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Bridging the Gap: Capping Fort Washington Way



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September 25, 2023

The Honorable Pete M. Buttigieg
Secretary of Transportation
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Ave, SE
Washington, District of Columbia 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

It is our great pleasure to present this project and commitment of partnership and funding to ensure the success of ***Bridging the Gap: Capping Fort Washington Way***. This Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods (RCN) funding request is submitted by the City of Cincinnati, though the project reflects a true collaboration with local partners including City of Cincinnati, Hamilton County, and the private sector, led by the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber, along with the Cincinnati Parks organization.

As indicated within the application, Bridging the Gap: Capping Fort Washington Way is the realization of three-decades of community visioning, zoning changes, incremental construction projects, and improved community engagement that will reclaim and construct 5-acres of usable land above an existing interstate, that physically bridges the City's central business and jobs-opportunity area with the newly repopulated riverfront.

This project will be realized through partnership with US DOT via the RCN program. With a total project cost of \$187.3 Million, the project partners are committed to meeting the local match requirement of \$37.5 Million. This will be sourced from multiple existing funding streams, including:

- City and County Capital funding via local operating budgets,
- Joint City and County State of Ohio capital funding grants (2024, 2026, 2028),
- State funding and entitlements granted to MPO,
- City-established Tax Increment Financing district,
- Voter-approved sales tax levy to the local Transit Infrastructure Fund,
- Grants and endowment-financing via Cincinnati Parks,
- Private fundraising led by the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber

The project also leverages more than \$10 Million of local investment from this same alliance of named project partners more than two decades ago that laid the foundation for our project

today. That foresight by our predecessors will ensure that the streets that surround the future public space are designed to promote safe access for all.

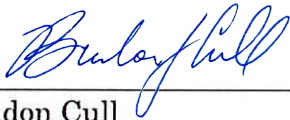
Sincerely,



Sheryl M. M. Long
City of Cincinnati City Manager



Jeff Aluotto
Hamilton County Administrator



Brendon Cull
Chamber President & CEO

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Introduction

The City of Cincinnati is requesting \$149.81 million in Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Program Capital Construction Grant funding to be matched by \$37.45 million in local funds from the City of Cincinnati, Hamilton County, and the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber (Cincinnati Chamber) to fully fund the design and construction of the \$187.2 million ***Bridging the Gap: Capping Fort Washington Way Project (Bridging the Gap)***. If successfully funded, the City will be able to realize the vision – 30 years in the making – of reconnecting Cincinnati's Central Business District to The Banks riverfront district by providing a 5.65-acre civic park space and plaza over the Fort Washington Way Interstate - removing this significant barrier to access, mobility, and economic development.

Once constructed this project will provide the following benefits:

- Create 5.65 acres of new civic park space in the heart of Cincinnati's central business district (CBD).
- Improve access to jobs in Cincinnati's CBD, especially for transit users.
- Improve safety for all pedestrians travelling between the CBD and Riverfront District.
- Present a future opportunity to create affordable housing in an area that saw displacement in the 1960s.

In addition to funding all final design and environmental work, The Bridging the Gap project scope will include the following physical elements:

Project elements:

- **Construct** an elevated cap park structure over Interstate 71 / U.S. Route 50 (locally known as Fort Washington Way) between Race Street and Walnut Street
- **Construct** all interior Tunnel Operating Systems
- **Construct** multimodal improvements and traffic safety countermeasures along surface roads and intersections within the project area

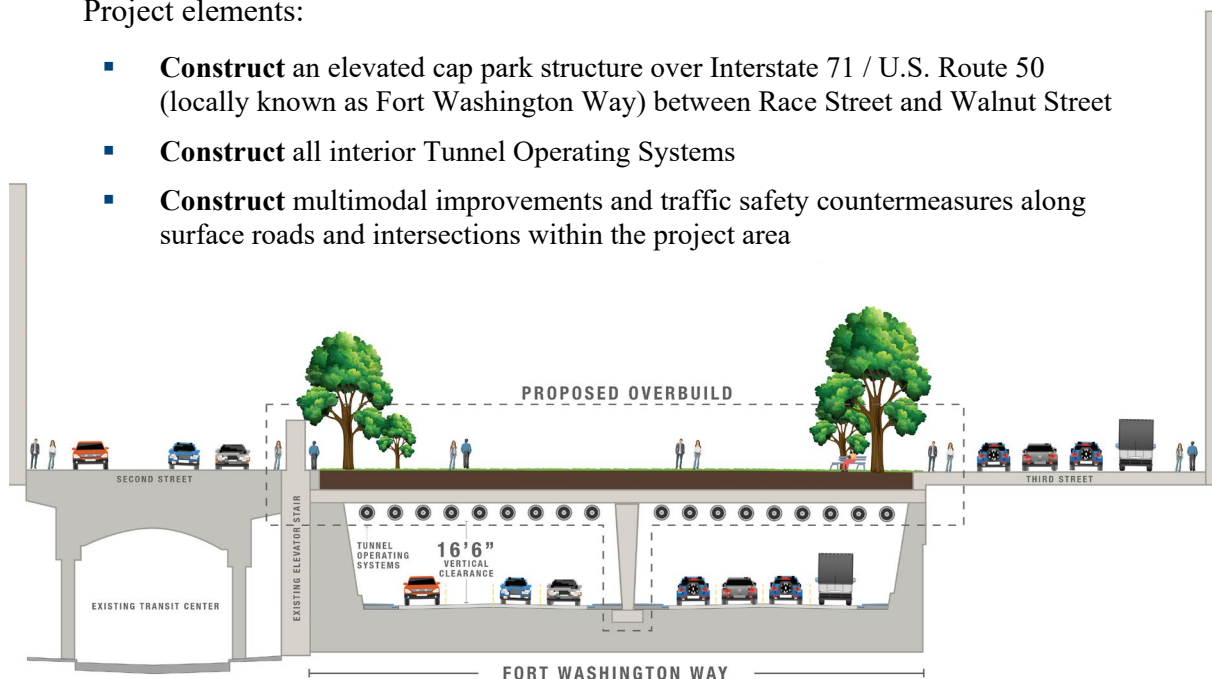


FIGURE 1. Conceptual Cross Section of *Bridging the Gap* Project Elements

Community Character

The *Bridging the Gap* project is located in an area that was subjected to urban renewal resulting in displacement of once vibrant communities in the early 1960s. Since initial construction, the roadway's width has been reduced but Fort Washington Way (FWW), 2nd Street, and 3rd Street all continue to be a major barrier for area residents and visitors.

Each day, an estimated 8,000 boardings or alightings occur on Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority (SORTA) buses within one-quarter mile of the *Bridging the Gap* project site; 270 Red Bike bikeshare bikes are rented at stations around The Banks; and 2,300 trips are taken on the Cincinnati Streetcar. The Banks district plays host to major events throughout the year that constantly draw massive crowds down from the CBD and across Fort Washington Way. Annually, this includes 88 Cincinnati Reds games at Great American Ballpark (seating capacity of more than 40,000), 10 Cincinnati Bengals games at Paycor Stadium (seating capacity of more than 80,000), numerous indoor concerts and sporting events at Heritage Bank Center (seating capacity of more than 17,000), and year-round indoor and outdoor concerts at the Andrew J. Brady Music Center (seating capacity of 8,000 outdoors, 4,500 indoors). Special events, including Oktoberfest Zinzinnati, Taste of Cincinnati, the Cincinnati Music Festival, and Kroger Wellness Festival, have also been hosted adjacent to FWW on 2nd Street and 3rd Street in recent years, attracting crowds upwards of 700,000 attendees.



