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Relationships, Capacity, and Trust: Youth Engagement Lessons Learned and Tools for OakDOT

Author Erin Slichter, University of California, Berkeley

Advisor Karen Trapenberg Frick, University of California, Berkeley

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16. Abstract This report presents lessons learned and tools for engaging youth in transportation planning in Oakland, California. Youth are disenfranchised from the transportation planning process, although their mobility is more affected than adults' mobility by the quality of transportation networks, and, as a result, they have unique expertise that is valuable to transportation planning. In addition to giving planners access to youth expertise, engaging with youth presents an opportunity for the Oakland Department of Transportation (OakDOT) to build mutually beneficial relationships, civic capacity, and trust between city government and the next generation. The report is in three parts. First, I analyze observations of an in-person community design workshop and several online engagement methods for a transportation planning project in a disinvested neighborhood. I find that the methods observed, when employed on their own, are incongruous with OakDOT's goals to build trust and a shared mobility agenda among Oakland's communities because they don't foster an impactful dialogue about transportation and related neighborhood concerns. Second, I distill key findings from seven semi-structured interviews with practitioners of youth civic engagement and two focus groups with a youth transportation advisory board and a civic youth commission. I summarize 12 key findings in four categories: universally applicable learnings, engaging youth in school curriculum, working with community partners, and youth advisory boards and commissions. Third, I develop two youth engagement tools to be incorporated into OakDOT's standard operating procedure for community outreach: a matrix of 12 youth engagement strategies, and a template for planning youth engagement strategies.			
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Relationships, Capacity, and Trust:

Youth Engagement Lessons Learned and Tools for OakDOT

Erin Slichter

PROFESSIONAL REPORT

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of

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Karen Trapenberg Frick
Deborah McKoy

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Introduction.....	3
PROBLEM AND RESEARCH FOCUS.....	3
BACKGROUND.....	4
YOUTH VOICE: “WE DON’T HAVE A PLATFORM”.....	5
POSITIONALITY STATEMENT.....	6
METHODOLOGY.....	7
Observation of Calm East Oakland Streets Outreach.....	7
Interviews with Youth Civic Engagement Practitioners.....	8
Focus Groups with Youth Advisory Boards and Commissions.....	8
Participatory Research Considerations and Limitations.....	9
Literature Review.....	10
SUMMARY.....	10
DETAILED LITERATURE REVIEW.....	10
Why is community engagement important for active transportation planning in disinvested, low-income communities of color?.....	10
What are the challenges with current approaches to engagement in this context?.....	11
Can youth engagement effectively respond to these challenges, and if so, how?.....	13
Chapter 1: Case Study of Community Engagement for Calm East Oakland Streets.....	15
SUMMARY.....	15
DETAILED CASE STUDY.....	15
Chapter 2: Lessons Learned From Practitioners of Youth Civic Engagement.....	22
SUMMARY: LESSONS LEARNED FROM PRACTITIONERS OF YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT..	22
UNIVERSALLY APPLICABLE LEARNINGS.....	24
ENGAGING YOUTH IN SCHOOL CURRICULUM.....	31
WORKING WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS.....	35
YOUTH ADVISORY BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS.....	41
Chapter 3: Youth Engagement Tools.....	45
YOUTH ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY MATRIX.....	45
Matching Engagement to Impact: The Double Diamond Model for Planning.....	46
YOUTH ENGAGEMENT PLAN TEMPLATE.....	47
Conclusion.....	51

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Introduction

PROBLEM AND RESEARCH FOCUS

In recent years, transportation departments (DOTs) have increasingly shifted their main focus to safety improvements for people walking and bicycling in an effort to reduce traffic injuries and deaths, slow vehicle traffic, create liveable streets, increase neighborhood connections to active transportation networks, and reduce carbon emissions. Typical measures include speed humps, bulb-outs, and dedicated space for walking and bicycling. Planners often prioritize safety improvements on High Injury Networks, which disproportionately run through low-income communities of color. Thus, many safety-oriented projects take place in these neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, low-income and racialized neighborhoods also tend to have suffered decades of neglect on the part of DOTs, or on the flip side, to have been over-planned and problematized without realizing positive changes. Added to this dynamic is a history of DOTs exercising eminent domain to destroy people's homes and cultural spaces in the name of the greater good, and a current concern that new bike lanes are a harbinger of gentrification. Without careful thought, community engagement for traffic calming and active transportation projects runs the risk of re-traumatizing low-income communities by perpetuating disempowerment and neglecting residents' needs.

Cognizant of these needs for both life-saving infrastructure improvements and life-affirming planning practices, DOTs are also increasing their focus on capacity-building community engagement. While the standard approach for decades has been to solicit residents for feedback on a discreet issue, area, and time horizon, DOTs today are experimenting with building partnerships with communities to engage on a range of issues over time, through strategies like resident advisory committees, partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs), and youth commissions. This approach centers equity and seeks to involve populations that are often excluded from planning processes, including low-income people of color and youth. There are challenges to this approach, such as limited capacity among residents and CBOs, differing knowledge systems and priorities between the public and planners, and poor cultural competency from DOTs.

In this capstone, I analyze the community engagement process for a safety-oriented project in a disinvested neighborhood in Oakland, focusing on the ability of the engagement methods used to meet OakDOT's goals to build trust and a shared mobility agenda among Oakland's communities. Then, I analyze interviews and focus groups with practitioners of youth civic engagement to glean lessons learned, centering the potential for youth engagement in transportation planning to build civic capacity. Finally, I develop two youth engagement tools to be incorporated into OakDOT's standard operating procedure for community outreach: a matrix of youth engagement strategies and a template for planning youth engagement strategies.

BACKGROUND

In disinvested neighborhoods where planning has caused place-based trauma for residents and communities, engaging with those communities about transportation is anything but a benign exercise in planners' due diligence. Transportation planners can either redress communal trauma by vesting communities with the power and capacity to have agency over the future of their mobility and spaces, or perpetuate trauma by reinforcing residents' lived and inherited experience that their voices do not matter. Planners often conflate participation, which seeks to receive input from as many people as possible on a specific issue or project, with inclusion, which iteratively creates a community of practice with the capacity to address both the issue at hand and other related issues.¹ Without carefully considering whether participation or inclusion, or both, are needed in an engagement process, planners may feel that they have adequately 'included' the community in the decision-making process, while community members may feel disempowered because their opinions were reduced to dot stickers on a poster board.

Relationship-based engagement is essential for building communities' capacity to be empowered about transportation issues, and thus also for redressing trauma caused by planning. OakDOT employed relationship-based engagement during the development of the 2019 Bike Plan, partnering with six CBOs in pursuit of the department's goals to build trust and a shared mobility agenda across Oakland's communities. However, OakDOT's commitment to relationship-based work has been inconsistent across projects and over time, compromising the department's accountability to Oakland residents and setting back attempts at building trust, capacity, and empowerment (see Chapter 2, *Working With Community Partners* for detailed analysis).

Youth* in particular are disenfranchised from the transportation planning process, though they are more affected by transportation decisions than the population as a whole. Youth generally make a greater proportion of their trips by walking, bicycling, and transit than adults.² This means that young people have uniquely valuable expertise about these modes of transportation, while a greater reliance on walking and bicycling puts young people at greater risk for traffic violence. Typical community engagement processes for transportation planning exclude youth, losing out on the expertise they offer and sending the message that they are not welcome at the table.

**For the purposes of this capstone, the terms 'youth' and 'young people' are used interchangeably, and refer to people between the ages of 5 and 24.*

¹ Kathryn S. Quick and Martha S. Feldman, "Distinguishing Participation and Inclusion," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 31, no. 3 (September 1, 2011): 272–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X11410979>.

² John Pucher and Ralph Buehler, *City Cycling* (The MIT Press, 2012), <https://direct.mit.edu/books/book/2974/City-Cycling>.

YOUTH VOICE: “WE DON’T HAVE A PLATFORM”

“There’s many different things that youth go through [in transportation], but **we don’t really have a platform** to express our voices.” — Edamevoh Ajayi

“Youth are a great way to understand the effects and ramifications of changing transportation, because **they’re aware of this stuff**. [But] no one knows exactly where to reach out and be like, ‘Hey, I’m experiencing these issues,’ or, ‘Hey, I have an idea for how to solve these issues.’ As youth we don’t really have that platform.” — Zoya Sarangan

“If we did have that platform, **we would be able to solve issues** like that. Because we don’t have a clear way to talk to people in charge, or maybe they just don’t care.” — Tengis Temur

“When there is an issue that we see in transportation, oftentimes we don’t know where to voice out our opinions, and when we do, often that gets **[perceived] like we’re complaining**. We don’t really have an outlet to reach authorities and advocate.” — Nathan YuHeng Li

“As youth, we try to use our voices, but it’s viewed as complaining. That’s not what we want. **We want to use our voices for good.**” — Mia Hatfield

“Youth are one of the best ways to measure how good a public transit system is, because they’re this captive audience from ages 12 to 16, where they can’t drive, but they still have to get to their school, and they’re mature and old enough to take the bus by themselves. That’s something that needs to get to adults and politicians. It’s not just a mode of [transportation] for some people that can provide economic growth for the city. **Sometimes it’s a lifeline.**” — Vikas Gobburi

Quotes from Oakland Youth Commissioners Edamevoh Ajayi, Tengis Temur, Nathan YuHeng Li, and Mia Hatfield; and from San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) Youth Transportation Advisory Board (YTAB) members Zoya Sarangan and Vikas Gobburi.

POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

I am a middle-class white woman and a graduate student studying city planning and focusing on transportation. I was born in San Francisco, grew up in San Mateo, and now live in Berkeley. I'm not from Oakland, and my entrypoint for this capstone was academic and professional, rather than personal. I attended and observed an outreach event for an OakDOT project as an assignment for a class, and there became connected with OakDOT staff who helped me develop the concept for this capstone. I originally heard of the outreach event because my partner is an engineer at a firm that OakDOT consulted with for the project.

Though I have lived elsewhere, I've had the privilege of always being able to return to a safe home and a loving family in the San Francisco Bay Area. I am proud to call the Bay Area my home, and I affirm that this place is home to others like me and not like me. The right to belong in this place has been colonially defined since the arrival of Spanish colonists in 1769, who enslaved the indigenous Miwok, Ohlone, Patwin, and Yokuts people, and pillaged the land they had stewarded for thousands of years. I acknowledge that my professional field, the discipline of city and regional planning, operates within the framework of colonial land ownership and has done inexcusable harm to marginalized communities on the basis that they do not belong in the places they call home or at the decision-making table. I am conducting this capstone project on unceded indigenous land, supported by institutions (the University of California and OakDOT) that have perpetuated exclusion and infrastructural violence. This capstone project aims to create tools that can expand access to belonging and decision-making through planning for communities who struggle to be heard, including the indigenous people who live here to this day.

Growing up here, I witnessed the rapid changes of the dot-com boom and bust, the inflated early aughts housing market and the 2008 financial crisis, and the progressive dominance of Silicon Valley over this region. Each of these changes caused people to move: lower middle-class people moving into homes backed by predatory lenders, people losing those homes and moving farther into the exurbs, college-educated people moving into the area for tech jobs, low-income people getting priced out of their urban neighborhoods and moving where the rent is more affordable, people immigrating from overseas in pursuit of education or sanctuary, and so on. The specifics of who has been impacted by each of these movements are in turn a manifestation of oppressive systems that sort and separate people according to the value they are seen as contributing to the various financial, institutional, and political structures we live within: systemic racism in housing, systemic sexism in employment, systemic classism in governance, and so on. This place is marked by amazing opportunities for people to enrich their lives, and amazing volatility in people's access to those opportunities.

Movement in terms of where people live is one factor that determines people's access to opportunity in the Bay Area. The flipside of that coin is our ability to move in the day-to-day sense. In this sprawling metropolis, transportation networks are vital for connecting people with opportunities, and rife with patterns of exclusion that limit the geographies and travel modes that marginalized people can access. While growing up in San Mateo, I got to most places I needed to go in a car, but as I got older I was able to ride Caltrain or BART independently. This experience made me feel like I'd found the keys to the city - like I belonged. At the same time, I was acutely aware that my access to these transportation resources, and the sense of belonging that it bestowed upon me, was a privilege that was not evenly distributed throughout the region. I was struck by a similar feeling upon moving to the East Bay. The Berkeley neighborhood I live in is dense, walkable, and supported by several bus lines and a robust bike infrastructure network that make me feel safe and welcome to ride throughout the city, while many predominantly Black and brown neighborhoods nearby have simultaneously been neglected by transportation planning and born the brunt of the environmental impacts of its practice in the form of air pollution, traffic violence, and literal destruction of homes.

I am motivated to be a transportation planner because of these injustices. Through my career, I hope to facilitate dialogue between planners and underserved communities, building institutional capacity, social capital, and access to belonging in our region's opportunity network and decision-making process. This capstone project aims to further these goals through one strategy to uplift often unheard voices: making space for youth in the community engagement process.

