

## Community Connectors:

Supporting leaders in small and mid-sized communities—in and out of government—to repair the damage of divisive infrastructure

With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, [Smart Growth America](#) in collaboration with [Equitable Cities](#), the [New Urban Mobility Alliance](#), and [America Walks](#) have created the **Community Connectors** program to help advance locally driven projects that will reconnect communities separated or harmed by transportation infrastructure and tap available federal and state funds to support them. This call for applications will support **15 teams from small to mid-sized cities** (between approximately 50,000 and 500,000 in population) with a capacity building grant to advance these projects.

Public entities and nonprofit organizations may apply together as small teams to receive grants of up to **\$130,000 each for capacity building** to advance these projects.

In addition to the grant, the selected teams will also receive **customized technical assistance** and participate in a **learning exchange program** over the subsequent 18-24 months, which includes a required convening in Atlanta, GA in November 2023.

Applications open on **May 22** and are due before **July 15, 2023 at 11:59 p.m.** Full eligibility details follow on pages 3-4.

## Repairing the damage of divisive infrastructure

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The **Community Connectors program** seeks to equip small and mid-sized communities to take advantage of USDOT's new programs (\$4 billion over five years) for **identifying, removing and repairing the wounds of divisive infrastructure**, make a powerful case for a significantly larger effort, and *also* equip them to make use of the wider federal and state transportation programs to advance similar projects.

The \$1.2 trillion infrastructure law passed in 2021 contained the unprecedented admission that the federal transportation program—largely but not limited to the highway program—has been used to divide communities for decades. This reality was acknowledged through the creation of the new USDOT [Reconnecting Communities grant program](#) (**\$1 billion** over five years) and the [Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant program](#) (created in The Inflation Reduction Act with **\$3 billion** over five years.)

Removing or repairing divisive infrastructure has often required local stakeholders to be pioneers setting out alone into uncharted lands. The lack of a roadmap and the nature of the work often meant

that there were few others to easily learn from. **The Community Connectors program** aims to change that by providing financial resources to help build local capacity and advance these projects, but also by connecting local leaders to experts and other cities attempting to accomplish similar things. These **capacity building grants** (and the companion technical assistance and learning exchanges) are oriented toward supporting small and mid-sized communities to ensure they can compete for federal and state funds to support Reconnecting Communities efforts. The overall objectives of this program are to:

- **Support community and government project teams to build partnerships** and co-create plans and projects with the greatest ability to affect those most impacted;
- **Expand the capacity of applicants** to co-design projects with the most impacted communities while centering equity and climate;
- **Create new and diverse partnerships** among the applicants & community-based organizations, local governments, transit agencies, health advocates, housing non-profits, land trusts, major employers, lenders & others;
- **Demonstrate how to leverage and align funds** from various sources for greater social impact; and
- **Identify and assess the needs** of applicant teams for longer-term TA and capacity-building support.
- **Support communities through the process** of applying for Reconnecting Communities or Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant program funding, other federal grant programs, or gaining access to funding from flexible state/federal sources.

## Other resources to support **Community Connectors**

While only 15 teams/cities will be selected for this program, anyone advancing similar projects can tap Transportation for America's **Community Connectors** portal of resources. (*Transportation for America is a program of Smart Growth America.*) Whether trying to stop a freeway expansion, steer more resources to transit, or advance a Reconnecting Communities project to remove an old highway or make wide, dangerous arterial roads a little safer for people to cross, the **Community Connectors portal** decodes the processes, explains common terms, clarifies the important actors, and inspires with helpful real-world stories. **Dig in at** [t4america.org/community-connectors](https://t4america.org/community-connectors)



## Capacity-building grants for selected communities

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**15 teams** that outline proposals in this application for projects (or concepts) to reconnect communities separated or harmed by transportation infrastructure through an integrated transportation, land-use, housing and economic development approach will be selected. (*\*Teams are not required to have applied for or formalized an application for any of USDOT's referenced programs.*)

### Capacity building grants of up to \$130,000 per selected community team

For supporting the ability to produce, perform or deploy transportation projects in coordination with land-use and housing decisions that reconnect communities. The primary goal of these grants are two-fold: Advancing these projects and building long-term capacity and expertise required for doing so. Eligible activities for these grants include but are not limited to:

- External or additional assistance to prepare an application for state and federal programs, including Reconnecting Communities or Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant program funding;
- Study to understand how land use and transportation interact;
- Assessing and updating land-use codes;
- Analyzing market needs in terms of residential, affordable housing, retail, office along a corridor;
- Conducting traffic analysis, setting design standards, determining objectives for state-managed roads;
- Research and analysis, including intercept surveys, focus groups and other methods for understanding community needs and concerns;
- Funding the planning or design of a roadway project or redesign;
- Contracting proposal writers to support applying for state or federal funds;
- Conducting meaningful public engagement and supporting the participation of community based organizations and residents;
- Mobilizing sustained public support for transformative reconnecting communities projects;
- Developing strategies for identifying, mitigating or preventing displacement;
- Others not named here

