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Collaborative Community Engagement for Post-Disaster Transportation Rebuilding:
Opportunities for Los Angeles After the January 2025 Fires

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Collaborative Community Engagement for Post-Disaster Transportation Rebuilding

OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOS ANGELES
AFTER THE JANUARY 2025 FIRES



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The analysis, views, recommendations, and conclusions expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of any of the project supporters, advisors, interviewees, or reviewers, nor do they represent the University of California, Los Angeles as a whole. Reference to individuals or their affiliations in this report does not necessarily represent their endorsement of the recommendations or conclusions of this report. The author is responsible for the content of this report.

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Cover photo: Fire Damage in Pacific Palisades on January 31, 2025. Ringo Chiu / Shutterstock

CONTENTS

Executive Summary	iii
1. Introduction	1
2. Transportation Rebuilding Post-Disaster	3
2.1. Fire Impacts on Transportation Infrastructure and Lessons for Recovery	
2.2. Constraints and Coordination in Transportation Rebuilding	
2.3. Transportation Planning for Evacuation	
2.4. Rebuilding after the January 2025 Los Angeles Fires	
3. Community Engagement in Transportation Planning	8
3.1. Engagement Practices in Transportation and Evacuation Planning	
3.2. Transportation Engagement after the January 2025 Fires	
4. Elements of the Transformative Climate Communities Program with Relevance to Transportation Rebuilding and Planning	11
4.1. Collaborative Visioning and Planning	
4.2. Structure for Cross-Agency Coordination	
4.3. Community-Based Organizations as Convenors and Representatives of the Broader Community	
4.4. Adaptive Flexibility to Meet Changing Needs	
5. Recommendations	18
5.1. Recommendation 1: Government agencies should integrate evacuation into transportation planning conversations, and vice versa.	
5.2. Recommendation 2: Transportation agencies should join in community-organized recovery and rebuilding conversations already underway.	
5.3. Recommendation 3: Transportation agencies should consult with local community-based organizations (CBOs) in the burn areas and compensate them for their time.	
5.4. Recommendation 4: Funders and regional transportation nonprofit organizations should support capacity for place-based CBOs.	
5.5. Recommendation 5: Transportation agencies should consider how to restructure engagement processes for long-term transportation planning to incorporate elements of the Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) model.	
6. Conclusion	20
7. References	21

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the aftermath of a disaster, local and state transportation agencies face the immense challenge of restoring critical infrastructure and services. The primary pressure is to rebuild quickly, supporting community recovery by repairing roadways and restoring services to their pre-disaster state. However, a rapid, like-for-like reconstruction of transportation systems can inadvertently prevent or increase the cost of implementing other community-defined priorities that surface during the long-term recovery process. The devastation brought by a disaster might spur new community visions for mobility that could be incorporated into rebuilding.

This study examines the potential for collaborative community engagement in post-disaster transportation planning, focusing on the communities heavily damaged by the January 2025 Eaton and Palisades fires in Los Angeles. Drawing on experiences with California's Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) program—a state-funded grant initiative supporting community-prioritized climate action projects—we explore the opportunities and challenges of a model where government agencies and community-based organizations (CBOs) collaborate to center the voices and priorities of residents in the rebuilding process.

The TCC program's successes demonstrate the value of sustained, formalized partnerships between government and community stakeholders in ensuring the translation of community vision into tangible outcomes. CBOs play a vital role in this model as trusted representatives and intermediaries—but in a post-disaster setting, this role could add to the burden that CBOs carry in meeting other community needs. The report concludes with recommendations for advancing community engagement and cross-agency coordination in transportation rebuilding in a way that is responsive to the distinctive demands and constraints of a post-disaster setting.

The research for this report was designed to support policymakers and local communities in shaping a post-fire community engagement strategy for transportation rebuilding. It involved synthesizing academic literature on transportation planning and post-disaster rebuilding, surveying rebuilding activities through a review of public communications and interviews with transportation professionals in the Los Angeles region, and incorporating findings from interviews with fire survivors and community leaders. We leveraged our deep familiarity with the TCC program to assess its applicability, aiming to provide actionable insights for a more collaborative and resilient approach to transportation recovery.

1. INTRODUCTION

Local and state transportation agencies face competing pressures in restoring transportation infrastructure and services after disasters. Pressure to rebuild quickly to support community recovery favors repair and restoration of roadways and services as they existed prior to the fires. At the same time, contemporary regulatory standards and public priorities, along with disaster impacts, may motivate agencies to consider infrastructure or service designs that are more resilient to the current and future risk landscape and that support other transportation system goals, including safety, accessibility, equity, and greenhouse gas emission reductions.

A race to rebuild transportation infrastructure post-disaster could preclude or increase the cost of other community-defined priorities that emerge during the long recovery process. Once roadway repairs and reconstruction are underway, it becomes more difficult to pursue alternative transportation pathways, such as building complete streets or changing road design for more effective evacuation. Rapid transportation rebuilding also could forestall actions that are beyond the realm of transportation agency authority, such as undergrounding power lines, implementing neighborhood-scale electrification, or shifting land use patterns. Even modest decisions like the reintroduction of bus routes might preclude broader efforts to reconfigure a neighborhood's transit connectivity.

Because the task of rebuilding is unlike typical transportation planning, it raises the question of whether community engagement processes should be more extensive or broader in scope than is typical for transportation decision-making. This study considers that question with application to the communities most heavily damaged by the January 2025 Eaton and Palisades fires in the Los Angeles area.