METHODOLOGY

As the purpose of this capstone is to develop tools for inclusion in transportation planning, the methods used centered principles of participatory research when possible. The primary way this manifested was in the data analysis stage; for each interview and focus group, I provided a summary of what I'd learned to the research participant(s) and invited their review to identify what aligned, or didn't, between our perspectives of the learning experience. I invited a second round of participant review during the writing stage. This iterative approach to research participation not only ensured that I'd properly understood what participants told me, but also communicated to participants that they share ownership of the data and its interpretation, and made opportunities for building working relationships between myself and participants over multiple iterations of learning.

Observation of Calm East Oakland Streets Outreach

Observation of the Calm East Oakland Streets community design workshop took place in-person at the Tassafaronga Community Center. I arrived early to help staff set up, and took photos and notes by hand during the event, focusing on if and how the design and execution of the event facilitated dialogue between participants and planners. Subsequently, I observed digital outreach methods online, similarly focusing on the potential for dialogue through these methods.

Interviews with Youth Civic Engagement Practitioners

I conducted seven semi-structured interviews with practitioners of youth civic engagement, including two people who engage youth in civic project-based learning in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), three leaders at CBOs in Oakland, one staff person for a youth transportation council in LA, and one former OakDOT transportation planner. Interviews ranged in duration from 25 minutes to one hour. I was connected with most of the interview participants via the snowball method. Interview questions centered on participants' personal experiences with youth engagement in planning. Detailed introductions for each of the interviewees are provided in Chapter 2.

All interviews were audio-recorded. I analyzed transcripts for each interview individually and sent my analysis to participants for their review, before bringing the lessons learned from the interviews into conversation with each other. Next, I sent the sections of my capstone that were informed by the interviews to the respective interviewees over email for their review of my analysis in context.

Focus Groups with Youth Advisory Boards and Commissions

I conducted two focus groups, one with the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) Youth Transportation Advisory Board (YTAB), and another with the Oakland Youth Commission.

The focus group with the YTAB was designed subsequent to a conversation with Lawrence Festin, who oversees the Board. I presented at their in-person meeting to briefly introduce my project aims, and then facilitated a 45-minute group discussion around the following guiding questions:

- Reflect on a time that you felt empowered, or disempowered, to make a difference in your city. What do you want transportation planners to know about that experience?
- How do you know that your city is hearing and responding to youth transportation needs? How do you know when it is falling short?
- What tools help you reach out to and represent other people your age? What makes it hard to do this job, and what would make it easier?

A month later, I attended a second YTAB meeting to present my analysis of our conversation. I provided Board members with printed summaries and a paper questionnaire to invite their feedback and additional thoughts on the subject. Lastly, I sent the sections of my capstone that were informed by the focus group to the YTAB over email to invite their review of my analysis in context.

For the focus group with the Oakland Youth Commission, I introduced my project with a presentation at their in-person meeting, then provided the Commissioners with a selection of quotes from the YTAB focus group. The Commissioners discussed the quotes in small groups for five minutes, then shared out and had a large group discussion about the quotes and the same guiding questions as above for 15 minutes. I sent the Commission a summary of our conversation, but due to time constraints, I was unable to invite their feedback during the writing process.

Participatory Research Considerations and Limitations

As detailed above, I strove to employ participatory research methods for this project, manifest primarily in opportunities for iterative co-learning between myself and research participants during the analysis and writing stages of the research process. I faced several limitations for conducting truly participatory research. First and most significant among these was time; I didn't have time to involve research participants in developing this project's concept or designing the research methods. Instead, the project concept and methods were developed in consultation with OakDOT staff, Meredith Sadin of UC Berkeley's Possibility Lab, and my capstone advisor, Deborah McKoy.

Time also limited my ability to put the relationship-building intentions of this project into practice. One of the key themes that emerged from my conversations with research participants was that relationship-based community engagement works best when planners don't just show up when they need something, but instead maintain a presence in community and give back when they can. I enacted this principle by accompanying the YTAB on a field trip to the SFMTA Woods Division, and by connecting an interviewee with another researcher at UC Berkeley to talk about the interviewee's own project. I will additionally be serving as a reviewer for OUSD high schoolers' presentations on the planning and design projects they've been developing this semester. Given more time and depending on the capacity of my research participants, I would have sought to bring participants into conversation with one another to foster the beginnings of a community of practice.

Lastly, I was unable to directly involve two key interest holders in this research process: youth who are not already civically engaged, and City of Oakland leadership beyond OakDOT. This speaks to the difficulty in reaching these kinds of interest holders in community engagement for planning generally; while it's generally feasible to foster a conversation between planners, CBOs and their constituencies, and schools, it's difficult to reach populations who are not affiliated with a CBO or otherwise civically engaged, and to translate learnings from community processes to leaders who are further up the decision-making ladder.

Literature Review

SUMMARY

This literature review establishes the rationale for applying youth engagement to the engagement process for safety-oriented transportation planning. It answers three questions: Why is community engagement important in disinvested neighborhoods? What challenges are there with current approaches? Can youth engagement effectively respond to these challenges, and if so, how? I find that community engagement is important in this context because vesting communities with knowledge and power can fulfill planners' ethical imperative to address planning-based trauma; righting past wrongs of transportation planning must be grounded in trust-building relationships; and infrastructural changes should be informed by local expertise to be successful in diverse socioeconomic contexts. Current challenges include mismatch between planners' and communities' priorities; participant disenfranchisement; inappropriate engagement models; and difficulties in maintaining partnerships. Youth engagement can effectively respond to these challenges because youth have unique lived experience and expertise that are relevant to active transportation infrastructure, and youth engagement can build civic capacity and communities of practice.

DETAILED LITERATURE REVIEW

Why is community engagement important for active transportation planning in disinvested, low-income communities of color?

First, systematic disinvestment in places is traumatic for communities. Personal identity is strongly linked to place, and thus transportation planning that has systematically disinvested or destroyed places, such as the use of eminent domain for highway construction, constitutes a traumatic attack on personal and communal identity. Poe argues that planners therefore have an ethical imperative to acknowledge and redress planning-induced communal trauma. Planners can do this by investing in community capacity to plan public spaces that dismantle White supremacy. In other words, conducting community engagement that vests communities with the knowledge and power to shape the future of their places is a way that transportation planners can begin to heal planning-based trauma in disinvested communities.³

Second, engagement with communities that have been traumatized by past planning decisions and processes must be grounded in trust-building relationships. Transportation planning carries a legacy of top-down decision-making in the name of the greater good that has resulted in well-founded

³ Jocelyn Poe, "Theorizing Communal Trauma: Examining the Relationship between Race, Spatial Imaginaries, and Planning in the U.S. South - Jocelyn Poe, 2022," *Planning Theory*, May 4, 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/SCCST5Q3YUSQDSVE88HQ/full>.

distrust of government among adversely impacted communities. Prusia argues that even today, participation processes can perpetuate distrust because they are often transactional, centering the planners' intention to extract feedback from communities. This transactional model will continue to sow distrust and widen the distance between government and the public; in order to build trust between disinvested communities and DOTs and realize positive and just planning outcomes, planners must move instead towards a relationship-centered model of engagement.⁴

Third, people and neighborhoods with different socioeconomic positions use active transportation infrastructure differently, so planners must rely on local expertise when applying infrastructural changes in different contexts. A review of 17 articles found that the built environment has a lesser effect on walking and physical activity for disadvantaged communities; i.e. adding or improving a sidewalk will promote more walking in a high-resource area than in a low-resource one. Adkins et al. argue that this is because physical infrastructure is not the only thing affecting walkability for disadvantaged communities; also of concern are unhealthy air, isolating land use patterns, marginalization in the planning process, fear of displacement, and threats to personal safety, whether via disproportionate traffic or police violence inflicted upon low-income people of color while inhabiting public space. Planners' personal backgrounds and experiences rarely match up with the communities they serve; it is therefore necessary for planners to engage meaningfully with communities, and with disadvantaged communities in particular. Doing so allows planners to adapt infrastructural investments and planning processes themselves to better match the needs of socioeconomically diverse communities, and to connect a transportation project to non-infrastructural factors impacting walkability.⁵

What are the challenges with current approaches to engagement in this context?

One challenge that transportation planners face in engaging disadvantaged communities is that planning priorities don't always line up with the community's priorities. This can result in poor turnout at public meetings, or in disconnection between planners and residents who do attend. Whereas planners come to public meetings as professionals, residents come to public meetings as themselves, with whatever issues their neighborhood is facing in tow. Guillory finds that planners often struggle with this disconnect, whether because they are unaware of public priorities and are caught off guard by seemingly unrelated concerns, or because they don't have tools to address

⁴ Kizz Swajay Prusia, "Planning for Trust: A Relationship-Centered Approach to Community Engagement in City Planning Practice" (University of Washington, 2019), <http://hdl.handle.net/1773/44468>.

⁵ Arlie Adkins et al., "Contextualizing Walkability: Do Relationships Between Built Environments and Walking Vary by Socioeconomic Context?," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 83, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 296–314, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2017.1322527>.

concerns that are not directly related to their professional expertise or the project at hand.⁶ McCullough and Stokkum found that a key component of successful community engagement with disadvantaged communities is the ability for planners to address concerns beyond the scope of a project, such as displacement and public safety.⁷

Another challenge is that community engagement can often leave participants feeling less heard and empowered, instead of more, leading to doubt that participating will affect planning outcomes at all. Legacy argues that this is because community engagement is often reduced to consensus building, which depoliticizes the planning process and limits the ability of dissenting opinions to be heard. This can position the government and the public as oppositional to each other, and lead disenfranchised residents to express dissenting opinions outside of the formal process by protesting.⁸ In a study of DOT-led and community-led engagement processes, Linovski and Baker find that the two approaches operated with substantially different understandings of equity and the foundational goals of planning.⁹ This disconnect highlights the need for community engagement to be an explicitly political process, putting opposing principles and opinions in conversation with each other, rather than shutting dissenters out.

Planners may also struggle to meaningfully engage communities and develop public support for projects because they apply inappropriate engagement methods to the context at hand. One way that this can play out is when planners assume that conducting a participatory approach is appropriate. Participatory approaches to community engagement seek to get input from the broadest sweep of the public as possible. This approach makes sense for some projects, but for others it can leave participants feeling like they weren't really heard, furthering feelings of distrust. Quick and Feldman analyze this approach in contrast to inclusive engagement, which instead builds a community of practice with a small subset of community representatives who work together with planners on a project over time. Not only is this approach more appropriate in some contexts, producing planning outcomes that are more supported by the community as a whole, but it can

⁶ Kayla Guillory, "Co-Designing for Public Participation: Developing a Relationship-Based Toolkit for Public Engagement with the Utah Transfer Authority" (Thesis, University of Michigan, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.7302/8111>.

⁷ Sarah R. McCullough and Rebecca van Stokkum, "Answers from the Margins: Participatory Planning with Disadvantaged Communities," March 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.7922/G2RX99DZ>.

⁸ Crystal Legacy, "Is There a Crisis of Participatory Planning?," *Planning Theory* 16, no. 4 (November 1, 2017): 425–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095216667433>.

⁹ Orly Linovski and Dwayne Marshall Baker, "Community-Designed Participation: Lessons for Equitable Engagement in Transportation Planning," *Transportation Research Record* 2677, no. 6 (June 1, 2023): 172–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03611981221145131>.

initiate an ongoing relationship between planners and the community to collaborate on a broad range of planning challenges over time.¹⁰

Lastly, even when DOTs manage to establish partnerships with CBOs, it's difficult to maintain those relationships and institutional knowledge when both DOTs and CBOs have limited funding and high staff turnover. The Greenlining Institute finds that relationships rely on DOTs having cultural competency to be able to collaborate with CBOs, but when DOT staff cycle out, that institutional knowledge is lost. Additionally, CBOs often lack sustained decision-making power and funding. These challenges point to the need for a more evergreen approach to equity-focused transportation planning that can iteratively maintain relationships between new staff based on shared institutional knowledge.¹¹

Can youth engagement effectively respond to these challenges, and if so, how?

First and foremost, youth engagement is an effective approach for active transportation planning because youth face unique mobility barriers that can be overcome with safe active transportation infrastructure.

Youth under 16 can't drive, and many have no independent income to pay for public transit. As such, when active modes like walking and bicycling are safe and accessible, they present a greater opportunity for increased mobility for youth than they do for adults. As a result, youth generally make a greater proportion of their trips by walking and bicycling than adults.¹²

This makes them more vulnerable to traffic violence, more impacted beneficiaries of safety improvements, and more knowledgeable of what makes streets feel safer. DOTs have started to recognize the value of this unique positionality in recent years, and have been incorporating youth participation in more of their planning work. Jung and Kim find that youth can be valuable key actors in participatory planning for safety-focused transportation work, because they have insights about safety and transportation challenges faced by themselves as well as the broader community.¹³

¹⁰ Kathryn S. Quick and Martha S. Feldman, "Distinguishing Participation and Inclusion," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 31, no. 3 (September 1, 2011): 272–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X11410979>.

