



RECONNECTING CHICAGO'S WEST SIDE COMMUNITIES

Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Planning Grant Application 2023



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List of Appendices

All Appendices and supporting documents are located on the Reconnecting Communities application website: ReconnectingWestSideCommunities.cnectchicago.com

- Appendix A: Letters of Support
- Appendix B: Letter of Funding Commitment
- Appendix C: Study Area Maps
- Appendix D: EJ Screen Report
- Appendix E: FHWA HEP GIS Map
- Appendix F: History





Overview

I-290, known locally as the Eisenhower Expressway, has divided neighborhoods on Chicago's West Side since its construction in the 1950s. More than 13,000 residences, 400 businesses, and 9 acres of a historic park were demolished. A major rapid transit rail line, today known as the Blue Line, was relocated into the highway median, centered within a 450-foot wide swath of expressway lanes and frontage roads. Tight-knit communities were displaced or scattered while the new expressway system catalyzed suburban development and white flight. The effect of these physical and societal forces left poor and minority residents in divided neighborhoods with reduced economic opportunities. Seven decades later, Chicago's West Side communities have never fully recovered. Reconnecting Communities grant funding will advance the City of Chicago's *Reconnecting Chicago's West Side Communities Plan*, aimed at addressing the adverse impacts of I-290 on the surrounding communities. See **Appendix F –History** for more details.

The City will partner with and learn from community members to develop the plan, which will present a vision for improved connections that reflect the needs of the neighborhoods most impacted by I-290. Infrastructure improvements identified in the plan will promote safety and accessibility, support access to services, recreation, education, and economic opportunities, and serve as a source of pride for the residents in the study area. The City has already engaged community members and stakeholders for input on the approach to this plan, as described in **Criterion 4. Community-based Stewardship, Management, and Partnerships**.

Timing is critical. A prompt start will allow the plan to have the most meaningful impact. Major reconstruction of I-290 in Chicago and nearby suburbs is imminent, but a temporary pause in the project created a unique opportunity for the *Reconnecting Chicago's West Side Communities Plan* to provide timely support and community input, including additional insight from the communities surrounding I-290. In 2017 the Illinois Department of Transportation completed preliminary engineering and environmental studies, but construction funding was not available at that time. Certain bridge structures have now advanced to design and are on the State's 5-year construction schedule, and IDOT is pursuing new sources of construction funding. Work is expected to begin soon on renewing the preliminary engineering and environmental studies. The *Reconnecting Chicago's West Side Communities Plan* will inform IDOT's refined I-290 designs by suggesting improvements to the reconstruction project where feasible and by helping to ensure that the designs are forward-compatible with future improvements identified in this study to further enhance community connectivity. The total cost to develop the *Reconnecting Chicago's West Side Communities Plan* is \$2 million and the City is applying for Reconnecting Communities funds for \$2 million.

