DOWNTOWN ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

A NEW STANDARD FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN ENGAGEMENT: REPAIRING THE PAST AND SHAPING THE FUTURE

PINNACLE AWARD 2026
POLICY AND ADVOCACY
SUMMARY

Downtown Detroit Partnership

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Downtown Detroit Partnership took the lead in transforming a contentious highway redesign into a national model for community-driven infrastructure. The I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project, led by the Michigan Department of Transportation, proposes replacing a downtown freeway with a surface-level boulevard. Early designs prioritized traffic flow, relied on outdated data and were introduced without fully integrating meaningful public input, leaving residents and business leaders questioning whether the project reflected a shared vision for Detroit's future. Backed by a $2 million grant from The Kresge Foundation, DDP stepped forward to lead an independent Peer Review and a comprehensive engagement process that brought together residents, corporate and small business leaders, institutional partners and visitor perspectives. The effort reframed the project around current data, best practices and community priorities. Purpose: Reposition the project as a community-informed, forward-looking investment that strengthens Downtown Detroit. Goals: Unite diverse stakeholders, leverage catalytic public funding for maximum economic and placemaking impact and establish a replicable framework for community-led infrastructure planning. Key Components: 1. Independent Peer Review grounded in current data and national best practices. 2. Inclusive engagement strategy reaching residents, businesses and institutional partners. 3. Strategic alignment of mobility, land use and economic development priorities. 4. Public advocacy and cross-sector collaboration to strengthen trust and accountability. Outcomes: MDOT paused and revised the project scope, incorporated DDP's Peer Review recommendations and committed to a community-driven Framework Plan. DDP not only influenced the project's direction but created a blueprint for how cities can guide transformational infrastructure through meaningful stakeholder engagement.

INNOVATION

The DDP's Peer Review stands out because it redefined the role and influence of a Downtown place management organization in major infrastructure project plans. DDP's model builds bridges between public and private-sector interests while prioritizing a community-led vision. Rather than reacting to state-led highway projects, the DDP proactively convened diverse stakeholders to advance the project while being mindful of its long-term goals. The team's role in bringing a framework to the city and State on how transformational projects should be led is innovative in both strategy and structure. The independent review created space for objective analysis on the engineering of the project while ensuring the community's voice was embedded into every recommendation. The DDP used this framework on another project that while different has the same goal: Reconnecting communities. DDP's I-75 Cap project is one that has been heavily community-led, and the team continues to engage. This process also introduced a dedicated communications channel, The Road Ahead. The Road Ahead updates allowed for transparency in a technically rigorous analysis, which enters a realm of systems-level influence. This replicable framework can be used by cities and states to lead transformational projects more inclusively, equitably, and strategically.

OUTCOME

The Peer Review and engagement initiative directly addressed the central challenge identified at the start of the project: a major infrastructure redesign moving forward without public alignment. By introducing independent analysis and community engagement, DDP reshaped the conversation and the project. In November 2024, DDP delivered the Peer Review a nearly 200-page analysis combining technical evaluation, national best practices and community-informed recommendations addressing roadway design, land use, construction impacts and long-term economic potential. The report became a key reference point for policymakers, planners and the public. The effort generated measurable outcomes. The Michigan Department of Transportation incorporated several Peer Review recommendations into its revised approach, including reducing the number of travel lanes, improving pedestrian-oriented design and creating land parcels more conducive to redevelopment and public space. MDOT also paused the project to reassess the design and ensure stronger alignment with community priorities. Equally important, the project

shifted how engagement occurred. Through public meetings, stakeholder outreach and media coverage, the Peer Review sparked a broader civic conversation and built stronger collaboration among MDOT, the City of Detroit, philanthropic partners and the community. The initiative remains ongoing. MDOT and the City are now advancing a community-driven Framework Plan that will guide land use, design and development decisions over the next several years. DDP's work created a durable resource for the field. The Peer Review and research now serve as a blueprint for other cities seeking to ensure that transformational infrastructure projects are informed by community engagement, data-driven analysis and long-term urban strategy.