¹¹ "Beyond Engagement: Equity Principles to Guide State Departments of Transportation and Community Collaboration" (The Greenlining Institute, March 5, 2024), <https://greenlining.org/publications/equity-principles-to-guide-state-departments-of-transportation-and-community-collaboration/>.

¹² Pucher and Buehler, *City Cycling*.

¹³ Bo-Kyung Jung and Donghyun Kim, "Children as Key Actors in Participatory Planning: Co-Working Experience of Community Planning for Walking Safety Around Bongrae Elementary School in South Korea," *Planning Theory & Practice* 25, no. 3 (May 26, 2024): 321–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2024.2363790>.

Engaging youth can also be a promising approach to community engagement in disinvested neighborhoods. Frank finds that effective youth engagement benefits youth themselves, by helping them feel more connected to their community and empowered to make change, and benefits the communities that youth are part of, by producing widely positive policy outcomes and enhancing civic capacity of adults as well as youth to work together on planning issues. Youth engagement can also initiate a virtuous cycle, where young people learn about an issue in their community while participating in the planning process for one project, and then carry the knowledge and expertise that they develop in that process into enthusiasm for participating in other projects.¹⁴ Similarly, Derr et al. find that youth participation presents an opportunity for people from underrepresented populations to access citizenship from a young age, making it more likely that they will be civically engaged as adults.¹⁵

Finally, youth engagement is inherently an inclusive approach within Quick and Feldman's participation-inclusion framework, because it limits participants to a certain age bracket and requires a robust educational component to bring young people up to speed on planning issues. For youth engagement to be successful, McKoy and Vincent find that this process should build a 'community of practice' that enables youth, teachers, and planners to maintain a collaborative relationship.¹⁶ Building a community of practice in this way could address the challenge of maintaining institutional knowledge and capacity for planning between CBOs and DOTs.

¹⁴ Kathryn I. Frank, "The Potential of Youth Participation in Planning," *Journal of Planning Literature* 20, no. 4 (May 1, 2006): 351–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0885412205286016>.

¹⁵ Victoria Derr et al., "A City for All Citizens: Integrating Children and Youth from Marginalized Populations into City Planning," *Buildings* 3, no. 3 (July 23, 2013): 482–505, <https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings3030482>.

¹⁶ Deborah L. McKoy and Jeffrey M. Vincent, "Engaging Schools in Urban Revitalization: The Y-PLAN (Youth—Plan, Learn, Act, Now!)," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 26, no. 4 (June 1, 2007): 389–403, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X06298817>.

Chapter 1: Case Study of Community Engagement for Calm East Oakland Streets

SUMMARY

This chapter presents a case study of several elements of the community engagement process for Calm East Oakland Streets, including a design workshop, an online survey, and a web map. It is an incomplete account, focusing on the outreach methods that I was able to observe. I find that these methods on their own are incongruous with OakDOT's goals to build trust and a shared mobility agenda across Oakland's communities because they don't foster an impactful dialogue about transportation and related neighborhood concerns, both between residents and planners and between residents and other residents. To realize their goals, OakDOT must consistently complement these 'thin' or 'participatory' outreach methods, which seek to engage a broad sweep of the population in a relatively shallow and short-form way, with 'thick' and 'inclusive' engagement methods, which seek to build civic capacity and empowerment among individuals and networks of people through an iterative, long-form engagement process.

DETAILED CASE STUDY

The Calm East Oakland Streets project aims to slow vehicle traffic and create calmer streets for people to walk and bike to schools, parks, and stores in the neighborhood. The project emerged out of the 2019 Bike Plan, for which OakDOT conducted an extensive community engagement process. From October 2017 to April 2019, OakDOT held sixty outreach events, employed 576 staff hours, and engaged 3,644 people to get public input throughout the plan's development process. They also partnered with six community organizations "to help identify and give voice to the mobility needs of disadvantaged communities in East and West Oakland." OakDOT intended for this community engagement process to not just inform the development of the Bike Plan, but also to work towards a larger goal: "a process to build trust, improve communication and collaboration, and foster a common vocabulary and mobility agenda across different neighborhoods and communities in Oakland."¹⁷

The outreach process for Calm East Oakland Streets offers a rich opportunity to analyze and critique OakDOT's approach to community engagement, particularly because this project is located in an

¹⁷ City of Oakland Department of Transportation, "Oakland Bicycle Plan," July 2019, <https://www.oaklandca.gov/resources/bicycle-plan>.

area that has suffered communal trauma due to planning decisions, making empowering and healing planning processes all the more important. Place-based communal trauma happens because, as Poe writes, “belonging to place is intrinsically tied to identity.” With this intertwining, we can then understand that “the destruction of place is akin to the process the body undergoes when it goes into shock. ... Because this process happens in a community, these experiences are internalized as collective memory.”¹⁸ Thus, transportation planning that has systematically disinvested or destroyed places, such as the use of eminent domain for highway construction, constitutes a traumatic attack on personal and communal placed identity. In the case of East Oakland, this means that decades of neglect for the condition of the pavement translates to neglect for East Oakland residents themselves.



A Google Street View of a segment of 81st Avenue that is included in *Calm East Oakland Streets*. The project will repave the street, which today is severely rutted, potholed, and patched.

Poe further argues, “If planning has induced communal trauma, ... the field has an ethical obligation to acknowledge trauma imaginaries and redress communal trauma.” Planners can do this by investing in community capacity to plan public spaces that dismantle White supremacy.¹⁹ In other words, conducting community engagement that vests communities with the knowledge and power to shape the future of their places is a way that transportation planners can begin to heal planning-induced trauma in disinvested communities.

In September 2024, OakDOT hosted a design workshop for *Calm East Oakland Streets* at the Tassafaronga Recreation Center. The materials of the event were consistent with a typical planning open house: large printed satellite images of the project area taped to the wall, informative posters on tripod stands, a sign-in sheet by the door to collect email addresses, and a table with single-serving bags of chips and tangerines. The event was scheduled for four hours, but staff wrapped up half an hour early when it became clear that nobody else was coming. Only four people

¹⁸ Jocelyn Poe, “Theorizing Communal Trauma: Examining the Relationship between Race, Spatial Imaginaries, and Planning in the U.S. South,” *Planning Theory* 21, no. 1 (February 1, 2022): 56–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14730952211014563>.

¹⁹ Poe.

had come to the workshop, all of whom had attended previous meetings about this project and were variously civically engaged: the chair of a neighborhood committee, a Bicyclist and Pedestrian Advisory Commissioner, a representative from the parks and rec department. In short, no members of the truly general public had shown up.



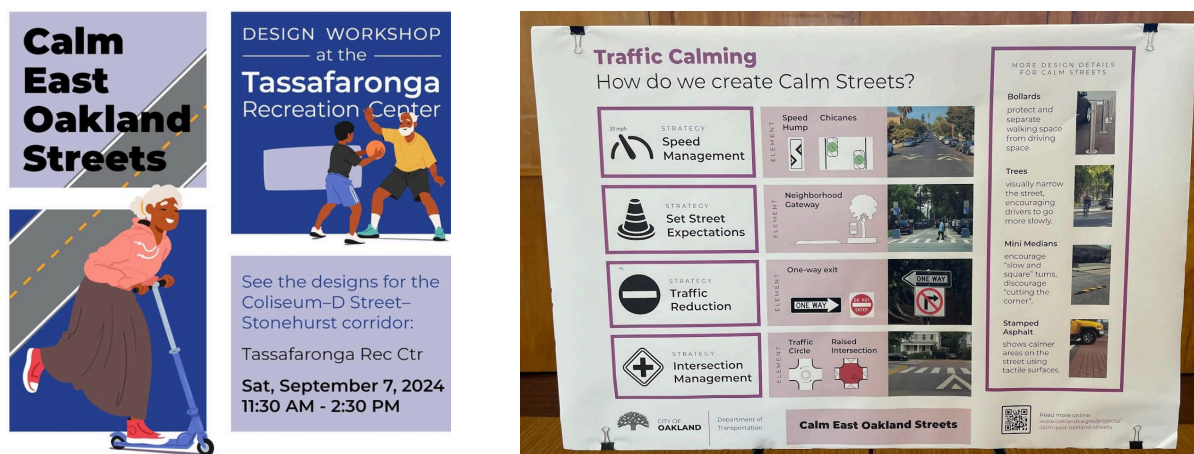
Left: the door to the September workshop room with a wayfinding arrow. Right: the workshop room setup with poster boards, a sign-in sheet, and a snack table.

Despite the intentions of the Bike Plan to build trust and a shared mobility agenda with Oakland's communities, OakDOT continues to struggle to engage communities in disadvantaged neighborhoods on projects to improve bicycling and walking conditions. Almost a year after outreach for Calm East Oakland Streets began, the design workshop was nearly empty. It later became known that due to a mix-up, the mailers to alert nearby residents of the workshop hadn't been sent until a week after the event took place; if this error was largely responsible for the event's poor attendance, that would mean that most residents would only have learned about the workshop or even the project as a whole because of a mailer sent to their door, revealing that communication channels between OakDOT and residents of East Oakland are lacking.

On the other hand, it's possible that the workshop would have been just as empty even if the mailers had been sent on time, which would point to a different kind of disconnect. One of the OakDOT staff members at the event guessed that more people hadn't come because of a lack of trust for the government among residents in this disinvested neighborhood, where some streets have not been repaved in thirty years or more. Another hypothesized that residents may see these kinds of street safety projects as related to other issues in their community, like public safety, policing, and gentrification, but be discouraged from attending a meeting because planners can only speak to the discreet project at hand. During a follow-up conversation a few weeks later, one of the staff added that many residents simply don't have capacity to be personally invested in transportation planning, and it may even be socially unacceptable for individuals or community organizations to spend time on bike lanes or potholes when the community is facing more pressing issues like displacement and

gun violence. Either way, it's clear that OakDOT's work to build trust, collaboration, and a shared mobility agenda with the public is far from done.

The design workshop in September aligns with Nabatchi and Leighninger's conception of "thin participation," in which "individuals are provided with opportunities to express their ideas, opinions, and concerns in a way that requires only a few moments of their time."²⁰ Thin participation can take the form of an open house, a survey, or a booth at a fair. As shown in the instagram post advertising the design workshop below, its primary aim was for residents to see the designs. Another goal of the event was to educate residents about traffic calming; one of the poster boards on display had the headline, "How do we create calm streets?" and showed an array of infrastructural methods that can be used for slowing vehicle traffic. Although this kind of thin participation can empower individuals with knowledge about a project, it is disingenuous to call this event a workshop, which is a thick participation technique that empowers groups of people to directly influence the design for a project.



Left: an instagram post advertising the design workshop. Right: an educational poster board from the design workshop.

OakDOT employed several other thin participation outreach events for Calm East Oakland Streets. For example, OakDOT staff tabled outside of schools and libraries in the project area to engage with youth and their parents. This method was more successful than the workshop in terms of reaching more people, as curious young people passing by would eagerly approach the staff to learn about their work. This is most likely simply due to the location that OakDOT staff chose: whereas the design workshop at the recreation center asked residents to go out of their way to participate, tabling outside of a school or library brings participation to the places that residents already are. Deguzman describes a similar application of this strategy, in which she tabled at laundromats to meet the community where they were. This strategy is more effective for engaging with people who don't have

²⁰ Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger, "Good or Bad? Charming or Tedious? Understanding Public Participation," in *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015), 13–44, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119154815.ch2>.

the time or resources to add another errand to their schedule, or those who are not independently knowledgeable or motivated enough to engage with a particular planning project.²¹

OakDOT also used digital outreach tools, including an online survey and a web mapping tool. Hafferty et al. caution that while digital tools can be effective methods for engagement, they work best when paired with in-person engagement because both mediums have their strengths and weaknesses. While in-person engagement can build trust between planners and the public and is a good way to start an engagement process with a community, in-person events can also exclude members of the community for whom attending an event in person is burdensome. Digital engagement can fill in some of those gaps, but planners must be cognizant of the digital divide that may still limit the ability of some people to access online participation methods.²² OakDOT staff did well to incorporate both in-person and online engagement methods for Calm East Oakland Streets.

Another challenge associated with online methods that Hafferty et al. describe is the risk of miscommunication and misinterpretation. The online survey for Calm East Oakland Streets opened by stating that the project “aims to stop aggressive driving, fix broken streets, and create safe space for people to walk and bike to local destinations.” Then, the first survey question was, “How safe do you feel traveling throughout East Oakland?”²³ Although somebody with existing knowledge about the purpose of the project and traffic calming in general would understand that the survey is asking respondents to reflect on their experience of safety as it relates to the presence and behavior of vehicles on the street, there is ample room for misinterpretation in this question. Somebody else might feel compelled to answer based on how safe they feel from other dangers, like being assaulted or arrested.

By limiting the definition of safety to safety from vehicle traffic, the online survey made a subtle attempt at consensus-building. Indeed, Afzalan and Muller argue that online participation tools can facilitate consensus-building because they allow participants to interact directly with each other and take time to reflect before responding, whereas in-person participation is typically led by a planner and requires participants to respond to each other in the moment.²⁴ However, this survey didn’t allow respondents to see how others had responded. Whereas the survey might have built

²¹ *Community as a Moral, Unifying Force with Destiny* Deguzman, Lecture (Ohio State University, 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiHMxQQA78A>.