Drawing on experiences with California's Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) program, we examine the applicability of sustained, collaborative community engagement in transportation planning in the aftermath of disaster. TCC is a state-funded grant program that supports investments in neighborhood-scale climate action projects that community-based partnerships select and prioritize. We examine the opportunities, potential benefits, and challenges of a model in which government agencies and community-based organizations (CBOs) collaborate in processes that center the voices and priorities of residents and other community stakeholders in transportation rebuilding. We point to the success of TCC in building sustained partnerships both among government agencies and between government and community stakeholders. We also highlight the critical role of CBOs as organizers and intermediaries in the TCC place-based planning model, and the challenges of adding additional burden on CBOs in the post-disaster context, when they strain to meet many other community needs. We conclude with guidance for transportation agencies on how to rebuild in a way that is community-led, equity-driven, and integrated with other community-defined priorities—but not extractive on CBOs that work to meet many diverse needs in post-disaster recovery.

This research project was funded and designed to support policymakers, transit agencies, emergency planners, and local communities in shaping a strategy for community engagement in transportation planning after the Los Angeles fires. The work was comprised of three parts. First, we synthesized academic literature and case studies to characterize the demands on transportation planning and strategies for community engagement in both post-disaster rebuilding and longer-term evacuation preparedness. Then, using news reports, public communications from transportation agencies, and 10 interviews with transportation professionals in the Los Angeles region, we surveyed the rebuilding and engagement activities underway as of summer 2025 in the Eaton and Palisades burn areas. Our interviews, conducted from May through July, were intended to collect information only about transportation planning activities, not interviewees' personal perspectives or opinions, and they were not inclusive of many area agencies managing heavy workloads after the fires. We also pulled in findings from interviews conducted in the spring of 2025 with fire survivors and community leaders in the fire-impacted areas. Finally, we leveraged our familiarity with the TCC program and an archive of interviews with TCC project leaders to summarize the challenges and opportunities of applying the TCC model to post-fire recovery.

As rapid-response research, this project was not designed to provide comprehensive guidance on post-disaster community engagement or to fully characterize the perspectives of transportation agency officials, community groups, or residents on engagement strategies. The considerations we raise about post-disaster transportation engagement could set the stage for more in-depth future research that incorporates insights from key transportation and community stakeholders. The information presented in this report reflects our understanding of the recovery status as of September 2025, but recovery is a complex and dynamic process, with many threads of activity that might not be fully reflected here.

The report proceeds as follows: First, we describe the distinct demands of transportation planning and rebuilding post-disaster, both in general and specific to the Los Angeles burn areas. We then describe both the aspirations and the reality of community engagement practices under these conditions. The third section introduces TCC as a model for collaborative community engagement and presents opportunities and challenges in its application to transportation rebuilding. We conclude with recommendations for transportation planners and questions for future research.

2. TRANSPORTATION REBUILDING POST-DISASTER

2.1. Fire Impacts on Transportation Infrastructure and Lessons for Recovery

Natural disasters, including wildfires, floods, earthquakes, and hurricanes, pose critical threats to transportation systems and expose vulnerabilities in emergency response. For physical infrastructure, fire has distinctive effects on pavement degradation and structural weakening that manifest both immediately and through long-term cascades (Ram et al., 2025; Fraser et al., 2020). Although most destruction occurs during the active fire phase, infrastructure can remain vulnerable in the aftermath of an event if prompt restorative measures are not undertaken. Even moderate post-fire rainfall can mobilize debris flows that cause substantial damage, especially in fire-affected regions with steep terrain and erodible soils. Repeated movement of heavy vehicles for fire response and recovery work further contributes to damage and degradation.

Case studies from past disasters highlight the importance of planning and advance coordination for improving transportation resilience to disaster events. After flooding in Kauai in 2018, logistical and institutional barriers, including complex funding mechanisms and failures in communication across agencies, slowed rebuilding of critical transportation infrastructure on the Hawaiian island (Kim et al., 2023). Similarly, Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans revealed important shortcomings in transportation emergency and recovery planning (Amdal and Swigart, 2010). Key organizations and decision-makers operated under a set of assumptions about operational capacities and people's behavior that turned out to be faulty. Changes put in place during recovery have attached higher priority to hurricane readiness and transportation resiliency, especially within individual transportation providers. Yet coordination across providers and modes continued to be a challenge post-storm, perpetuating the regional transportation network's vulnerability to disaster.

Together, these case studies demonstrate that effective response to disasters requires building the frameworks and practices for cross-agency coordination and developing response strategies that are both context-specific and adaptive to conditions on the ground. Failure to create anticipatory responses to known vulnerabilities can amplify risks and delay community recovery.

2.2. Constraints and Coordination in Transportation Rebuilding

Rebuilding and reintroduction of transportation services after a disaster involve different constraints than for typical transportation planning. Opportunities for substantial reconfiguration of infrastructure and its uses are less limited by the existing built environment, and the physical destruction and disruption of people's mobility patterns may invite new ways of thinking about transportation systems and needs. While physical constraints may be looser, time constraints are much stricter (Olshanky et al., 2012). Coordinated sequencing of activities is essential for post-disaster recovery processes to avoid becoming mired in delay (Rouhanizadeh and

Kermanshachi, 2020). Road reconstruction is an especially sensitive element of recovery sequencing. Passable roads are essential to transport the materials and labor needed for rebuilding, but repair and restoration of power, water, and other underground infrastructure can add to road damage. Finally, the funding environment offers its own distinct set of constraints, with recovery funds often tied to strict deadlines or limitations on project scope.

Interagency coordination—an enduring challenge in transportation planning—is all the more critical in the post-disaster context. Without clear institutional roles and coordination across infrastructure sectors, bureaucratic inefficiencies and poor resource allocations can significantly delay critical recovery efforts and exacerbate preexisting infrastructure vulnerabilities (Zimmerman, 2014; Kim et al., 2023). Alternatively, where governing structures allow for integrated planning and response, and stakeholder engagement processes incorporate historically marginalized communities in resilience-building efforts, recovery is more efficient and equitable (Singh et al., 2021). In combination, improving transportation recovery requires institutional preparedness, interagency collaboration, and strong governance frameworks.

