



America's Infrastructure Needs: Community Development Leaders Weigh In

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—*Marietta Rodriguez, NeighborWorks America*



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n 2021, a lot has been written about President Joe Biden's American Jobs Plan and its Neighborhood Homes Investment Act component—aka his infrastructure plan—but much of the discussion focuses on the politics of the bill, rather than on the nation's infrastructure needs. So, to add substance to the discussion, we asked a group of community development CEOs to share their reactions. Tony Pickett of Grounded Solutions Network, Marietta Rodriguez of NeighborWorks America, Lisa Rice of the National Fair Housing Alliance, and Dr. Akilah Watkins of the Center for Community Progress are members of an informal cohort of leaders of color who meet periodically and who, over the past few years, have gained leadership roles in national community development organizations, many of which had previously maintained all-white leadership.

As prompts, we provided three questions: (1) What is the most transformational aspect of the infrastructure bill? (2) What is missing from the bill that is important to include? (3) What conversation should we be having about infrastructure that we are not having? Respondents were invited to answer these questions directly or use them as a launching pad to go in whatever direction they chose.

WEAVING TOGETHER OUR COLLECTIVE KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

by Marietta Rodriguez



“In the post-pandemic recovery period, it has never been more critical to implement cross-sectoral collaboration in addressing the needs and bridging the gaps—socially and economically.”

What comes to mind in thinking about the possibility of any infrastructure investment is the need for a comprehensive and coordinated response. As much as everyone is actively strategizing to develop the most appropriate plan to address the myriad challenges that regions and communities face, the results are still too fractured. Unfortunately, disparate agendas and insufficient funds have fostered a siloed implementation environment with more problems than working solutions. It's been too long since we have seen such positive movement [as Biden's plan] toward national investment in infrastructure that speaks to the diverse needs associated with systemic change. NeighborWorks is optimistic. It's refreshing to see and feel this kind of discussion around comprehensive investment. It will be vital to our post-pandemic recovery—strengthening capacity and ensuring long-term sustainability for communities.

What's missing and the conversations we should be having are the same. In the post-pandemic recovery period, it has never been more critical to implement cross-sectoral collaboration in addressing the needs and bridging the gaps—socially and economically. No panacea will address all the inequities that have stifled growth and stability in our communities. That said, we have an opportunity to come together as a collective and galvanize and fortify our resources and expertise to maximize this moment. Just as a rope is made of separate strands working together, we are weaving together our collective knowledge and power. We should be talking about how we get everyone to the table to talk about prioritization, planning, and supplemental support. It's going to take a cross-section of government, business, and nonprofits working together to turn the tide by stabilizing the economy, bridging health and education gaps, and fostering future generations of wealth through homeownership and stable affordable housing.

Marietta Rodriguez is president and CEO of NeighborWorks America. For more than forty years, Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation, a national, nonpartisan nonprofit known as NeighborWorks America, has striven to make every community a place of opportunity. The NeighborWorks network includes nearly 250 members in every state, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF FLEXIBLE LOCAL COMMUNITY FUNDING

by *Dr. Akilah Watkins*

“Writ large, the Biden administration’s American Jobs Plan (AJP) embraces an expansive view of ‘infrastructure’ that recognizes housing, neighborhoods, and community as essential.”



Writ large, the Biden administration’s American Jobs Plan (AJP) embraces an expansive view of “infrastructure” that recognizes housing, neighborhoods, and community as essential. A key component within the bill with massive transformational potential is the Neighborhood Homes Investment Act (NHIA).

NHIA is a targeted tax credit designed to spur rehab and development by filling the appraisal gap in “weak market” communities. In so many small and midsized cities, the cost to acquire and rehab—or build—a home exceeds its value when built. The NHIA tax credit is designed to fill that gap, eliminating a significant economic barrier that has kept nonprofit and for-profit developers alike from working in weaker housing markets and scaling up their operations. That said, this tax credit is only accessible in targeted geographies,¹ is capped at 35 percent of the total project cost, and requires the homes to be sold to income-qualifying owner-occupants.²

The Center for Community Progress has been actively involved in the NHIA coalition, and we were there on the ground in Erie, Pennsylvania, when it secured its lead Republican House sponsor in 2019. So, it’s really encouraging to see the Biden administration recognize the need to revitalize communities and expand the toolkit for equitable community development.