Photos 1-3. Demolition for the Congress Street Expressway

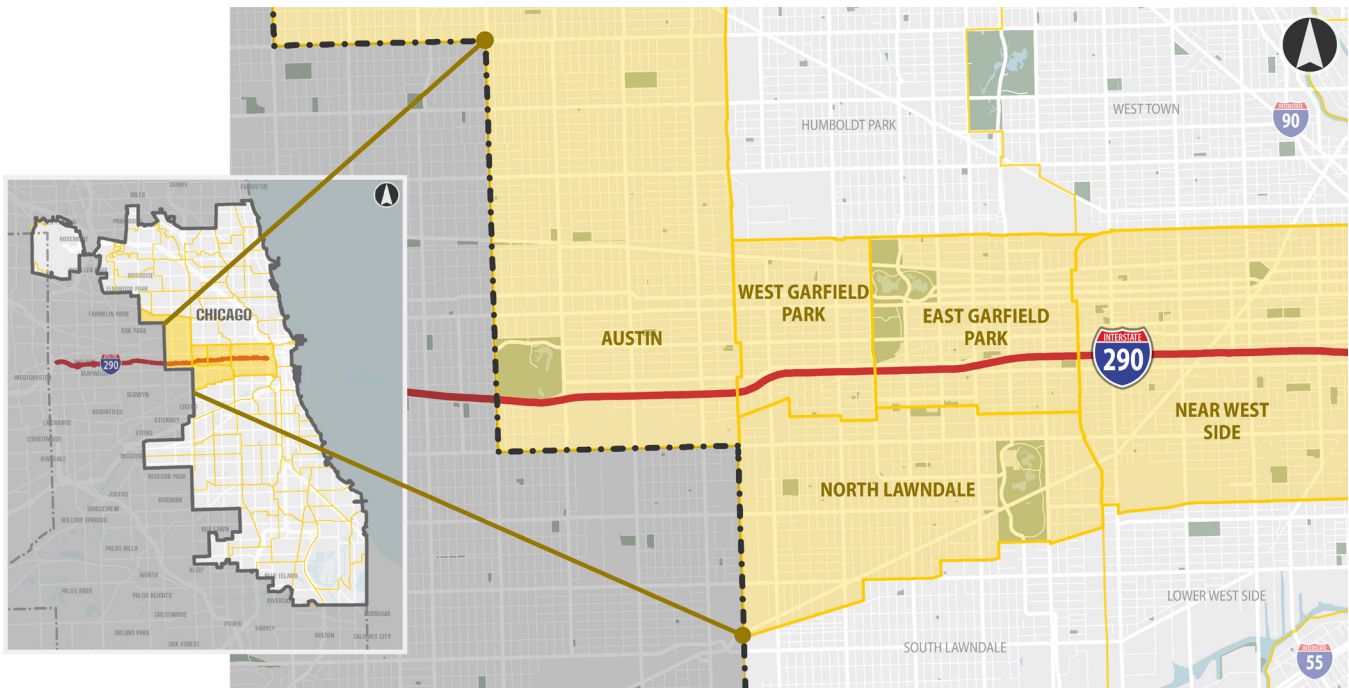




Project Location and Map

I-290 crosses the West Side of Chicago, bisecting disinvested neighborhoods and communities. Between the western City boundary and downtown Chicago, it splits four of Chicago's 77 designated Community Areas: Austin, West Garfield Park, East Garfield Park, and Near West Side. While the adjacent North Lawndale Community Area is not directly bisected by I-290, it is heavily impacted by the corridor and partially falls within the study area. The study area covers the portions of these communities nearest the expressway, bounded by Madison Street, Roosevelt Road, Austin Boulevard, and Damen Avenue.

Figure 1. West Side Communities Adjacent to I-290



As shown in **Appendix E – FHWA HEP Map**, the Austin, West Garfield Park, East Garfield Park, and North Lawndale communities are predominately Black and have median incomes significantly below the city median. The Near West Side is more complicated because it covers a large geographic area including both disinvested neighborhoods further west as well as more affluent areas closer to downtown, resulting in overall statistics that mask the variance within this area. The portion of Near West Side included in the study area is the historically disinvested area.

See **Appendix D – EJ Screen Report** for more details.

The CTA Blue Line train runs down the center of the expressway from downtown Chicago past the western City limits to Forest Park, IL. There are 10 Blue Line train stations along I-290 within the *Reconnecting Chicago's West Side Communities Plan* study area, which are accessed through bridges over the expressway. This was the first multimodal interstate corridor in the United States to incorporate a transit rail line within its right-of-way.

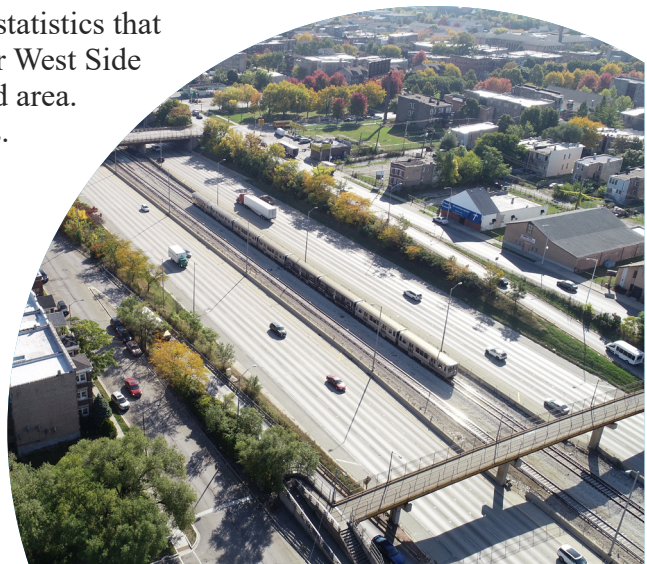
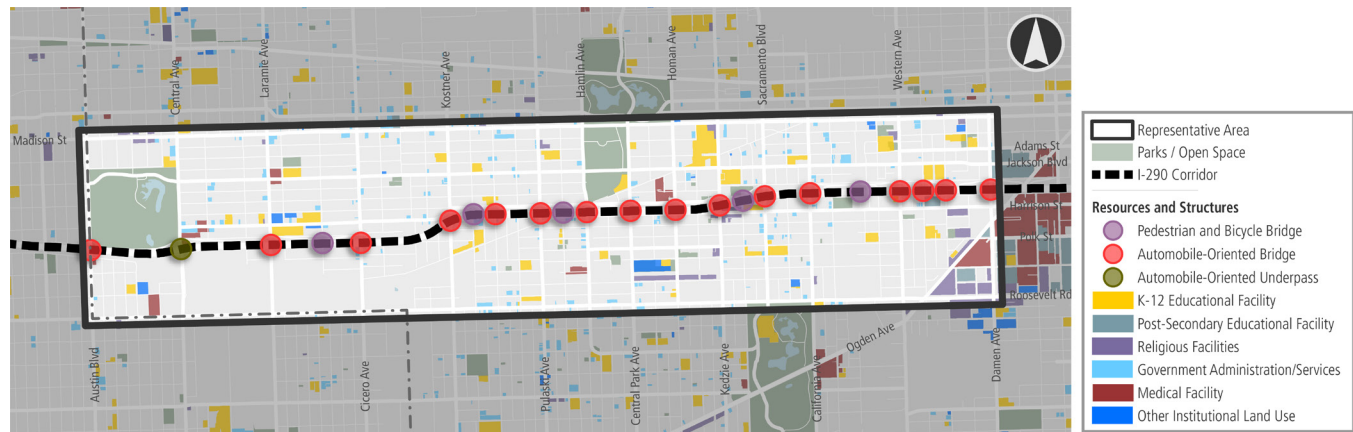


Photo 4. Blue Line train and pedestrian bridge across I-290



Pedestrians and cyclists can cross I-290 at 22 locations in this area, including five pedestrian bridges (one closed) and 17 bridges shared with motor vehicles. Seventeen bus routes serve this area, including 45 high ridership bus stops (200+ daily riders), see **Appendix C – Transit Map**. Multiple bike routes are found in this area, as seen in **Appendix C – Bike Routes Map**. Although, none cross I-290 within the westernmost 2.5 miles of the study area.

Figure 2. Local Resources and Structures



Response to Merit Criteria

Criterion 1. Equity and Environmental Justice

Harmful Historic Policies

I-290 is a physical barrier and a source of harmful environmental and health effects for local residents. The expressway destroyed homes and businesses, displacing entire communities. Recognizing the harmful legacy of these past actions, the City of Chicago plans to set a new course by improving community safety, cohesion, and quality of life through enhanced connectivity over and around this interstate expressway.

As a result of I-290, Mexican-Americans on the Near West Side were displaced to Pilsen and Little Village while residents of the tight-knit communities in Greektown and Little Italy were scattered across the city. The predominantly Jewish residents of West Garfield Park saw the construction of the superhighway as a physical manifestation of their political powerlessness to protect their communities. One of the “crown jewels” of the Austin community was Columbus Park. When I-290 was constructed, the southern 9 acres of the park were destroyed. The park was not extensively restored until 1992.

Four out of the five neighborhoods in the study area are ranked as having the lowest mobility and highest economic hardship on CDOT's Mobility and Economic Hardship Index (MOBEC). To date, these communities have never fully recovered from the disruption posed by the construction of I-290 and have experienced significant decline as a result. By weakening the social and economic cohesiveness of adjacent neighborhoods, the expressway also abetted significant demographic fluctuations caused by predatory real estate practices that led to white flight, as white residents left for suburban areas. For example, West Garfield Park was 0.05% Black in 1950. By 1970, this increased to 97.98%.

While I-290 provided rapid access to downtown Chicago and the Loop for people moving to the newly created suburbs, it did not benefit residents whose lives were disrupted by the creation of this superhighway. The relocated rapid transit line became physically isolated from the remaining community, and former regional express train services were discontinued. Original plans envisioned that a commercial corridor would develop adjacent to the expressway, as seen in the West Central Community Plan for Industrialism. Unfortunately, displacement of homes, business, and transit service



fueled suburbanization and reduced investment in these areas. I-290 weakened the urban neighborhoods in its path instead of strengthening them.

Existing Disparities and Community Needs

A primary goal of this project is to develop a plan shaped by community stewardship. To this end, the City has begun to engage stakeholders from the West Side communities. Needs highlighted in these initial stakeholder conversations include improving air quality, reducing extreme heat, improving public health, and holistically addressing harms beyond infrastructure. The *Reconnecting Chicago's West Side Communities Plan* will identify those harms and develop a range of solutions (see **Criteria 2, 3, and 6** for more details). The needs identified by community stakeholders align with the data.

Harmful historic policies continue to echo in the communities adjacent to I-290 today. The EJ Screen shows that 60 percent households half a mile from the I-290 corridor are low income compared to 35 percent across the City. Within 0.5 miles of I-290, 18 percent of the population is unemployed, twice the rate for Chicago. The City of Chicago is committed to substantive investment in communities that have been historically disinvested. This plan is key to build on ongoing and future economic development in the area by identifying the effects of reduced connectivity across the I-290 on wealth building, and access to jobs and other essential resources.

