





Equity in Infrastructure

By Wendy Morton-Huddleston

Recent infrastructure legislation creates an opportunity to expand economic resources and quell disparities in many areas, including neighborhoods encroached by interstate development and nationwide imbalance in affordable broadband access. The \$1.2 trillion in funding will provide lifeline resources to programs, communities and agencies. Communities, particularly, stand to benefit from revitalization based on fair policies and practices to address underserved populations and build program equity, which is the consistent, systematic, fair, just and impartial treatment of all individuals.¹ The value and importance of infrastructure improvements rest in restored connectivity in communities and neighborhoods. The way to get there as a nation depends on sound strategy, influencers and data.



RECONNECT COMMUNITIES

The bipartisan infrastructure bill includes \$1 billion to reconnect communities impacted by the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956,² one of the largest-ever U.S. public works projects, based on a promise of prosperity, faster commutes and more jobs. The first step was neighborhood demolition in many areas to make way for the new interstates. Black and Latino neighborhoods felt the most severe effects as road crews bulldozed their homes and bisected established communities. Among numerous examples is the disappearance of the 15th ward in Syracuse, New York, under the shadow of I-81. Despite protests from residents and some district and county lawmakers, crews razed all of its homes and businesses and displaced more than 1,300 black families.³ Meanwhile, in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Boyle Heights, many Latino residents were cut off from their schools and churches when a highway bisected the area.⁴

Atlanta currently expects to receive \$900,000 for a study of residents who live along interstates 75 and 85,⁵ with an eye toward building a platform over

both roads for a greenspace, parks and mobility walkways for safe pedestrian travel. It is part of Atlanta's regional transportation plan to prioritize spending through 2050 in the 20 counties of the metropolitan area; federal infrastructure funding could advance projects in the queue.⁶

As urban planners and designers assess the reconstruction of street grids, parks and neighborhoods in expectation of infrastructure funds, an opportunity arises to restore and renew communities that lost their culture and heritage in massive highway projects. Some of the funding is intended to address inequities, including \$500 million

for the Reconnecting Communities Program, outlined in **Figure 1**, plus \$100 million for planning grants and \$400 million for capital construction grants. In addition, the Department of Transportation will continue to assess interstate expansion to investigate civil rights violations, climate impact and congestion. The program comes with the "Building a Better America" guidebook for state, local, tribal and territorial governments and other government partners⁷ to provide transparency into resources, points of contact, timelines and planning activities and help them prepare for implementation. The guidance recommends appointing infrastructure coordinators to manage the flow of funds to states and cultivate intergovernmental engagement. It also offers advice on what to apply for, whom to contact, and how to prepare effectively for rebuilding.⁸

IMPROVE BROADBAND

According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC),⁹ nearly 17 million school children lack internet access at home, creating a nationwide homework gap. Meanwhile, urban and rural communities face a broadband digital divide with suburban areas. According to the Pew Research Center, people of color, older adults, and people with lower levels of income are less likely to have broadband service at home.¹⁰ Research from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance¹¹ in Cleveland, Ohio, for example, shows 44% of homes lack broadband. In response, the FCC is working on two programs to help communities. The Emergency Broadband Benefit is the first and largest program in the

Figure 1. Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program

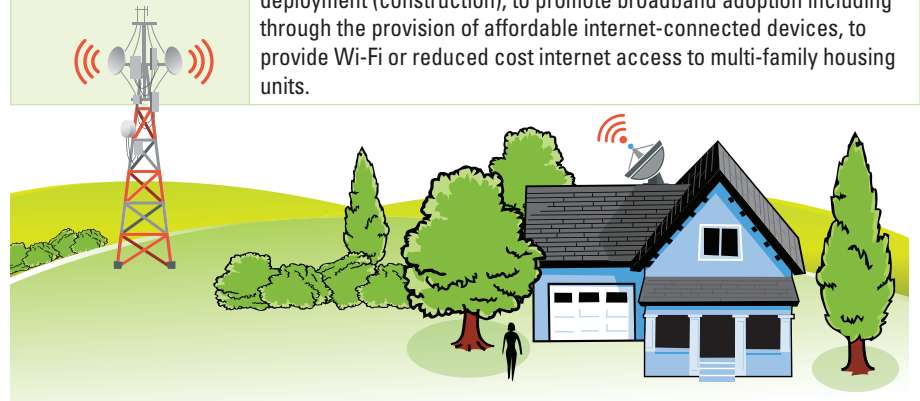
Program	Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program
Agency	Department of Transportation
Bureau	Federal Highway Administration
Funding	\$1,000,000,000
Funding Mechanism	Competitive Grant
Description	Restore community connectivity by removing, retrofitting or mitigating highways that create barriers to community connectivity (mobility, access or economic development).
Eligible Use	Grants (> or = \$5 million) for capital construction projects.

