



## Advancing Equity through Capital Construction Projects in Asheville, NC

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*As part of Bloomberg Philanthropies' What Works Cities initiative, the Government Performance Lab (GPL) provided pro-bono technical assistance to help the City of Asheville create an equity-focused framework for prioritizing sidewalk construction projects.*

**The Challenge:** In many cities across the country, decisions like which streets to pave or which sidewalks to repair are made based on factors such as volume of traffic or number of complaints. Unfortunately, this type of approach can disadvantage communities that are less likely to make complaints or aren't regarded as high-traffic destinations. In Asheville, as in many U.S. cities, redlining (exclusionary real estate practices) and urban renewal pushed minority communities outside of central areas. Regions of the city that have previously been neglected by capital spending projects (including street and sidewalk repair) are largely low-income communities of color.<sup>1</sup> Sidewalks are important for economic opportunity (increasing property values and links to transportation), well-being (connecting individuals to community resources or parks), and safety (preventing pedestrian-involved accidents). As part of the City's wider effort to improve the equity of capital investments, Asheville set out to address sidewalk disparities in historically-neglected communities.

**The Innovation:** In Asheville, allocating resources to repair, upgrade, or install sidewalks had previously been based on factors such as safety and proximity to community destinations. However, using these factors alone can effectively deprioritize marginalized neighborhoods because of lower traffic counts and fewer existing community destinations. With support from the GPL, the City aimed to intentionally incorporate economic and racial equity as selection criteria for capital projects. Specifically, the City:

### **Created a new prioritization framework for sidewalk construction that elevates equity**

With up to \$200,000 to spend annually on sidewalk projects, the Neighborhood Sidewalks team wanted to determine the best way to allocate funding effectively and equitably. A cross-agency team of City staff, with support from the GPL, identified three major components for making decisions on which sidewalk projects to prioritize for investment:

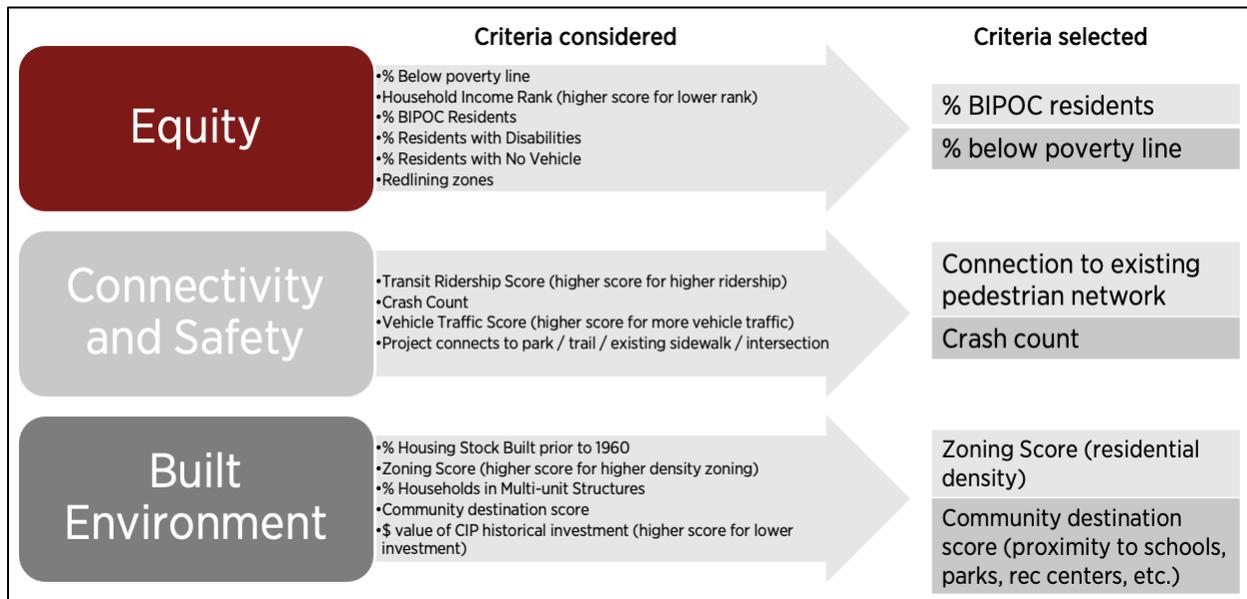
1. **Equity:** refers to projects in areas that have been historically marginalized or disinvested in, or to neighborhoods with a high proportion of low-income and/or people of color.
2. **Connectivity and safety:** refers to the degree of connection between the area and other forms of transportation (connectivity), and the number of pedestrian-involved crashes or accidents (safety).
3. **Built environment:** refers to factors like community density, level of previous community investment, and proximity to community destinations like school and parks.