FIGURE 2. Baseball Fans Cross 2nd St. at FWW

Detailed Project Scope

Bridging the Gap is a project that builds upon the forethought of civic leaders and community partners who successfully advocated for the inclusion of foundation pilings that could support a future highway cap park when FWW was reconstructed in 2000. This project intends to design and construct the highway cap structure, integrated tunnel safety systems below, and a vibrant civic park space above – all supported by the structural pilings included during the original reconstruction of FWW. This continued investment will create a regional civic space that reconnects the CBD to the riverfront while also replacing existing infrastructure to ensure a long-term state of good repair along FWW for decades to come.

BRIDGE REPLACEMENTS & CAP STRUCTURE

Included in the project will be the replacement of three bridges that span FWW, along Race Street, Vine Street, and Walnut Street. These bridges are all 23 years through their 50-year useful life, and – if not replaced – would be 30 years old by the time of completion of the *Bridging the Gap* project. Because of this, the City and the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) desire to replace the bridges to proactively address any anticipated structural issues and bring them into the same maintenance schedule as the highway cap and tunnel, saving future maintenance and construction costs in the process. The demolition and replacement of these bridges is estimated to cost \$11.4 million.

The structure for the bridges and highway cap will be similar to the existing bridge structures across FWW in design. This structural system will take advantage of the foundation pilings that were installed when FWW was reconstructed to support the ***Bridging the Gap*** civic park space on top of it. It is estimated that the construction of the highway cap support structure will cost \$33.2 million.

TUNNEL SYSTEMS (TO BE CONSTRUCTED UNDER THE CAP)

To maintain traffic on FWW, a tunnel will be constructed to span the highway that includes all necessary tunnel systems. Construction of these elements are expected to cost \$48.9 million and will include tunnel ventilation systems, fire protection systems, electrical power systems, fire alarm and detection systems, tunnel roadway lighting, and miscellaneous safety items.

Tunnel Ventilation System

A longitudinal mechanical ventilation utilizing in-tunnel mounted jet fans is proposed for the FWW cap tunnels. This type of ventilation system is the most cost-effective and efficient system considering the length, location, and existing physical limitations of the proposed cap. In order for this type of system to be effective a full-height, fire-rated wall must be constructed to separate the directions of traffic, resulting in two physically separated traffic tunnels. In a fire emergency, the ventilation system will create airflow in the direction of traffic flow.

Fire Protection Systems

The proposed FWW Cap will require specific fire protection elements including a fire protection standpipe for the entire length and portable fire extinguishers placed along the roadway. A fixed firefighting system (FFFS) is also proposed to provide quick response suppression capability in the case of a significant vehicle fire and to help mitigate any damage to the cap structure.

Electrical Power Systems, Special System & Traffic Control

The electrical system will support life safety operations, fire emergency operations, and tunnel operations, including ventilation, lighting, communications, fire alarm and fire detection, exit signs, and traffic control.

Closed-circuit television (CCTV) systems with surveillance cameras located throughout the tunnel will be used as the primary means to identify and locate fires in the tunnel. An automatic fire detection system consisting of a linear heat detection sub system is proposed. A Fire Alarm Control Panel (FACP) would be provided to receive signals from the facilities' automatic fire detection system and to initiate alarms. An Automatic Incident Detection (AID) system will be installed within the tunnel and its immediate approaches to provide real-time detection and alarms related to traffic speeds and flows.

Tunnel Roadway Lighting

The tunnel lighting system will be designed to meet FHWA requirements while using the most energy efficient technology currently available. It will be designed to accommodate safe entry into the tunnel during daytime and nighttime hours as well as under emergency power disruptions. Each travel lane within the tunnel has a row of lighting luminaires installed above.

PARK SPACE AND STREET SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS

Bridging the Gap will provide approximately four acres of open green space, up to 1.65 acres of plaza space, and streetscape improvements with improved safety elements. Construction costs for all the park, civic space, and streetscape improvements total \$21.4 million. The final design of these spaces will be determined via a public engagement and community outreach process.

The green space will provide an event lawn, complete with deck waterproofing, engineered soil, sodding, drainage, watering system, and electrical power. The civic plazas will incorporate concrete pavers, seating walls, planters, and ornamental landscaping.

Additionally, *Bridging the Gap* includes streetscape and street safety improvements along 2nd Street, 3rd Street, Race Street, Vine Street, and Walnut Street. Both 2nd Street and 3rd Street currently operate as one-way pairs, with five travel lanes on each street. As part of the project, the city will seek public input and redesign each street to include traffic calming measures and pedestrian safety improvements, such as curb bump-outs, new crosswalks, modernized accessible pedestrian signals (APS), leading pedestrian intervals, on-street parking, and landscaping treatments. Also included in these improvements will be a new 0.5-mile two-way protected bike lane, either along 2nd Street or 3rd Street. The construction of these streetscape and safety improvements is estimated to cost approximately \$9.1 million of the total \$21.3 million park space and street safety improvements budget.

MAINTENANCE OF TRAFFIC

Maintenance of Traffic (MOT) for the *Bridging the Gap* project would require nighttime intermittent closures to place beams with interstate being rerouted during these closures. This project will also likely require lane closures near the outside edges and/or the median for micro-piling, as needed. The interruption of traffic due to the construction of the new [Brent Spence Companion Bridge](#) is expected to cause a diversion of traffic, reducing volumes along FWW. As the scope of the Brent Spence project continues to be defined, the City, ODOT, and KYTC will work closely to identify coordinated MOT phasing that mitigates traffic impacts and will result in lower construction costs for both projects.

History, Background, and Barriers

The [1948 Cincinnati Metropolitan Master Plan](#) highlighted the need for two major transportation facilities to facilitate traffic flow: a Millcreek Expressway (which became I-75) and a Third Street Distributor (later named Fort Washington Way). Using federal grants, the city purchased properties during the 1950s and 1960s to implement the redevelopment plan. All buildings between the south side of Third Street and the north side of Second Street were demolished for the construction of FWW between 1957 and 1961 (Figure 3, left image). Those displaced by the highway project were predominantly poor working classes and African Americans. Construction of FWW was completed in 1961 (Figure 3, middle image).