2.3. Transportation Planning for Evacuation

Disasters draw attention to the performance of transportation systems in supporting emergency evacuation—a critical function of transportation networks that receives less attention during normal, nonemergency conditions. Because road capacity and conditions set limits on how quickly an at-risk area can be cleared using private vehicles, changes to physical infrastructure, such as road widening or new connections, can help save lives by expanding the flow of evacuees that a road network can accommodate (Lindell et al., 2018). Experience with a life-threatening emergency could heighten the priority that community members attach to evacuation as a function of a local road network.

An emergency can also call attention to the many other factors that shape evacuation performance: the timing and distribution of information and warnings; traffic control strategies and the coordination of evacuation routes to improve flow and allow ingress of emergency personnel; the creation of temporary refuge and staging sites; use of multimodal options to expand capacity and serve those without private vehicles; and advance planning to serve the elderly, disabled people, and other sensitive populations who are overrepresented in deaths from disaster (Murray-Tuite and Wolshon, 2013; Zehra and Wong, 2024). For many people who struggle with mobility, public transportation is the preferred or the only mode of transportation during an evacuation (Wambura and Wong, 2024). Meeting the needs of a community's residents requires attention to not only physical infrastructure but also to evacuation plans and procedures. Collaboration among transportation departments, planning agencies, emergency personnel, and community members can help address these considerations, while advance planning that incorporates behavioral analysis and hazard modeling can help improve evacuation management in real time and prioritize capital improvements over the longer term (Jana et al., 2025).

2.4. Rebuilding after the January 2025 Los Angeles Fires

The January 2025 fires in Los Angeles County were among the most destructive and costliest disaster events in the region's history, causing economic losses of \$60 billion or more. The Palisades and Eaton fires accounted for the overwhelming part of the damage, together burning more than 37,000 acres, destroying over 16,000 structures, and directly taking at least 31 lives. These fires, along with several others that occurred across the county at the same time, required over 180,000 people to evacuate, with evacuation warnings affecting an additional 200,000.

The monumental scale of the fires and the complexity of the region's transportation governance complicate the task of restoring transportation services and preparing for future emergencies. Each fire stretched across local government boundaries, bringing in numerous city, county, and state agencies responsible for road repairs, transit routes, mobility support, and longer-term transportation planning. The Eaton fire's destructive impacts were concentrated in the unincorporated community of Altadena, with additional damage experienced in unincorporated Kinneloa Mesa and the cities of Pasadena and Sierra Madre. The local government for most of the Eaton burn area is Los Angeles County, but Pasadena's road and bus networks are important contributors to the area's transportation services. Devastation from the Palisades fire was borne most heavily in the Pacific Palisades, a neighborhood of the City of Los Angeles, but also reached into the City of Malibu and unincorporated parts of Los Angeles County, especially the community of Sunset Mesa. The City of Santa Monica, adjacent to the Palisades, escaped direct impact from the fire but is part of the transportation network serving the burn area, both through its street connections to the Palisades' steep canyon roads and through its Big Blue Bus transit service. The countywide transit operator, LA Metro, offers additional bus service in both burn areas and connects residents and businesses with communities throughout the region through a vast bus and rail network.

In addition to the local and regional agencies involved in transportation response and rebuilding is the state agency Caltrans. Caltrans provides funding and oversight for local transportation planning, but also directly operates roads, including State Route 1—the Pacific Coast Highway—the main artery for many of the communities affected by the Palisades fire. The fire caused extensive damage in and around Route 1, forcing a monthslong closure that created burdensome detours and access constraints for residents and caused economic strain for businesses.

Even compared to the heavily car-dependent Los Angeles region as a whole, residents of both fire-affected areas rely overwhelmingly on private vehicles for transportation, especially in the Palisades burn area. The fires struck communities that are largely residential, dominated by single-family homes, and more prosperous than the broader region, with relatively few residents facing barriers to car ownership. Much of the housing in the Palisades was built on narrow, steep canyon roads not easily served by transit—and not easily evacuated under emergency conditions. More of Altadena was laid out on gridded streets, and the community has more economic diversity than in the Palisades, with one in six Altadenans earning incomes

that made them eligible for public safety-net programs (Mullin et al., 2025). Among the areas impacted by the fires, transit ridership was most prevalent in the flatter, more densely populated neighborhoods of Altadena, matching regionwide rates of transit use (Lopez, 2019).

While overall rates of transit use among burn area residents are generally low, transit provides essential mobility for those who are transit-reliant, including workers who commute into the burn areas. Roughly 10,000 workers were employed within the perimeters of the two fires, and as many as 68,000 more worked within the evacuation zones (UCLA Labor Center, 2025). The largest shares of these workers were employed in health care and social assistance, accommodation and food service, and retail trade, and thousands lost their jobs when homes, restaurants, and facilities were destroyed in the fires (Reyes-Velarde and Kuang, 2025). The majority of those employed in the burn areas were women, and many were low-income or immigrant workers who lost not only their workplaces but their entire sources of income (Mejia and Vives, 2025). Restoring reliable transportation access, including transit services, is necessary for displaced workers to return to their jobs and rebuild stable livelihoods.

The recovery and rebuilding of transportation services and infrastructure after the January fires have been incremental processes. In the days immediately following the fire, transit routes were suspended or detoured not only in the burn areas but also in surrounding neighborhoods while roads were cleared of debris and transit agencies ensured safe operating conditions. Road conditions were not the only disruption for transit; the small agency Pasadena Transit halted all service for a short time because of an operator shortage stemming from the personal losses many workers had experienced, as well as the health risks of exposure to poor air quality. Most transit service disruptions were lifted after the first few days or weeks, but others have taken longer. The long closure of State Route 1 required the halting of bus service that connects coastal communities. LA Metro resumed service between Malibu and Santa Monica by March, but only with a 10-mile no-stopping zone that still persists over nine months post-fire. Big Blue Bus reintroduced service to the Palisades in stages, with full local service on the main bus line restored as of August 2025. The LA Metro bus lines serving Altadena continue to operate under modified routes.