²² Caitlin Hafferty et al., “Engagement in the Digital Age: Understanding ‘What Works’ for Participatory Technologies in Environmental Decision-Making,” *Journal of Environmental Management* 365 (August 1, 2024): 121365, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2024.121365>.

²³ City of Oakland Department of Transportation, “Calm East Oakland Streets Survey,” Qualtrics, 2024, https://qualtricsxm22whq9qz.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2faGZXoM87x2XP0.

²⁴ Nader Afzalan and Brian and Muller, “Online Participatory Technologies: Opportunities and Challenges for Enriching Participatory Planning,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 84, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 162–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2018.1434010>.

better if people's comments were posted to a unified board, rather than hidden away in individual windows for each improvement.

Overall, the thin participation methods described in this chapter may have empowered individual residents by informing them of the project and consulting them about what makes streets feel safer from vehicle traffic. But these thin methods on their own could not have empowered groups of people or the community as a whole because they did not facilitate dialogue with and between members of the public, as thick participation methods like true workshops, participatory budgeting, or resident advisory committees do. Along with the fact that some of the thin methods employed (the 'workshop' and the web map) received minimal attention from residents, it's clear that these methods alone do not advance OakDOT's goals to build trust, collaboration, and a shared mobility agenda with all communities of Oakland.

This mismatch is reminiscent of the conflation of participation and inclusion that Quick and Feldman describe. While *participation* seeks to get input from as many people as possible on the content of programs and policies, *inclusion* iteratively builds a community of practice with the capacity to engage with a range of planning issues over time. Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses, but planners struggle to do meaningful community engagement when they fail to recognize the distinction between them.²⁸ In this case, the 2019 Bike Plan process employed both participation (hosting sixty outreach events) and inclusion (partnering with six community organizations). But the community of practice created with local organizations during that process wasn't sustained, so the process for Calm East Oakland Streets has been strictly participatory. This approach hasn't consistently succeeded in reaching the community, while an inclusive approach might have better matched the community's needs and capacity; those four civically engaged workshop attendees could have been invited to join a focus group, and this inclusive method could have complemented the participatory methods that informed a wider array of residents about the project. Altogether, this case demonstrates that to realize their trust-building goals, OakDOT must invest in building and sustaining relationships with diverse Oakland communities.

²⁸ Quick and Feldman, "Distinguishing Participation and Inclusion," September 1, 2011.

Chapter 2: Lessons Learned From Practitioners of Youth Civic Engagement

This chapter analyzes interviews and focus groups that I conducted with practitioners of youth civic engagement to glean lessons learned, centering the potential for youth engagement in transportation planning to build civic capacity. Because civic capacity is a function of relationships between members of the public and power-holders, the findings presented here pertain to long-form engagement with the potential for building such relationships. I first present universally applicable lessons learned, and then delve into insights and best practices for youth civic engagement in three different forums, arranged in increasing order of existing civic capacity for engaging in transportation planning:

1. Engaging youth in school curriculum (youth are expected to have low existing civic capacity for engaging in transportation planning)
2. Partnering with CBOs (youth have middling existing civic capacity)
3. Youth advisory boards and commissions (youth have high existing civic capacity)

Findings are summarized in the table below, and analyzed in depth in the four subsequent sections.

SUMMARY: LESSONS LEARNED FROM PRACTITIONERS OF YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

UNIVERSALLY APPLICABLE LEARNINGS	
Authentic relationships that reaffirm trust are the bedrock of capacity-building engagement, particularly for young people as their understanding of institutions and themselves develops.	
Authenticity and accountability are the foundations of trusting relationships.	→ Match youth engagement strategies to the impact they can be expected to have, given the stage of the project.
Trust is built between people , not between institutions.	→ Support relationship-building comprehensively by investing in people's stability and personal development .
Youth capacity is already stretched thin between school, extracurriculars, family commitments, and for some, work.	→ Tailor engagement to connect to young people's existing interests , such as art, or involvements, such as clubs or CBOs.

ENGAGING YOUTH IN SCHOOL CURRICULUM - low existing civic capacity Although most or all students in the classroom won't come in knowing about transportation planning, this forum casts the widest, most inclusive net for bringing new voices into the process.	
Young people in schools have experience and critical thinking skills that are valuable to planning projects at any stage.	→ Be specific about what kind of input will be useful and what form it should take to set expectations for students' impact.
Planners and teachers have different knowledge and need different things from youth.	→ Work with liaisons to navigate differences , ideally one on each side to protect against miscommunication.
Exposure to career pathways is an impactful way for planners to 'give back,' but planning and related fields tend not to reflect the racial diversity of Oakland youth.	→ Seek opportunities for planners with diverse identities to share their career pathways.
WORKING WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS - middling existing civic capacity Youth who are involved with local organizations have civic capacity that can be tapped into for engagement about transportation when balanced with community priorities.	
Inconsistent funding, leadership, and institutional priorities make it hard to maintain relationships with community partners.	→ Make relationship-building and maintenance a permanent, measurable department-wide priority.
Those without prior exposure to planning may struggle to find a personal connection to projects and feel comfortable getting involved.	→ Use place-based , ongoing engagement as an accessible entrypoint into planning, and to protect relationships from staff turnover.
Typical planning methods and data may not resonate with community needs or line up with goals for community engagement.	→ Be open to alternative methods and forms of data, and emphasize the importance of process alongside product.
YOUTH ADVISORY BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS - high existing civic capacity Youth council members or other representatives have the privilege to advocate for transportation issues they care about, and personal networks to spread broader awareness among their peers.	
Youth advisory boards and commissions are a platform for motivated young people to advocate for transportation needs.	→ Take the opportunity to go deeper on the interests that youth participants come in with.
Spreading awareness among youth more broadly is key for transportation advocacy.	→ Foster the ability of youth civic engagement participants to connect with their peers.
Ageism hinders access to decision-making, even for youth civic representatives.	→ Identify adult allies to speak up for youth, and design more inclusive public forums.

UNIVERSALLY APPLICABLE LEARNINGS

The lessons learned in this section emerged from conversations with Camrin Fredrick, Annie Ledbury, Hank Phan, Tyrone “Champ” Stevenson, Tania Taylor, Walter Wallace, and the SFMTA Youth Transportation Advisory Board (YTAB). Detailed introductions to each of these contributors are included with the respective youth engagement forum section that they belong to below. While the focus of this analysis is how to apply these learning to youth civic engagement, most are relevant and applicable to engagement with people of all ages.

Authenticity and accountability are the foundations of trusting relationships.

→ **Match youth engagement strategies to the impact** they can be expected to have, given the stage of the project.

It comes as no surprise that every person interviewed for this report emphasized the importance of authenticity in community engagement. Not limited to engaging with youth, authenticity in the context of community engagement means that planners are honest about the impact that participants’ input can have on a planning process, and follow through on that expectation. Some interviewees described the benefits of authentically engaging with communities, others detailed the threats to practicing authenticity as a planner, and all spoke to the consequences of letting authenticity fall by the wayside. As a whole, authenticity and accountability are paramount because they form the bedrock of trusting relationships – without authenticity, trust cannot be built or maintained.

Camrin Fredrick of OUSD noted that having a real-world partner who’s authentically committed to incorporating youth voice both results in better projects and is a powerful motivator for students. In project-based learning at OUSD, she said, “One of the most key elements is that they actually want youth input. ... The kids need to feel like somebody actually wants to listen to their idea, and might even entertain the possibility of it informing something they do.”²⁹ Based on the questions that planners ask them and how they receive their work, students can tell if they’re really being listened to and taken seriously. This starts when planners first meet students, so planners should make it clear from the start that they value the students’ direct expertise of a real problem. Fredrick explained, “The way we get the kids motivated is we’re like, ‘This is real, this is a real project that’s happening in the city and they want to hear from you. You guys are the experts in your community, you’re the ones that ride the bus every day.’”³⁰ When planners demonstrate an authentic commitment to hearing youth voice, young people begin to recognize their lived experience as valuable expertise, and become motivated to participate.

²⁹ Camrin Fredrick, Interview by Erin Slichter, April 1, 2025.

³⁰ Fredrick.

SFMTA YTAB manager Lawrence Festin echoed that young people feel empowered to participate more when they can trust that they'll be responded to. Whereas hearing young people's opinions and not responding breaks down their trust of the institution of planning, authentically responding to youth voice or acting on what they said initiates a trust-building cycle where young people will be encouraged to speak up again in the future:

"One thing that would really help increase the trust between whatever agency it is and the students, is to actually have those changes made. [Actually being able to see] that change being made would help them contribute more, because they know that they're making a difference, rather than just having their opinions be said and then not heard."³¹

One way to communicate that youth voice is valued is to make space for it early in planning processes, when young people's input can impact formative decisions about a project's direction. However, this isn't always feasible. Walter Wallace of the Black Film Guild, an organization that partnered with OakDOT on the Grand Avenue Mobility Plan, recalled that the young artists who participated in the engagement strategy Grand Avenue BE HEARD were encouraged to think about the corridor in a visionary capacity, and make art about their lived experiences and desired spatial futures, despite the fact that some key decisions about the Mobility Plan had already been made. Wallace explained, "What the students were doing, it should have been much earlier on, because [OakDOT] had already been working on a lot... So it's not like they were giving ideas around what the bus route should look like They should be brought in way earlier on, when we're just ideating."³² When visionary thinking can no longer impact project outcomes, it's important for planning teams to be honest about the scale of impact that youth voice can still have. Fortunately, this was the case for Grand Avenue BE HEARD, as OakDOT never gave youth participants the impression that their artworks would directly translate into project outcomes.

Part of this honesty can include planners making explicit their *process-focused* goals for engagement, rather than product-oriented objectives. Hank Phan, who led OakDOT's community engagement process for Grand Avenue, emphasized that his primary goal for BE HEARD was to build relationships with participants, with getting young people's input on design alternatives a secondary goal. Overall, youth engagement strategies should match the impact they can be expected to have on the project at its present stage. When visionary input can no longer impact project outcomes, planners should be honest about the true intended impact of this kind of engagement: to build relationships and civic capacity between planners and the next generation.

For Phan, his experience doing community engagement for Telegraph Avenue Corridor Improvements illustrated the consequences of not centering authenticity in this process. For this high-profile project, decisions that were made early on inhibited planning staff's ability to practice

³¹ SFMTA Youth Transportation Advisory Board, Focus Group by Erin Slichter, February 22, 2025.

³² Walter Wallace, Interview by Erin Slichter, March 3, 2025.

authenticity and build trust. Phan detailed, “Whereas other projects that I started myself, I was able to say, ‘No, this is what we need to do,’ [for Telegraph], people way before me already had an idea of what they wanted it to be. So [I] was basically doing the leg work that they hadn’t done before to check the boxes of engagement.”³³ Though he tried to be creative with the engagement process for Telegraph, Phan couldn’t have a genuine dialogue with the community because most of the decisions about the project had already been made. Stripped of the opportunity to build trust with the community through authentic engagement, Phan recalls that he instead “got yelled at for three years,” causing him to burn out. Failing to center authenticity not only undermines opportunities to build trust with communities, but discourages planners who are committed to doing this kind of work, leading to reduced capacity for forming relationships on both sides.

Trust is built between people, not between institutions.

→ Support relationship-building comprehensively by investing in people’s **stability and personal development**.

A phenomenon that was expressed repeatedly in the interviews was that while people could have a positive experience and build trusting working relationships between themselves and other individuals, this does not necessarily translate into trust between a community as a whole and the whole department or City a planner works for. It may be tempting to try to find a way to foster institutional trust among communities, but ultimately, relationships exist between people, not institutions. As such, in the pursuit of civic capacity, interpersonal relationships cannot be overlooked. As Annie Ledbury of EBALDC put it, building civic capacity is about “the people they meet, ... and just knowing, ‘Oh, I just happen to know the real estate person down the street, I happen to know the City Administrator’s office assistant.’ ... It’s about individual people getting their skill sets strengthened, and knowing who else has their finger on that pulse. ... They know who their champions are, and they know who to call when something’s happening.”³⁴

Wallace described how trust was built between himself and Phan while working together on the Grand Avenue Mobility Plan, adding that interpersonal trust is challenged when public agencies are not consistently able to follow through on the expectations that planners and community members establish interpersonally. He explained, “Hank [Phan] and I can build trust with the community all day long. Hank is very good at doing that. I can do that all day long. When you work with a government agency, the problem is that when Hank says something, the agency has to deliver on what he says, otherwise the trust is broken.”³⁵ Inconsistent investment in community-informed

³³ Hank Phan, Interview by Erin Slichter, February 11, 2025.

³⁴ Annie Ledbury, Interview by Erin Slichter, March 4, 2025.

³⁵ Wallace, Interview by Erin Slichter.

planning from department leadership may dissuade staff from building relationships with communities in the first place.