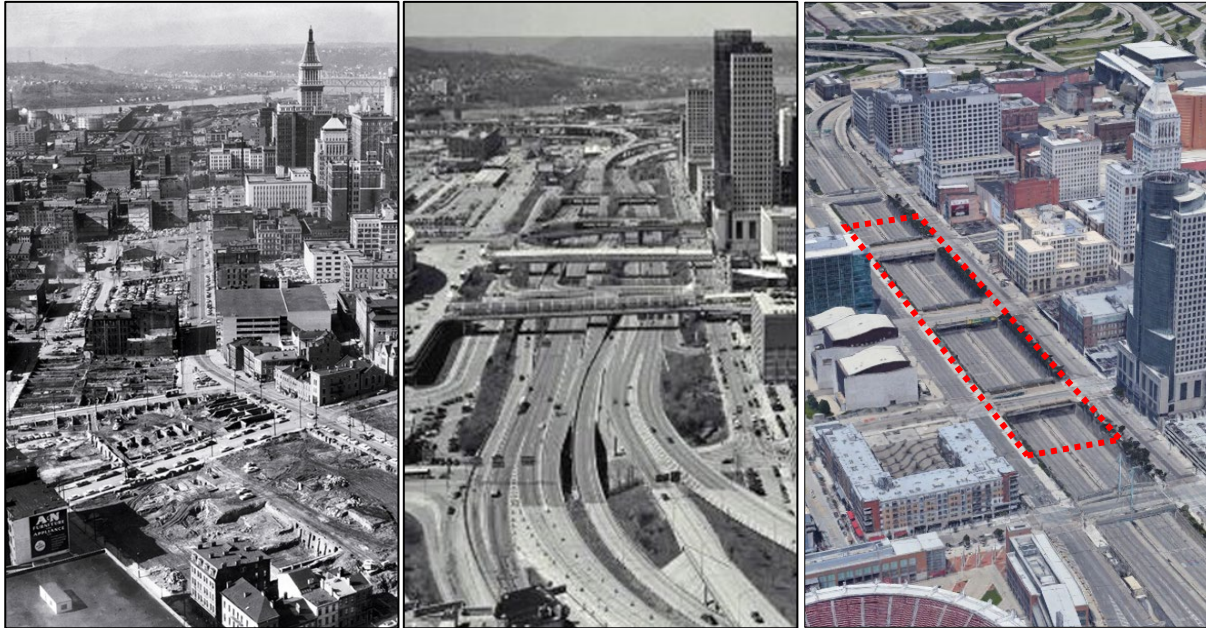


FIGURE 3. FWW Through the Years (left to right: 1950's, 1961, 2013)

By the mid-1990's, FWW was exceeding its original design limits with more than 120,000 vehicles using the highway daily. Heavy traffic congestion, high crash incidences due to complex interstate on- and off-ramps, and pedestrian safety were also problematic during peak traffic periods. The Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) initiated a project to address these issues. It was during this redesign that concerns were first documented about the long-term economic impacts of the division between the CBD and the riverfront.

FWW reconstruction began in 1997, ultimately reducing the overall width of the highway footprint – from 600 feet across to only 160 feet across today – and removing the complex network of on- and off-ramps to improve safety (see Figure 1, right image). This was a major win for the community. The redesigned FWW also reconnected Cincinnati's historic street grid south of 3rd Street. By reducing the footprint of the freeway, an additional 15 acres of land was opened for future development of Cincinnati's riverfront area. The area that was redeveloped now includes the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center Museum, two professional sports stadiums, Smale Riverfront Park, and The Banks: a mixed-use district of public spaces and entertainment.



FIGURE 4. Conceptual Site Plan From the Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan

While the FWW reconstruction greatly reduced the width of the highway, there remains an open space over the highway that presents a significant barrier to access, mobility, and economic development. Just two blocks north of FWW is [Fountain Square](#), Cincinnati's historic downtown civic space, centered around the Tyler Davidson Fountain. Fountain Square hosts regular concerts, social events, and celebrations and hotels, museums, and street-level commercial activity contribute to a bustling activity zone. South of FWW sits The Banks, which attracts thousands of visitors and residents from across the city daily. However, because of FWW, these two socially and economically significant activity centers have become disjointed.

Fortunately, when FWW was reconfigured, there was forethought by the City of Cincinnati, Hamilton County, and private sector partners about future use of the space above FWW. As part of the ODOT project, foundation pilings were built in the ground with the intention of one day using them to support an elevated highway cap park, as envisioned in [the 2000 Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan](#) (Figure 4). At that time, the entire \$10 million dollar cost of the design and construction of the pilings was privately raised with hopes that this long-term, visionary investment would help spur the reconnection of the CBD and Ohio River waterfront. That investment is equivalent to more than \$17 million today, when adjusted for inflation.

PROJECT LOCATION

The ***Bridging the Gap*** project site is along the section of the depressed Fort Washington Way (FWW) highway bounded by 2nd Street, 3rd Street, Race Street, and Walnut Street. The project is located within Ohio's 1st congressional district. It is within a Federally designated Area of Persistent Poverty and an Opportunity Zone.

According to [current census figures](#), the Cincinnati region is home to 2,214,265 residents, 310,053 of which live within the city proper. Approximately 18,000 residents live within the four core downtown neighborhoods of the CBD, Over-the-Rhine, West End, and Pendleton. Another 40,961 people live in the City of Covington, Kentucky, directly across the Ohio River from The Banks. Within the four core downtown neighborhoods of Cincinnati, 77.9% of households have one or no vehicle and 33.9% have income below the federal poverty limit. Racially and ethnically, 49.3% of the population are Black, 42.6% are White, 3.6% are Asian, and 1.9% are of Hispanic or Latino origin. The median household income is approximately \$52,000.

The City of Cincinnati is the primary economic engine for the region, providing approximately 225,000 jobs and facilitating the efficient flow of commodities along its interstates and major thoroughfares. Cincinnati's jobs are distributed throughout the city but are found in the highest density in the urban core, predominantly located within the ten blocks immediately north of FWW. According to the most recent [Census data](#), there are an estimated 73,000 jobs within one mile of FWW; most of which are located within Federally designated Areas of Persistent Poverty tracts as seen in Figure 9 (on page 15). Of those jobs, 24.6% (17,959 jobs) are for workers with an educational attainment of a high school degree (or equivalent) or less. 79.8% of jobs (58,383) are held by White workers and 15.4% (11,258) are held by Black workers. 16.3% of jobs (11,887) are held by workers with monthly earnings of \$1,250 or less.



FIGURE 5. *Bridging the Gap Project Location Map*

The streets surrounding FWW are all configured as multi-lane, one-way streets. [Annual average daily traffic](#) (AADT) counts collected in 2022 along FWW, indicate that approximately 110,000 vehicles use the depressed FWW interstate daily. This includes approximately 20,000 trucks that use this important freight corridor daily. 2018 AADT counts show that approximately 9,400 vehicles travel daily on 3rd Street, adjacent to the proposed FWW cap, and approximately 12,500 vehicles travel daily on 2nd Street. Vehicles traveling along these two five-lane arterials move at speeds of 35 mph or greater. Given these low vehicle counts and excess lane capacity on 2nd Street and 3rd Street, road diet and traffic calming measures are feasible.