The EJ Screen shows that these West Side communities experience low life expectancy and have a 25 percent health value, which is at the 89th state percentile, and the rate of asthma along the I-290 corridor is at the 95th state percentile. The very serious health disparities observed along I-290 are likely due to the unacceptable air quality. These communities experience diesel particulate matter at concentrations at the 92nd state percentile and toxic releases to the air at concentrations at the 97th state percentile. The unhealthy air quality is likely due to proximity to I-290.

The health disparities produced in part by proximity to the I-290 expressway are further magnified by a lack of access to green space. According to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), the accessible park acreage per 1,000 residents for the West Side communities ranges from 0.69 to 4.08, while the overall park accessibility for Chicago is 2.42, see **Table 1** to the right. The communities with the highest park access are West and East Garfield Park, which boast the historic Garfield Park, which is connected to Chicago's Boulevard System. The City will work closely with the Community Advisory Group and stakeholders to increase connectivity to Garfield Park and identify other green space assets that require connectivity improvements.

Table 1. Park Accessibility

Community Area	Accessible Park Acreage per 1,000 Residents
Austin	0.69
West Garfield	3.25
East Garfield	4.08
Near West Side	1.63
North Lawndale	2.01
Chicago (baseline)	2.42

Criterion 2. Access

I-290 separates West Side Chicagoans from educational, cultural, recreational, health, and economic opportunities within their communities. It limits access to transit, including the CTA Blue Line and many bus routes. The *Reconnecting Chicago's West Side Communities Plan* will explore options such as improving infrastructure for people walking or biking on existing shared and pedestrian bridges, adding or enhancing pedestrian bridges and bicycle facilities, incorporating greenery into bridges, and making safety and access improvements to nearby streets and intersections through complete streets principles. The latter could include curb bump-outs, bus bulbs, pedestrian refuge medians, raised crosswalks, bike lanes, high-visibility pavement markings, and traffic signal upgrades such as pedestrian countdown timers and accessible pedestrian signals. Special attention to be paid to those with visually impairments.





The CTA also has plans to upgrade their facilities, seeking funding for accessible stations system-wide wherever possible. Two of the stations within the study area are already accessible, and one is programmed to be accessible by the end of 2025. All ten Blue Line station entrances within the study area are in the middle of the 450-foot barrier that I-290 and its frontage roads create. Two of these stations are ADA accessible, and one is programmed to be accessible by the end of 2025. The plan will complement the CTA's ongoing efforts to upgrade their station accessibility.

Safety in the transportation system is and has been a top priority for the City of Chicago as evidenced through its many planning and policy initiatives over the past decade including: [Chicago Pedestrian Plan](#), [Chicago Cycling Strategy](#), [Complete Streets Design Guidelines](#), [Make Way for People Initiative](#), [Make Way for Play Guide](#), [High Crash Corridors Framework Plan](#), [Vision Zero Chicago Action Plan](#), and most recently its new [Strategic Plan for Transportation](#) with a major focus on safety and equity in the transportation system.

Criterion 3. Facility Suitability

The I-290 corridor through Chicago spans four lanes in each direction with CTA Blue Line rapid transit tracks and stations in the median, plus frontage roads and frequent entrance and exit ramps at cross streets. Together, these features create a nearly 400-foot-wide barrier between communities to the north and south. I-290 separates West side residents and visitors from local educational, recreational, and health resources. It hampers economic opportunity by limiting the customer and employee base for local businesses, and conversely by limiting residents' access to employment opportunities, goods, and services. It poses health and safety risks for members of the surrounding communities, and it impedes access to transit. These effects are experienced most profoundly by people without access to motor vehicles and people with limited mobility, both groups that are over-represented on the West Side compared to the City of Chicago overall.

Educational, Economic, and Services Destinations

The *Reconnecting Chicago's West Side Communities Plan* study area is bounded by Madison Street on the north, which is primarily a commercial corridor. Laramie Avenue, Cicero Avenue, Pulaski Road, and Western Avenue serve a variety of commercial and industrial uses, as does Roosevelt Road on the south edge of the study area. Educational resources in the study area include 36 elementary and high schools and various daycare facilities. Two libraries, six hospitals, YMCAs, and more provide vital health and community resources. Places of worship are found throughout the study area, and hospitals include Loretto Hospital in the Austin community and the Jesse Brown Veterans Medical Center in the Illinois Medical District.