Along with investment from planning leadership, several other factors support planning staff to build strong relationships with communities are, including department mandates and dedicated resources, support from or requirements of grants, adequate guidance and training on relationship- and capacity-building, and overall planning team capacity for community-based work. Without these things being consistent, though, planning staff are left to carry out their personal visions for how community engagement should be, within institutional constraints. In an environment that is inconsistently supportive of community-based work, staff can easily get burnt out, as Phan did, leading to high staff turnover and an unstable drive for authentic community engagement. Phan described the fragility of this kind of work during his time at OakDOT, saying, “Staff are moving all the time. ... I feel like we all had that momentum, and then all of us one by one dropped off. ... It’s tiring just doing that by yourself, you versus the entire management or department. ... And then, would future staff even personally have that goal? ... How are you going to train this?”³⁶ This instability has the ultimate effect of compromising city departments’ ability to build trusting relationships with communities.

Because relationships are built between people, a focus on relationship-based community engagement requires supporting people to stay where they are. Supporting planners in this way can take the form of initiatives to boost staff retention and train relationship-based engagement. To support communities, this could mean enacting policies to reduce disinvested communities’ vulnerability to gentrification and displacement. Youth specifically could be supported through higher education and employment programs that build young people’s professional networks in their home communities. These recommendations fall outside the scope of what a single city department can do, but point to the fact that relationship-based engagement is best supported by such comprehensive, city-wide strategies. As Ledbury summed it up, “Relationships can’t be held when people can’t afford to stay in your city.”³⁷

One more directly actionable way that planning teams can invest in building relationships with youth is by supporting young people in other aspects of their lives, in addition to doing focused work on a topic like transportation planning. Ledbury mentioned a few youth civic engagement leaders and educators who are admirable in this regard, who build “deep lasting relationships with students. And they are present for them, not just when they’re giving them information about planning, but when they lose their job. ... Even having an adult that cares about you can go so far. ... And so you have to have that alongside the content exchange.”³⁸ Engagement with youth should cultivate

³⁶ Phan, Interview by Erin Slichter.

³⁷ Ledbury, Interview by Erin Slichter.

³⁸ Ledbury.

relationships for their own sake, not just for the purposes of getting feedback on a particular project. Beyond just being present, a few forms this kind of support can take are providing advice on educational and career pathways, such as how to write about their civic engagement experience on college and job applications, and simply helping young people or their families connect with other city departments or service providers that they could benefit from being in contact with.

LA Metro takes a comprehensive approach to building civic capacity among youth; Tania Taylor explained that “the vision of Metro has always been to build youth. ... There’s an array of ‘next generation workforce’ programs where Metro is building youth to become the transportation leaders of the future.”³⁹ Programs include Metro’s Youth Council, paid high school and college internship programs, entry level training programs for recent college graduates, as well as their partnership with the SEED LA School, an entire high school focused on preparing students for careers in transportation. These opportunities for young people’s personal career development create a robust infrastructure to support ongoing relationships and civic engagement in transportation for LA youth.

*Youth **capacity** is already stretched thin between school, extracurriculars, family commitments, and for some, work.*

→ Tailor engagement to **connect to young people’s existing interests**, such as art, or involvements, such as clubs or CBOs.

One of the reasons community engagement is hard in disadvantaged communities is that residents’ capacity is already stretched thin, so participating in a planning process or even a single outreach event can be a big ask. This holds true for young people as well. In addition to going to school, the equivalent of a full-time job for high school students, many young people also do extracurriculars like sports and arts, have to keep up with family commitments like running errands and caring for younger siblings, or even have to work. Oakland Youth Commission Director Sara Tiras explained, “Young people have a full-time job going to school, and it’s important that they get to weigh in on policy and have input, and it doesn’t make sense for that to be their full-time job. They already have one.”⁴⁰ Speaking from personal experience, Oakland Youth Commissioner Tengis Temur added, “You’re in high school, you’ve got extracurriculars, you’ve got a lot of homework. I just don’t see someone taking time out of their day, ... especially on the topic of transportation. I find it kind of difficult [to imagine] how you’re going to put them onto that.”⁴¹ Young people, especially high school students and youth who work, often don’t have capacity to spare to take on something new.

³⁹ Tania Taylor, Interview by Erin Slichter, March 21, 2025.

⁴⁰ Oakland Youth Commission, Focus Group by Erin Slichter, April 21, 2025.

⁴¹ Oakland Youth Commission.

In this context, the greatest opportunity for building youth civic capacity to engage in transportation planning lies in connecting engagement to something that young people are already committed to, involved with, or interested in. Emphasizing this, Ledbury detailed that this could mean finding a connection to a particular place, or to youth programs, saying, “What you can do is have thoughtful connections, whether it’s to a community table ... or existing youth programs. And then you’re layering in some content that is thoughtfully designed and aligned.”⁴² Working with existing youth programs and aligning an engagement process with their work is a powerful way to build civic capacity among youth. It is especially powerful when the youth programs approach the City to share that they are interested in a particular project. This speaks to how important it is for the City and OakDOT to put out quality information about their projects that enables youth programs and other community groups to identify aligned interests and civic partnership opportunities themselves.

For the Grand Avenue Mobility Plan, Wallace and Phan used art as a connecting interest to involve youth at the Black Film Guild, resulting in BE HEARD, a showcase of young people’s art about their experience of and vision for the corridor. For Wallace, art is a fruitful medium to share knowledge and build community, because that’s a realm that he’s personally familiar with and interested in. However, for other planners and community partners, that could look different. He explained, “I think the first thing is finding things that people are interested in. So in Oakland, a lot of people are artists. ... And we build a community based on that over time. ... For me, it’s the arts. ... For somebody else, it could be something different. I chose the arts because it’s something that I’m comfortable with.”⁴³ OakDOT could pursue opportunities for its planners to connect with youth based on other existing interests, such as sports, food, dance, speech and debate, or other civic issues that youth are involved with in their neighborhoods like public health or community safety.

One reason that art can be an effective way to connect with young people who don’t have prior experience with planning is that it’s a way to start a dialogue about a space or a street, without needing any technical knowledge. The dialogue can then move towards more technical planning topics in due time. Phan detailed this process:

“I let them choose their art, do their thing, but [I also asked them], ‘Hey, what would make it better for you and how you get around? ... What’s your definition of safety? ... What would allow you to thrive?’ ... They’re younger, and no one’s ever asked them that. ... Maybe they’d thought of it [in terms of], ‘I have to avoid this street because of this and that.’ You know, things that we don’t think about in the office, but that they think about on the street. Then [planners] think about the design of the street, but they don’t think about that. ... It helps us build a relationship with them. ... It’s like, ‘Look, you have ownership over your neighborhood, your street. You have ownership over how you

⁴² Ledbury, Interview by Erin Slichter.

⁴³ Wallace, Interview by Erin Slichter.

get around, your mobility. You have the ability to say yes or no, to have a choice and not just be complacent and a victim to everything else happening around you.”⁴⁴

In this way, a long-term art project was a powerful engagement strategy for building relationships with youth participants and bestowing them with a sense of agency over their places, as well as for exposing planners to things they wouldn’t have thought were important to transportation planning on their own. However, Phan indicated that while the youth engagement process for this project succeeded in helping young people see Grand Avenue with a ‘planning lens,’ there is room for improvement in helping planners see projects from young people’s point of view, or at least in recognizing the value of alternative forms of data, such as paintings and songs.

Tyrone “Champ” Stevenson of the Original Scraper Bike Team also spoke to the power of art as a communicative planning tool. In the Original Scraper Bike Team’s work with youth in underserved Oakland neighborhoods, Stevenson uses art as a medium to cultivate young people’s attention and visionary capabilities. “Working with youth, they’re visionaries, so a lot of kids need the visuals to be able to see their future, or be able to see change. ... They just need to see and be exposed to what’s possible. Given some direction and creativity, kids can go crazy.”⁴⁵ Thinking of street design concepts as art makes them accessible for any young person to engage with as a creative project.

While most of the learnings from this chapter are drawn from interviewees’ experiences with youth engagement through community partnerships, they are applicable to the other youth civic engagement forums included in this chapter as well. When engaging youth in schools, tapping into an existing interest can mean working with a teacher to find synergies between an upcoming project and what students will be learning that year in their history, social studies, or science curriculum, or partnering with a campus club or sports team. With youth advisory boards and commissions such as the Oakland Youth Commission, this can mean identifying the Commission’s policy priorities that are related to transportation, and making those connections explicit in presentations and other engagement strategies. The section on youth advisory boards and commissions below provides more detail on how to identify participants’ interests and tailor engagement based on that. Altogether, transportation planning is a multifaceted field with intuitive connections to public space, health, safety, housing, commerce, education, culture, and history, each of which are an opportunity to connect with young people based on something that’s already important to them.

⁴⁴ Phan, Interview by Erin Slichter.

⁴⁵ Tyrone “Champ” Stevenson, Interview by Erin Slichter, March 7, 2025.

ENGAGING YOUTH IN SCHOOL CURRICULUM

The lessons learned in this section emerged from conversations with Camrin Fredrick and Lilly Jacobson. They pertain to projects in the style or methodology of Y-PLAN (Youth - Plan, Learn, Act Now), where schools partner with civic agencies or CBOs to engage students in project-based learning and develop proposals for a real planning project over the course of a semester.

Camrin Fredrick is a Career Technical Education (CTE) coach for Oakland Unified School District. Working within the OUSD High School Linked Learning Office, she facilitates the design and implementation of project-based learning curricula in the district's college & career pathways, including Y-PLAN projects.

Lilly Jacobson is the director of the Sustainable Urban Design Academy at Castlemont High School in OUSD. Over the course of a semester, students in Jacobson's class take on real-world planning and design projects. They work with clients that genuinely want student input on their work, including CBOs like the Black Cultural Zone and government bodies like the Oakland Housing Authority.

Young people in schools have experience and critical thinking skills that are valuable to planning projects at any stage.

→ **Be specific** about what kind of input will be useful and what form it should take to set expectations for students' impact.

There's a common perception that engaging youth in planning is valuable because young people are hopeful and capable of conceiving of out-of-the-box ideas that adults wouldn't entertain for long enough to see if they could really work. However, this kind of creative, big-picture visioning isn't valuable when projects are farther along in the planning process and most big decisions have been made. In these cases, planners may think that it's a waste of time to engage young people, or, rightly, want to avoid giving them a false sense of hope that their 'pie in the sky' ideas will be implemented. As Camrin Fredrick of OUSD put it, "A lot of the views on youth engagement are like, 'Youth are still hopeful, and they're not jaded, and they're more creative, and they're going to propose a monorail over the city because they don't know that we'll never be able to afford that.'"⁴⁶ This perception causes planners to discount young people's ideas. Lillian Jacobson of OUSD echoed, "I feel like we often underestimate what kind of expertise young people have, because they may not have all the technical skills, or the understanding of the planning process."⁴⁷ On the whole,

⁴⁶ Fredrick, Interview by Erin Slichter.

⁴⁷ Lilly Jacobson, Interview by Erin Slichter, March 26, 2025.

planners can recognize the value of young people's visionary capability, but often don't perceive youth as having expertise that is relevant to planning.

This perception makes it hard for planners to imagine that it would be 'worth it' to engage young people on planning projects that are farther along. However, the young people in Oakland's schools do have expertise based on their unique lived experience, as well as critical thinking skills that are valuable to planning projects at any stage, so long as engagement can still have an impact on project outcomes. Fredrick explained, "[Imagination] is important, but when we think about the City of Oakland engaging OUSD kids, [they] are living through any problem the City is trying to address. At least a group of kids in the classroom ... are going to have direct lived experience with that issue, ... or they're going to have access to people with direct lived experience of the problems."⁴⁸ Jacobson spoke to the expertise young people have that's specific to transportation, adding, "Young people in East Oakland, a lot of them don't have cars, and they are walking around or taking the bus. ... Experientially, they have a deep level of expertise about what is wrong in their community and what could be improved. ... Their experience of the public realm in particular provides incredible value and a perspective that a lot of people don't think about."⁴⁹

To overcome the perception that young people don't have relevant expertise, Jacobson develops her students' technical skills so that they can communicate their data and proposals in a format that speaks to planners. Jacobson's students learn to draw in plan view, build 3-D digital and physical models, administer surveys, and present the results. Learning these technical skills and working through the design process also helps the students to recognize their personal experience as expertise. Jacobson explained, "We walk around the school and make observations, and talk about how certain spaces make us feel and what they might feel that way. ... I think sometimes starting with things that are a little bit closer to home is a way to get them to tap into that. Like, 'Oh yeah, I do actually have an experience!'"⁵⁰ A small project about public space on their school campus helps the students conceptualize their experience in the space as valuable data. Then, as the class moves into the empathize phase of the design process, students can survey and interview community members, putting their experiences and needs as young people into conversation with those of others.

To make the best use of students' expertise, it is helpful for planners to be as specific as possible about what they're looking for. Fredrick detailed, "Do they want survey data from the youth? Do they want programmatic ideas, [or] design ideas? ... Do they want an oral presentation, [or] a model, [or] a policy brief?"⁵¹ This helps teachers understand what they need their students to produce, and what they need to include in their curriculum to get them there. Making specific asks of the students is

⁴⁸ Fredrick, Interview by Erin Slichter.