FIGURE 6. *Aerial Rendering of Proposed Bridging the Gap Civic Park Space*

Public transit is readily accessible in the area surrounding FWW. This includes [The Connector](#), a modern streetcar which provides service from a southern terminus station at 2nd Street & Walnut Street to a northern terminus station at Findlay Market, connecting The Banks through the CBD and into Over-the-Rhine. Opened in 2016, ridership on The Connector was 846,622 passengers in 2022, an all-time annual record. With a substantial jump in ridership so far this year, the Connector is on pace to hit another annual record in 2023.

In addition to The Connector, fixed-route bus service in Hamilton County is operated by SORTA. The majority of SORTA's bus routes connect to Government Square Transit Center – the primary transit center in downtown Cincinnati – located two blocks north of FWW. SORTA has also invested in the underground [Riverfront Transit Center](#) – located under 2nd Street – which was built in 2003 utilizing a grant from the Federal Transit Administration and completed in coordination with the reconstruction of FWW. This transit center is currently used by SORTA's Metro Plus, a limited-stop express service along Montgomery Road, with connections to major universities and employment centers in Uptown and Downtown. SORTA also recently completed an alternatives analysis planning study to identify future bus rapid transit (BRT) investments, which will also utilize the Riverfront Transit Center. The first two BRT lines will begin design in Fall 2023 and will include lines that service the Reading Road corridor and the Hamilton Avenue corridor, two high ridership corridors that were ranked highest in [SORTA's BRT alternative analysis](#). These BRT lines are projected to begin operations in late-2027 or early-2028, with the Reading Road corridor expected to attract 4,813 trips per day and the Hamilton Avenue corridor expected to attract 4,173 trips per day. Nine local bus routes and nine express bus routes operated by the Transit Authority of Northern Kentucky (TANK) provide access to communities across Northern Kentucky, including the cities of Covington, Newport, and Bellevue which are all accessible via the [Southbank Shuttle](#) that provides service to the *Bridging the Gap* project site every 15 minutes.

Recent economic development south of FWW has occurred primarily through the development of The Banks. In total, \$128 million in public funding has leveraged over \$800 million in private investment to create this mixed-use riverfront district bookended by Cincinnati's two professional sports stadiums. Recent studies estimate that there is potential for 2.6 million square feet of new or infill development within one block of the proposed *Bridging the Gap* project site (See appendix D). This infill development presents an unprecedented opportunity to address the displacement that occurred in this area during the urban renewal of the 1960s by incentivizing mixed-use developments that contain affordable units of housing.

RESPONSE TO MERIT CRITERIA

Bridging the Gap will be the culmination of decades of planning – via a public-private partnership between the City of Cincinnati, Hamilton County, and business and civic leaders – to once and for all reconnect Cincinnati's downtown neighborhoods to the Ohio riverfront. This project is another step towards rectifying the physical and symbolic division that was created through the buildout of FWW which resulted in the displacement of communities and persons of color in downtown Cincinnati.

The project will benefit all Cincinnatians through the creation of 5.65 acres of regional civic park space within an area of persistent poverty in downtown Cincinnati; the implementation of safety

improvements for pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users; and increasing opportunity for increased affordable housing investment on 7.9 acres of developable properties adjacent to the project site.

“Reconnecting our communities, and creating cohesive spaces that all residents can access and enjoy, has the power to unlock Cincinnati’s fullest potential. The Fort Washington Way project is a major step towards making a transformational impact on the face of our city, and I’m excited by our collaborative work to pursue this incredible opportunity.” – Cincinnati Mayor Aftab Pureval

Criteria #1: Equity and Environmental Justice

ACCESS TO AREAS OF PERSISTENT POVERTY

The ***Bridging the Gap*** project site is located within Hamilton County, which has been identified at the county-level as an Area of Persistent Poverty by U.S. DOT. At the Census Tract level, the project site is within Census Tract 265, which is also identified as an Area of Persistent Poverty. The map shown in Figure 7 shows the locations of census tracts classified as Areas of Persistent Poverty within the City of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, overlaid with SORTA bus routes. Large sections of the City of Cincinnati are classified as such, particularly areas west of the I-71 and I-75 corridors.

Bridging the Gap will create a regional park that is easily accessible to most city residents via public transit. Of SORTA’s 48 bus routes, 41 provide service within a one-quarter mile walking distance of the project site. More importantly, however, the project location is accessible via nine SORTA bus routes that have been classified as frequent routes, defined as routes that provide service every 20 minutes or better. Of the 76 census tracts within Hamilton County that are classified as areas of persistent poverty, 56 tracts (73.7%) are within a quarter mile walking distance of the nine frequent SORTA bus routes. People residing within these communities will be able to rely on a frequent network of transit to connect them to this new regional civic space.

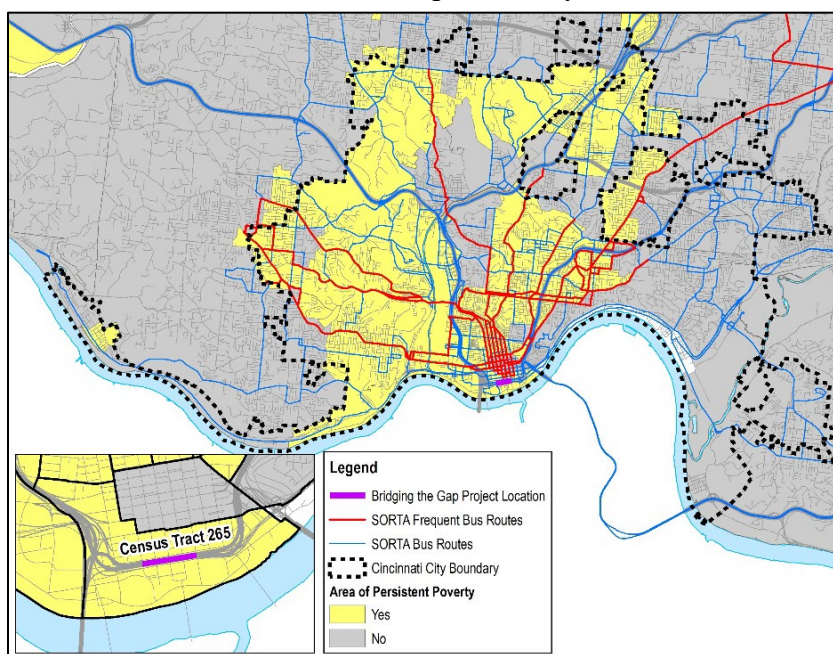


FIGURE 7. City of Cincinnati Areas of Persistent Poverty Map

According to 2021 U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) data, a total of 150,185 people live within a quarter-mile walking distance of SORTA’s nine frequent bus routes, 123,385 of whom reside within the limits of the City of Cincinnati. Approximately 25.9% of the population along these nine frequent routes have income that is below the federal poverty limit over the past twelve months. Approximately 32.2% of the population along these routes is

Black and 4.5% is Hispanic or Latino. Additionally, 58.2% of the population has access to zero or one vehicle. With SORTA's future plans to continue to increase bus frequencies and to build out a network of BRT lines connecting directly to FWW, frequent and reliable transit access between historically underserved communities and the *Bridging the Gap* project site will only continue to improve in the years and decades to come.

