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## Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Durham's Blueprint for Equitable Community Engagement

By CED Program Interns & Students

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What started as community push-back on Durham's proposed rails-to-trails development has turned into a model for standardizing equitable and inclusive engagement. Here's how community concern about the Durham Belt Line resulted in a shift in culture development and the creation of Durham's Equitable Community Engagement Plan.

### Background on the Durham Belt Line Project

Originally built in 1892 to support the American Tobacco factory, the Durham Belt Line was purchased and used by railway company Norfolk Southern from 1900 until the late 1990s. Since then, the rail spur has sat idle until The Conservation Fund and the City of Durham acquired it in 2017 with plans to convert it into a 1.7-mile linear park in the model of New York City's High Line, Atlanta's BeltLine, and the Downtown Greenway in Greensboro, NC.

The Durham Belt Line sits on 18 acres that starts on Chapel Hill Street on the edge of City Center and runs north through the West Village District and east through Old North Durham to Avondale Road. The greenway would connect with the South Ellerbe Creek stormwater restoration project already under construction as well as the American Tobacco trail to the south of downtown. (Source: DURHAM HERALD-SUN and the City of Durham)

### Community Concerns about Equity and the Belt Line Project

Durham leaders conceived of the Belt Line project as an opportunity to increase access to green space and the range of transportation options for nearby residents. Stewart Engineering, the lead firm for the Belt Line Master Plan, estimated that the number of households in these neighborhoods with access to open space would increase by 52%. Beyond access to green space, the Belt Line is conceived as a new gateway into Durham's Innovation District and may serve as a catalyst for additional infill development.

However, local community leaders were reportedly not deeply included in the design and development of the Belt Line. According to Next City, an urban planning-focused publication, the community survey for the Belt Line only engaged 250 residents with a median income of \$90,000. However, the three census tracts that surround the Belt Line project includes a population of 7,076 with a median income of approximately \$50,000. (US Census).

"We realized none of our partners in communities of color or affordable housing or equitable development knew about it," said Tara Mei Smith to Next City. Smith, along with Justin Robinson, leads Extra Terrestrial Projects, a non-profit based in Durham and New York City that focuses on connecting urban residents with nature.

The Belt Line project would be expected to bring new amenities and resources that would be attractive to both current residents and those looking for residential areas with redevelopment potential. This raised concerns in the community that parts of Old North Durham may be at risk of "green gentrification."

"In Durham, a 53.9 percent black and brown city, one in five renters receives an eviction notice a year. Fears of Atlanta Belt Line-esque gentrification were felt most acutely in neighborhoods along the eastern end of the trail, home to communities of color and cost-burdened renters." (Next City)



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Nathaniel Smith, founder of the Partnership for Southern Equity, commented to the Durham Herald-Sun, "I think the challenge is if you're not creating a Belt Line for everybody, if you're creating the circumstances that perpetuate a really separate but equal city, the only people who will be able to live around the Belt Line area are people who can afford million dollar homes, like in Atlanta."

### **Public Outcry Leads to New Community Engagement Standards**

At an August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018 Durham City Council meeting, residents raised these concerns with their elected leaders—and the leaders agreed. The Council directed city staff to develop an equitable community development plan for the Belt Line. However, Durham's Neighborhood Improvement Services Department went further and developed an Equitable Community Engagement Blueprint (ECE Blueprint), which will guide development in Durham going forward.

According to Next City, "existing city plans often address equity and engagement separately." The ECE Blueprint attempts to address this by ensuring that equitable community engagement is defined for each future project and that goals and accountability measures in place. The document was drafted in 90 days and should be considered a working draft that will continue to evolve over time.

The ECE Blueprint guides city leaders and staff to ensure development initiatives have three elements:

- Definition for equitable community development;
- Key components of actionable and accountable engagement plan
- Tools and strategies for engagement that guide city efforts

### **Durham's Key Components in Defining Equitable Community Engagement**

In the ECE Blueprint, community engagement is "any process that seeks the community's input to ensure that the City's decision making is well informed." This engagement should be viewed as a dialogue between the city and community and should allow for the community to offer opinions, propose ideas, and develop collective solutions.

Historically, community engagement has not always been representative of the community's geographic, socioeconomic, and demographic characteristics. Equitable community engagement seeks to change this and in particular seeks to ensure those most adversely impacted and those most often marginalized are included.

Although equitable community engagement will vary from project to project, there are common actions required to define the scope of engagement. The Durham ECE Blueprint offers specific recommendations on how to:

- Collect Baseline Data on Who Participates Today
- Measure Who is Participating, Not Just How Many Participated
- Bring Engagement Opportunities to The People
- Understand Historical Context
- Ensure a Flexible and Adaptable Process
- Define Accountability Partners

### **Durham's Steps to Building an Equitable Community Engagement Plan**

The Durham ECE Blueprint recommends a five-step process to build a definition of equitable community engagement and develop a plan of engagement:

- Step 1: What level of engagement should we use?
  - Step 1a: Be Transparent with the Community
  - Step 1b: Define the Impact of the Project
  - Step 1c: Identify the Engagement Level (i.e., Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, or Empower).
- Step 2: Who should we engage?
  - Step 2a: Define the Audience
  - Step 2b: Identify Community Partners



- Step 2c: Coordinate with Government Departments
- Step 3: How should we engage?
  - Step 3a: Define Potential Barriers to Engagement
  - Step 3b: Define Potential Opportunities *for Engagement*
- Step 4: How will we measure successful engagement?
  - Collect and Evaluate Data
- Step 5: How will we build for the long-term?
  - Step 5a: Grow Capacity of Community Partners
  - Step 5b: Continue Engagement

Laura Biediger, community engagement coordinator at the Neighborhood Improvement Services Department, notes that this process is a culture shift for the city government. However, there is hope among Durham's community partners that will be a meaningful step forward toward addressing inequity and moving toward a more inclusive model for economic development.

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