⁴⁹ Jacobson, Interview by Erin Slichter.

⁵⁰ Jacobson.

⁵¹ Fredrick, Interview by Erin Slichter.

also an opportunity to set the students' expectations for what level of influence their ideas will have. As Jacobson explained, "It's important to be clear with students [that their design] is not going to be built exactly, but [their] design ideas are inspiring the next phase."⁵² Whether planners are looking for 'dream big' concepts or for experiential data about sidewalks, being specific about what kind of input is wanted and how it will be incorporated into the project avoids setting young people's expectations for their impact too high, and the inevitable disappointment and distrust that result if the City falls short of that expectation.

*Planners and teachers have **different knowledge** and **need different things** from youth.*

→ Work with **liaisons to navigate differences**, ideally one on each side to protect against miscommunication.

At its best, community engagement for planning projects is accessible for all, including those who have no prior knowledge of planning. When developing an engagement strategy for youth in schools, it's especially important to make a planning project understandable to partnering teachers, because they need to know enough about it to be able to teach it. One way to ensure that teachers can get up to speed on a planning project is to work with a liaison. Fredrick often plays this role when developing planning partnerships for OUSD project-based learning curricula, and describes the role as someone who "understands the teacher's curriculum and what they're looking for, and has the time to meet with the client and really understand the project, [and] who can see the connections and ... start to imagine possibilities of where the students might plug in."⁵³ Having somebody in this role helps to set clear and mutually beneficial expectations between the teacher and the project partner, avoiding the otherwise likely scenario in which the planner doesn't quite know what they want from the students, and the teacher doesn't quite know what the project is about.

OUSD's Linked Learning initiative aims to create mutually beneficial curriculum in partnership with industries, facilitated by Fredrick and other work-based learning liaisons. However, this setup puts most of the onus on translating planning concepts for teachers and students on OUSD. Fredrick noted that it is helpful when the industry partner, such as OakDOT, also has a specialist in community engagement available to navigate differences between partners and find synergies. For example, planners could work through OakDOT's Inclusive Community Engagement Officer to connect with a work-based learning liaison at a school near an upcoming project, who would in turn bring a teacher into the conversation. Having this redundancy in terms of expertise in community engagement and partnerships protects projects from miscommunication that may arise if OUSD's liaison isn't able to be at every meeting between planners and teachers.

⁵² Jacobson, Interview by Erin Slichter.

⁵³ Fredrick, Interview by Erin Slichter.

*Exposure to **career pathways** is an impactful way for planners to ‘give back,’ but planning and related fields tend not to reflect the racial diversity of Oakland youth.*

→ Seek opportunities for **planners with diverse identities** to share their career pathways.

For youth, the most impactful part of working on real planning projects is often the exposure they get to career pathways in planning and related fields, more than the project itself. Fredrick expressed, “It’s always really really helpful for [City staff] to talk about their own educational and career pathways. ... Honestly, that part is probably the most impactful from the educator perspective. That’s the thing that’s really going to stick with the kid, and might change their ideas about their future.”⁵⁴ Students engaged in planning projects in schools make a valuable impact on planning outcomes, and telling students about why and how they entered the industry is an important way that planners can ‘give back’ to students with a reciprocal impact.

However, one challenge in this regard is that the planning and design fields are less racially diverse than the student body at most of Oakland’s schools. Jacobson described that this makes it hard for her students to envision themselves pursuing careers in these fields after school. Instead, she said, “They often end up going more the trades route. ... If that’s what they want to do, that’s great. But ... our pipeline to actual architecture, urban planning, urban design, or landscape architecture is not very robust because ... there’s not a lot of representation in those fields.”⁵⁵ Jacobson described this as a “chicken and egg” problem, where these fields want to diversify, but struggle to attract racially diverse talent because they’re predominantly White in the first place and may not feel welcoming to young Black or Latino students. In light of this, it is especially important for planners to share their career pathways with students when they come from diverse racial backgrounds themselves.

⁵⁴ Fredrick.

⁵⁵ Jacobson, Interview by Erin Slichter.

WORKING WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The lessons learned in this section emerged from conversations with Annie Ledbury, Hank Phan, Tyrone “Champ” Stevenson, and Walter Wallace. They pertain to youth engagement strategies conducted in partnership with CBOs.

Annie Ledbury is the associate director of Creative Community Development at the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC), a non-profit affordable housing and community developer. EBALDC partnered with OakDOT on the Grand Avenue Mobility Plan, completed in 2022, to lead creative engagement strategies, such as chalkboards that invited passers-by to respond to prompts about the corridor.

Hank Phan worked as a planner at OakDOT from 2017 to 2021, during which time he worked on the Grand Avenue Mobility Plan and Telegraph Avenue Corridor Improvements.

Tyrone “Champ” Stevenson is the Co-Founder and Chief Visionary Officer of the Original Scraper Bike Team, which empowers youth in Oakland’s underserved neighborhoods by engaging their creative powers to turn bikes into vehicles for self-expression. The Original Scraper Bike Team partnered with OakDOT on the 2019 Oakland Bike Plan.

Walter Wallace is the executive director of the Black Film Guild, a non-profit organization in West Oakland that develops artists’ skills. Wallace partnered with OakDOT on the Grand Avenue Mobility Plan to engage youth in West Oakland, culminating in a digital gallery of young artists’ work called Grand Avenue BE HEARD. He also served as a Cultural Strategist-in-Government within OakDOT to innovate creative ways to have dialogue with Oakland’s communities.

Inconsistent funding, leadership, and institutional priorities make it hard to maintain relationships with community partners.

→ Make relationship-building and maintenance a **permanent, measurable department-wide priority**.

One challenge that planning teams face in developing relationships with communities is that community engagement is typically funded through specific project budgets. This means that the City doesn’t have funding to maintain connections with communities when there isn’t a project underway. Walter Wallace of the Black Film Guild detailed, “One of the biggest challenges that a lot of agencies [face] is that they only come around when there’s a budget. ... When you do that, the problem is that you’re not building trust. You’re just coming in when there’s something that you have

to gain from it, when it's something you have to do."⁵⁶ Project-specific funding for community engagement impedes planners' ability to build trust with communities.

Hank Phan, who formerly worked at OakDOT, echoed that it's hard for Cities to stay accountable when the funding for a project runs out. For some of his projects while working there, he said, "There was a lot of front end work with engagement that we were doing, but there is no back end work. It was sort of like, let's do this cool thing, and then shelve it. And then maybe one day when we have enough funding, we'll pull it off the shelf, see if it's even still relevant."⁵⁷

Another challenge to the City's ability to stay accountable to communities is that leadership and institutional priorities change. As a result, planners are not able to consistently invest their time in relationship-based, capacity-building community engagement. Phan described how these inconsistencies manifested during his tenure at OakDOT, oscillating between free reign for planners to prioritize community engagement on the Grand Avenue Mobility Plan and rigid expectations for project progress on Telegraph Avenue Corridor Improvements:

"It was a very unique time period in the department, and we were able to have flexibility to run free and do what we thought was right, spend time and resources on things that we thought were worth it. ... With this agency or another agency, or even between departments depending on the leadership, you might not be able to have that. Staff might not be able to have that flexibility, [and instead meet pushback like], 'What are you doing? Stop going to all these meetings. Stop meeting with all these people.'"⁵⁸

In an environment that is inconsistently supportive of community-based work, staff can easily get burnt out, leading to high staff turnover and an unstable base of staff expertise for authentic community engagement. Inconsistency leads to burnout among community partners as well. Champ Stevenson of the Original Scraper Bike Team described how the community engagement process for the 2019 Bike Plan was a moment when the City was invested in working with communities, but that this investment faltered when it came time to implement a bike facility on 90th Avenue, one of the Bike Plan's recommendations. This experience undermined trust between the Original Scraper Bike Team and OakDOT, returning the onus to make sure that community voice is heard onto their own shoulders.

Stevenson recalled, "In the beginning, there were opportunities where the City would incentivize community members to come participate. ... They would give us a grant, and that grant would help support getting folks there, and getting out the message. ... That was really successful during the

⁵⁶ Wallace, Interview by Erin Slichter.

⁵⁷ Phan, Interview by Erin Slichter.

⁵⁸ Phan.

early stages of the master bike plan.”⁵⁹ During the Bike Plan process, the City’s investment in community engagement, manifest in paid partnerships with CBOs, succeeded in getting community members involved who would not otherwise have been, including youth and seniors. Stevenson credited much of OakDOT’s commitment to community partnership at the time to then director Ryan Russo, which speaks both to the power that City leaders have in prioritizing community voice, and to the fragility of this kind of work should leadership change.

One of the most prominent projects to emerge out of the Bike Plan is the 90th Avenue center-running bike lane, decorated with Scraper Bike motifs. OakDOT’s website states, “To reach this design concept, OakDOT worked closely with the Original Scraper Bike Team and the local community.”⁶⁰ But at the start, Stevenson had to take the initiative for his community to be represented in its planning process, despite their involvement in the Bike Plan itself. He was able to do so because a member of the Original Scraper Bike Team was on a City commission and let him know that the City was planning to begin work on 90th.

Even after the center-running bike lane was designed through a community-based process, Stevenson had to maintain pressure on the City to follow through on its installation when the project ran over budget. After the street was repaved, the project went untouched for three months until Stevenson checked in with the project manager. Stevenson recalled:

“We sat through all these meetings aside from the master bike plan just to work on this project alone. ... I set up a meeting, and there was the directors of OakDOT and Public Works, ... and I was there by myself, representing East Oakland and my organization. And when they told me that they didn’t have the funds, you had to go in there and slap some tables ... and let them know, ‘I’m not playing with y’all.’ This is why the public really don’t trust [the City], because y’all will tell us one thing and then go behind closed doors and come up with a whole other plan.”⁶¹

Following this meeting, the City somehow found the necessary funds to complete the installation and paint the center-running bike lane. This experience demonstrates how the onus was put on the community to ensure that their voice was heard and responded to. Even after the City had invested in working with CBOs for the Bike Plan, the City failed to take the initiative to maintain a working relationship with the Original Scraper Bike Team for 90th. This inconsistent commitment to working with communities undermines opportunities for building trust, sending trust into a negative balance instead. In Stevenson’s words, the Original Scraper Bike Team couldn’t trust that OakDOT would

⁵⁹ Stevenson, Interview by Erin Slichter.

⁶⁰ City of Oakland Department of Transportation, “90th Ave Repaving & Redesign,” accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.oaklandca.gov/projects/90th-ave-repaving-redesign>.

⁶¹ Stevenson, Interview by Erin Slichter.

follow through, and instead “had to make sure that they were gonna hold up their end of the bargain” themselves.⁶²

*Those without prior exposure to planning may **struggle to find a personal connection** to projects and feel comfortable getting involved.*

→ Use **place-based**, ongoing engagement as an accessible entrypoint into planning, and to protect relationships from staff turnover.

Many typical community engagement events, such as public hearings and one-off workshops in community centers like the one detailed in Chapter 1 for Calm East Oakland Streets, cater to participants who already have an interest in and a comfort level with the decision-making process for transportation planning. Wallace noted that these events often feel unwelcoming to those who haven’t previously been involved in a planning process:

“[OakDOT does] these community meetings ... and outreach events, but it’s the same people who are coming. Typically it’s people who are college-educated, mostly White, ... you know, they already kind of know what’s going on. They understand the language. They feel comfortable in those environments. And it’s great that people are coming, but you’re not necessarily reaching marginalized voices. And so one of the ways to do that is just to meet them where they are.”⁶³

Those whose voices have been historically excluded from participatory processes may not feel comfortable entering that space for the first time, or may think that they lack the “language” to participate. This is of particular concern for young people, who have simply had fewer opportunities to participate in civic life. Wallace noted that an antidote to this pattern is to meet people where they are, both in terms of the physical places where they already gather, and in terms of their level of understanding and comfort with the decision-making process for transportation planning.

Anchoring engagement in existing community gathering spaces, or simply focusing engagement on geographic distinctions that are familiar to residents, like neighborhoods, helps to welcome newcomers to the process because the place itself serves as the existing interest that can connect participants to planning; participants may not start out feeling comfortable forming opinions about transportation planning, but they can more easily recognize that they have relevant experiences and insights about their neighborhood. Annie Ledbury at EBALDC uses hyper-local ‘creative action projects’ to tap into this kind of capacity, where they bring neighbors together to “come up with a problem statement and create something together ... like a mural, or a mini park, or a fence, or a research effort.”⁶⁴ These small-scale projects are effective ways to introduce people to the fields of

⁶² Stevenson.

⁶³ Wallace, Interview by Erin Slichter.

⁶⁴ Ledbury, Interview by Erin Slichter.

planning and policy, because they use a concrete, tangible problem and solution to work through City processes and start to build relationships between interest holders.