Criteria #2: Access

The City of Cincinnati and its public and private partners have long been aware of the difficulties associated with travelling across FWW, even after the highway footprint was significantly reduced when FWW was reconstructed in 2000. The depressed highway carries personal and commercial vehicles safely and efficiently into and out of the CBD; however, the local streets across and adjacent to FWW – including 2nd Street and 3rd Street – have long crossing distances (in excess of 60 feet) for pedestrians and bicyclists, which poses a significant barrier to safe mobility. The existing design of these streets does not place high priority on pedestrian safety, and existing traffic volumes – ranging between 9,000 and 13,000 vehicles per day – strongly indicate that vehicular lane reductions are possible without significantly impacting motorist travel times.

PEDESTRIAN SAFETY

Bridging the Gap proposes to right-size and redesign 2nd Street and 3rd Street to improve pedestrian safety and increase accessibility. Improvements at ten intersections will include traffic calming and pedestrian safety measures such as adding curb bump-outs, new crosswalks, modernized accessible pedestrian signals (APS), leading pedestrian intervals, and on-street parking. A traffic study will be completed to ensure that any impacts to vehicular traffic movement are minimized while multimodal safety and accessibility are prioritized.

BIKE NETWORK CONNECTIVITY

Improved bicycle infrastructure is also critical to encourage residents and visitors to utilize multi-modal options to access the *Bridging the Gap* civic greenspace. There is currently a lack of safe, separated bicycle facilities within the heart of Cincinnati's CBD; however, the City has [created a plan to increase the downtown bike network](#) (Figure 8). This 5.5 mile bike network would tie into the larger regional bike network which includes downtown connections to the [Ohio River Trail](#), [Purple People bicycle and pedestrian bridge](#), and the Central Parkway protected bike lane – which [will be extended to connect to more neighborhoods](#) north of downtown. It would also provide connections to the 3.5 mile [State to Central project](#) – a Complete Streets network along Linn Street and 8th Street in the West End, Queensgate, and Lower Price Hill neighborhoods - which the City received \$20 million in USDOT 2022 Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) grant funding to construct. These local bike network connections will also provide access to a planned 34-mile urban trail loop, known as [The CROWN](#).

As part of the *Bridging the Gap* project, the City is proposing to add an additional two-way protected bike facility along 2nd Street or 3rd Street, which would provide a direct connection between the *Bridging the Gap* civic greenspace and the City's proposed downtown bike network. It will also provide connectivity to Red Bike bikeshare station near GE at the Banks, located at the intersection of 2nd Street & Vine Street. The Red Bike network has provided nearly 500,000 total rides since 2019, averaging 100,000 rides per year. On average, the GE at the Banks station has 1,000 bike check-outs per year from 2019 to 2023 and would likely experience increased use with the addition of the new park space.

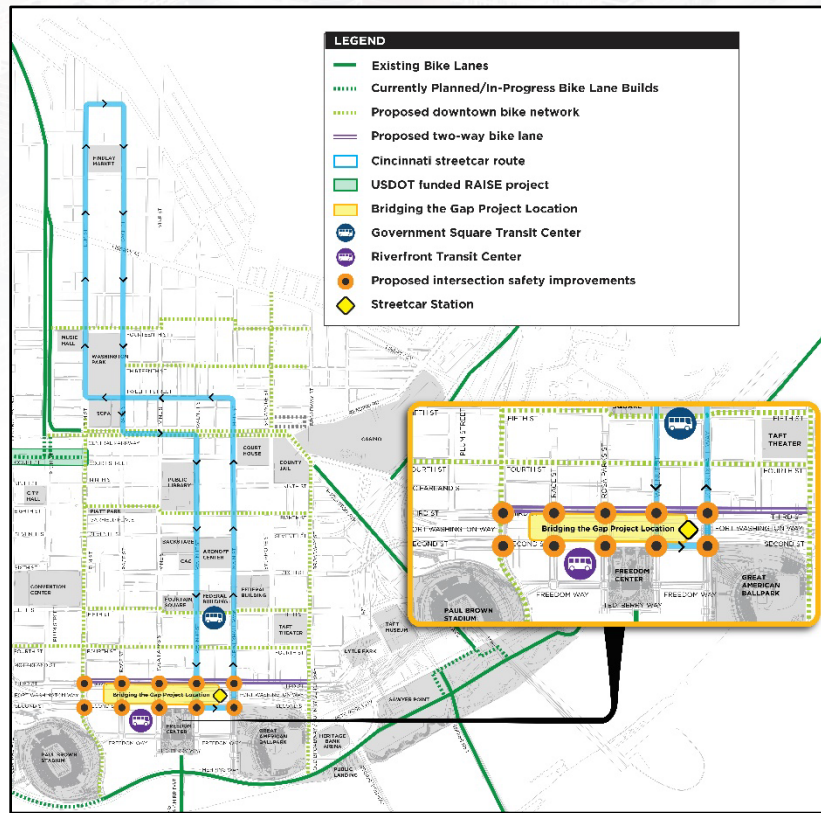


FIGURE 8. Bridging the Gap project location map, with planned downtown bike network and streetcar route

After construction, it is anticipated that the *Bridging the Gap* project will provide \$300 thousand (discounted using a 7% real discount rate) in overall bike facility benefits.

ACCESS TO PUBLIC TRANSIT

Adding the protected bike facility along 2nd Street or 3rd Street will also provide a safe bike connection between the Riverfront Transit Center and the proposed downtown bike network, increasing opportunities for multimodal connectivity. The underground Riverfront Transit Center is accessed via multiple street-level entrances on 2nd Street between Elm Street and Main Street, including two ADA accessible elevators. Currently, SORTA's Metro Plus bus service is the only route that uses the Riverfront Transit Center; however, [two planned BRT lines](#) are projected to begin operations here in late-2027 or early-2028. The Reading Road BRT is expected to attract 4,813 trips per day and the Hamilton Avenue BRT is expected to attract 4,173 trips per day.

41 of SORTA's 48 bus routes currently provide service to Government Square, the principal downtown transit center located two blocks north of the *Bridging the Gap* project site at the intersection of 5th Street and Walnut Street. This includes access to nine frequent bus routes with service frequencies of 20 minutes or better. Nine local bus routes and nine express bus routes operated by the [Transit Authority of Northern Kentucky \(TANK\)](#) provide access to communities across Northern Kentucky, including the cities of Covington, Newport, and Bellevue, all of

which are accessible via the [Southbank Shuttle](#) that provides service to the *Bridging the Gap* project site every 15 minutes.

[The Connector](#) – a 3.6-mile modern streetcar loop that was completed in 2016 – is accessible via the station at The Banks located on 2nd Street directly across from the *Bridging the Gap* project site. Service on the Connector is free and operates 365 days a year providing service [extending from The Banks to Findlay Market](#) in Over-the-Rhine. The Connector has set ridership records during every month of 2023, with [ridership from January to May 2023 up nearly 40%](#) over the same five-month period in 2022 and [ridership on pace to surpass the annual ridership record set in 2022](#). Given all of these public transit services in close proximity, the *Bridging the Gap* project site is well integrated within the primary hub of Cincinnati’s public transit network, increasing mobility options for residents across the city who will visit this regional park space.