U.S. to address broadband affordability to connect eligible applicants to resources, such as jobs, health care services and virtual classrooms. The Emergency Connectivity Fund covers laptops, tablets, wi-fi hotspots, modems, routers and broadband connectivity purchases for schools and libraries for lending to students, staff and library patrons.

Broadband parity is essential for citizens to stay informed in society that increasingly communicates digitally. The infrastructure provisions approaches solutions in a number of ways, including the \$42.45 billion Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment Program, outlined in **Figure 2**, to offer state broadband deployment grants to connect unserved and underserved communities.¹² The National Telecommunications and Information Administration will administer the program, which will fund infrastructure expansion to connect citizens to reliable, high-speed, affordable

Figure 2. Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment Program

Program	Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment Program
Agency	Department of Commerce
Bureau	National Telecommunications and Information Administration
Funding	\$42,450,000,000
Funding Mechanism	Grant
Description	Appropriates \$42.45 billion for states, territories, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico to use for broadband planning, deployment and adoption projects.
Eligible Use	Planning (broadband data collection and mapping) infrastructure deployment (construction), to promote broadband adoption including through the provision of affordable internet-connected devices, to provide Wi-Fi or reduced cost internet access to multi-family housing units.



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broadband. It also aims to connect eligible community anchor institutions, such as schools, libraries, health clinics, higher education institutions, public housing organizations, and community support organizations, that facilitate broadband service to vulnerable populations, including individuals with low incomes and unemployed and elderly people.¹³

ACCOUNTABILITY IN INFRASTRUCTURE PROGRAMS

Now begins the process of accountability as the federal government institutes the new infrastructure programs to mitigate fraud, waste and abuse, and impose controls to protect taxpayer dollars distributed to state, local and tribal governments. Prudent implementation requires effective administration, management and evidence-based reporting of funds and outcomes. With that in mind, state and local leaders might consider the following suggestions to drive more equitable outcomes.

- 1. Strategy:** A forward-looking strategy that promotes accountability and control activities, such as plans, policies and procedures, can be tested throughout an enterprise to ease distribution, management and reporting of aid to federal, state, local and tribal partners.
- 2. Influencers:** An open, fair process that engages diverse voices in program planning and design will make the best use of infrastructure funding. Consider a cross-functional task force of influencers,

such as urban planners, design engineers, chief equity officers, representatives of not-for-profits, and management and program decisionmakers.

- 3. Data:** Trust the data that reveals the greatest need and any lack of historic investment in minority and underserved communities, including their access to technology and job training. Invest in innovative data tools that take into account a broad range of socio-economic and quality of life indicators to help leaders understand local communities, their economies, and their needs toward equity.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury offers guidance for the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund that highlights efforts to promote equitable outcomes, including examples of program design. Jurisdictions can consider and measure equity at the various stages of the program with requirements of four areas:

- **Goals** — Is the intention to serve particular groups of historically underserved, marginalized or adversely affected groups?
- **Awareness** — Is it practical to make all residents or businesses equally aware of the services funded?
- **Access and Distribution** — Do targeted groups face differences in levels of access to benefits and services? Will administrative requirements result in disparities in the ability to complete applications or meet eligibility criteria?
- **Outcomes** — Are intended outcomes focused on closing gaps, reaching universal levels of service or making progress toward equity?¹⁴

Accountability professionals can work with agencies, officials and community partners to increase the likelihood of addressing longstanding inequity among people of color and their neighborhoods, culture and heritage through upcoming infrastructure investments. Our efforts now have the potential to create lasting change that could reverberate for decades to come. Let's hope we do not miss this chance. Advancing equity for all to realize equitable

outcomes is the responsibility of citizens and government. As a society, we must commit to change, accountability and sustainability across public and private sectors to influence a future that benefits everyone. ■

Endnotes

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6. Donsky, Paul. "How the New U.S. Infrastructure Law Could Accelerate ATL Projects," *What's Next ATL*, Atlanta Regional Commission, Feb. 28, 2022.
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10. Pew Research. "Internet Broadband Fact Sheet," April 7, 2021.
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13. See Endnote 7.
14. Treasury. "Compliance & Reporting Guidance: State & Local Fiscal Recovery Funds," Feb. 28, 2022.



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