Full reconstruction of the physical infrastructure in the burn areas will take years. The official reopening of State Route 1 in late May marked a major milestone in reestablishing regional transportation connectivity, though repair and restoration work continues. Local roads in fire-impacted areas were made passable much more quickly, which allowed an unusually rapid government-led debris removal from private properties (Briscoe et al., 2025). Rapid debris removal, in turn, helps keep roads clear to support the next stages in rebuilding. But rebuilding contributes to further deterioration of roads, as heavy vehicles put extra wear on already-weakened pavement, and the restoration of sewer, stormwater, drinking water, gas, and electric services entails trenching and construction that may tear up roads multiple times over. Utilities' plans to bury hundreds of miles of electric wires could elongate this cycle of construction-related impacts. More than 10,000 infrastructure projects are currently slated for the burn areas, nearly all of which involve roads—some projects contributing to road wear, others to road restoration (LA County, 2025). Coordinating the sequence and timing of these projects

is critical for avoiding logjams in the multiyear rebuilding process. Many of these activities are being coordinated across agencies and jurisdictions through a transportation work group of the county's Rebuild and Long-Term Recovery Task Force.

Disaster makes more visible and salient the importance of evacuation planning. In the Palisades, the rush to flee canyon neighborhoods produced congestion and bottlenecks that led residents to abandon their cars along critical corridors, creating barriers to the ingress of emergency vehicles. Planning, coordination, and resource placement could improve evacuation performance, but there may be limits on evacuation capacity without physical changes to the road network or integration of multimodal evacuation alternatives. The gridded streets of Altadena did not produce the same kind of gridlock, but the evacuation needs of seniors and other vulnerable populations were shown in sharp relief when Pasadena Transit bus drivers raced into the fire to help evacuate senior living facilities whose own required evacuation procedures proved inadequate (Viel, 2025). LA Metro and Big Blue Bus also helped support the evacuation of schools and at least one hospital until bus service was deemed too dangerous. These experiences illustrate the important role that public transit providers could play, with adequate training and preparation, in a coordinated multimodal evacuation effort. Yet there are limits to the safety risks that can be taken by transit operators.

3. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

3.1. Engagement Practices in Transportation and Evacuation Planning

State-centric approaches to transportation planning have dominated in common planning practice (Karner et al., 2020). Agencies often employ a “decide, announce, defend” model (Linovski and Marshall Baker, 2023), in which policy decisions are made with little or no public input. Research on the practice of public engagement indicates that legally required engagement processes can strengthen the connection between transportation agencies and the communities they serve, but that agencies often rely on routinized, constrained forms of participation—such as public hearings, comment periods, and reviews—to fulfill engagement requirements (Innes and Booher, 2007). These limited efforts often lack genuine intention, impact, and success in improving transportation outcomes for communities (Karner and Marcantonio, 2018; Linovski and Marshall Baker, 2023).

Both transportation planners and the public agree that a large gap exists between the quality of public involvement in transportation decision-making they desire and the quality of involvement that is achieved in practice (Bailey et al., 2019). Enabling more substantive and impactful public engagement in decision-making requires engagement processes that are active, inclusive, structured, and continuous (Grossardt et al., 2003). Guidance for best practices in community participation focuses on creating robust and engaging interactions; prioritizing unmet needs and underserved populations; and translating the lessons and outcomes from engagement activities into meaningful planning and policy decisions (Karner and Marcantonio, 2018; Wagner, 2013). All of these are best achieved through processes that are longer-term and more deeply rooted than the typical, routinized participation practices.

Evacuation planning also benefits from sustained processes for incorporating community perspectives. Community engagement facilitates social interaction and learning that can help build risk awareness and resilience capacity (Johnston et al., 2024). Practices that reach beyond information provision to fully incorporate community members in planning and decision-making can help unlock local knowledge about vulnerabilities and resources for hazard response. Creating a consistent and inclusive space for community members to engage with emergency management officials and transportation planners helps ensure that evacuation plans accommodate diverse transportation needs, especially for those who are most vulnerable during a disaster (Wambura and Wong, 2024). Regular and open dialogue also helps foster trust between officials and the community, an especially critical factor when evacuation orders are issued (Eisenman et al., 2011).

3.2. Transportation Engagement after the January 2025 Fires

Publicly available information from transportation agencies and interviews with agency personnel indicate that the first six months of agency effort after the January 2025 Los Angeles fires have focused on meeting immediate recovery needs and ensuring mobility in fire-affected communities. Public works departments have marshaled efforts to clear roads and ensure safety and access to neighborhoods. Transit agencies have worked to connect fire-affected residents and workers to transit services. One mechanism for doing so has been through fare assistance programs, like the expansion of LA Metro LIFE to provide free and reduced-fare rides to residents and workers affected by the fires. The other mechanism has been through restoring routes or providing alternative services. In Altadena, LA Metro adjusted its bus routes to reach additional neighborhoods and community facilities while it remained unable to serve parts of its normal routes, and it continues to operate Micro Metro on-demand ride service throughout the fire-affected area. Pasadena Transit, Big Blue Bus, and LA Metro all have taken measures to meet the needs of students who experienced displacement from their homes or schools by coordinating route adjustments, transit pass distribution, and deployment of additional transit ambassadors and security measures.