These multimodal safety improvements, in tandem with the current and planned public transit services available within walking distance of the project site, will help facilitate safe, multimodal access to the *Bridging the Gap* civic park space for residents across the city, as well as to The Banks district along the Ohio River and Cincinnati’s CBD, which is home to over 70,000 jobs.

After construction, it is anticipated that the *Bridging the Gap* project will provide \$18.3 million (discounted using a 7% real discount rate) in overall safety benefits.

Criteria #3: Facility Suitability

REMOVAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL BURDENS

FWW currently consists of eight highway lanes spanning 145 feet which are constructed of concrete without any permeable surfaces. The lack of permeable surfaces results in a high degree of stormwater runoff and the concrete captures and releases heat into the air, causing an urban heat island effect. The *Bridging the Gap* project will create four acres of new permeable greenspace surrounded by trees and landscaping, which will provide an immense amount of permeable surface to minimize stormwater runoff and which will also minimize heat absorption, thereby reducing air temperatures in the project area. The park space will also help to reduce the current level of noise and visual pollution caused by the FWW interstate. Finally, streetscape and pedestrian infrastructure enhancements will help to improve safety outcomes for people traversing 2nd Street and 3rd Street when walking or rolling between the CBD and the riverfront.

INFRASTRUCTURE VULNERABILITIES

The three bridges over FWW that are included in the *Bridging the Gap* project scope – at Race Street, Vine Street, and Walnut Street – were constructed by the Ohio Department of Transportation in 2000 but are operated and maintained fully by the City of Cincinnati (maintenance agreement included in appendix D). According to a recent bridge inspection report compiled by the City, the bridge deck, superstructure, and substructure are all in good or very good condition as they approach their half-life. Annual maintenance and operation costs for these bridges are currently minor; however, it is expected that these costs will increase as the bridges approach 30 years old in 2030 and that they will begin to experience cracking, spalling, delamination, and other issues until ultimately needing to undergo reconstruction before 2050.

By replacing these three bridges as they approach the 30-year mark, *Bridging the Gap* will ensure a long-term state of good repair and will put the bridges on a similar timeline as the FWW

MOVEMENT OF GOODS

Criteria #4: Community Engagement and Community-based Stewardship, Management, and Partnerships

A HISTORY OF PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

The FWW 2000 Team Partnership Charter highlighted goals of creating a pedestrian friendly infrastructure project as part of a grand civic space through design and construction, including the narrowing of the facility which would allow decking to reconnect the communities to the Ohio Riverfront. In addition to the FWW Partnership Charter, the [Urban Design Master Plan](#) was developed collaboratively with the City of Cincinnati, Hamilton County, and OKI Regional Council of Governments and was led by a



Riverfront Advisory Commission of business and community leaders.

This grant application and project is a true public/private partnership, with local government leadership from the City of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, along with the Cincinnati Chamber leading efforts to engage business and civic leaders. As evidenced by the array of public and private support letters for this request – included as an appendix to this application – there is considerable excitement from community-based organizations and anchor institutions which are eager to experience the positive impact this project will have on Cincinnati’s CBD and the region as a whole.

AN INCLUSIVE FUTURE

Public engagement for the Project has already kicked off earlier this summer when the Chamber met with the [Downtown Residents Council](#) about the Project and gained support for developing this grant application.

The City of Cincinnati and its partners at the County and Cincinnati Chamber consider ***Bridging the Gap*** as an opportunity to amend historic wrongs done to the community while improving safety for residents and visitors to the area. If the Project is successfully funded through the FY23 RCN program, the City plans to retain a public engagement firm with close ties to the community. One of the first steps will be for the City and its partners to form a Community Advisory Board (CAB) to ensure that community voices are heard. The CAB will help guide all outreach processes to ensure that all engagement is meaningful and authentic.

The CAB will help guide the development of a robust Community Participation Plan (CPP) that will facilitate meaningful engagement during the design and environmental process. The CPP will reach hard-to-access community members through culturally appropriate and innovative practices including social media, online and in-person surveys, stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and public open houses. A central focus of the community participation plan will be to reach community members that live in the several Area of Persistent Poverty and Opportunity Zone Census tract located in close proximity to the ***Bridging the Gap*** project site and in areas accessible to the site via transit (see Appendix D for list of 56 census tracts).

As part of the environmental process, an Environmental Justice (EJ) analysis and requisite public engagement process will be completed; however, the city is committed to going above and beyond what is federally required to ensure that all community voices are heard. This investment in deep community engagement is a core principle of the City’s [Engage Cincy](#) initiative to provide opportunities for all to participate in meaningful and proactive ways during the City’s decision-making processes.

To ensure community voices are heard during the design and environmental process of the ***Bridging the Gap*** project, The City plans to do the following as part of their engagement plan:

- **Convene a community advisory board** made up of representatives from community organizations from the area. These board members will meet quarterly to receive frequent updates on the Project’s process directly from the city with the expectation that that information will be conveyed to members of their respective community organizations.
- **Host frequent outreach events that are inclusive of local arts organizations, community organizations, and local artists** so that the local art community and Cincinnati’s unique local cultures can inform placemaking decisions. Cincinnati has a thriving art community and a strong

commitment to culturally significant public art, as seen in the city’s [collection of public murals](#) throughout the city. This work has already begun! In advance of this grant application, the Chamber met with the Downtown Residents Council to provide an overview of the Project and get their support.

- **The City will also implement a full suite of engagement tools** used previously on other high profile projects; including frequent social media posts, website hosted project material, in-person open houses, online design preference surveys, and full-page newspaper ads.

A FISCALLY SMART APPROACH TO LOCAL MATCH FUNDS

There are no “other federal funds” being allocated to this project. All funds other than RCN funds (if awarded) will be sourced from City, County, and Chamber local match funds. Funds will be allocated 80/20 for each project activity as defined in Table 1 of the Budget Narrative document. Funding sources for the *Bridging the Gap* local match include:

- City and County Capital funding via local operating budgets,
- Joint City and County State of Ohio capital funding grants (2024, 2026, 2028),
- State funding and entitlements granted to MPO,
- City-established Tax Increment Financing district,
- Voter-approved sales tax levy to the local Transit Infrastructure Fund,
- Grants and endowment-financing via Cincinnati Parks,
- Private fundraising led by the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber

Criteria #5: Equitable Development

REDEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL & AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Bridging the Gap is also expected to help spur the development of 7.9 acres of vacant or underutilized property along 2nd Street and 3rd Street (red-shaded properties shown in Appendix D). The future redevelopment of these properties will provide potential opportunity for increased affordable housing development within the downtown core, a key priority for Cincinnati Mayor Aftab Pureval. Mayor Pureval has outlined an [affordable housing plan](#) which includes goals such as reforming Cincinnati’s zoning code to allow for more affordable housing development, partnering with developers to expand affordable housing stock, and creating programs to help low- and moderate-income Cincinnati residents achieve homeownership. Any affordable units created adjacent to the *Bridging the Gap* site would have direct access to high-quality transit, recreational park space, and job opportunities.