## Wraparound assistance for selected communities

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In addition to the primary award of a capacity-building grant to support and advance a community's project concept or proposal, communities will also receive wraparound support:

### (1) Travel/expenses for required participation in a fall 2023 convening + ongoing learning exchange

The fall 2023 convening is designed for selected teams to co-develop their projects and approaches, work as a team and meet peers across the country working in the same space. We anticipate hosting the convening in Atlanta during the week of November 13th, 2023. (*\*\*Teams are required to participate in this convening to receive a capacity building grant and technical assistance.*) In addition to the convening, ongoing learning exchanges will provide guidance on reconnecting communities strategies, best

practices and funding opportunities and to serve as a hub for continuing to scope and shape the capacity building grants and ongoing technical assistance.

## (2) Tailored technical assistance for each community team

Wraparound technical assistance to support each community team will be provided in an ongoing fashion from fall 2023 through approximately spring 2025. The technical assistance will be scoped during the fall 2023 convening (*\*required for all grantees*) and then provided by a roster of experts from across the country, including the core project team's four organizations. The assistance is likely to directly support such activities as navigating federal funding opportunities, developing grant applications, measuring access to jobs and essential services, performing fiscal analyses, developing anti-displacement strategies, and supporting community engagement best practices.

## Eligibility

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- **Community size:** Teams representing cities between ~50,000 and ~500,000 in population.
- **Eligible entities:** Government agencies (including US territories), tribes, non-profit community-based nonprofit organizations, and academic institutions. Each team will identify a lead organization for the application. *\*For-profit entities are permitted to be part of a wider project team but are not eligible to receive any of the funds directly or indirectly disbursed through the grant.*
- **Convening:** Teams are required to be able to participate in a convening and learning exchange in Atlanta sometime during the week of November 13, 2023 where projects and technical assistance will be co-designed and scoped. Travel and hotel costs will be covered for ~six members from each team.
- **Eligible funding uses:** The capacity building grants are intended to build a community's capacity—including the capacity for community members and community based organizations to participate in this work—to advance these kinds of projects. Grant funds may be used for staff salaries, consultant fees, data collection and analysis, meetings, supplies, funding support for community based organization participation, initiative-related travel, other direct expenses, and other expenses not named here but approved during the scoping process
- **Ineligible funding uses:** In keeping with Robert Wood Johnson Foundation policy, funds may not be used to support clinical trials of unapproved drugs or devices, to construct or renovate facilities, for capital costs of any kind, for lobbying-related activities and expenses, for political activities, or as a substitute for funds currently being used to support similar activities.
- **Assent to participate in evaluation:** An independent research group selected and funded by RWJF will conduct an evaluation of this program. As a condition of accepting this assistance, grantees agree to participate in the evaluation.
- **Reporting requirements:** Grantees will be expected to provide narrative and financial reports periodically as well as information needed for overall project performance monitoring and management. Teams will be required to participate in periodic meetings and give progress reports on their capacity-building grants. Each team will be expected to provide a written report(s) on their project.
- **Budgeting guidelines:** After selection, while developing the scope for the capacity-building grant, the team will collaborate on a schedule and a budget that specifies how and when the funding will be spent. This guidance will be provided in the fall.

## Selection criteria

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- **Geographic diversity:** The team will select projects that span the country and a range of population sizes within the stated eligibility.
- **Need, with a priority on lower-capacity communities:** The project aims to specifically support lower capacity communities who have structural disadvantages making it challenging to apply for federal funding or to steer their state toward smarter and more equitable investments in their communities. Lower capacity communities include those who have been excluded from public & private investment and deal with barriers resulting from concentrated poverty and/or structural racism. Priority will be given to teams/projects that place a clear emphasis on bringing measurable benefits to communities that are low-income and/or low-capacity, with a history of disinvestment and damage from past infrastructure decisions—particularly communities of color.
- **Range of project types:**
  - **Level of preparation:** The final cohort of selected communities will span a continuum of readiness and will include several with refined ideas (such as those who have already applied for the Reconnecting Communities program) as well as communities with more nascent ideas that need to be developed.
  - **Type of infrastructure:** The team is also aiming to select a diverse range of project types beyond highway removal or repair, including projects to make existing dangerous arterial roads safer, improve access to transit, and address accessibility barriers, among others.
- **Interdisciplinary approach:** A preference for projects that are not isolated to transportation stakeholders, but show evidence of strong coordination with land-use and housing decisions.
- **Teaming arrangement and partnerships:** The goal is to assemble diverse and multi-entity project teams that bring public agencies together with community-based organizations and advocates (and other stakeholders) to scope and advance these projects. **The teams most likely to be selected will bring multiple entities together into one cohesive team, and will have:**
  - **Some control of infrastructure in question:** To improve the likelihood of the project advancing, some entity within the assembled team should have a level of decision-making control over the infrastructure in question, which could be quantified with a letter of support from elected leadership.
  - **A focus on equity:** An orientation toward upending structural racism and advancing equity
  - **Extensive partnerships:** Outside of the formal teaming list, there will be evidence of extensive partnerships with organizations/individuals committed to the project or idea. For less developed projects (types 2 and 3), teams will display knowledge of the organizations or stakeholders that will need to be engaged and involved (other CBOs, employers, state/county agencies, etc)
  - **A robust community engagement history or plan:** Which may take the form of broad community support, a history of proactive community engagement, and/or a plan for engaging the community on a project to be developed, among others.