Efforts to meet the immediate needs of residents and recovery have allowed little, if any, attention to engaging fire-affected communities in visioning their long-term transportation priorities. The transportation agency personnel we interviewed were sensitive to the trauma that communities had experienced and did not want to add to the community burden; we heard repeatedly that there may be little interest and capacity among survivors to participate in a transportation visioning process. Following a disaster, many survivors focus on processing the trauma and its impacts, expressing their emotional responses, and meeting basic needs while managing the financial and logistical details of their losses (Peek et al. 2011). Introducing ideas of new forms of mobility or patterns in the built environment may be met with resistance or silence if communities are not ready for future-oriented discussions. Yet individuals vary widely in their timelines for restoring normalcy and their willingness to engage in public dialogues, and many are eager to enter conversations about long-term recovery and planning (Bonanno et al. 2010). Because of racial and economic disparities in vulnerability to disaster, those most ready to engage in recovery planning in the months after a disaster may not be representative of the full community and its transportation needs (Hamideh 2020; Lambrou et al. 2023).

As the recovery process shifts from immediate response to longer-term rebuilding, our interviews reveal that transportation agencies are waiting to return to pre-fire planning processes and integrate those processes with updated or new community needs informed by the fires. Transit development and implementation at Pasadena Transit and Big Blue Bus, climate resiliency planning for State Route 1, and an emergency management outreach strategy at Metro were just some of the planning processes underway in January 2025 that touched on areas affected by the fires. Failing to revisit these processes and bring in fresh perspectives from the community will likely produce strategies that emphasize a “return to normal” rather than an imagining of some alternative (Rosenberg et al., 2022). The fires open up a broad set of questions about density, urban form, and the ways these intersect with the risk profiles of the burned areas. Many voices,

from within the burn areas and far beyond, have been eager to engage these questions in the fires' aftermath. Reports in the *The Guardian*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other national and international outlets highlight how the rush to rebuild may be overlooking opportunities to redesign systems that better support the population during future disasters. For example, observing how the sprawling layout of the Palisades contributed to the difficult evacuation, some planners offer the idea of moving residential density “up” and not “out” into fire-prone areas as a strategy for future risk management (Wainwright, 2025), arguing that density would help support the recovery of local businesses and the return of residents (Wharton and Iniguez Elebee, 2025; Smith, 2025). Different models for rebuilding in the burn areas inextricably involve different models for transportation services.

Interviews and meetings with dozens of fire survivors conducted by UCLA in spring 2025 indicate that many do not want to rebuild conditions that contributed to the fires' destructiveness (Mullin et al., 2025).¹ While these conversations did not focus on transportation issues, participants often expressed preferences and priorities about mobility as well as about issues including evacuation routes, land use, and housing density that all have transportation planning implications. Some fire survivors expressed opposition to adding housing density that could make roads more congested, especially during evacuation. Others voiced support for more housing and local businesses along main corridors, coupled with transportation infrastructure that facilitates walking and biking. Even in the first few months following the fires, some residents were ready to engage in future-focused conversations. By the end of summer 2025, more of these conversations were underway, including in visioning charrettes organized by the Palisades Recovery Coalition and Resilient Palisades with assistance from RAND.

In summary, an approach to transportation rebuilding that focuses on direct replacement of infrastructure and services without broader community conversation risks repeating the dangerous scenarios from the January 2025 fires and forgoing opportunities to produce new community benefits from an updated transportation network. The challenge then becomes designing an engagement process that is appropriate to the distinct planning processes of disaster recovery—that acknowledges survivors' trauma but also supports and values community experience and priorities.

1 Interviews with fire survivors and community leaders were conducted as part of UCLA's partnership with the Blue Ribbon Commission on Climate Action and Fire-Safe Recovery (Mullin et al., 2025).

4. ELEMENTS OF THE TRANSFORMATIVE CLIMATE COMMUNITIES PROGRAM WITH RELEVANCE TO TRANSPORTATION REBUILDING AND PLANNING

To consider what a sustained, community-engaged transportation planning process might look like after the Los Angeles fires, we turn to the Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) program. TCC is a place-based program that funds community-prioritized infrastructure in the state's most disadvantaged neighborhoods. Launched by the California State Legislature in 2017, TCC provides large, multiyear competitive grants to communities impacted by pollution and poverty for portfolios of projects aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions while also producing neighborhood-scale transformative change. The program has been funded by cap-and-invest dollars as part of California Climate Investments, the state general fund, and spending from a voter-approved climate bond.

Critical for the current purpose, each TCC plan is designed and implemented at the neighborhood scale by a collaborative group of partners who commit to sustained engagement throughout the five-year life of the grant. Each TCC site designs and designates a governance structure, called the collaborative stakeholder structure (CSS), that brings together public agencies, community-based organizations (CBOs), and residents in a formalized partnership agreement. Many of these governance structures include local transportation agency representation, often with multiple transportation agencies sitting on the same CSS. This model of sustained, place-based interaction among government agencies and community representatives is similar to coordination recommendations in the literature for post-disaster transportation planning.

Since TCC's launch, the program has awarded 15 implementation grants to neighborhoods throughout the state, with grant sizes ranging from \$9 million to \$67 million. Transportation projects that TCC has catalyzed include electric vehicle (EV) and bicycle sharing programs, bicycle and pedestrian improvements, EV charging station installations, and bus service expansion and electrification. TCC has also funded non-transportation projects like urban greening, rooftop solar installations, and other priorities advanced by local organizations and agencies. In addition to designing portfolios of projects, TCC grant recipients create plans for community engagement, displacement avoidance, and workforce development that articulate a vision for how the projects will catalyze broader community transformation.

Below, we marshal evidence from experiences of TCC implementation to identify lessons, opportunities, and challenges in applying the model to post-disaster transportation planning. For six years, the UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation has partnered with communities receiving TCC implementation grants to research and evaluate activities carried out under these grants. In annual progress reports, UCLA researchers document milestones and personal stories from grant implementation in seven TCC communities.²

2 An archive of Luskin Center for Innovation evaluation materials for seven TCC sites is available at <https://innovation.luskin.ucla.edu/tcc/>

Through a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews with project partners and community members, our researchers have learned about awardees' experiences with grant implementation and about the impacts of TCC projects and plans in the broader community.