Additionally, census tract 265 is identified as an Opportunity Zone, as defined by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This designation further increases the likelihood of future development of the properties adjacent to the project site.

CREATIVE PLACEMAKING & PUBLIC ART

The Cincinnati region has a strong legacy of the arts, as well as a high level of public participation and community support for the arts, as seen in the city’s [collection of public murals](#) throughout the city. Cincinnati was recently [ranked 12th in the nation in the Arts Vibrancy Index](#), a [data-driven report created by SMU DataArts](#) which “examines the level of supply, demand, and government support of the arts in more than 900 communities across the county.” [ArtsWave](#), a non-profit organization that funds art programs and projects across the region, has been a driving force for decades in the continued growth of the arts in Cincinnati.

As part of the public engagement process for *Bridging the Gap*, the City and project partners will host frequent outreach events that target local arts organizations and local artists so that the local art community and Cincinnati's unique local cultures can inform placemaking and design decisions for the civic park space. The City will ensure that regional and local art organizations, such as [ArtsWave](#) and [ArtWorks](#), will be engaged as key stakeholders throughout the public involvement process.

Criteria #6: Climate and Environment

In March of 2023, the City of Cincinnati Planning Commission adopted the [2023 Green Cincinnati Plan \(GCP\)](#) that sets the ambitious goals of reducing carbon emissions by 50% by the year 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. Over the course of nine months feedback was received from nearly 3,800 residents at 42 community meetings or online. The plan features goals and strategies that directly reflect the community's interest in addressing climate change at the local level and emphasizing building a more equitable and resilient city for all residents.

Climate change is having an alarming impact across the world. In Cincinnati, “urban heat island” areas — those with a lot of impermeable surfaces like parking lots and large buildings — can get up to 12 degrees warmer than those with more tree canopies and green spaces. As of April, 2020, Cincinnati had experienced nine 100-year rainstorm events in the past decade, according to data from OES. The city had spent more than \$150 million to address basement flooding and hill-slide issues related to excessive rainfall in recent years.

By constructing the *Bridging the Gap* project that creates four acres of new permeable greenspace bound by trees; improves access to high-quality choices for lower-carbon travel like walking, cycling, rolling, and transit; and reduces the noise and visual pollution caused by an interstate. USDOT will be directly supporting several of the goals outlined in the plan and addressing several of Cincinnati's environmental concerns, including urban heat island effects and flooding. Primarily the Project will help achieve the following goals:

- Increase the number of residents within a quarter mile of safe bike and pedestrian infrastructure by 50 percent from 2022 levels by 2030.
- Expand the tree canopy by 10 percent in the Central Business District.
- Increase greenspaces so that every resident has a greenspace within a half-mile walk by 2028

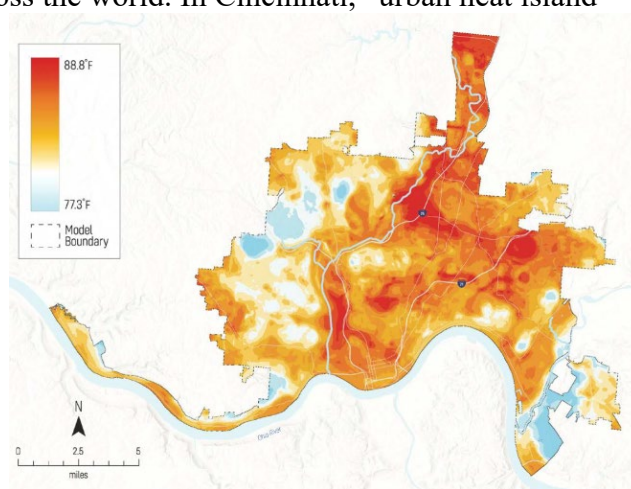


FIGURE 10. Cincinnati neighborhoods could experience up to a 10 degree difference in evening

Criteria #7: Workforce Development and Economic Opportunity

DBE GOALS AND PROGRESS

Historically, the City and County have heavily prioritized DBE participation in the redevelopment of The Banks. Small Business Enterprise (SBE) and Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) participation has been publicly documented since 2008, with [quarterly reports](#)

made available for public review by The Banks Public Partnership. Currently, SBE participation is 29.5% for The Banks project and includes 22.9% combined Minority and Female workforce participation for the current phase of the project.

The City of Cincinnati is committed to further increasing inclusive economic development opportunities in contracting across all departments and projects. As a step towards increasing participation by DBEs, the City commissioned an economic inclusion study in 2014 which was led by the City's Economic Inclusion Advisory Council (EIAC). The EIAC was made up of local leaders from the public, private, and non-profit sectors. Through the study, the City released a [final report](#) in January 2015 that identified key recommendations to increase participation by minority business enterprises (MBE) and women-owned business enterprises (WBE).

One of the key recommendations from the economic inclusion study was for the creation of a [Department of Economic Inclusion](#). Established in 2015, the department's goal is to ensure economic opportunity and inclusion for all citizens seeking to do business with the City of Cincinnati and serve as a catalyst for the growth of minority- and women-owned businesses in the City and throughout the region. The Department of Economic Inclusion is responsible for administering, enforcing, and monitoring the Equal Employment Opportunity Program, the Living Wage Program, MBE/WBE/SBE certification programs, and Local, State & Federal Prevailing Wage laws.

The city recently completed an updated disparity study to determine progress since the 2015 report. From 2016 to 2020, total utilization of MBE firms was 12.3 percent for construction contracts (prime contractor or subcontractor) and WBE utilization was 5.2 percent. For architecture & engineering contracts, utilization of MBE firms was 13.4 percent and WBE utilization was 0.8 percent. The City of Cincinnati, Hamilton County, and the Chamber are all committed to MBE and WBE participation and will utilize all available resources to engage potential DBE firms in an effort to continue to increase participation rates for this project.

PROJECT READINESS

Environmental Risk

The City of Cincinnati and its project partners are dedicated to the successful completion of the ***Bridging the Gap*** project and anticipate receiving all environmental approvals in advance of project obligation. To ensure that this environmental milestone is met, the City will coordinate closely with the Ohio Department of Transportation, who have expressed their endorsement via a letter of support (appendix C) for all NEPA documentation necessary to implement the Project.

Ohio (ODOT) is one of only eight states which has NEPA Assignment, meaning it has formally assumed responsibility for all environmental laws, rules and orders, interagency consultation, and any other environmental related actions for transportation projects in Ohio. Under this program, ODOT is deemed to be a Federal Agency [FHWA] for environmental matters. As a result, there would be less regulatory hurdles for proper clearance and a streamlined approval process resulting in an expeditious road to begin construction in the second quarter of 2026.

INCLUSION IN TIP

Planning for the ***Bridging the Gap*** project began in earnest more than 20 years ago with the creation of the [Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan](#) in 2000. Since then, countless references have been made to this project and its local and regional significance; however,

momentum for the Project has been slow in recent years due to a lack of funding availability and addressing other regional priorities.