Recreation and Green Space Destinations

I-290 also separates residents from regional parks, most notably Garfield Park and Columbus Park which are both on the north side of the expressway. These parks provide nature and green space, field houses, swimming facilities, athletic fields, lagoons, tennis courts, gardens, playgrounds, and a golf course. The Garfield Park Conservatory, widely regarded as one of the largest and best indoor conservatories in the country, has been a year-round resource for education and relaxation in nature since its opening in 1908, decades before I-290 was constructed. Columbus Park is considered the masterpiece of landscape architect Jens Jensen. It is one of the few parks in the

Photo 5. Austin Blvd and I-290 at Columbus Park





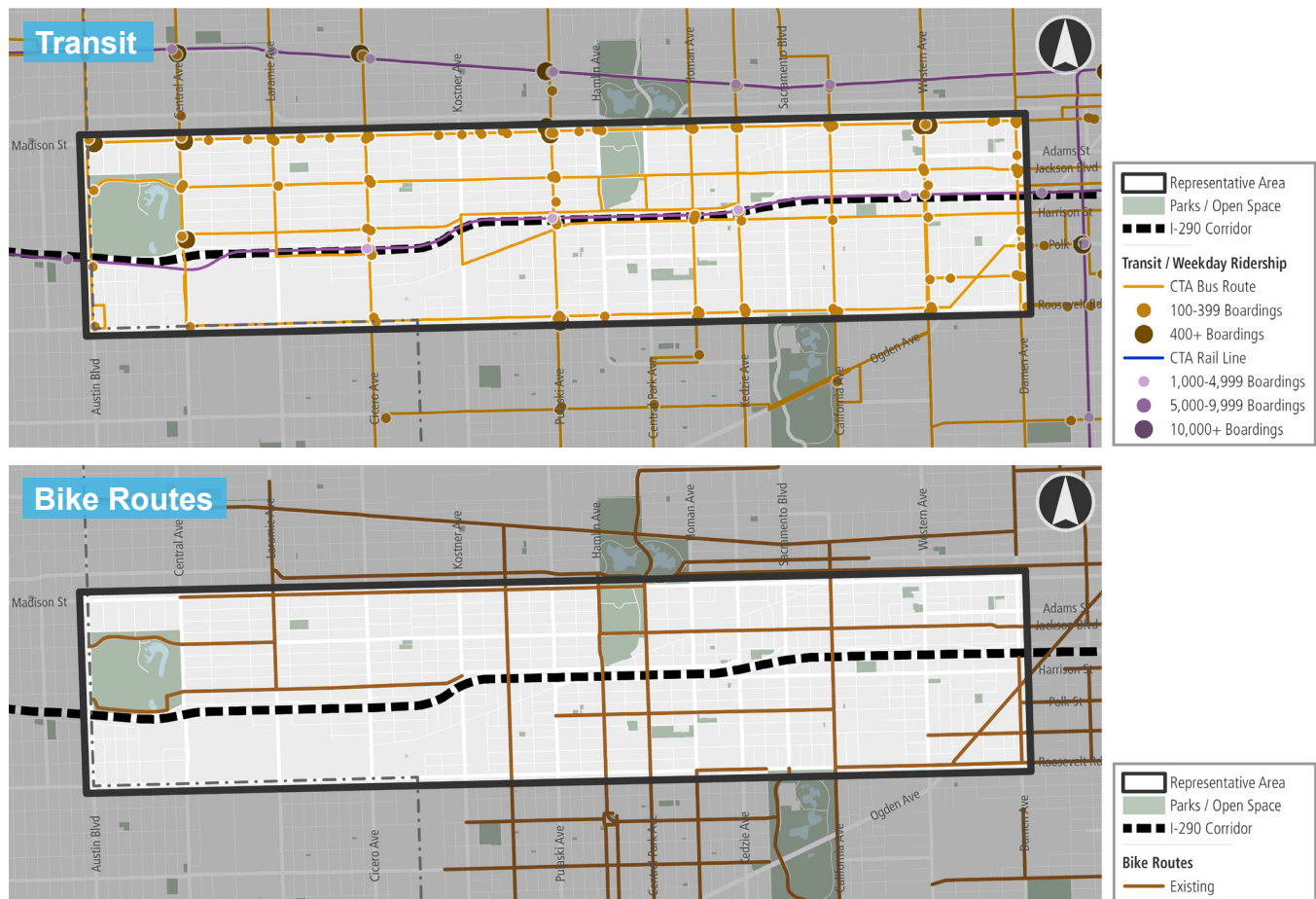
nation to be designated a National Historic Landmark in its entirety. For Chicagoans south of I-290, the expressway is a barrier inhibiting access to the immense natural, cultural, and recreational resources that these parks offer. Independence Boulevard, part of Chicago's historic Boulevard System, is effectively a park in its own right, with 120 feet of green space, trees, paths, and grassy fields between vehicular lanes. It connects Garfield Park to Douglass Park, another large historic park just south of the study area with similar amenities and two high schools. Before I-290, Independence Boulevard was a continuous greenway connection between Garfield and Douglass parks. Expressway construction left a gap in that greenway. Today, pedestrian access across I-290 is limited to two bridges, each carrying a narrow sidewalk on one side.