Hallmarks of the TCC program are interagency collaboration and robust, sustained community engagement—two principles that are strongly advised in the literature on transportation planning and disaster preparation and response. Transportation planning agencies might, therefore, use the TCC program model as a learning tool for pre- and post-disaster planning. Below, we identify four key lessons from the TCC program that point to potential benefits and challenges of implementing the TCC model for post-disaster transportation rebuilding. The first point relates to TCC's approach to collaborative visioning and planning. The second focuses on structures for ongoing interagency and cross-organizational coordination and collaboration. Third, we highlight the critical role that CBOs play as community engagement leaders and trusted messengers for community priorities. Finally, we highlight how the TCC grant program allows for adaptation over time, with program leaders and grantees making adjustments in response to new information and opportunities. The purpose of using a program model such as TCC is to move toward equitable solutions to improving transportation planning post-disaster.

4.1. Collaborative Visioning and Planning

Core to the TCC program model is a commitment to collaborative visioning and planning. Partnership-building at a TCC site coincides with initial project brainstorming and ideation. As organizations—typically CBOs—begin to consider applying for a TCC grant, they build relationships with potential partner organizations, who might be other neighborhood CBOs, local government agencies, workforce development boards, faith-based or philanthropic organizations, community development corporations, or nonprofits specializing in a project activity such as car sharing, solar installations, or tree planting. The growing collaborative consults with residents and businesses within its project area to set goals and priorities. This work can be supported by a competitive TCC Planning Grant, which provides funds for activities such as:

- Capacity building both within and across lead organizations;
- Community engagement to reach potential partners as well as individual residents and businesses, including those who may be overburdened; and
- Structured activities, including partnership development, stakeholder mapping, community needs assessments, and the creation of a shared governance structure.

The visioning and planning that go into a TCC Implementation Grant proposal are iterative. First is the development of partnerships and a leadership structure among organizations that will be responsible for project delivery. Through cycles of consultation, these partners host multiple

convenings and comment periods to assess community needs and design and revise projects. In some TCC sites, residents and community stakeholders vote on plans for funding allocation in the Implementation Grant proposal.

The sustained, inclusive engagement evident in the TCC project design aligns with the practices advised in the transportation literature. Both for general transportation planning and for planning specific to evacuation, the literature points to the importance of incorporating the local knowledge of community residents from the earliest stages of design, and building opportunities for structured and repeated interactions between planners and community members. TCC, thus, offers a model that could help guide transportation agencies seeking to employ more community-centered engagement practices, especially with respect to long-term planning and evacuation preparation.

However, the sustained and inclusive practice that is TCC's asset may not be well-suited to transportation planning after a disaster. First is the challenge of the timeline. The very nature of sustained engagement suggests a long process. Although post-disaster rebuilding can take years, the reintroduction of transportation facilities and services starts immediately. Transportation is at the core of other rebuilding activities. Making roads passable is among the highest post-event priorities to allow cleanup to begin, and roads are the network that enables other repair and reconstruction activity. Restoring transit provides essential mobility into and out of disaster-affected areas, especially for more vulnerable residents and workers. In short, the pressure for rapid project delivery is far more acute in the post-disaster setting than it is for TCC communities, where the need for investment stems from slow-moving, rather than fast-moving, harms. Demands for rapid delivery may be further reinforced by deadlines and conditions of post-disaster funding streams.

The second challenge is community capacity for engagement on transportation at a time when people have experienced trauma and are facing the demands of personal recovery. In the months and years after a disaster, some survivors will be available and interested in engaging with visioning and planning for the community's future, while others will need to focus on mental and physical health effects of the event and on addressing housing and financial needs (Hamideh and Rongerude, 2018). Participation in a time-demanding engagement process may, therefore, be limited and not representative of all perspectives—including the perspectives of the future residents and businesses that will move in during the turnover that occurs in communities post-disaster (Lee, 2017; Paul et al., 2024). Community capacity exists in post-disaster settings for survivors to help each other recover and rebuild, individually and collectively. The design challenge is to engage survivors with a trauma-informed approach (Rosenberg et al., 2022) and through processes that leverage the knowledge and connectedness held by CBOs. As will be explored in Lesson 3 below, TCC reveals that community groups can be an effective way to bring community stakeholders into visioning, planning, and decision-making processes.

4.2. Structure for Cross-Agency Coordination

Another principal theme in guidance for transportation planning, as well as for post-disaster recovery, is the importance of cross-agency coordination. Here, TCC offers a model as well.

The formalized structure of a CSS, the partnership and governance entity that develops and guides a TCC plan, provides an opportunity for sustained cross-agency collaboration focusing on a defined neighborhood. Partnership agreements designate CSS membership and operating rules for grant governance. A CSS is composed of a defined number of representatives from each partner organization and often community member representatives as well. Project partners commit to having representatives attend meetings throughout the multiyear life of a TCC grant. All CSSes include representation from local government agencies responsible for services related to the TCC project list. Because TCC portfolios nearly always incorporate transportation projects, transportation agency personnel regularly serve on CSSes, often alongside personnel from other transportation agencies at other levels of government (e.g., city and county/regional).

A CSS typically meets on a bimonthly or quarterly basis to provide updates and exchange information on implementation status, roadblocks, successes, and strategies. Every project partner has an expectation to join these meetings throughout the entire implementation period. Residents and community members participate directly through CSS membership or indirectly through a community engagement working group that reports back to the larger CSS, offering suggestions and best practices to the project partners through a community lens. The lead TCC grantee typically sets the meeting agendas and facilitates the CSS meetings.