Momentum for the Project was renewed in early 2022 prior to submittal to the Reconnecting Communities Program Planning Grant Application. Though unsuccessful, the effort sparked political interest in listing the project in the Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana (OKI) Regional Council of Governments Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and the State of Ohio STIP. The project is currently in the process of being added to the TIP and expected to be complete in the coming months.

DETAILED PROJECT SCHEDULE

The ***Bridging the Gap*** project schedule is a direct reflection of The City of Cincinnati and Ohio Department of Transportation's joint effort to expedite the Project's construction while maximizing the amount of public involvement.

Project's ability to move ahead is largely contingent upon securing RCN funds and as such, the environmental and public engagement processes will be the first project elements to kick-off if the ***Bridging the Gap*** project is selected once award recipients are announced. The design and environmental processes will kick-off in the first quarter of 2025 and continue until mid-2026. Construction bid, procurement, and commencement activities will kick-off once design and environmental are complete in mid-2026. It is worth noting that The City does not anticipate substantial utility coordination or right-of-way activities but has allocated time in the schedule for these items.

Project Element	23 & before	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Public Engagement								
TIP/STIP Designation								
Design								
Environmental								
Right-of-Way								
Utilities								
Construction								
Closeout								

FIGURE 11. Bridging the Gap project schedule

REQUIRED APPROVALS

Environmental Permits and Review

At this time, because of potential minor property acquisition and anticipated US DOT Act, Section 4(f) de minimis findings for the connections to existing bike facilities and coordination required during implementation, the City anticipates a D1 documentation. A D1 project means it is "Categorically Excluded" in accordance with 23 CFR 771.117c and does not individually or cumulatively have a significant environmental impact. ODOT's CE Guidance also lays out the process for approving environmental documents. Projects with lower levels of impact can be approved by ODOT district offices, again, minimizing time needed for project clearance.

The City's Department of Transportation and Engineering (DOTE) currently has a standing monthly meeting with ODOT, the owner of the bridges, to discuss existing and future projects.

Once notification of the Grant occurs, coordination will begin almost instantaneously and ODOT will be heavily involved as a major stakeholder.

Additionally, the City is also an active part of the Intermodal Coordinating Committee (ICC), which serves a technical advisory role for the Ohio Kentucky Indiana Regional Council of Governments, the MPO for the Greater Cincinnati region. The ICC meets monthly and has a formalized process for reviewing projects which need to be incorporated in the region's Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and for continuing transportation planning commensurate with the Unified Planning Work Program. The nature of the project is consistent with OKI's Long-Term Transportation Plan and would not result in a delay for inclusion in the region's TIP. OKI is committed to this project and has provided a letter of support.

Based on the routine nature of D1 documentation and the ability to be incorporated into the TIP, the City expects timely NEPA clearance within the overall implementation schedule of less than 12 months. To be conservative, the project schedule has allotted 18 months.

ASSESSMENT OF PROJECT RISKS AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

The City has developed a project cost estimate and schedule that includes generous contingency in both time and money to mitigate any potential project risks in advance. The short list that follows below are some risks that have been identified in the project's risk register.

- **MOT:** Complex project such as this, with extensive overhead work, have the potential to create excessive traffic delays. The City plans to combine construction sequencing of the ***Bridging the Gap*** project with the \$3.6B Brent Spence Bridge project, thereby minimize impacts to the traveling public.
- **Structure Construction:** The tunnel constructed by the project would introduce design and construction challenges that could impact project cost and schedule. To mitigate potential impacts, The City will rely heavily on the partnership mentioned throughout this grant application between the City, County, ODOT and KYTC and has allocated a substantial 50% construction contingency.
- **An Equitable Approach:** Constructing a world-class park space in downtown Cincinnati provides major benefits for all users; however, the City wants to ensure an equitable approach is being taken that considers the historic wrongs that were done in the area. The City, with the support of its partners, will promote equity in terms of housing, amenities, bike/ped and improved transit in and through the area. The plan to engage the public will be community led with extensive input from design through construction.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The City plans to retain a public engagement firm with close ties to the community to develop a robust Community Participation Plan (CPP) that will facilitate meaningful engagement during the design and environmental process. The City and its partners will also form a Community Advisory Board (CAB) to ensure community voices are heard. The CPP will reach hard-to-access community members through culturally appropriate and innovative practices including social media, online and in-person surveys, stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and public open houses. A central focus of the community participation plan will be to reach community members that live in the several Area of Persistent Poverty and Opportunity Zone Census tract located in close proximity to the ***Bridging the Gap*** project site and in areas accessible to the site via transit (see Appendix D for list of 56 census tracts). The CAB will help guide this outreach process to ensure that all engagement is meaningful and authentic.

BENEFIT-COST ANALYSIS (BCA)

In 2021 dollars, the Project is expected to generate \$98.7 million in discounted benefits. When compared to discounted costs of \$94.7 million, this results in a Net Present Value (NPV) of \$1.6 million and a Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR) of 1.04. This BCA quantified benefits using the latest Project information and available data. Many other economic benefits, including reduced community exposure to noise and emissions from the Interstate as well as the social and environmental benefits of trees, are not quantified in absence of detailed data. While these benefits would further increase the benefit cost ratio, they are discussed qualitatively within the BCA.

This BCA quantified benefits using the latest Project information and available data. Many other economic benefits, including reduced community exposure to noise and emissions from the Interstate as well as the social and environmental benefits of trees, are not quantified in absence of detailed data. While these benefits would further increase the benefit cost ratio, they are discussed qualitatively within the BCA.

Benefit Category	Undiscounted	Discounted
Improved Vehicle Safety	\$49.5	\$12.6
Improved Pedestrian Safety	\$22.2	\$5.7
Cycling Facility Improvements	\$1.0	\$0.3
Repurposed Right-of-Way	\$5.6	\$2.9
Commercial Property Value Uplift	\$126.6	\$64.3
Residual Value	\$90.5	\$12.7
O&M Cost Savings	\$0.7	\$0.3
Total Benefits	\$296.1	\$98.7
Total Costs	\$150.8	\$94.7
Net Present Value (NPV)	\$145.3	\$4.0
Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR)	1.96	1.04
Internal Rate of Return (IRR)	7.6%	
Payback Period (Years)	12 yrs	

PROJECT BUDGET

The City of Cincinnati is requesting \$149.81 million in FY2023 Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods (RCN) funds to design and fully construction the \$187.27 million ***Bridging the Gap*** project. If successful, the RCN funds will be supported by \$37.45 million in local match funds sourced 1/3 from the City of Cincinnati, 1/3 from Hamilton County, and 1/3 from business and civic leaders raised by the Cincinnati Chamber. Letters of commitment for each source of local match funds are included in the first pages of this application. This project is the culmination of more than 20 years of planning and community support and provides a great example of City, County, State, and Private stakeholders coming together to reconnect communities that will improve quality of life for all Cincinnatians.

The City of Cincinnati understands the potential risk associated with estimating costs before commencing design and environmental work and has allocated a generous 50% construction contingency to the overall project cost. A full breakdown of project sources and uses, expenditures by fiscal year, and more detail on match fund commitments please review the Budget Narrative Document.