a formula including factors such as poverty, population, and age of housing to determine whether there is a present need. Over 1,200 cities, counties, and states receive CDBG funding.

The City of Cincinnati recieves CDBG funding that is administered by the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED). It is recommended that the Steering Committee explore funding opportunities with this funding source and that neighborhood CDCs or other organizations apply to utilize this funding for critical developments along the corridor.

Low Income Housing Tax Credits

Tax credits can be a significant source of funding for housing development projects. The low median income ($16,162) and high poverty rate (55%) along the corridor, make the area a candidate for several types of tax credits, including Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC). It is recommended that LIHTC be pursued as a potential funding source for new residential development.

New Market Tax Credits

The New Markets Tax Credit Program (NMTC) is a tool for attracting private investment to low-income communities, with the goal of breaking cycles of disinvestment. Individuals and corporate investors make equity investments in Community Development Entities (CDEs) and in exchange receive a tax credit against their federal income tax. CDEs are awarded NMTCs through a competitive process administered by The CDFI Fund, a branch of the U.S. Treasury. Once equity investments are made by private investors, the CDE can make loans and investments to businesses operating in low-income communities.

communities. The terms and rates are much better than what businesses could access in the market. Investment spurs business growth, job creation, and catalyzes further development and revitalization. As the entire study area is eligible for NMTCs, it is recommended that local businesses apply for funding through the program.

**HOME Investment**

The HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME) provides grants to States that are then distributed to communities to be used in partnership with local nonprofit groups. The funds are generally used for affordable housing construction and rehabilitation as well as rental assistance to low-income residents. The corridor could potentially direct these funds to land clearance, new housing, and restoration of existing housing along or adjacent to the corridor.

The amount each jurisdiction is awarded is determined by a formula, which considered a jurisdiction’s housing supply, poverty, and other factors. To qualify for HOME funds, the jurisdiction must have an approved Consolidated Plan, which sets out how the HOME funds will be spent.

**Tax Abatements**

Residential and Commercial tax abatements are development incentives offered by the City’s Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) that have proven successful in many Cincinnati communities. The Cincinnati Residential Tax Abatement allows property owners who are renovating or building on their property to pay taxes on the pre-improvement value of their property for up to 15 years.

The objective of the program is to spark community revitalization, retain and attract homeowners, and reduce development costs. Commercial Tax Abatements allow property owners to pay pre-improvement taxes on their projects up to 10 years if the projects result in job creation. This can often close the gap on crucial catalytic development in revitalizing neighborhoods.

**Transformational Mixed-Use Development Tax Credit**

Also known as TMUD’s, this tax credit is based on legislation the state of Ohio passed early in 2021. In cities like Cincinnati, the credit can be utilized by property owners or insurance company investors who invest in large-scale projects that will have a transformational economic impact on the development site and surrounding area and have more than one intended use, with some combination of retail, office, hotel, residential, recreation, structured parking, and other similar uses into one project. The investment in a project must exceed $50 million and include one of the following:

- at least one new or previously vacant building that is at least 15 stories high;
- has a floor area of at least 350,000 square feet;
- after completion will be the site of employment accounting for at least $4 million in annual payroll; or
- includes two or more connected buildings that collectively have a floor area exceeding 350,000 square feet.

The TMUD credit is limited to 10% of the project’s certified development costs and does not include any estimated credits preliminarily approved for insurance companies contributing capital to the same project. Insurance companies that act as the applicant and a direct investor in the TMUD, are limited to claiming a maximum of 10% of the capital contribution made by the company towards the planning or construction of the development. Eligible projects are capped at $40 million in tax credits to be awarded.
Above: A map of TIF Districts in Cincinnati with the corridor called out. Below: A map of Opportunity Zones in Cincinnati with the corridor circled.
Mill Creek Greenway Trail proposed extension (yellow dashed line) Yellow Bridge to Lick Run and Western Hills Viaduct

Property ownership
City of Cincinnati
MVCD
CSX
Solar Advantage
undefined

MVCD easments

Neighborhoods
South Cumminsville
Millvale
English Woods
North Fairmount
South Fairmount
Left: A map of the proposed corridor routing. Above: A proposed routing alternative for the southern section with a connection to downtown Cincinnati.
Looking north along the proposed Mill Creek Greenway corridor on a sunny fall day.