The CSSes that guide TCC grant implementation in communities throughout the state have a record of success in spanning agency silos. This model of sustained and structured engagement with a place-based focus helps to build trust across agency barriers and shift agencies out of their routine practice. The result is a process that has public agencies collaborating with one another and with community partners to deliver projects in a way that is responsive to evolving conditions and needs in the community.

The CSS model also promotes accountability by formalizing each partner's goals, budgets, and implementation plans in a partnership agreement. Each partner organization commits publicly to its work plan, making visible the allocation of responsibility for project delivery.

The sustained, place-based attention that a CSS enables comes at a cost. Participation in a CSS is time-intensive, and coordinating across the busy schedules of many partners can be onerous. The time and schedule demands would become all the more difficult in a post-disaster setting where government agency personnel are stretched thin with the responsibilities of recovery. Yet a consistent lesson across recovery processes is the critical value of communication and coordination (Johnson and Olshanky, 2017). This is why state and national disaster recovery frameworks organize short-term recovery efforts through coordinating entities that link agencies across jurisdictions and with private and community organizations within identified

recovery support function areas, including infrastructure systems. Within Los Angeles County, a Rebuild and Long-Term Recovery Task Force is coordinating across agencies on post-fire recovery, including through a transportation work group. These activities are focused on the critical tasks of reconstructing physical infrastructure and making resilience improvements, but are not instruments for broader planning around transportation systems in the burn areas. As transportation agencies restart their own long-term planning processes for State Route 1 and other areas affected by fires, TCC provides a model—even if in pared-down form—for how these planning processes could reach across agency boundaries and help structure and facilitate coordination in post-disaster recovery and planning.

4.3. Community-Based Organizations as Convenors and Representatives of the Broader Community

Part of the strength of the TCC model can be attributed to participating Community-Based Organizations' deep history in serving the interests of their communities and thus having engendered trust with local residents and businesses prior to TCC implementation. Community members' trust in a CBO can translate to trust in the broader TCC endeavor that includes other nonprofit organizations and local government agencies. Through partnership with a CBO that has trust and deep roots in the community, other entities are able to borrow that trust (Ranieri, 2025).

The trust engendered by CBOs performs two functions that are relevant to post-disaster transportation planning. Trust can help catalyze participation in planning processes at a time when survivors face participation barriers, including physical dislocation and the time burdens of personal recovery. In TCC communities, residents often become engaged because of existing relationships with participating CBOs, and CBO leadership helps to attract and retain participation from community members who distrust government agencies. For transportation agencies seeking to meaningfully include community members in post-fire planning efforts, partnering with CBOs would help recognize existing community leadership and provide some accountability for delivering on the outcomes of an engagement process. Reaching beyond place-based CBOs to other nonprofit organizations might help reach seniors, day laborers, and other populations with distinct transportation needs but who often are underrepresented in community engagement processes. Another alternative is to work through newly formed groups that do not have the deep legacy of community trust, but may help agencies connect with displaced community members. For example, many survivors of the Los Angeles fires have organized themselves into online groups, using technology to efficiently connect and share information with each other.

Experience in some TCC communities suggests that community members' trust in CBOs also can have the opposite effect—instead of catalyzing broader participation, it lifts the participation burden from community members through their confidence that the CBO will act in the community's best interest. This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in which CBOs often serve as nonelected neighborhood representatives, especially in the context of community development

projects for underserved areas (Levine, 2016). Residents who feel that the government has not served them in the past may not want to directly engage in government-led planning processes but instead have CBO representatives help craft a vision for future transportation services in the area. However, providing this support to transportation agencies would add an additional responsibility at a time when CBOs—often already underresourced—are stretching to meet new demands (Miller and Mach, 2021). Whether to help attract resident participation or for CBOs to work on residents' behalf, there may be opportunities for regional organizations that work on transportation issues to contribute to convening and organizing support to neighborhood-level CBOs as they undertake transportation planning work.

The TCC model offers lessons for how government–CBO partnerships can be successful even in the challenging post-disaster context. First is the importance of recognizing power dynamics and honestly acknowledging trust deficits. TCC seeks to bring local government and CBOs together in power-sharing relationships that may disrupt traditional political hierarchies concentrated in City Hall. Meaningful partnership requires all participants to be willing to have uncomfortable conversations and acknowledge where trust deficits exist. These conversations can be particularly difficult for agency staff who may not feel they have the authority to speak on behalf of their organizations. Yet frank conversations about trust are especially important in the post-disaster context. In the months following the Los Angeles fires, loss of trust in government was a topline concern expressed by fire survivors (Mullin et al., 2025) and influenced community response to government proposals for rebuilding strategy (Dillon, 2025).

4.4. Adaptive Flexibility to Meet Changing Needs

An asset of the TCC model is the accountability built from partners' commitments to a governing structure and specified workplans and deliverables. However, systems that promote accountability can be resistant to learning and unable to adapt to changing conditions (Janssen and van der Voort, 2016). TCC maintains some degree of adaptive flexibility in recognition that conditions change on the ground. This flexibility is evident at the grant application stage, where program guidelines allow applying communities to set their own visions and priorities, and during grant implementation, where TCC grantees have been empowered to change their scopes of work. For example, in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some grantees not only delayed their plans but also responded to evolving community needs by significantly altering their priorities, such as shifting funds from a project for safe routes to school to one focused on food delivery. Even at the administrative level, the state agency that leads TCC uses program evaluation to learn from grant recipients' experiences and make adjustments, such as changing invoice reimbursement processes to better accommodate grantees with budget constraints.