A powerful tool missing from the bill is the Restoring Communities Left Behind Act.³ This \$5 billion federal investment would support customized community revitalization strategies designed by local partnerships working on the ground in those communities. This would be flexible money that partnerships (through a broad set of uses including land banking, shared equity ownership, and support for existing homeowners) could use to tackle historic challenges like closing the racial homeownership gap and expanding access to safe, affordable housing in the disinvested small and midsized cities with the greatest need. This bill has been building momentum since its introduction in February 2021, and we are hopeful that congressional leaders will include this program as the actual infrastructure legislation takes shape.

Dr. Akilah Watkins is president and CEO of the Center for Community Progress.

DESIGNING INFRASTRUCTURE WITH A DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE AND HOLISTIC APPROACH

by *Lisa Rice*

“The Biden administration and Congress have a chance to invest in all communities through the preservation, retrofitting, or new construction of housing while simultaneously spurring new transportation, environmental, energy, and clean water projects that benefit us all.”



Congress hasn't reached an agreement on the final infrastructure package; but to be transformational, first the bill must correct the harm to communities and people of color caused by previous infrastructure bills like the National Highway Acts.⁴ Second, the law must include housing as a fundamental component of our nation's infrastructure.

Our nation must reckon with its legacy of racism and government-sponsored discrimination. Much of that has manifested through biased policies incorporated in previous infrastructure projects that provided resources and benefits to whites, enriching them while simultaneously denying opportunities and amenities to people of color. Previous infrastructure packages provided majority-white communities with updated sewer systems, storm and flood protection systems, roads, broadband, green spaces, clean air, fresh water, and other amenities, while robbing people of color of their land rights, isolating them in concrete-laden spaces, contributing to residential segregation, exposing them to climate hazards and increased pollution, and resulting in systemic disinvestments for Native American, Latino, Black, and Asian communities. As a result, people of color are twice as likely to live in areas without potable water or proper sanitation,⁵ and redlined communities are on average thirteen degrees hotter than other neighborhoods.⁶

By crafting the bill through an equity lens and recognizing housing as an essential component of infrastructure, the Biden administration and Congress have a chance to invest in all communities through the preservation, retrofitting, or new construction of housing while simultaneously spurring new transportation, environmental, energy, and clean water projects that benefit us all.

What is missing from the bill? The Biden administration and Congress must ensure that there is a general requirement that federal grants, tax programs, and other initiatives be implemented in a manner that affirmatively furthers fair housing and community opportunity in accordance with civil rights statutes. They must expand the housing supply and enable people to access housing opportunities.

The Fair Housing Act of 1968 requires that all federal funds be used to dismantle the vestiges of government-sponsored discrimination and promote the development of healthy, well-resourced communities.⁷ This provision must apply to the infrastructure plan to rectify the impact of past government-sponsored disinvestment, segregation, and other harms. Much in the same way that the federal government has an obligation to repair roads and bridges on which the public relies, it must also repair the deep scars in marginalized communities inflicted by inequitable infrastructure projects.

The bill must also require meaningful accountability mechanisms. All federal agencies, including the Department of Transportation (DOT), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Department of the Treasury, the Department of Commerce, and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), must work together to meet these important goals.

Congress and the Biden Administration must see this package as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build strong, healthy communities and connect infrastructure investments to equal housing opportunities. It is critical to not see this bill through the lens of a zero-sum game but rather to understand the wisdom in ensuring that everyone will benefit from an infrastructure package that supports our collective well-being.

A conversation we should be having about infrastructure that we are not currently having? We are not talking enough about how our nation's history of biased infrastructure policies, knack for favoring poorly designed projects, and lack of innovation have created a built environment that is largely

inaccessible to people with disabilities. Going forward, it's imperative that we take a disability-inclusive and holistic approach to addressing infrastructure needs. Past infrastructure programs and policies have not only often devastated communities and displaced entire neighborhoods but also excluded any consideration of the needs of people with disabilities. Since our founding, our country's investments in agriculture, national and regional transportation networks, water and flood control systems, and housing developments have not equitably served people with disabilities—and have often harmed them.

Roughly 26 percent of the population has a disability.⁸ To rectify past failures, the disability community must be intricately involved in designing what our society looks like and how people are able to be connected to physical spaces as well as critical amenities like broadband, transportation, jobs, and housing.

Lisa Rice is president and CEO of the National Fair Housing Alliance.

INFRASTRUCTURE AS A ROAD TO REPARATIONS

by Tony Pickett



The Biden administration has defined a \$2.3 trillion jobs, infrastructure, and green-energy proposal that has the potential to reshape the U.S. economy for generations. But our public discourse remains largely focused on specifics—for example, the magnitude of impact for drinking water, clean energy, transportation, manufacturing innovation, housing, broadband access, and human services. Our national conversation should instead focus on clearly illuminating this rare opportunity to direct public investment with a racial equity lens, simultaneously expanding access to wealth and economic vitality for future generations.

“Rather than merely debate the types and costs of proposed infrastructure spending items, our leaders should focus on repairing decades of damage to Black and Brown communities.”

Realizing that vision requires bringing organized political will and pressure to bear on congressional approval of the proposed spending and associated corporate tax increases. The prosperity of our cities, suburbs, and rural communities depends on a layered collection of supportive services, systems, and related decisions regarding their benefits and burdens. While highways and rail corridors help move people and goods, they can also disrupt, divide, and destroy communities. During the decades of planning for and construction of our national Interstate Highway System, many historically Black communities across the nation suffered massive residential displacement, Black-owned assets were devalued, and generations of Black people contracted chronic respiratory illnesses resulting from poor air quality. Documented examples of damage to Black communities range from the Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota, where a freeway demolished seven hundred homes and forced three hundred Black-owned businesses to close,⁹ to Alabama’s decision during the height of the civil rights movement to route the I-85 through—and thus divide—Montgomery’s wealthiest Black neighborhood, which contained the home of Ralph David Abernathy.¹⁰ Instances of this particular type of environmental racism are still being inflicted on communities of color today—for instance, the widening of I-70 in Denver, Colorado, displacing Latinx residents of Elyria-Swansea.¹¹

The Biden proposal is an unprecedented opportunity to repair past racial injustice while simultaneously creating greater access to future wealth and economic prosperity for communities of color. At Grounded Solutions Network, progressive planners and transportation advocates are supporting the direct linkage of public infrastructure redesign and improvements to innovation in democratic forms of land ownership and community benefits. Transportation for America has announced an ambitious policy proposal for using land banks and land trusts to secure communal land ownership, housing, and wealth creation opportunities for Black and Brown communities.¹² The coalition declares:

To ensure that neighborhoods around the highway receive the benefits of its removal or modification, the project sponsor for any award under this program should be required to establish a land trust or land bank that would receive initial ownership of any property that becomes developable through activities supported by a grant under this program. The land trust would help locals buy the property, preserve and build affordable housing, support the opening of locally-owned small businesses, and preserve green-space and parks. A \$5 billion federal investment could support 1–2 dozen land trusts for five years.¹³

Rather than merely debate the types and costs of proposed infrastructure spending items, our leaders should focus on repairing decades of damage to Black and Brown communities. The proposed federal transportation infrastructure expenditures should be viewed as only the first wave of public investments contributing to reparations, reducing the racial wealth gap, and achieving economic justice for communities of color.

Tony Pickett is CEO of the Grounded Solutions Network.

NOTES

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