# APPLICATION

## HOW TO APPLY ONLINE

**Apply online** at <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/program/community-connectors-grants> where you can find an interactive application and all supplemental information and documents. We highly recommend downloading this application as a .doc file, preparing your answers in advance, pasting them into the online application, and submitting them all at once. Click “File >> Download >> Microsoft Word (.docx) There are maximum character counts for each question, but there are no penalties for writing shorter answers.

**Questions?** Please submit through the online form at <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/program/community-connectors-grants>

**Applications are due by July 15, 2023 at 11:59 p.m. Eastern time.** Please don't wait until the last minute to prepare and submit your application. There is an online presentation and Q&A taking place on June 6, 2023. You can register or watch a recording afterward on the [grants home](#).

## 1) Project type and description

**(1-A) Project development:** This program aims to assist communities with projects and ideas that span a spectrum from nascent to more concrete. Please choose the option below that best fits your team's project and application. As noted above, applications will be split into Project Type categories and then evaluated against other applications within each type—not against the full pool of applicants. *Please check only one box.*

- Type 1: Advancing a Specific Project:** We have a well-developed project concept, for which we *may* have already procured some level of funding to advance. We may have also already prepared an application for Reconnecting Communities program funding or other comparable programs, or need help getting a solid application over the finish line.
- Type 2: Developing a Project:** We have a specific idea for a project, which we need to better scope and develop, and procure funding sources to advance. Writing a Reconnecting Communities grant application would be either not possible or very difficult for us at this time.
- Type 3: Considering an Approach:** We have a corridor or area that is in need of repair, reconfiguration, or demolition and replacement, and we need help to study and develop the best potential solutions together.

**(1-B) What type of infrastructure(s) is creating the damage or disconnection?** Please choose what best describes the type of infrastructure that has damaged and divided the community. For example, such as displacing residents to build the infrastructure, impairing access to destinations, making travel by a



range of modes unsafe or inconvenient, or prioritizing thru-travelers and commuters at the expense of the local community. *Please check only one box.*

- Local or arterial roadway
- Limited access highway (interstate, tollway, etc)
- Rail or transit line
- Missing basic infrastructure (sidewalks, crosswalks, lighting, curbs, etc)
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**(1-C) Project description:** Describe your proposed project scope, idea, or corridor. As noted, projects across the three types will span a spectrum of readiness and refinement, so teams without well-defined projects are not expected to have a refined narrative of the project, though they should be able to describe the corridor, neighborhood, or divisive infrastructure in question. *Please write a single paragraph of no more than 75 words.*

**For teams selecting Type 1: Advancing a Specific Project and Type 2: Developing a Project only:**

**(1-D) Draft scope for capacity-building grant:** Describe a rough scope for the capacity-building grant and explain why the specific items in your scope are the most vital needs for your project. (*\*\*Scopes will be developed and/or further refined in the convening, so the draft scope is not necessarily binding for selected project teams.*) *250 words maximum:*

**(1-E) Outcomes.** What outcomes and benefits do you *most* want to accomplish/realize through this project? Please select the anticipated outcomes that are most significant to your team with your specific project. *Select no more than four outcomes from the list.*

- Safety:** Project has significant benefits beyond common practice for planning, designing, or building infrastructure to protect, reduce, or mitigate systemic safety issues.
- Environmental benefits:** Project has significant benefits beyond common practice for planning, designing, or building infrastructure that targets a known documented environmental problem. This includes a priority on climate mitigation or adaptation, and climate resilience, including hardening, addressing flooding, urban heat island effects, and others.
- Quality of life:** Quality of life is an explicit project purpose and the project has significant benefits beyond common practice for planning, designing, or building infrastructure, etc. *E.g., the applicants might envision a new plaza that will host farmers' markets on the weekend and a range of community events on weeknight.*
- Mobility and community connectivity:** Improved mobility and community connectivity is an explicit project purpose and the project has significant benefits, etc.
- Inclusive development of the local economy:** The project will support the local economy and the well-being of local businesses and households. This may include the goals of creating a wide range of new jobs and/or improving local/regional economic competitiveness/opportunity. *E.g., the new connections envisioned by the applicants connect downtown visitors to neighborhoods that feature ethnic restaurants and cultural tourism opportunities.*
- State of good repair:** Improving overall state of repair is an explicit project purpose.

