



CITY OF HARRISONBURG PUBLIC WORKS

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To: Ande Banks, City Manager
From: Thomas Hartman, PE, PMP, LEED AP, Director of Public Works
Date: June 27, 2023
Re: Community Connectors Grant Program

Summary:

Informational item for an application to fund a collaboration between City and community stakeholders to understand and acknowledge past harms related to “urban renewal” projects in the city and plan for reestablishing a safe and vibrant corridor connecting the Northeast Neighborhood and Downtown Harrisonburg.

Background:

In the 1950s and 1960s, the City and associated agencies completed federally-funded projects in the areas now considered to be the north part of downtown Harrisonburg¹. These efforts, which the City referred to as Project R-4 and Project R-16, destroyed many homes and businesses in the neighborhood known as “Newtown”². As described in the recent Downtown 2040 Plan document, “The decision to take 40 acres of property during Urban Renewal resulted in the displacement of many people and the loss of many Black-owned homes and businesses, leaving a physical and emotional scar visible in the auto-oriented development that separates the historic fabric of Downtown and the Northeast neighborhood.”³

Many cities throughout the country also have a history of destruction and displacement caused by construction of transportation infrastructure and federally funded urban renewal projects. In recent years, neighborhood advocates, Planning professionals, and others have identified the need for efforts to address the challenges that continue to impact communities as a result of these past projects. In response to these needs, the federal government has begun to offer grants for efforts to reconnect communities through investment in transportation infrastructure.

If the City desires to pursue any available federal funding to address the impacts of urban renewal projects, a community-based effort will be important for identifying existing concerns and desirable changes to the area. The recently announced Community Connectors Grant program presents a good opportunity to complete this work. The grant program is run by the non-profit Smart Growth America in collaboration with Equitable Cities, the New Urban Mobility Alliance, and America Walks, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The purpose of the Community Connectors Grant program is to help advance locally

¹ Northeast Neighborhood Association webpage: <https://www.nenava.org/history.html>

² <https://www.wmra.org/wmra-news/2020-02-11/the-legacy-of-harrisonburgs-urban-renewal>

³ https://www.harrisonburgva.gov/sites/default/files/CMO/FINAL_Harrisonburg_Downtown2040_022822.pdf

driven projects that will reconnect communities separated or harmed by transportation infrastructure. The program will select 15 teams from small to mid-sized cities (between approximately 50,000 and 500,000 in population) to receive a capacity-building grant to advance their efforts. Public entities and nonprofit organizations may apply together as small teams to receive grants of up to \$130,000 for capacity building to advance their projects.

City staff are working to submit an application for this technical assistance grant. The grant would not fund construction of any infrastructure or any physical changes. A primary purpose of the grant would be to improve the City's collaboration with stakeholders including the Northeast Neighborhood Association and Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance, along with broader outreach to neighborhood residents. There is flexibility for the team to identify the scope of technical assistance if the grant is awarded, with an understanding that building on the Downtown 2040 Plan recommendations for this area will be a key goal. Specifically, identifying any preferred improvements to transportation infrastructure – whether North Mason Street or another street – and further identifying desires regarding development and preservation that would benefit the community. If the grant is submitted and selected for funding, the effort would begin before the end of 2023 and last until mid-2025.

Key Issues:

N/A

Environmental Impact:

N/A

Fiscal Impact:

N/A

Prior Actions:

N/A.

Alternatives:

N/A

Community Engagement:

To be determined.

Recommendation:

N/A.

Attachments:

1. Presentation

Review: