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Blueprints for Change

USDN | urban sustainability directors network

THE GREENLINING INSTITUTE

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Authors

Alvaro S. Sanchez (he/him/his) is a Shared Prosperity Strategist. He is a strategic racial equity and climate justice leader who turns bold ideas into tangible results. He has spent more than 15 years designing and executing multi-sector strategies that move billions in public and private dollars toward communities of color. As the former Vice-President of Policy at The Greenlining Institute and now a Shared Prosperity Strategist, Alvaro has led initiatives such as Greenlining the Block, the Towards Equitable Electric Mobility community of practice, and Blueprints for Belonging, each building durable civic infrastructure and field capacity. His policy work spans state, federal, and local arenas, from advocating for California's Office of Racial Equity to establishing the Transformative Climate Communities state program via legislation to shaping California Climate Investments and Justice40 implementation. He is on the board of the Urban Sustainability Directors Network and the advisory board of the UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation. A sought-after author and commentator, Alvaro's thought leadership helps policymakers, advocates, and funders connect racial equity, climate action, and shared prosperity in practical, scalable ways.

Morokot Uy (she/her/hers) is the Sr. Program Manager for Capacity Building at The Greenlining Institute supporting her hometown of Stockton. Her professional background includes coalition building, capacity and community power building, and advancing environmental and climate justice priorities. Prior to joining Greenlining, Morokot served as the coordinator for Rise Stockton, an environmental justice coalition striving to make collective impact and center community priorities in climate solutions. Most recently, she was an Executive Fellow at the California Strategic Growth Council where she supported the development of their capacity building and community resilience programs. Morokot is excited to work in Stockton again and tie together her experiences of community organizing with her knowledge of policy and program development. Morokot graduated from UC Davis with a B.A. in International Relations. In her free time, she enjoys live music, trying new foods, and spending time with family and friends.

Editorial

Danielle Bell, Associate Director of Narrative Strategy at The Greenlining Institute

Tram Nguyen, Copy Editor

Design

Ashley Johnson, Associate Director of Branding and Marketing at The Greenlining Institute

Zhanae Briggs, Manager for Communications at The Greenlining Institute

Design Action Collective

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The Greenlining Institute

The Greenlining Institute works towards a future where communities of color can build wealth, live in healthy places filled with economic opportunity, and are ready to meet the challenges posed by climate change. Greenlining is building an abundant future that brings investments and opportunities into our communities – what we call Greenlining. Since 1993, we have successfully advocated for and negotiated initiatives directing more than $800 billion in corporate and public investments into communities of color in California and across the nation.

Urban Sustainability Directors Network

Founded in 2008, Urban Sustainability Director's Network is a national non-profit organization with an expansive peer network of over 300 local government members across the US and Canada. USDN works to create equitable, resilient, and sustainable communities by advancing the field of local government sustainability and equipping practitioners to be catalysts of transformative change. USDN brings local government sustainability practitioners together to innovate, collaborate, and accelerate the work of local sustainability and climate work through peer learning spaces, cohorts, resource sharing, and coaching. By equipping them with the knowledge, resources, and partnerships they need to succeed, USDN helps advance change locally in member communities as well as across the field of practice. The aggregate impact and influence of USDN's collective work makes an equitable, resilient, and sustainable society more attainable.

Executive Summary

The Biden-Harris Administration ushered in a historic surge of federal investment in community development infrastructure for frontline communities through Justice40, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and the Inflation Reduction Act. These initiatives allocated billions of dollars to environmental justice and climate projects that prioritized community needs while driving economic growth and environmental benefits in historically disinvested communities of color.[1] Thousands of local projects were jumpstarted across the United States addressing both neighborhood-level and large scale energy, resilience, transportation, water, and community infrastructure needs. These investments aimed to bring together cross-sector stakeholders including local government, community-based organizations, nonprofits, and more, and address crucial gaps and systemic barriers in centering equity in community-driven climate infrastructure development.

In a reversal, the Trump Administration froze or clawed back at least $425 billion in federal infrastructure funding and decimated key federal agencies responsible for implementation. These actions make it difficult to assess the full impact and potential of the investments.[2] Even so, the progress that was achieved and the civic infrastructure built during this limited four-year window offer important lessons for how such investments can deliver lasting value in, for, and with disadvantaged communities.

The Greenlining Institute and the Urban Sustainability Directors Network produced this report to analyze the local impact of these federal investments and provide important insight into the experience of preparing for and implementing infrastructure dollars across diverse programs and jurisdictions. This draws on over 40 interviews, survey responses, and a two-day convening with project implementation practitioners and intermediaries involved in federal, state, and community-driven infrastructure and climate-related projects.

The research surfaced challenges and barriers in implementation, identified best practices for community-driven development, and offered insight into foundations we could build to prepare for future funding. We found that successful community-driven infrastructure projects depend on sustained and strategic investment in key systems and community leadership well before major funding arrives. The following recommendations build on these findings and are intended to guide public agencies, local governments, philanthropy, private capital partners, technical assistance providers, and other stakeholders to ensure community and capital development efforts are equitable in process and outcomes.

1. **Invest Early in Strategic, Technical, and Administrative Capacity:** Early investment in organizational capacity for CBOs and local governments well before the arrival of major funding is essential for readiness, especially in strategic planning, technical know-how, and administrative systems. Early investment enables organizations to develop shovel-ready project pipelines, master the intricacies of financial management, and reduce start-up lag once dollars flow.
2. **Make Capacity Building an Ongoing Investment, Expanding Unrestricted Dollars for Organizational Readiness, Staff Retention, and Skill Development:** Robust organizational capacity ensures projects not only launch but are completed on time, within scope, and with maximum community benefit. Effective capacity building creates stable teams ready for new opportunities, shifts in funding, and challenges that arise during implementation.

3. **Build Cohort and Peer-Learning Structures for Mutual Support:** Peer-learning cohorts that connect local advocates and implementers, local government, and funders are invaluable for overcoming strategic and technical hurdles during project rollouts. These networks foster mutual learning, rapid problem-solving, and cross-pollination of successful practices, building resilience within the field.
4. **Prioritize Co-design Before Funding Allocation:** Early involvement of local implementers in shaping project design, including timelines, roles, responsibilities, governance structures, narratives, and grant guidelines before funding decisions are made is critical to prevent projects from stalling. Early co-design with community-based partners leads to more grounded programs, smoother compliance, and stronger trust among local actors.
5. **Strategically Invest in Growing Development Capacity:** When CBOs and local governments have robust development capacity, projects are more likely to be completed on time, deliver lasting value, and increase public trust in infrastructure initiatives more broadly. Increased development capacity enables local actors to move projects from concept to shovel-ready, navigate complex grant requirements, and adapt quickly to changing funding landscapes.
6. **Use Windows of Funding Opportunity as Catalysts for Long-Term Asset-Building and Community Ownership:** Funding waves should coincide with efforts to build foundations for long-term asset-building, centering community ownership and durable governance structures. This model contrasts sharply with legacy approaches in which short-term projects evaporate at the close of a funding cycle.
7. **Innovate Public Financing Strategies and Bridge Traditional Financial Sources with Community-Owned and Reparative Models:** Innovative funding and financing strategies, such as blending public funding with community-controlled structures, provide access to flexible capital for pre-development stages that are rarely covered by federal grants. They also reduce reliance on rigid financing models that tend to privilege well-resourced developers and exclude grassroots organizations. Bridging public and reparative financial models democratizes infrastructure development while improving project efficiency, increasing buy-in, and ensuring infrastructure dollars seed long-lasting prosperity and power in underserved communities.
8. **Strengthen Political and Partnership Ecosystems for Long-Term Stability:** Robust ecosystem networks — linking local governments, CBOs, philanthropy, labor, private sector, and technical partners — act as connective tissue that sustains field knowledge, trust, and shared strategy through political transitions and funding droughts. These alliances coordinate resources, align advocacy, and foster mutual support, making it possible to pivot quickly in response to new policy priorities, regulatory shifts, or emergencies.
9. **Fund Data Collection, Evaluation, and Communications/Storytelling:** Project evaluation data can deepen institutional and community ecosystems that can sustain community-led investments long-term. It helps legislators, community partners, and other key stakeholders demonstrate success, ensures accountability, and extends the research base on the impact of particular interventions on environmental, equity, and economic outcomes.

While the promise of Justice40, BIL, and IRA programs was cut short, the work and wisdom generated through what was implemented are powerful assets. By committing to expanding the reach of capacity building funds, cultivating dynamic networks of support, and placing community expertise at the heart of federal investment strategy, decision-makers can unlock transformative, equitable infrastructure not just during the next wave of funding, but well into the future.

Introduction

Between January 2021 and January 2025, the Biden-Harris Administration opened a brief but historic window of federal investment in community development infrastructure for frontline and disadvantaged communities. Justice40 was launched through Executive Order 14008 in January 2021, directing federal agencies to work toward delivering 40% of the overall benefits of certain climate, clean energy, housing, workforce, remediation, clean water, and related investments to disadvantaged communities.[3] That framework was then backed by major statutory investments, including the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, signed on November 15, 2021,[4] and the Inflation Reduction Act, signed on August 16, 2022.[5] Together, Justice40, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and the Inflation Reduction Act created new pathways for billions of federal dollars to support community development infrastructure across the country.

Environmental justice groups, philanthropy, capacity building organizations, technical assistance providers, and other stakeholders prepared to effectively implement this funding. They worked to ensure federal and state dollars flowed into priority communities, establish new partnerships and scale existing collaborations to maximize impact, and advance new models that prioritize community needs.

The historic surge of federal investment unleashed an unprecedented wave of environmental justice and clean energy funding for climate action and community development, with billions allocated for local energy, resilience, transportation, water, and civic infrastructure projects across the United States. Beyond jumpstarting thousands of projects, these investments fueled the development of critical civic infrastructure: expanded capacity in community-based organizations, built sophisticated technical assistance networks, and strengthened partnerships between local governments, advocates, and technical experts. These assets represent hard-won progress in grant management, financial administration, project development, and community engagement.

Beginning on January 20, 2025, that window narrowed sharply. The Trump Administration rescinded Executive Order 14008, paused disbursements of certain funds appropriated through the IRA and BIL, and directed agencies to terminate environmental justice offices, positions, programs, and equity-related grants or contracts to the maximum extent allowed by law.[6] In the months that followed, the Environmental Protection Agency announced the termination of its environmental justice and DEI arms, while additional grant cancellations, funding freezes, and agency cuts reshaped the implementation landscape.[7] These actions clawed back or destabilized billions in federal infrastructure and climate-related funding, decimated key federal agencies and offices responsible for implementation, and fostered an environment of uncertainty and fear across the country.

While much of the promise of this funding remains unrealized, there is an opportunity to leverage the civic infrastructure built during this limited window to set a foundation of readiness and long-term success for the future. Even as federal priorities shift, the progress achieved during the Biden-Harris years offers important lessons for how public investment can deliver lasting value in, for, and with disadvantaged communities.

However, major risks are on the horizon. First, many community organizations and local governments expanded their work and built internal systems at a pace beyond their capacity to sustain them. This rapid growth and sudden loss of hard-earned funding resulted in organizations firing the teams they hired in anticipation of implementing federal dollars, closing sustainability offices, and shifting their climate work portfolios. Second, as federal and philanthropic funding cycles shift or recede, the ecosystem of skilled organizations, trusted partnerships, and community champions built in preparation for federal infrastructure investments could dissipate, leaving communities less able to implement the next wave of climate and infrastructure programs when they inevitably happen.

This brief synthesizes learnings from interviews, survey responses, and a two-day convening with project implementation practitioners and intermediaries involved in federal, state, and community-driven climate infrastructure projects. It provides insight into the experience of preparing for and implementing historic levels of funding across diverse programs and jurisdictions to identify lessons learned, best practices, and future opportunities to embed equity in infrastructure project development and implementation.

These findings underscore that successful community-driven infrastructure projects require both deep local roots and robust, early, and sustained investment in systems and community leadership well before major funding arrives. The brief calls on government, advocates, practitioners, and funders to seize this moment, bind the network more tightly, and invest strategically to ensure that the expanded civic infrastructure remains vibrant, resilient, and ready to deliver systemic change for years to come.

These learnings and recommendations are also grounded in the imperative to expand racial equity and community power. For decades, disinvestment, exclusion, and extractive development have shaped how infrastructure shows up in communities, often requiring them to fight for basic resources and protections.

The lessons from this investment cycle point toward a different approach — one where communities are resourced not just to respond, but to proactively shape, lead, and own projects that reflect their priorities for climate and economic resilience. This shift depends on rethinking how resources flow, strengthening the partnerships that sustain local capacity, and shaping policy environments that support community leadership. In this way, civic infrastructure becomes not just a vehicle for project delivery, but a mechanism for redistributing power, building community wealth, and ensuring that the benefits of climate and infrastructure investments are equitably realized.

Methodology

The Greenlining Institute, in partnership with the Urban Sustainability Directors Network and Upright Consulting, conducted an eight-month long research process to identify lessons learned, best practices, and opportunities to embed equity in infrastructure project implementation. This report draws on over 40 interviews started in mid-2025, survey responses, and a two-day convening in October 2025 with project implementation practitioners and intermediaries involved in federal, state, and community-driven infrastructure and climate-related projects. Interview, survey, and convening participants were identified through their experience implementing public funds and from the Greenlining Institute's network of Greenlining the Block partners and peers.

Interviewees were asked to share key insights from their experience implementing infrastructure projects while survey respondents helped us gauge the need and focus for the research process. The Blueprints for Change Convening in October 2025 was used to groundtruth our analysis and stress test the findings from the interviews and surveys. Convening participants were asked how to overcome barriers and scale up best practices and policy solutions.

Our research questions included:

- What did we learn from the BIL and IRA about advancing equity through federal policy and investments?
- What are best practices and major barriers?
- How do we scale up best practices and solutions?
- What are clear next steps for this kind of work?

Major Themes

The major themes of this research highlight that a critical outcome of recent federal investments was the development of civic infrastructure, organizational capacity, relational trust, and narrative power that has the potential to shape the next era of public purpose investment. Investing in and maintaining these assets is essential to set the foundation for effective, community-led infrastructure delivery and community wealth.

Implementation Readiness

Practitioners across the field recognized a mismatch between the scale and pace of recent federal infrastructure funding and capacity to rapidly deploy it. When resources surged through the IRA and BIL, the civic ecosystem (governments, technical assistance providers, and especially community-based organizations) was not "implementation-ready" to translate dollars into projects at such a scale.

Systemic disinvestment and disparities have historically hindered many communities from developing the capacity and infrastructure required to move quickly to implement projects when funding is available. Additionally, systemwide deficits in grant management, compliance, and project delivery expertise meant that critical funds were slow to reach these communities.

In spite of these challenges, collaboration and investment in capacity building, ranging from the establishment of technical assistance cohorts to new local government roles, have left behind valuable civic infrastructure assets: trained staff, viable project implementation pathways, and nascent cross-sector partnerships. These assets backfill some of the systemwide deficits and, if maintained, will leave communities more implementation-ready for future waves of investment. However, the risk is great that this ecosystem could atrophy without adequate investments in community capacity to better equip communities to leverage future opportunities.

Community Partnership

The recent investment cycle demonstrated that early and authentic community partnership is critical for equitable infrastructure progress. Federal requirements for community engagement, such as those mandated by Justice40, drove the cultivation of community-based organizations, technical assistance networks, and stronger government-CBO collaboration.[8] This created opportunities for communities to build shared values, principles, and trust that are essential to shape projects to local needs and enhance prospects for follow-through and accountability.

Yet, practitioners voiced concerns about the fragility of these new relational and technical gains in a funding environment that has long forced disinvested communities and under-resourced organizations to compete for scarce, short-term dollars. Common issues such as burnout, misaligned values and timelines, and the fleeting nature of grant-driven partnerships are not inherent failures of communities or CBOs, but symptoms of a system that funds in fragments, rather than sustaining long-term relationships, capacity, and trust required for durable community development.

Practitioners also noted that – despite requirements – significant funding flowed through programs and agencies that were not held to the same standards for engagement and community partnership. This often resulted in little community engagement and no opportunity to build CBO capacity.

Ensuring the continued vitality of these civic assets, especially institutions capable of sustained community collaboration and cross-sector brokering, will be vital for strengthening partnership infrastructures that can withstand working in more challenging environments and for seeding systemic transformation in investment cycles to come.

Organizational and Development Capacity

Capacity gaps in staffing, systems, and technical expertise remain among community-based organizations and local governments charged with implementing infrastructure projects.

Practitioners described widespread challenges in scaling up project development. CBOs are closest to community needs, but severe underinvestment often left them without the staff, grant and construction management expertise, or technical skills needed to move from visioning to execution at the required pace and scale. Many local governments — especially those serving under-resourced or historically marginalized communities — struggled with similar deficits, including outdated internal systems, overburdened staff, and limited flexibility to meet the complex compliance standards and match requirements that accompanied federal dollars.

Strategic investments in capacity building and technical assistance through IRA, BIL, and related initiatives drove progress in starting to close these gaps. Efforts such as training cohorts and peer learning opportunities, dedicated staff roles for grant pursuit and project management, and tailored support that extends beyond grant writing to include capital development and infrastructure expertise have strengthened the field's ability to deliver. These assets, however, remain fragile and organizational and development capacity investments are required to bridge the needs of many communities where the gap is extremely wide.

Financing and Policy Barriers

Infrastructure investment on the scale of the BIL and IRA exposed deep-seated challenges in public finance and policy implementation. Despite robust headline funding, many CBOs and local governments found themselves unable to unlock or braid funds due to rigid compliance demands, complicated match requirements, and a lack of timely bridge financing. Federal technical assistance efforts often stopped at grant writing, falling short of supporting needs related to project delivery, maintenance and operations, and building development capacity in the field.

At the same time, communities have innovated new approaches to overcome traditional financing challenges. Financial intermediaries, revolving funds, and peer learning networks helped bridge persistent gaps between capital and community impact. Without sustained support for these innovations — and the practitioners behind them — many communities risk falling back into the same bottlenecks, raising doubts about whether future funding can deliver meaningful, on-the-ground results.

Culture and Narrative Change

Beyond dollars, the most profound unrealized effect of recent federal investment was cultural: it helped advance a shared national narrative that community-led infrastructure is possible, necessary, and legitimate. Practitioners, local and federal agencies, philanthropy, intermediaries, and community-based organizations began to align around a broader vision of progress defined not only by dollars spent or projects completed, but by community priorities, capacity, trust, and long-term benefit.

Practitioners emphasized that sustaining this shift requires culture change within institutions. Agencies, funders, and intermediaries must move away from risk-averse systems that slow projects down through rigid rules and excessive caution, and toward active partnership that helps communities navigate requirements, solve problems, and move work forward.

If not resourced and deepened, these emergent narratives and cultural competencies could quickly revert to fragmented, consultant-driven approaches in future cycles.

Lessons Learned

These lessons synthesize the observations, reflections, and anecdotes from over 40 interviews and a two-day convening with community organizations, government, funders, and other implementation practitioners. They highlight the successes and challenges of implementing federal infrastructure dollars.

Early Community Engagement is Critical

Implementation practitioners repeatedly found that projects grounded in early, deep engagement with community stakeholders proved far more resilient and responsive to local needs. By bringing residents and local organizations into decision-making from the outset, practitioners were able to build real partnerships and durable trust and support, which made projects more resilient to changing priorities, bureaucratic obstacles, and compliance requirements.

The City of Atlanta is a great example. The City hired a community engagement director to ensure city staff responded to and effectively partnered with the community while pursuing federal funds.[9] Staff highlighted that community engagement must be transparent to build the trust needed to facilitate real partnerships.

For public investments to realize their equity and climate goals, such engagement must be resourced as a core project activity and seen as a benefit to the overall outcomes rather than approached as a procedural necessity.

Organizations Must Build Financial Infrastructure Early

Practitioners stressed that strong financial infrastructure systems — including sustained, diversified funding sources and well-organized financial data systems — are essential for surviving the delays and complexities of federal, state, and local grant compliance. For community-led projects in particular, practitioners emphasized that significant time and resources are required upfront to identify the types of financial systems, capital structures, and administrative capacities needed to support a project before determining how those systems will be financed, established, and utilized.

CBOs that invested early in these financial foundations and obtained financial support through bridge loans and credit lines were more likely to weather temporary gaps in cash flow, adjust to inflation during extended project timelines, and successfully navigate lengthy federal approval processes. Without strong financial systems in place, even promising projects stalled or lost momentum as administrative burdens grew.

Balance Tensions in Building Effective, Locally Tailored, and Responsive Funding Programs

There is an inherent tension in designing large public funding programs: the more a program is designed to be responsive to community needs and shaped by community engagement, the more time and flexibility it requires to develop and implement effectively. By contrast, programs that rely on established administrative pathways can move funding out the door more quickly, but may struggle to reflect local priorities or produce transformative outcomes and tangible changes for local residents and households.

This tension surfaced repeatedly in discussions about the rollout of the BIL and the IRA. For example, practitioners noted that the BIL largely relied on established programs, often allocating funding to states through formulas with state agencies administering funds once they were received. This structure made BIL-funded programs easier and faster to implement, but practitioners noted that much of this funding moved through legacy state programs. Depending on the state and administering agency, these legacy programs were often not designed with meaningful input from community-based organizations or local governments and did not necessarily align with community-identified needs.

By contrast, practitioners shared that some of the new IRA programs and funding mechanisms that allowed for adaptation to local realities — permitting community-driven decision-making around design, milestones, and resource allocation — consistently delivered more meaningful and equitable results, but often moved much slower. Because these programs were newly created, agencies spent considerable time developing guidelines, administrative systems, and public engagement processes from scratch. Additionally, CBOs and local governments then had to learn a new program and the nuances of how to apply and implement funding once received.

While these efforts were intended to democratize federal funding and incorporate community input, practitioners noted that lengthy public comment periods and complex application requirements often slowed implementation and left no time for the iteration and flexibility needed to adjust grant structures to respond to real-time community needs. However, these challenges were not insurmountable and given more time and space to iterate, there were pathways forward to improve the programs.

Ultimately, practitioners recognized the successes and challenges of each approach to designing funding programs. They called for federal and state policymakers to build flexibility into grant structures, supporting locally tailored approaches and rapid troubleshooting as IRA-funded programs attempted, while implementing and moving funds faster as BIL-funded programs did.

Capacity Building and Technical Assistance Must Be Available Throughout the Life Cycle of a Project

It became clear to practitioners that capacity building and technical assistance must extend well before and beyond the initial grant application phase. Successful projects benefited from capacity building that prepared CBOs and local governments to manage project delivery, cash flow, compliance, and reporting at scale throughout the entire lifecycle of the infrastructure investment. Practitioners also emphasized that supporting CBOs with hiring the appropriate technical staff for development (e.g., designers, architects, construction, finance) was critical in successfully moving a project forward.

Case Study: Little Manila Rising and The Greenlining Institute

As a capacity building partner and participant in The Greenlining Institute's Greenlining the Block program, Little Manila Rising in Stockton, CA was able to access support both prior to applying for the California Strategic Growth Council's Community Resilience Centers Program and after they were awarded.[10] This type of sustained, end-to-end technical assistance is especially critical for community-based organizations that have historically been excluded from capital development processes, are building new capacity in this space, or are navigating systems that were not designed with them in mind.

Greenlining's capacity building resources included partnership development, project planning, and grant writing and analysis that supported LMR's successful application. After the award, LMR's participation in GTB provided them access to specific capital development technical assistance resources such as a capital infrastructure curriculum, a community of practice among CBO peers, technical consultants to work on project design, and capital campaign support to get funding for construction. By investing in LMR at every stage — from project ideation through delivery — Greenlining helped ensure not only that the project moved forward, but that LMR was positioned to lead and sustain this work over the long term.

Cohort and Partnership Models are Effective for Building Capacity

Investments in peer cohorts, resource-mapping networks, and facilitated partnership development are invaluable for resilience and project success. Practitioners noted that cohorts fostered mutual learning, troubleshooting, and cross-sector collaboration. These supportive networks helped organizations to become "implementation-ready" and collectively overcome capacity challenges within individual organizations.

Practitioners also emphasized the importance of peer cohorts for morale and general support, offering spaces where participants can navigate challenges and celebrate successes together. In the case of Active San Gabriel Valley, they participated in three peer cohorts: EJ Ready, an initiative of Liberty Hill; Greenlining the Block; and Redesign LA.[11] The partnerships they built through these peer networks helped ActiveSGV identify and apply for funding opportunities. They also served as capacity builders for smaller partner organizations within their coalition and provided federal funding compliance training.

Grants Requiring Cross-Sector and Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration Improve Overall Success

Grants that required genuine, sustained partnership between government entities and community-based organizations accelerated both relationship-building and a sense of co-ownership of project outcomes. Success rates were highest where governments, philanthropy, technical assistance providers, the private sector, and community organizations collaborated from the start, defining clear roles and sharing ownership of project goals.

Co-writing applications and sharing responsibility for delivery cultivated habits of co-governance, clarified project scope and budget, and established regular communication among all parties. Practitioners report that establishing relationships prior to windows of funding opportunities raised the ceiling for what could be accomplished, reducing friction and staving off duplication or competition later in the process.

These partnerships formed the backbone of new local civic infrastructure that can serve communities well beyond any one project period, yet their continuity depends on ongoing investment, attention, and willingness of local governments to be courageous in piloting new ways to work with community-based organizations.

Case Study: Southeast Sustainability Directors Network and Eastside Community Network

Southeast Sustainability Directors Network reflected on the lessons they learned serving as a third-party facilitator and bridge builder between local governments, CBOs, and technical assistance providers. Where trust and alignment already existed, projects advanced more smoothly; where they did not, progress required intentional effort to navigate tensions and build shared understanding. SSDN also noted that the partners they brought in to support this work were deeply rooted in the communities they served and led by staff of color, which helped strengthen trust, cultural competency, and long-term collaboration.

Eastside Community Network's experience underscored the consequences when these elements are missing. They shared that the technical assistance provided through the Community Change Grant program did not meet their needs, in part because they had no role in selecting the provider. Without partners who understood the local context, the support and partnership felt misaligned and absent of community context. Instead, the prescribed technical assistance providers imposed architectural standards beyond the needs of the community and left ECN feeling disempowered.

These two starkly different experiences highlight the importance of partnerships that share values, define clear roles, and share ownership of the project.

Focus on Increasing the Political Durability of Infrastructure Funding

Practitioners repeatedly emphasized that durable civic infrastructure cannot be built on episodic infusions of federal funding alone. The boom-and-bust cycles that characterize federal and state investment risk leaving communities without sustained capacity, trusted partnerships, or the ability to implement future rounds of innovation. Stakeholders call for strategies and institutional investments that will ensure political durability so that hard-won gains in civic infrastructure are not repeatedly lost between funding waves, but instead continuously deepen and expand over time.

More predictable funding streams, along with timely or upfront payment structures, would better enable local governments and CBOs to plan, build capacity, and deliver projects consistently — especially in historically marginalized communities where this capacity is most needed.

While these system-level changes will take time, philanthropy can coordinate its financial assets to support community-led projects and fill a critical role bridging financial gaps and time lags between the availability of public funding and needing to secure private financing.

Reform Legacy Infrastructure Programs

A key lesson from federal infrastructure investment practitioners is the importance of balancing advocacy for systemic reform of longstanding, legacy funding programs — such as the Surface Transportation Block Grant Program — with the creation of new, more equitable grant models like the EPA's Community Change Grant.

Practitioners highlight that new grant programs like the Community Change Grant represent vital innovation in federal funding design, offering more accessible, targeted, and participatory resources for community-led projects and capacity building.[12] However, the resources allotted to these programs pale in comparison to longstanding legacy funding programs, many of which were designed decades ago with little to no community input.

Advocates note the ongoing challenge of pushing reforms through for STBG to include more flexibility, greater local control, and alignment with climate and equity goals while managing existing administrative burdens and legacy allocations that favor traditional infrastructure.[13]

Practitioners recommend pursuing major changes to legacy infrastructure funding programs to better serve equity and climate imperatives. While it is important to invest in launching and refining new grant programs designed to fill gaps, build local infrastructure, and experiment with novel financing and governance, the scale and reach of legacy funding programs has the potential to undo equity and climate progress unless they are reformed to align with those goals.

Challenges

Practitioners identified many challenges in advancing community-led infrastructure projects. The five listed below categorize the major challenges faced by CBOs and local governments through the most recent federal infrastructure investment cycle. Recommendations to address these challenges are offered for public agencies, philanthropies, and practitioners.

Grant Management and Compliance Burden

Practitioners widely report that federal grant management and compliance requirements — such as documentation, complex reporting, and audit standards — pose a disproportionate burden on smaller CBOs and under-resourced local governments. These barriers divert limited staff time from program delivery to administrative navigation, and the steep learning curve threatens equity by privileging larger, well-resourced institutions. Recommendations include:

- Providing streamlined, user-friendly guidance on compliance expectations early in the grant process.
- Investing in shared grant management infrastructure, such as regional or cross-sector back-office support, to reduce duplication and administrative overhead.
- Expanding technical assistance to include hands-on support for compliance, not just application writing.

Gaps Between Policy Ambition and Local Execution

The gulf between the scale of federal policy goals and the practical capacity of local actors to deliver projects merits repeated highlighting. Local practitioners cite challenges with inflation-driven cost increases, rigid or mismatched program guidelines, and unpredictable funding cycles that complicate planning and execution. Effective coordination between supply-side (project development) and demand-side (community needs, financing) actors is still lacking; more robust networking and centralized platforms are needed. Pipeline transparency and standardized templates or financial models could help bridge this gap. Recommendations include:

- Incorporating inflation adjustments and contingency allowances into federal and state project budgets and contracts.
- Allowing greater flexibility in project timelines and eligible activities, which helps local implementers adapt to changing conditions.
- Supporting blended and braided funding models, enabling communities to pool multiple sources and better align resources with holistic community needs.
- Encouraging participatory design processes, so that projects reflect real community interests and constraints from the outset.

Capacity Building Plateau

Practitioners recognize that capacity building investments often yield early momentum, but without ongoing, unrestricted support, gains tend to plateau or erode — even as project demands grow more complex. Short-term funding fails to address organizational development, leadership pipeline growth, and staff retention needed for long-term impact, in both CBOs and local government, particularly smaller and rural governments. Recommendations include:

- Prioritizing multi-year (five years minimum), flexible capacity building grants that cover core operations, skill development, and organizational wellness.
- Embedding professional development and leadership succession planning in funded initiatives.
- Supporting peer learning cohorts and mentorship networks to foster ongoing skill exchange, morale, and cross-pollination of best practices.
- Advocating for funders (public and philanthropic) to shift away from project-only grants and toward supporting the stability and health of local civic institutions.

Risk-Aversion

Implementation experience shows that excessive risk-aversion — both among permitting and implementing agencies, funders, and lenders — often results in fewer investments in community-led projects, capacity building grants, and operating support, leading to missed opportunities. This can lead to missed opportunities, stalled projects, and inefficient use of resources. Recommendations include:

- Embracing pilot projects and iterative program approaches that assume and build in space for some failure and learning by doing.

Trust Breakdowns and Burnout

Under-resourcing communities leads to perpetual planning processes. A lack of funds to implement promised projects also breaks down trust between local government staff and community partners. It also leads to persistent staff burnout and high turnover rates that stall projects and exacerbate trust breakdowns. Recommendations include:

- Investing in organizational and staff well-being, including sabbaticals, flexible work structures, regular recognition, and adequate compensation to guard against burnout.
- Establishing transparent, multi-directional feedback mechanisms among funders, technical assistance providers, and grantee organizations to repair and sustain trust.
- Building spaces and routines for storytelling, celebration, and reflection to reinforce a hopeful shared mission and keep teams resilient amid challenges.

Best Practices and Recommendations

In the following section, we present best practices for effective approaches to implementation, grounded in the lived experiences of practitioners interviewed for this brief. We also present forward-looking recommendations based on these interviews and further discussion at the Blueprints for Change convening held in October of 2025. They stem from reflections and observations made during the lead up and preparation for the surge of federal infrastructure funding to today.

Best Practice: Invest Early in Strategic, Technical, and Administrative Capacity

Federal infrastructure practitioners widely echoed that investing in organizational capacity well before the arrival of major funding is essential for readiness, especially in strategic planning, technical know-how, and administrative systems for financial data and grant management. Early investment enables organizations to develop shovel-ready project pipelines, master the intricacies of financial management, and reduce start-up lag once dollars flow.

Case Study: SAGE Development Authority and Justice Capital

In 2019, the democratically elected leadership of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe created SAGE Development Authority as a Section 17 Corporation to institutionalize the Tribe's involvement in renewable energy projects. With strong leadership, strategic alignment with wealth-building, community ownership, and governance, SAGE has been able to successfully move forward the Anpetu Wi Wind Farm, a 235-megawatt wind farm. When built, Anpetu Wi will be the first wind farm in the U.S. with meaningful Tribal ownership.

SAGE's commitment to community ownership and governance drew Justice Capital to support their organizational capacity for project development and build financial sustainability for the wind farm. Justice Capital invested in years of development support for SAGE, supporting a community-led design process, helping develop a capital stack, and protecting the role of community in the governance structure of the project.

This positioned SAGE with a shovel-ready, community-driven project, strong financial and administrative systems, and a competitive proposal for federal funds. At the height of IRA funding, the wind farm stood to receive upwards of $300 million over the life of the project.

Though the loss of this funding has been challenging to navigate, the project remains financially viable because the partnerships and administrative structures that endure were established well before the public funding window.

Recommendation: Make Capacity Building an Ongoing Investment, Expanding Unrestricted Dollars for Organizational Readiness, Staff Retention, and Skill Development

Funders in the public and philanthropic sectors should make capacity building an ongoing investment. Expanding unrestricted dollars for organizational readiness, staff wellness, retention, and skill development is foundational for the effective and efficient delivery of infrastructure projects in historically marginalized and under-resourced communities. Robust organizational capacity ensures projects not only launch but are completed on time, within scope, and with maximum community benefit. Effective capacity building prevents crisis-driven fire drills, instead creating stable teams ready for new opportunities, shifts in funding, and challenges that arise during implementation.

Staffing stability in organizations is important for retaining institutional knowledge, skills, and relationships that build project momentum and maintain project continuity. Organizations with stable teams are able to drive projects through planning to implementation while keeping true to scope and avoiding delays caused by rehiring and onboarding new staff. Investing in staff wellness and retention directly addresses burnout and high turnover that otherwise disrupt long-term projects, especially in community-based organizations operating on the frontlines of federal infrastructure implementation.

Skill development is essential for managing complex grants, engaging in multi-stakeholder partnerships, adapting to regulatory changes, and overseeing fiscal and technical details of infrastructure projects. When organizations invest in ongoing training, cross-functional learning, and succession planning, they are better equipped to respond to community needs, drive innovation, and secure future funding. This creates a virtuous cycle: improved staff skills lead to stronger project outcomes, which in turn builds credibility, attracts future investment, and strengthens the civic infrastructure ecosystem.

In sum, treating capacity building as an ongoing, holistic investment — prioritizing staff well-being, organizational health, and skill growth — translates directly into more resilient projects, empowered leaders, and transformative results that serve communities for the long term.

Best Practice: Build Cohort and Peer-Learning Structures for Mutual Support

Peer-learning cohorts that connect local advocates and implementers, local government, and funders have repeatedly proven invaluable for overcoming strategic and technical hurdles during project rollouts. These networks foster mutual learning, rapid problem-solving, and cross-pollination of successful practices, which builds resilience within the field. Cohort approaches also help smaller organizations avoid isolation and burnout, allowing both individuals and strategies to evolve with changing policy and funding landscapes.

Case Study: Little Manila Rising and Casa Familiar

In the case of Little Manila Rising and Casa Familiar, two community-based partners in California, both participated in The Greenlining Institute's Greenlining the Block program, which hosts a community of practice of 24 CBOs advancing climate justice neighborhood projects in communities across California, Colorado, Illinois, North Carolina, and Michigan. GTB's community of practice virtually convened partners monthly to provide a space for peer learning and support as CBOs navigated climate capital development challenges. Through GTB, LMR and Casa Familiar connected and collaborated within peer circles of CBO-led project development that enabled their teams to support one another in refining project design and solving financial challenges.

Together they workshopped challenges related to developing community resilience hubs and shared successful practices. Their virtual support of each other culminated in Little Manila Rising visiting Casa Familiar's project in San Ysidro, CA. Experiencing the transformation happening in San Ysidro served as invaluable inspiration for LMR, helping to clarify what their own project could achieve in South Stockton.

Best Practice: Prioritize Co-design Before Funding Allocation

A major difference between successful and stalled projects often comes down to whether implementers were involved in shaping project design, narratives, and grant guidelines before funding decisions were made. Practitioners noted that co-design with community-based partners well ahead of allocation leads to more grounded programs, smoother compliance, and greater trust among local actors.

Case Study: City of Richmond

In Richmond, Virginia, the Sustainability Office established the Racial Equity & Environmental Justice Roundtable to inform every step of the RVAgreen 2050: Climate Equity Action Plan 2030 process.[14] The roundtable was made up of Richmond residents who worked alongside technical experts to create the plan. By merging different perspectives, knowledge, and lived experiences, the roundtable identified seven community priorities: Racial Equity & Environmental Justice, Government Accountability, Community Wealth, Neighborhoods, Affordable Housing, Health & Well-Being, Engagement, and Communication. These priorities were baked into every step of the plan.

The roundtable ensured that the Climate Equity Action Plan 2030 was approved without any major setbacks and City of Richmond staff reported that implementation of the plan has been more effective because of community support, both de-risking elements of the strategy while building a sense of ownership and collaboration early in the process. While the roundtable formally dissolved once the plan was approved, some roundtable participants remained engaged and informed, preparing them to pursue resilience funding opportunities with the City of Richmond.

Recommendation: Strategically Invest in Growing Development Capacity

Funders across public, private, and philanthropic sectors should invest in growing development capacity for CBOs and local governments through technical assistance programs and building administrative capacity. Bridging the severe lack of project development capacity among CBOs and local governments is essential for translating federal infrastructure investments into real, equitable outcomes at the local level. Without the ability to develop competitive proposals, manage compliance, oversee construction, and steward long-term community assets, even the most ambitious federal programs fail to reach the communities most in need. Increased development capacity enables local actors to move projects from concept to shovel-ready, navigate complex grant requirements, and adapt quickly to changing funding landscapes — drastically improving the pace, quality, and resilience of infrastructure delivery.

When CBOs and local governments lack the staff, technical capacity, and administrative systems to plan and implement projects, they get passed up for investment opportunities and dollars inevitably flow to the more resourced municipalities or larger, externally based consulting firms, bypassing frontline communities and deepening inequity. Targeted investments in development capacity not only level the playing field but also ensure infrastructure projects reflect genuine community needs and priorities. When CBOs and local governments have robust development capacity, projects are more likely to be completed on time, address community needs, and increase public trust in infrastructure initiatives more broadly.

Best Practice: Use Windows of Funding Opportunity as Catalysts for Long-Term Asset-Building and Community Ownership

Practitioners warn against viewing each wave of federal funding as a standalone fix. Instead, they advocate using these opportunities to lay foundations for long-term asset-building, centering community and shared ownership and durable governance structures that outlast these up and down cycles. Just as SAGE Development (discussed above) embeds community ownership and governance into all of its development projects, so does the City Heights Community Development Corporation.

Since 2012, City Heights CDC has organized and convened a core group of residents, building the foundation for sustained local leadership. When the California Air Resources Board awarded a $3 million Sustainable Transportation Equity Project grant in their neighborhood, the organization leveraged that moment to catalyze a partnership with the city that centered resident leadership.[15] Recognizing the need to pair community vision with strong technical support, City Heights CDC mobilized relationships to fill capacity gaps and ensure the long-term maintenance of local infrastructure.

Both SAGE and City Heights CDC focus on building local capacity, securing community-controlled assets, and reinvesting returns into future efforts. These resilience projects represent not one-off interventions, but the continuation of years of work to convert short-term funding into durable, locally rooted assets. This approach stands in sharp contrast to legacy models, where projects often dissolve at the end of a funding cycle, leaving little behind beyond diminished trust and weakened capacity.

Best Practice: Innovate Public Financing Strategies and Bridge Traditional Financial Sources with Community-Owned and Reparative Models

Innovating public financing strategies and bridging traditional financial sources with community-owned and reparative models has proven essential for delivering infrastructure projects that are both effective and just. Federal grants and state dollars, while necessary, are rarely sufficient to meet the unique needs of marginalized communities or to overcome the market-based barriers — such as risk-aversion and historical disinvestment — that have historically excluded them from infrastructure investment through practices like redlining that still weigh on communities of color today.

Financial institutions and strategies that center communities, like CDFIs, public banks, and revolving loan funds, often try to directly align capital with local priorities, ensure participation in decision-making, and create long-term value that remains in communities rather than being extracted.

Case Study: Justice Capital

By blending public funding with community-controlled structures, projects gain access to flexible capital needed for pre-development, bridge financing, and stages that are rarely covered by federal grants alone. Justice Capital's approach to capital stacking leverages social, political, and economic capital and adjusts traditional financing mechanisms to meet community needs and function more reparatively. This allows them to deploy capital to Black and Indigenous frontline communities in earlier stages, prioritizing community-led solutions that center community ownership and governance.

Their capital blending starts with valuing sweat equity — time, physical labor, and mental effort — for project ideation. During this stage of business development, the project's lead evolves a project idea and achieves a level of readiness that unlocks Justice Capital's pre-development financing support. In the pre-development stage, Justice Capital partners access public grants for pre-development, which can quickly unlock recoverable grants and catalytic grants for model development.

Justice Capital supports their partners to achieve benchmarks in the pre-development and model development stages. Without this progress, projects are unable to access the growth capital needed to scale solutions. In this way, Justice Capital provides a vital service that several community partners mentioned is missing in the ecosystem – a savvy navigator of the traditional financing system with values and mission alignment.

These innovative approaches reduce reliance on traditional, rigid financing that tends to privilege well-resourced developers and excludes grassroots actors. They also buffer projects from the boom-and-bust dynamic of public funding cycles, helping to ensure that infrastructure investments result in durable, locally owned assets and equitable outcomes. In sum, bridging public and reparative financial models not only democratizes infrastructure development but also improves project efficiency, increases buy-in, and guarantees that infrastructure dollars seed long-lasting prosperity and power in underserved communities.

Best Practice: Strengthen Political and Partnership Ecosystems for Long-Term Stability

Strengthening political durability and ecosystem networks — so that civic infrastructure does not depend solely on federal funding cycles — is fundamental for delivering infrastructure that is resilient, adaptive, and able to serve communities beyond the lifespan of any single grant or funding wave. When infrastructure development relies exclusively on episodic public investment, hard-won capacity, partnerships, and momentum too often vanish as soon as funding ebbs, forcing communities to rebuild from scratch with each new opportunity.

Robust ecosystem networks — linking local governments, CBOs, philanthropy, labor, and technical partners — act as connective tissue that sustains field knowledge, trust, and shared strategy through political transitions and funding droughts. These alliances coordinate resources, align advocacy, and foster mutual support, making it possible to pivot quickly in response to new policy priorities, regulatory shifts, or emergencies.

For example, the City of Richmond's Neighborhood Climate Resilience Grant Program, which supports the implementation of equity-centered, neighborhood-based planning and climate resilience projects within the city, demonstrates the type of political durability that can be achieved by a strong ecosystem and good project delivery.[16]

The NCRG program was initially funded by the American Rescue Plan and shifted to being funded from the city's general fund after gaining political support and positioning itself as a key city tool for delivering projects that build climate resilience in historically underserved neighborhoods, improve local green spaces, and support community wellness and engagement. The adoption and sustainability of programs like this help to build political durability — broad political and community support, reliable funding — and translate near-term projects initiated during large public funding windows into enduring progress that can withstand shifting political and financial environments.

Political durability also allows communities to resist the fragmentation and inequity that arise when only the most prepared or connected actors can "catch the wave" of new federal investments. By investing in ecosystem networks and long-term organizational alliances, communities develop the power, relationships, and institutional memory that drive sustained project pipelines and policy wins — even during periods of uncertainty or governmental gridlock.

Ultimately, this strategic approach ensures that civic infrastructure — skilled staff, trusted coalitions, and community-serving assets — is preserved and accumulated over time, producing more efficient project delivery, fostering innovation, and enabling communities to transform every funding window into lasting, equitable gains for their residents.

Recommendation: Fund Data Collection, Evaluation, and Communications/Storytelling

Program administrators should allow and encourage the use of funds for data collection and evaluation of infrastructure investments that can be used to serve multiple purposes. It helps legislators, community partners, and other key stakeholders demonstrate success, ensure accountability, and extend the research base on the impact of particular interventions on environmental, equity, and economic outcomes, among others. Locally, evaluation can also build the capacity of local organizations and community members to participate more substantively in research and knowledge generation processes and continue collecting and analyzing data well after a third-party evaluator's formal work has concluded. Framed this way, evaluation becomes a tool for strengthening political durability and ecosystem networks rather than just a compliance exercise.

Depending on the conclusions of the evaluation, local organizations and community members can leverage evaluation to secure additional funding, partnerships, and political capital to continue, expand, and deepen their work on climate action and environmental justice. Legislators, agency staff, and advocates are also able to leverage evaluation data to justify continued and expanded investment, align program rules across agencies, and weave networks of practitioners learning from common metrics and shared evidence. Combined, project evaluation data can deepen the institutional and community ecosystem that can sustain community-driven infrastructure investments over the long term.

Conclusion

The passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act marked an unprecedented federal commitment to renewing America's infrastructure. Combined with Justice40, these investments had the opportunity to prioritize equitable, community-driven development. However, the promise of these investments was eliminated by the Trump Administration's systematic rollback of agency expertise and capacity, federal workforce cuts, and administrative clawbacks of billions in authorized funding.

As a result, many communities across the nation are being denied a critical opportunity — not just to build roads and bridges — but to reimagine how public investment can catalyze transformative change, experiment with new, community-centered approaches and models, and cultivate the civic infrastructure needed for lasting impact.

Instead of embracing the full potential of BIL and IRA to empower community voices and nurture the next generation of local leaders, funding delays and a gutted federal implementation apparatus left many shovel-ready projects unbuilt and the seeds of civic infrastructure left untended.

Yet, the work and wisdom generated through this period remain powerful assets. Across the country, practitioners, local governments, and community organizations have shown what's possible when capacity is invested in early and often, when technical assistance is sophisticated and community-calibrated, and when partnerships are forged to bridge local expertise with national ambition. At the same time, local governments, community leaders, and their partners must work collaboratively to build durable local implementation pathways, institutional capacity, and resource networks that are not wholly dependent on federal funding cycles. By investing in these foundations between major federal funding windows, communities can preserve expertise, sustain partnerships, and maintain momentum even during periods of fiscal and political uncertainty. Doing so ensures that when the next wave of federal investment arrives, communities are positioned not to start from scratch, but to accelerate and scale work already underway — transforming episodic funding opportunities into sustained, equitable progress.

Looking forward, the path to unlocking transformative, equitable infrastructure lies in doubling down on these lessons: expanding the reach and flexibility of capacity building funds, cultivating dynamic networks of support, and placing community expertise at the heart of federal investment strategy.

If we commit to strengthening the relationships and social infrastructure between local government, community-based organizations, private companies, technical assistance ecosystems, and deep cross-sector partnerships, future waves of federal investment can realize the full promise of not just rebuilding infrastructure — but rebuilding trust, opportunity, and shared prosperity in every community. The foundation is laid; it is up to us to build boldly and inclusively upon it.

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