Existing Routes to Local Destinations and Transit

Pedestrians or bicyclists can cross I-290 at 22 locations in this area (see **Figure 2** in the **Project Location and Map** section). Five of these crossings are pedestrian bridges (one of which is closed) and 17 are bridges shared with motor vehicle traffic.

Most of the bridges are not ADA compliant, and pedestrians are relegated to narrow sidewalks with little to no shade. All ten CTA Blue Line stations in the study area are in the center of the bridges because the Blue Line runs down the center of I-290. Most station entrances lead to only one side of the bridge, so transit riders who transfer between the train station and buses on the other side of the street often cross mid-block. Despite these conditions, seventeen bus routes in the study area include 45 high ridership stops (200+ daily riders), as seen in **Appendix C – Transit Map**. There are many designated bike routes in the study area for east-west travel parallel to I-290, but for the westernmost 2.25 miles of the study area, none of them runs north-south across the expressway, as seen in **Appendix C – Bike Routes Map**.

Figure 3. Transit and Bike Routes

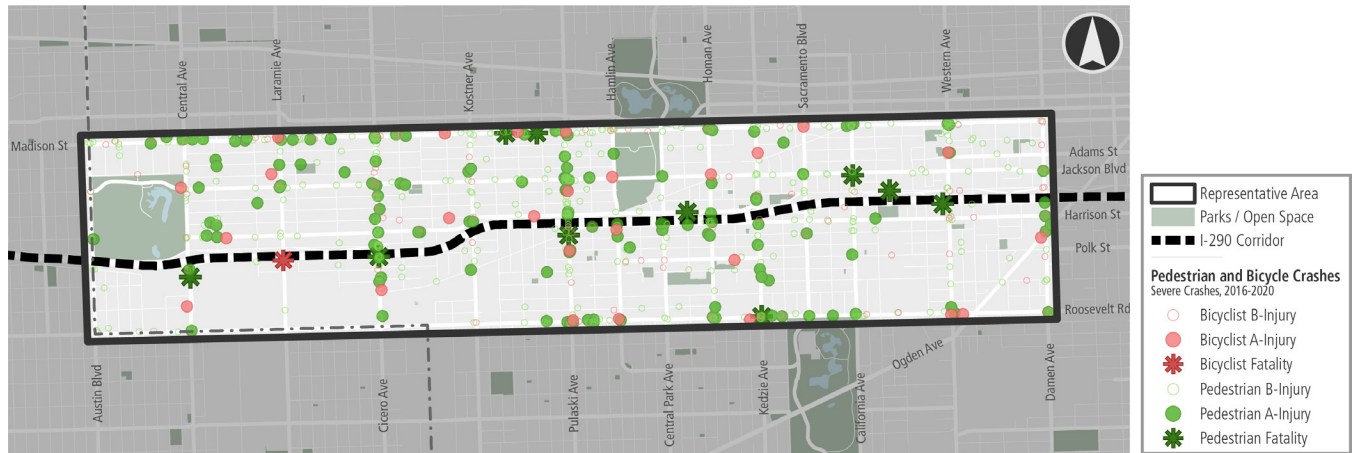




Safety

Pedestrians near I-290 often must cross I-290 ramps where traffic speeds onto and off of the expressway. Narrow sidewalks are adjacent to heavy traffic, and crosswalks are long. These existing conditions lead to increased traffic safety risk and stress for people walking or bicycling to the CTA stations and beyond. As seen in **Figure 4**, there were 10 pedestrian fatalities and 146 pedestrian incapacitating injuries in the study area between 2016-2020, with clusters of these occurring near the entrance and exit ramps of I-290 in addition to major arterials, such as Roosevelt Road and Madison Street. Community leaders have shared the public safety dangers along I-290, particularly in the evening. These challenges are even more significant for people who use wheelchairs or other mobility assistance devices.

Figure 4. Pedestrian and Bicycle Crashes (2016-2020)



Environmental Burden

The lack of greenery along I-290 contributes to the heat island effect, exacerbating the poor health outcomes of the surrounding community.