A further benefit of place-based engagement is that it can protect a community's civic capacity from the inevitability of City and CBO staff turnover. Ledbury mentioned Oakland's neighborhood councils as an effective forum for building and maintaining government-community relationships, because they are place-based, convening relevant interest holders and decision makers for a particular area. "If it's place-based, ... there are business needs, police needs, streets, Who are the stewards? Because then your relationships are with whoever's at that table for that place, and the City folks who need to engage come through."⁶⁵ For youth, who may not be regular attendees at neighborhood council meetings, place-based engagement could instead take the form of a youth mapping project, conducted in partnership with a CBO over several months in connection to an upcoming transportation project in the neighborhood.

*Typical planning methods and **data may not resonate** with community needs or line up with goals for community engagement.*

→ Be open to **alternative methods** and forms of data, and emphasize the importance of **process alongside product**.

Stevenson's creative work with the Original Scraper Bike Team is effective in engaging young people on transportation issues and generating artistic production that can become valuable data for planning, such as illustrations of the futures that young people envision for their places and communities. However, the recommendations this kind of engagement yields probably won't be based on data that planners are familiar with. Stevenson described a disconnect between traditional planning data and community priorities, saying, "When it comes to City data ... that's the engineer's perspective. ... I don't care how y'all get the data – this is what the community wants. This is what the community needs. This is a vision of the next future. ... If they're continuously doing things how the City wants, and it's not registering with the community, then it's not going to be taken serious."⁶⁶ The typical data that cities use to justify planning decisions may not speak to what is really important for a community. As an alternative, Stevenson suggested that planners can trust community-driven, artistic recommendations enough to build them as pilot projects. Data can then be collected on the pilot to inform decisions about how it will be made more permanent. Pilot projects also serve as an opportunity to bring communities into the data-collection process.

Ledbury echoed that while cities generally need quantitative data to be able to demonstrate the need for a project or its outcomes, the methods typically used to collect this data (surveys, traffic counts,

⁶⁵ Ledbury.

⁶⁶ Stevenson.

etc.) do not lend themselves to deep community engagement. As such, she emphasized the importance of open-mindedness to different kinds of data:

“If you just ask people, ‘What do you want?’ in a survey, that’s one thing. But if you ask people, ‘What would you do with a thousand dollars, working together with an artist, your neighbor, and the shop owner?’ that is a deep and rich set of data, ... really revolutionarily different than a survey. ... How do you take those processes and really carefully make them into qualitative sources of information, that you can see a before and after in a plan as a result of that data, ... when it’s not a multiple-choice question?”⁶⁷

Phan also spoke about using art as an alternative form of engagement data for transportation planning, and added that the process to get there is often as important or more important than the end product. Reflecting on the youth engagement process for Grand Avenue, he said, “The product is easy. You can get that done in four weeks. What’s hard is building a relationship to get to the right design. ... We wanted it to be a little bit different. ... How can we reach folks that we don’t normally reach?”⁶⁸ Art became a powerful strategy for building relationships with young participants and bestowing them with a sense of agency over Grand Avenue, but some people struggled to focus on the *relationships and capacity* that artistic production enabled, rather than on the *artistic output itself*, questioning the value that it could contribute to a transportation plan. When engaging with young people who may be thinking about how transportation decisions get made for the first time, it’s important to center the capacity- and relationship-building aspects of engagement.

⁶⁷ Ledbury, Interview by Erin Slichter.

⁶⁸ Phan, Interview by Erin Slichter.

YOUTH ADVISORY BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

The lessons learned in this section emerged from focus groups with the Oakland Youth Commission and the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) Youth Transportation Advisory Board (YTAB), and from a conversation with Tania Taylor.

The Oakland Youth Commission is a commission of Oakland's government that convenes youth ages 13-21 to represent youth voice in City decision-making and advise the City Council and mayor on youth priorities.

The SFMTA Youth Transportation Advisory Board (YTAB) convenes San Francisco youth ages 14-18 to identify youth transportation needs, conduct outreach, assess SFMTA's work, and make recommendations for projects, policies, and programs.

Tania Taylor is a senior manager at LA Metro who works with the Metro Youth Council. Started in 2022, each year the Youth Council assembles a cohort of about two dozen young people ages 14-17 to provide youth perspective on Metro's work, learn about how Metro's transit system functions, and advocate for transportation issues that affect youth.

Youth advisory boards and commissions are a platform for motivated young people to advocate for transportation needs.

→ Take the **opportunity to go deeper** on the interests that youth participants come in with.

The youth who serve in advisory boards and commissions like the Oakland Youth Commission and SFMTA's YTAB come to these bodies with a pre-existing interest in advocating for transportation. One member of the YTAB, Max Trujillo Díaz, described that they applied to be a part of it because of transportation inequities that they experience in their daily life. "Youth empowerment comes from an ambition to see change. ... I live in the Mission district, and historically speaking it's marginalized. ... Being a person who takes transit to and from school, ... the wealth inequity that I see also translates onto public transit, and so that involves infrequency in buses, or overcrowding. ... From everything that I've seen, I've developed a desire to make change, [but] I didn't have a space to advocate I think that's the reason that I applied to YTAB."⁶⁹ Trujillo Díaz found a space to advocate for transportation in the YTAB.

LA Metro's Youth Council similarly emphasizes youth advocacy. Tania Taylor of LA Metro noted that because the Youth Councilmembers come in with an existing interest in transportation, Metro staff

⁶⁹ SFMTA Youth Transportation Advisory Board, Focus Group by Erin Slichter.

survey the members and tailor the program each year to facilitate their learning and advocacy. “Our main goal of the Council is for advocacy. That’s why they signed on to be part of the Council, ... to be ambassadors for their communities and other high school students to give us their youth perspective. ... We have a one-year window, ... so we want to engage them in topics that are important to them.”⁷⁰ Because Youth Councilmembers self-select into the program and only serve one year, it works best for the topics to focus on building knowledge and advocacy of what they’re already interested in, rather than introducing new topics. That said, another purpose of the Youth Council is to gather youth insight on Metro’s projects, so the program seeks to strike a balance between topics that the members want to learn about and areas that Metro wants youth insight on.

Spreading awareness among youth more broadly is key for transportation advocacy.

→ Foster the ability of youth civic engagement participants to **connect with their peers**.

Although youth advisory boards and commissions only directly involve young people with a pre-existing interest in transportation, those young people who do get involved have expertise and connections to enable planning teams to connect with youth more broadly. Da’Von Griffin of the YTAB expressed the importance of spreading youth awareness of the decision-making process that’s behind transportation beyond just those who are on the YTAB:

“Teenagers that I’ve known in schools, from what I’ve seen, the only thing they know is that the bus goes to school, it goes towards their home, or wherever else they like to go with their friends. ... It’s just a free vehicle to go do whatever they want in. I want them to understand that it’s more than just that. ... They don’t seem to understand how much goes into public transportation. ... And we’re already going through a budget deficit [and a] decision-making process of, what lines are gonna get cancelled this upcoming summer? ... We need to be able to have everyone on board and understand what we need to do. Because right now, we’re at the brink. ... We’ve been all trying to do our part, but what we need them to do is understand.”⁷¹

The effectiveness of youth-led advocacy and awareness campaigns is demonstrated by the Metro Youth Council’s successful push for making free transit for youth permanent. Launched as a pilot program in 2021, GoPass is a free fare program for K-12 students on all LA Metro transit. In the beginning, some school districts were hesitant to buy into GoPass when many of them already provided subsidized transit fare to their students. Taylor expressed that “Youth Councilmembers made it a point to go to their schools, talk to their principals and their counselors, ... so they hear from youth on the importance of it — not just the data, but that personal experience as the end

⁷⁰ Taylor, Interview by Erin Slichter.

⁷¹ SFMTA Youth Transportation Advisory Board, Focus Group by Erin Slichter.

user,”⁷² which was instrumental in boosting uptake of the program. As end users with personal experience of transportation challenges and opportunities for youth, the Councilmembers were best-situated to advocate for their schools to implement GoPass. Another thing that facilitated these conversations was that Councilmembers knew how to tailor outreach about GoPass to their particular school. Students at some schools determined that tabling at an event would be an effective way to reach students, while at others they arranged morning announcements about the program. Still others opted for presentations or other methods. In this way, not only did Youth Councilmembers have the opportunity to advocate for a transportation issue that mattered to them, but Metro got to learn how best to communicate with different schools, boosting program enrollment and transit ridership. As a final tour de force, Youth Councilmembers wrote letters of support that resulted in GoPass being made permanent in 2024, and today over 400,000 students are registered.

Oakland Youth Commissioners noted that social media is a powerful way to spread awareness among their peers. However, this strategy might not capture the attention of students who aren’t already familiar with transportation issues or planning. To fill this gap, Commissioner Katie Liang suggested complementing youth-led social media campaigns with targeted, in-person engagement at schools, focusing on students’ routes to school.⁷³

Ageism hinders access to decision-making, even for youth civic representatives.

→ Identify **adult allies** to speak up for youth, and design more **inclusive public forums**.

Members of the Oakland Youth Commission and the YTAB noted that ageism is a critical issue hindering youth empowerment. Ageism can be expressed in various ways, from direct dismissal of young people’s input such as, ‘You’re too young to understand,’ to more subtle and systematic forms of exclusion, such as public meetings being held during school hours. For this section, I define ageism as any explicit or implicit factor that limits young people’s ability to impact decision-making to a greater degree than adults in the general public are limited. Combating ageism is a priority of the Oakland Youth Commission; in 2023 the Commission led a training on Adultism and Youth Empowerment for City employees.⁷⁴

Expanding on how public meetings are often inaccessible to youth, YTAB member Katelin Leong detailed, “It’s just a lack of accessibility. The meetings being during school hours ... maybe it’s downtown where you can’t really go, because by the time the meeting ends it might be nighttime and unsafe, or you just can’t get there. And it’s daunting to be in a room full of adults and try to

⁷² Taylor, Interview by Erin Slichter.

⁷³ Oakland Youth Commission, Focus Group by Erin Slichter.

⁷⁴ Oakland Youth Commission, “Annual Report of the Oakland Youth Commission, 2023-2024,” 2024, <https://www.oaklandca.gov/documents/2023-24-oakland-youth-commission-annual-report>.

speak up.”⁷⁵ Mason Zoyt, another YTAB member, added, “Ageism is really major. I’ve been in a lot [of meetings] where I show up and they’re like, ‘Oh, you’re a kid.’ That’s the immediate thing. It’s true ... but it doesn’t help when I’m trying to make a point clearly and introduce myself for being anything other than a kid.”⁷⁶ Not only are the time and place of public meetings inaccessible for youth, but the environment within them is not conducive to youth voice.

Youth civic representatives benefit from the allyship of adults to help them speak up. Oakland Youth Commissioner Bryce Hunt explained, “Having adult allies is really important. ... That makes it a lot easier, to know that there’s somebody there to look out for you if you’re talked over.”⁷⁷ The same is true for YTAB members; Lawrence Festin, who manages the YTAB, accompanies them to public meetings, and speaks on their behalf when a meeting is inaccessible to youth. However, that allyship is fragile because it rests on one person. Zoyt explained, “Here, we have Lawrence as an ally who will speak up for us with other adults if he notices that they’re not treating us with the right amount of respect. But in a lot of spaces, Lawrence isn’t there, or someone like Lawrence isn’t there. And that’s another barrier ... where we just need more adults who will see kids as people.”⁷⁸ To boost the effectiveness of youth advisory boards and commissions for empowering youth, not only do they need to connect young people with adult allies who will speak up for them, but decision-makers need to intentionally make space for listening and responding to youth voice.

LA Metro is also cognizant of ageism in their public processes. Taylor notes that they’ve learned that the Councilmembers often feel intimidated speaking at public meetings because of the rigid format. One way that Metro creates more accessible space for youth voice is by complementing required public meetings with youth-focused workshops. At these workshops, the project being discussed is presented in pieces at various stations, so young people can learn about the project and talk to staff directly in a friendly environment.

Another method that Metro uses to uplift youth voice is to recommend former Youth Council members for positions on advisory boards. However, for this to work, the application process has to be responsive to the fact that young people’s applications won’t be directly comparable with those of adults. Taylor explained, “A 17-year-old’s way of application is going to be very different from the 28-year-old who’s already a professional. So you need to understand the level that they’re coming in with, and focus on their perspective and experience.”⁷⁹ Adapting the application process for advisory boards to be intentionally inclusive of young people leads to more diverse and representative boards. Youth advisory boards and commissions can also be an opportunity to prepare youth to apply to advisory boards and be effective representatives.

⁷⁵ SFMTA Youth Transportation Advisory Board, Focus Group by Erin Slichter.

⁷⁶ SFMTA Youth Transportation Advisory Board.

⁷⁷ Oakland Youth Commission, Focus Group by Erin Slichter.

⁷⁸ SFMTA Youth Transportation Advisory Board, Focus Group by Erin Slichter.

⁷⁹ Taylor, Interview by Erin Slichter.