The adaptive nature of TCC has relevance to post-fire transportation planning. It demonstrates that maintaining some flexibility in an investment program doesn't need to undermine accountability. Projects and plans that might have been underway at the time of the fires can and should be revisited to consider how they fit with changed physical conditions in the burn areas, updated understandings about risk, and new visions and priorities of community

members. Planning processes that govern regional transportation spending can be slow to take up new challenges and conditions (Mullin et al., 2024). Yet failure to adapt plans in response to the fires, and to engage communities about how they might have learned and changed, risks rebuilding in ways that replicate and amplify prior risks. Transportation planners can also consider how adaptive flexibility can be built into recovery projects themselves through flexible designs that can be moved or augmented as land use and mobility patterns evolve through community rebuilding and resettlement.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our experience with TCC and our research on post-disaster transportation planning needs, we offer the following recommendations for advancing meaningful community engagement and cross-agency coordination.

5.1. Recommendation 1: Government agencies should integrate evacuation into transportation planning conversations, and vice versa.

Evacuation planning is transportation planning: the consideration of road network design and volume capacity; the use of models and simulations to design routes and procedures for evacuation flow; the deployment of communication tools that reach evacuees en route; and the coordination of mass transit services to reduce the volume of vehicles on the road and meet the needs of the transit-dependent. Evacuation challenges during the Eaton, Palisades, and other surrounding fires in January 2025 revealed that the region's preparation does not match the scale of the region's exposure to hazard. The high salience of evacuation challenges in fire-affected communities could be an entry point for broader community discussions about transportation priorities. Securing safe and efficient evacuation is a widely shared priority, providing an opportunity to build consensus and trust in engagement processes before turning to transportation topics that may elicit more disagreement.

5.2. Recommendation 2: Transportation agencies should join in community-organized recovery and rebuilding conversations already underway.

We found that agencies are well represented in town halls and information sessions convened by city and county governments. The format for these events favors information delivery, positioning the government as the keeper of knowledge that it imparts to the recipient community. Transportation agencies seeking to expand the scope of possibilities for rebuilding need to enter spaces that center community voices to begin learning about fire survivors' interest in the transportation and mobility future of their communities, how survivors see these issues intersecting with other priorities, and their capacity for engaging in deeper discussion about transportation.

5.3. Recommendation 3: Transportation agencies should consult with local community-based organizations (CBOs) in the burn areas and compensate them for their time.

Building meaningful engagement processes focused on transportation rebuilding in areas devastated by fire requires sensitivity to the diversity of experiences and perspectives in a community. Those who might be most ready and willing to participate in a transportation-focused engagement process might not be representative of the full community in their mobility patterns and needs, their preferences about land use and the built environment, and their vulnerability to future disaster events. CBOs can be knowledgeable conveners, intermediaries,

and/or representatives that bring a fuller perspective to transportation rebuilding conversations. If CBOs are able to participate, they should be compensated in a timely and fair manner for their unique ability to represent residents and other community stakeholders.

5.4. Recommendation 4: Funders and regional transportation nonprofit organizations should support capacity for place-based CBOs.

CBOs can be uniquely positioned to connect residents, businesses, and other stakeholders with government agencies and to represent voices that may be absent from a community conversation. These activities take time and resources that should be supported by agencies seeking community participation and by external funders supporting recovery and rebuilding processes, such as state and federal agencies, philanthropic organizations, and others. Regional transportation education and advocacy organizations also can play a role by providing technical expertise and organizing resources that support place-based CBOs as they enter into transportation work.

5.5. Recommendation 5: Transportation agencies should consider how to restructure engagement processes for long-term transportation planning to incorporate elements of the Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) model.

A dedicated effort to elicit community priorities post-fire and meaningfully translate them into planning actions and policies may not be feasible, given the constraints of both transportation funding instruments and post-disaster recovery efforts. Transportation agencies could still draw lessons from TCC to inform longer-term planning processes. The model of sustained engagement among a defined set of participants with well-defined roles, including CBOs playing a central role, has proven successful for generating community-centered plans and promoting cross-agency collaboration in support of community goals. The trust built among collaborative partners in the TCC model then allows and supports learning and adaptation when a crisis like fire arrives.

6. CONCLUSION

The transformed built and natural landscape that emerges after a fire or other disaster, and the changed perspectives and priorities that fire may bring, create a window for transportation agencies to engage communities in robust conversations about their mobility and transportation futures and to have those conversations inform pathways for rebuilding. The Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) model offers lessons for how engagement processes can be structured to meaningfully incorporate community participation and improve coordination among agencies responsible for project delivery, ultimately building trust that helps advance a community-centered transportation system. Yet our research on post-disaster rebuilding and the particular conditions surrounding rebuilding after the Los Angeles fires highlights challenges in implementing a TCC-like model: the need for rapid restoration of transportation facilities to support other aspects of recovery, the challenge of attracting broad community engagement in the midst of dislocation and post-disaster personal demands, and the strain on community-based organizations (CBOs) that play a critical role in TCC engagement processes.

Another critical distinction between the TCC program and post-fire conditions in Los Angeles relates to funding. TCC is, at its core, a funding program. Communities can access planning grants to support their work in building CSS partnership structures and developing their project portfolios, which makes them competitive for implementation grants that offer tens of millions of dollars to fund project delivery as well as the ongoing costs of sustaining partner engagement. The funding environment for rebuilding after the 2025 Los Angeles fires is much more uncertain. State and federal governments have released millions of dollars through programs to support individual relief and recovery, but thus far the federal government has not allocated funds through the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery program, which is typically the major source that backs the rebuilding of public infrastructure after a disaster. Meanwhile, transportation agencies are experiencing uncertainty about other funding streams amid widespread federal grant cancellations.

A direct, full-scale replication of the TCC model for rebuilding transportation infrastructure and services after the Los Angeles fires is, therefore, neither feasible nor well-suited to the context. However, transportation agencies can learn from the model as a way to guide engagement with communities both in the short and long terms in order to build transportation systems that are responsive to community needs as those needs evolve in a changing risk environment.

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