- Partnership and collaboration:** Project has or will support and engage diverse people and communities beyond common practices by collaborating, ensuring equity and supporting the creation or expansion of high-quality jobs.
- Innovation:** Innovation is an explicit project purpose AND the project has significant benefits beyond common practices for planning, designing, or building infrastructure.

**(1-F) Outcomes narrative.** Expand on the outcomes you selected above in a narrative form. And then elaborate: What do you hope to accomplish by reconnecting a community? If you are successful, what will be different? What are the benefits you anticipate the project to produce? What would success look like for your project? Please provide a clear, narrative description of the changes that your team hopes to bring, including any quantifiable and measurable outcomes. *250 words maximum:*

**(1-G) Looking to the future.** Briefly, explain how you might plan to sustain/ continue this work, even after the grant period? *250 words maximum:*

**(1-H) Timeline: For type 1 projects,** outline your expected timeline for the project, including any major milestones, and any relevant recent historical milestones to date. **For all other projects,** outline your ideal timeline for the overall project. *250 word maximum:*

## 2) Community information and teaming arrangement

**(2-A) Community overview:** Describe your community and the affected project area (if known), including data on demographic information (population, race, income, etc), community type (urban, suburban, exurban, rural), land use (residential, commercial, industrial, mixed use, etc), important destinations (job center, schools, etc). *500 words maximum.*

**(2-B) Lead organization, team description, lead entity, and partners:** *Maximum length for responding to these three bullets is 500 words:*

- **Lead organization:** Every applicant team must identify a **lead organization** with the ability to manage incoming grant funding and serve as the administrative home for each team. List and describe the lead organization and briefly describe their history with managing subgrants and administration.
- **Team description:** Who is committed to participate as part of the team? Describe the other organizations/entities that will be a part of your core team, including those most likely to participate as the six team members in the convening.)
- **Partners and informal team members:** Who are the other partners outside of the core team above? The program has space for six people from each team to actively participate in the convening, though the teams may be larger than six persons for the virtual learning exchanges and broader program purposes.

**(2-C) Community co-empowerment and engagement.** *Maximum length for answering these two bullets is 500 words:*

- If the **lead applicant** is a government entity, how do you intend to involve the communities impacted and ensure they participate in decisions to be made and included fully in the benefits of



the plan? If the lead applicant is a community or a community-based organization, how do you intend to engage the owners of the infrastructure and the relevant local or state government agencies? Applications that have **both** strong community and government leadership are most likely to advance.

- Describe the strategy and scope of your community engagement thus far on your project. Who has been involved in developing this project idea? Who are the primary stakeholders? How have the affected residents and neighborhoods been engaged and involved in the process? Who has been leading the project and the overall effort to date?**Engagement:**

**(2-D) Commitment of the leadership and project team:** Advancing these projects will require significant commitment and time from the community leadership, team members, and the wider project team. Please summarize your team's level of commitment to advancing a concrete project and seeing it through to fruition. Feel free to include any applicable letters of support from community members or leaders, local elected leaders, organization CEOs, etc. *Describe your team's level of commitment in no more than 250 words. Append any relevant letters as PDF attachments to the last question of this application in 5-A at the end of this application.*

### 3) Capacity challenges

**(3-A) Capacity:** What are your biggest capacity challenges for advancing your project that this grant and/or TA can support? Describe the organizational and knowledge-based capacity challenges to a potential project that this program could help augment and build, even if the grant can only solve a small portion of these challenges. What are your greatest capacity challenges overall? *500 words maximum:*

### 4) Convening

**(4-A) Convening and Learning Exchange attendance:** We anticipate hosting a two-day learning exchange workshop for all selected teams in November 2023 in Atlanta where projects will be developed and scoped. To be eligible for selection, teams must commit to attending. Are there any reasons why key members from your team would not be able to attend? (Note: Travel and participation expenses will be covered for all teams) *If applicable, please explain in 150 words maximum:*

### 5) Supplemental materials (not required)

**5-A) Optional supplemental info.** Submit any letters of support as part of question #2-D here. If applicable, please combine with any other supplemental materials you wish to include (reconnecting communities applications, project briefs assembled for other purposes, basic presentation materials about the project). Upload one single PDF. *If applicable, upload a single PDF here.*

**5-B) Other information** Any helpful links you'd like to include (existing project website, etc.), please include here. *If applicable, add text here, 100 word maximum:*