Chapter 3: Youth Engagement Tools

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY MATRIX

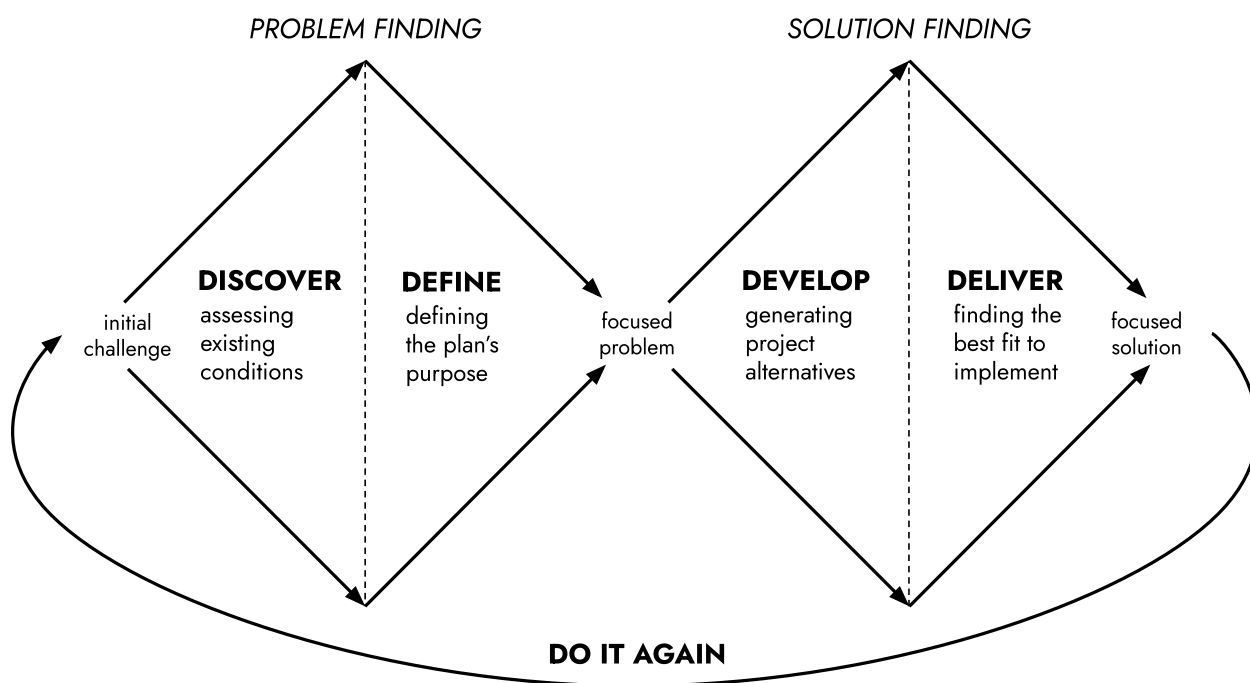
This matrix provides an overview of 12 youth engagement strategies as inspiration for engaging youth on OakDOT projects. The strategies range in length from 30 minutes (e.g. Mind Mapping) to several months (e.g. Youth-led Survey), and some can be adapted to engage participants as young as five. For each strategy, I consider at what phase of a project it would be useful, what kinds of planning questions it can answer, what ages are best suited to it, what its final product will be, and what participants will gain from the experience. I also estimate how long it will take to plan for each strategy, and what materials, staff, and partnerships with others outside of OakDOT will be needed. Lastly, I provide examples of the strategies in practice and links to further resources.

The matrix is available to view, copy, and edit in Google Sheets [at this link](#).

Matching Engagement to Impact: The Double Diamond Model for Planning

The diagram below is an adaptation of the Double Diamond Design Process Model. It maps how the planning process moves through problem finding and solution finding. In both problem and solution finding, the process starts with a divergent thinking phase, then moves towards a convergent thinking phase. Altogether, the Double Diamond Model maps four successive phases: Discover, Define, Develop, and Deliver. For more information, see [this guide](#).⁸⁰

To think through how this model can be applied to planning, consider the development of the 2019 Oakland Bike Plan. “Project Initiation” and “Public Engagement and Existing Conditions” align with the Discover phase, while “Proposed Bicycle Network and Priority Projects” and “Draft and Final Bicycle Plan” align with the Deliver phase. It is unclear if engagement was part of the Define or Develop phases, though engagement is important and useful to them. Lastly, planners Do It Again when prioritized projects like the 90th Avenue Bikeway go through their own planning process.



⁸⁰ Jeff Humble, “What Is the Double Diamond Design Process?,” The Fountain Institute, accessed April 29, 2025, <https://www.thefountaininstitute.com/blog/what-is-the-double-diamond-design-process>.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT PLAN TEMPLATE

The following template can be used to plan youth engagement for planning projects or initiatives that aren't affiliated with a specific project. I have filled it out with an example to demonstrate.

Project or Initiative Name: Hegenberger Road Complete Streets Plan

Current Phase: DISCOVER **DEFINE** DEVELOP DELIVER

Hegenberger Road is on the High Injury Network and lacks complete streets infrastructure like sidewalks, bike facilities, and safe crossings, despite being a vital transportation corridor. The next step is to work with the community to identify mobility needs.

Local Schools, Youth Amenities, and Organizations:

Schools

- EnCompass Academy
- ACORN Woodland Elementary
- Brookfield Village Elementary
- Coliseum College Prep Academy
- East Oakland PRIDE Elementary
- Highland Community School
- Greenleaf Elementary
- Lockwood Steam Academy
- Markham Elementary

Libraries, Rec Centers, and Parks

- Oakland Public Libraries: Martin Luther King Jr. Branch, 81st Avenue Branch, and Brookfield Branch
- Tassafaronga Recreation Center
- William "Bill" Patterson Park
 - Ira Jenkins Community Center
 - East Oakland Sports Center

Organizations

- Acta Non Verba: Youth Urban Farm Project
- East Oakland Building Healthy Communities
- Higher Ground Neighborhood Development Corporation
- HOPE Collaborative
- Original Scraper Bike Team
- Planting Justice
- East Oakland Collective

Rationale and Considerations: *(add as relevant)*

Authenticity and accountability are the foundations of trusting relationships.	→	Match youth engagement strategies to the impact they can be expected to have, given the stage of the project.
Young people in schools have experience and critical thinking skills that are valuable to planning projects at any stage .	→	Be specific about what kind of input will be useful and what form it should take to set expectations for students' impact.
Those without prior exposure to planning may struggle to find a personal connection to projects and feel comfortable getting involved.	→	Use place-based , ongoing engagement as an accessible entrypoint into planning, and to protect relationships from staff turnover.

Engagement Questions:

- How do youth use Hegenberger Road to access school, work, and other destinations?
- What barriers to transportation do youth face on Hegenberger Road?
- What youth mobility needs should be prioritized in the complete streets plan?

(Note that these questions focus on defining the problem, rather than finding solutions. Finding possible solutions is the focus of the Develop phase.)

Engagement Strategy: Youth planning projects with schools or CBOs, incorporating shorter-term strategies such as presentations, group discussions, mind mapping, site mapping, walk audit, data walk, and youth-led survey. Multiple youth planning projects could take place simultaneously at several schools and CBOs, culminating in an event for all groups to share findings with each other and other interest holders through presentations or a data walk.

Expected Outcomes:

What participants can gain

- Knowledge about the project, the planning process, and transportation issues
- Understanding personal experience as relevant planning data
- Technical skills in mapping, surveying, and data collection, analysis, and presentation
- Connections with other interest-holders and City decision-makers
- Career pathway exposure

What the City can gain

- Youth-identified mobility needs, barriers, and priorities
- Map of destinations in the project area that are important to youth
- Local data about youth experience with transportation on the corridor (youth travel patterns, which intersections feel dangerous and why, etc.)
- Stronger connections with youth, teachers, and CBOs who want to be involved

Community Partners:

Partner (contact)	Prior City Collaboration	Existing Capacity	Role in Project
Acta Non Verba (email address)	East Oakland Neighborhoods Initiative	<i>(In this column, note the partner's experience with civic engagement and transportation, or identify ways to connect the current project with the partner's existing initiatives and interests.)</i> Acta Non Verba focuses on community gardening, creating a safe space for youth, and teaching healthy living. The youth planning project can be tailored to connect with these existing interests in public space and health.	Co-develop detailed plan for youth planning project, convene youth participants, lead youth through project
Coliseum College Prep Academy (teacher)		This school's Community Leadership Pathway engages students in a 4-year curriculum to build computer science skills, culminating in a final project in the senior year to solve a problem in the community. The youth planning project can be tailored to further students' skills in coding and data analysis.	Co-develop curriculum, lead youth through project
OUSD Linked Learning Office (Camrin Fredrick, camrin.fredrick@ousd.org)	Y-PLAN projects, including Oakland High School project on Oakland General Plan	Experienced connecting civic partners with OUSD teachers to engage youth on real-world projects. Expert in project-based learning and Career Technical Education (CTE).	Facilitate OUSD partnership, find synergy between teacher and planner needs
<i>(Add as needed)</i>			

Civic Partners:

City Department (contact)	Role in Project
OakDOT (staff names and email addresses; ideally include planners and Inclusive Community Engagement Officer)	Civic lead; co-develop detailed plan with community partners, provide project information, organize presentations and field visits
AC Transit (staff name and email address)	Bus transit on Hegenberger
<i>(Add as needed)</i>	

Timeline: (The phases below are adapted from the [Y-PLAN 5-Step Roadmap](#). Adjust as needed.)

Phase 1: Preparation	Duration/Dates: 1-2 months
Activities: - Connect with project partners - Identify synergies and diverging needs between partners - Develop detailed plan/curriculum for the youth planning project - Set project timeline	Resources and Materials: - Project information (presentations, etc.) - Introduction to City Planning for Youth
Phase 2: Introducing Youth to Planning and the Project	Duration/Dates: 1-2 weeks
Activities: - Introduce youth participants to the project, including the phase it's currently at, the engagement questions the youth planning project seeks to answer, and the impact that youth input will have on the next phases of the project's development - Teach youth participants about planning and transportation - Group discussion about personal experiences on Hegenberger - Mind mapping your route to school/home/other destination	Resources and Materials: - Project information (presentations, flyers, etc.) - Introduction to City Planning for Youth - Detailed plan for youth planning project
Phase 3: Youth-led Data Gathering	Duration/Dates: 2-6 weeks
Activities: - Youth participants interview each other, peers, and other interest-holders about transportation on Hegenberger - Walk audit, bike audit, transit audit, or multi-modal - Survey on youth transportation experiences on Hegenberger - Site mapping with data from the walk audit and survey → add to a city-wide Youth Transportation Map that shows routes and destinations identified by youth planning participants over time	Resources and Materials: - Safe Routes to School Walk Audit Toolkit - Google Forms or Qualtrics - Field Papers - Maptionnaire
Phase 4: Presentation and Look Ahead	Duration/Dates: 1 day
Activities: - Share-out event between youth planning teams at other schools and organizations, including presentations or a data walk - Career/educational pathway panel for youth participants to learn about how the planners and other professionals involved in the project came to their careers - Planners, students, organizations, and other partners connect on next steps for the project and continued youth involvement	Resources and Materials: - Meeting space - Youth presentations or data posters - Planners/professionals presentation about education and career pathways

Conclusion

Youth are some of the most affected by transportation decisions in Oakland. Their unique travel behavior and needs give them unique expertise that is valuable for planning a transportation system that works well for all residents, but they are often excluded from the planning process. This capstone provides key considerations and tools to aid OakDOT transportation planners in activating young people's capacity to engage with planning and giving them a platform to do so.

Moving forward, engaging youth in transportation planning is an opportunity for the City of Oakland to build trust with the next generation. Realizing this opportunity will be a matter of staying accountable to young people's expectations, fostering youth capacity to engage in civic dialogue with the City and within their communities, and investing in sustained relationships that center young people's personal development alongside input on civic issues.

To further the work of this capstone, OakDOT can embody its relationship-building ethos by building a community of practice to test the lessons learned and tools in context. Whereas the concept of 'community' is often contested and vulnerable to cooptation by powerful groups with a stake in defining who does and doesn't belong,⁸¹ a community of practice embraces the ambiguity of 'community' in urban life by staying flexible, making space for new partners to step in as their goals and capacities align with the project, and for existing partners to take a step back in the opposite case.⁸² Over time, a community of practice becomes a site of learning with the capacity to engage with changing circumstances and new challenges.

This is the first draft — every finding can and should be edited as more insights are found, and every tool can and should be adapted as new things are tried. Most importantly, the community of practice that takes on this work should include representatives of those who will be most affected by its implementation: planners, educators, CBO leadership, civic engagement professionals, and of course, Oakland youth themselves.

⁸¹ Levy, N., Lerman, A. E., and Dixon, P., "Reimagining Public Safety: Defining 'Community' in Participatory Research," *Journal of Law and Social Inquiry* 49, no. 1 (February, 2024): 68-89, <https://doi.org/10.1017/lsi.2022.94>.

⁸² Kathryn S. Quick and Martha S. Feldman, "Distinguishing Participation and Inclusion," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 31, no. 3 (September 1, 2011): 272–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X11410979>.