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<sup>1</sup> City of Asheville GIS, 'Mapping Racial Equity in Asheville, NC', 2021, <https://avl.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=10d222eb75854cba994b9a0083a40740>.

To build a prioritization tool based on these three components, project partners considered many potential measurement criteria (see figure below). Ultimately, they decided to use two criteria for each component: equity is measured by the percent of residents identified as BIPOC and the percent of residents living below the poverty line; connectivity and safety are measured by the level of connection to an existing pedestrian network and the area’s crash count; and, the built environment is measured by an area’s zoning score and community destination score.

### Criteria considered for prioritizing sidewalk construction



To rank sidewalk projects against the six selected criteria, Asheville’s Geographic Information System (GIS) staff mapped sidewalk project locations and overlaid the relevant demographic information. For the less straightforward criteria (connectivity to existing networks, zoning, and community destination scores), the team created scoring ranges based on relevant, standardized criteria. (For example, the connection to an existing pedestrian network score was created by answering yes or no to the following prompts: project segment connects to greenway, project segment connects to city trail, project segment connects to an intersection.) The mapping and data-gathering process allowed City staff to know, for each potential sidewalk project, the zoning and community destination scores, the crash count, the level of connection to existing pedestrian networks, racial demographics, and resident income levels. This detailed project-level information allowed City staff to score and rank potential projects.<sup>2</sup> Once priority projects were identified, City staff determined which projects were feasible and reasonable based on a standard set of project requirements (for example, if there was already a sidewalk on one side of the street, or if there were significant obstructions in a sidewalk’s path, the project might be deferred). City staff have begun to plan these sidewalk projects in the places that rose to the top of the list.

<sup>2</sup> Staff modeled how weighting the different criteria affected which projects would come to the top of the list for funding, and ultimately decided to give each criteria equal weight (to both keep the tool simpler, and because various weightings did not result in significant differences to the order of project rankings).

**The Results:** Although it is still early after the launch of the sidewalk prioritization framework, Asheville has seen promising results. In particular, the project has:

**1. Directed funding for sidewalk construction to historically marginalized neighborhoods, in an effort to improve safety, connectivity, and economic opportunity outcomes**

The City has begun to improve and build sidewalks in low-income communities of color, and will continue this pattern of investment using the new prioritization framework. Improved sidewalks can help increase neighborhood mobility by better connecting residents to community resources and other transportation methods, and can reduce the number of pedestrian accidents. High-quality sidewalks can also improve property values for neighborhoods, and encourage other forms of community investment. This investment in sidewalk construction represents an important piece of the City's broader strategy to improve equitable outcomes through capital construction projects.

**2. Created a simple framework for incorporating equity in deciding how to allocate funding for capital projects, which can be applied more broadly across the City**

For the first time, the City of Asheville has explicitly included equity in deciding how to allocate funding for capital projects. The prioritization framework developed for the sidewalks project has inspired other departments to integrate equity considerations more strongly into their decision-making about community investments, such as where to install public WIFI and where to set up remote learning centers for students during the pandemic. By creating a simple model for incorporating equity into capital project prioritization, project partners hope that over time historically marginalized neighborhoods in Asheville will have more and higher-quality public infrastructure such as well-paved streets, well-maintained sidewalks, parks and recreation centers, and public transportation.

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