Risk of Inaction

I-290 reconstruction plans are on pause but they are expected to resume soon, as described in the Overview section of this narrative. This project will proceed with or without a local community-based plan. But without additional local perspective from West Side communities, there may be missed opportunities to meet the needs of the people most directly affected by the barriers the expressway imposes. The CTA's plans to upgrade their facilities and bring them into compliance with ADA standards are also ongoing. A neighborhood plan is vital to ensure accessible routes to these stations.

The *Reconnecting Chicago's West Side Communities Plan* will prepare a path to address the issues discussed here throughout Chicago's West side. These improvements are described in **Criterion 2: Access**.



Photo 6. Pedestrian bridge connecting to park assets



Criterion 4. Community-based Stewardship, Management, and Partnerships

The Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC) published a [report](#) identifying harmful transportation infrastructure across the city that should be prioritized as part of the *Reconnecting Communities Grant Program*. MPC surveyed the public to identify transportation infrastructure in the Chicago region that act as barriers to community assets and mobility, and I-290 through the West Side of Chicago rose to the top. The MPC report provides the City with a significant head start on a framework for future stakeholder engagement.

The City conducted a community workshop on October 3, 2022 and an informational stakeholder meeting on September 11, 2023 with over 20 key community leaders and residents from Austin, West Garfield Park, and North Lawndale. These early touchpoints were key in designing this planning project that addresses the community's concerns and previous planning for the I-290 corridor. Meaningful engagement will be integrated into every step of the *Reconnecting Chicago's West Side Communities Plan* project.

The City will complete an analysis in partnership with community members to understand historic and existing policies, burdens, and disparities that have contributed to the historic disinvestment throughout the project area. Upon project initiation, a robust and inclusive community participation plan that reflects a community-centered approach will be established. This will include a representative Community Advisory Group (CAG), public surveys, and multiple community workshops led by key community partners. All materials will be translated to additional languages to ensure all community members can participate and provide their feedback. The goal will be to foster community ownership of this project by building on previous grassroots planning, such as the [Vision Zero West Side Plan](#), and facilitate community visioning for a reconnected and thriving West Side.

In September 2023, prior to the submission of this grant application, the City convened a group of community stakeholders, see **Appendix G**. CAG representatives would include citywide equity and civic organizations, bringing an equity lens to the conversations. Recognizing the value of their time, the City intends to pay these individuals for their expertise.

The City will work closely with the CAG to develop public surveys that can be easily shared throughout the community. The public surveys will be made available online, in-person, and ADA accessible and will be advertised throughout the neighborhoods using a mixture of virtual and in-person methods. Through these public surveys, the West Side communities will share their experience navigating the I-290 corridor and how they would like to see inequities corrected.

In addition to a CAG and public surveys, multiple community workshops will be conducted at key points in the project. The community workshops will be held during the daytime and evenings/weekends to accommodate all community work schedules. The workshops will also be paired with existing activities, such as farmer's markets, safety meetings, and school events to reduce the number of commitments needed by community members and to capture residents who may not hear about the meeting but are attending the coinciding event.

"I-290 right now creates its own division, one side of the highway versus the other. Along the bridges that cross over I-290, other cities have created space for pedestrians and people to connect, including restaurants. May be interesting idea for uniting the West Side."

- West Side Leader Damell Shields of Austin Coming Together

"Riders are suffering because it's dangerous. We should integrate new, green technologies wherever possible to make it safer for bikers and transit riders."

- Cecily Langford of Equiticity



Criterion 5. Equitable Development

Placemaking

The City will work with the community on potential local artwork to celebrate the unique community character. One possibility is for coordination with the community workshops to celebrate the local culture and allow community members to leave their unique stamp on the improvements in this area. The Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events could work with the community to develop public artwork in coordination with the Community Advisory Group and community workshops. These could include murals or mosaics, which could then be integrated into the bridges over I-290, or on local streets adjacent to I-290.

Local Equitable Development Plan

The EJ Screen shows that the communities along the I-290 expressway experience an unemployment rate twice as high as the City, are identified as disadvantaged communities under DOTs Justice40 initiative, and are housing burdened. Over the years, the City has prioritized funding to support community wealth-building by prioritizing affordable housing and neighborhood economic cores. The City has incentivized mixed-income housing development through TIF funding. Much of the West Side communities divided by the I-290 corridor fall under a TIF District. The TIF District has led to over \$327M in redevelopment projects with \$99M TIF investment. There are six TIF-funded mixed-income housing developments near I-290 that represent 438 new housing units for the West Side communities ranging from condominiums to single-family homes, of which at least 70 percent will be affordable housing. The TIF district has also helped fund the redevelopment of Austin's community center, just one block north of the I-290 expressway. The community center is a key resource for the neighborhood and its redevelopment will bring essential community resources to the West Side including a gym, STEM workshops and labs, and a mental health clinic.

The City leverages funds generated in comparatively affluent neighborhoods to invest in locally owned small businesses through the [Neighborhood Opportunity Fund](#). The West Side communities' disinvestment has led to limited access to healthy food. Through the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund, the City has provided two local grocers and a pet care facility over \$1.5 M combined to continue their essential services to the community.

Chicago passed the most comprehensive, equity-focused update to its TOD policies in July 2022 through the [Connected Communities Ordinance](#) to prioritize equitable transit-oriented development (ETOD). One of the many goals for this ordinance is to advance Chicago's ongoing effort to bring [ETODs](#) to

disinvested and low-income neighborhoods while addressing the negative impacts of a car-centric built environment. The ordinance's zoning reforms will catalyze investment near transit, make streets safer for all Chicagoans who walk, roll, bike, or drive, and promote affordable housing options near transit. Under *Connected Communities*, new development and rehabilitation projects near the Blue Line and I-290 will have greater flexibility in parking minimums and potential for greater density. It also provides significant incentives for additional affordable housing and pedestrian-friendly designs.

LOCAL EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT

- » **TIF Funding for Mixed-Income Housing Development**
 - \$327M in redevelopment projects (\$99M from TIF investment)
 - 438 new housing units, at least 70% affordable
- » **Neighborhood Opportunity Fund**
 - \$1.5M in essential service developments (two local groceries and pet care facility)
- » **Connected Communities Ordinance**
 - Prioritize equitable transit-oriented development (ETOD)





Community Restoration, Stabilization, and Anti-Displacement Strategies

In 2019, the City completed the [Vision Zero West Side Plan](#). [Vision Zero Chicago](#) is the commitment and approach to eliminating fatalities and serious injuries from traffic crashes. The West Side Plan focuses specifically on the Garfield Park, Austin and North Lawndale areas. Identified improvements from the *Vision Zero West Side Plan* in Garfield Park include: prioritize investment in pedestrian safety on Madison Street, implement programs that encourage active transportation to and from schools, and explore other options for rapid delivery projects in the neighborhood.

Other guiding principles such as improving access to healthcare, training, and jobs for residents along the corridor will be established with the community at the onset of the project. These will then inform benchmarks as the design is developed and will be used to ensure the final infrastructure plan will align with the goals of the surrounding community. For example, if improving pedestrian safety at difficult intersections is a goal, one benchmark would be reducing injury pedestrian/bicycle crashes at intersections each year. Clear goals and benchmarks will be established throughout the planning process.

It is also anticipated that this project would bring economic vitality to the area, aligning with the USDOT Strategic Plan priority of Economic Strength and Global Competitiveness. These improvements would likely increase foot traffic, improve access to more jobs, and develop local jobs.

Criterion 6. Climate and Environment

The City's initial outreach to community stakeholders revealed that the community would like to see a plan that prioritizes environmental justice, see Criterion 1. Equity and Environmental Justice for more information. The EJ Screen and the [2022 Chicago Climate Action Plan \(CAP\)](#) show that the west side of Chicago is not only historically underserved, but it also lacks sufficient tree canopy coverage to weather extreme climate events such as extreme heat and rainfall, The Plan will develop strategies that prioritizes active transportation and the reduction of reliance on motor vehicles, thus reducing negative impacts of car use such as greenhouse gas emissions and improved health outcomes.

The Plan is consistent with the City's deep commitment to designing and developing projects that consider climate change impacts. The CAP provides a strategic framework to "reduce Chicago's contribution to global climate change, prepare our communities for the effects of a changing climate, and support a just transition to a thriving green economy." The plan will utilize this framework to inform the strategies developed for the community. For example, within the CAP, one strategy is to make walking, biking, or transit viable options for all trips. It is recommended to "prioritize sidewalk and road maintenance by using an equity lens along with condition assessments to address historic imbalances in the upkeep of City infrastructure".

Criterion 7. Workforce Development and Economic Opportunity

The *Reconnecting Chicago's West Side Communities Plan* will provide opportunities for small businesses in the transportation sector. At minimum 30 percent of the project will be required to be performed by Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) firms.

Any City of Chicago construction projects that come from the plan will also have economic benefits for the community. In the past, the City of Chicago has used local hiring agreements when permitted by the funding agency. The City also requires contractors to maximize use of U.S. Department of Labor-registered apprenticeship programs and have negotiated labor agreements that work to ensure that graduates of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and City Colleges of Chicago have access to apprenticeships for these good-paying jobs. This apprenticeship program benefits low-income students of color, 21 percent of CPS students who are bilingual, and nearly 70 percent who qualified for free or reduced lunch in the 2021-2022 school year. At the City Colleges, nearly 70 percent of students identify as students of color.