EXECUTION

The Peer Review process began in May 2023 and came at a crucial time in the project as MDOT and the City of Detroit were moving into the next phase of implementation. The DDP team got to work by assembling a world class team of industry and subject matter experts specializing in urban innovation and design, real estate and economic development. Project consultants include Urban AC, HR&A and Toole Design Group. Over the next 10 months, the team directed its attention to several key areas: benchmarking the work already taking place around the country to understand both missteps and best practices, engaging in extensive community research and discovering and analyzing trends in urban infrastructure, walkable spaces, inclusive design, cultural considerations and more. The Peer Review evaluation included detailed documentation of MDOT's design process, assumptions and engineering alternatives. Additionally, the team reviewed historic and current material provided by MDOT using 32 unique evaluation criteria. The team's discovery process also included a review of public comments that allowed them to understand the themes emerging around public concerns and goals for the project. Simultaneously, conducted extensive research on urban infrastructure, materials, innovations in land use, cultural initiatives and communication and mitigation strategies. DDP delivered a balanced, thoughtful and forward-thinking document that would help advocate for a truly reconnective and reparative process.

ENGAGEMENT/REPRESENTATION

The DDP established guiding principles to ensure the recommendations in the Peer Review reflected community priorities of historically displaced Black residents as a nonprofit place management organization, the DDP serves a diverse group of stakeholders and is a balanced voice in the community. This is done by leveraging its convening power to bring together these diverse voices. Engagement was conducted through a variety of channels, including stakeholder interviews, structured community conversations and cross-sector convenings to create space for historically underrepresented voices. The team wanted to sustain this engagement beyond the completion of the Peer Review, so a dedicated communications platform/channel was created – The Road Ahead. It has a distinct brand identity focused on infrastructure and mobility projects in the community and allows the DDP to provide consistent, transparent and ongoing updates and engagement opportunities to the community. Nearly 20 Road Ahead newsletters deployed to more than 900 subscribers. This mailing list provides a direct communications channel for project updates, meeting dates and recaps and next steps. Combining in-person engagement with sustained digital communication ensures that Peer Review was not a one-time exercise but an ongoing dialogue to strengthen trust and reinforce accountability throughout the process.

REPLICATION

The Peer Review is a replicable roadmap for other downtown organizations to navigate complex infrastructure projects with historic equity implications. Many communities like Detroit are reviewing mid-century highway decisions, and the Peer Review models how a non-profit intermediary can convene stakeholders, center historically impacted residents and influence public sector outcomes. The framework of the Peer Review is both scalable and adaptable. Organizations with limited budgets can seek philanthropic partnerships, university collaborations or pro bono technical experts to help lead structured listening sessions. Bigger districts can approach the process in a multi-phase process that integrates engineering analysis, historical research and proctored community engagement. The DDP has published the Peer Review on its website. Audiences that could benefit from the work include departments of transportation, economic development, diversity, development, downtown development authorities, chambers of commerce, architects, urban planners, schools and universities. The DDP's model empowers likeminded organizations to move beyond advocacy and into solution-oriented leadership to create a more equitable, community-informed approach to infrastructure projects nationwide.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Photos of I-375 infrastructure: https://photos.app.goo.gl/iQHTLdbLiEAUJG1X6

DDP I-375 Webpage: I-375 - Downtown Detroit Partnership

DDP CEO blog: I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project Peer Review - Downtown Detroit Partnership

DDP CEO Blog: Planning Ahead: Let's Make Sure We Get I-375 Right - Downtown Detroit Partnership

DDP Press release: Downtown Detroit Partnership I-375 Peer Review Report Offers Recommendations to Maximize the Project Opportunity - Downtown Detroit Partnership

Media Hits:

Reparative I-375 talks focus on efforts to honor historic Black neighborhoods

Downtown Detroit Partnership has an alternative plan for I-375 - Crain's Detroit Business

Downtown Detroit Partnership wants I-375 scaled back - Crain's Detroit Business

PODCAST: What's going on with I-375? (w/ Eric Larson, Downtown Detroit Partnership)

Downtown Detroit Partnership I-375 Peer Review Report - Kresge Foundation

MDOT restarts I-375 project, cutting costs and prioritizing community concerns

Revised I-375 plan gets good marks from former critics - Crain's Detroit Business

CBS YouTube: The Downtown Detroit Partnership (DDP) has a vision for the I-375 redesign: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94Yuoh9OU-w