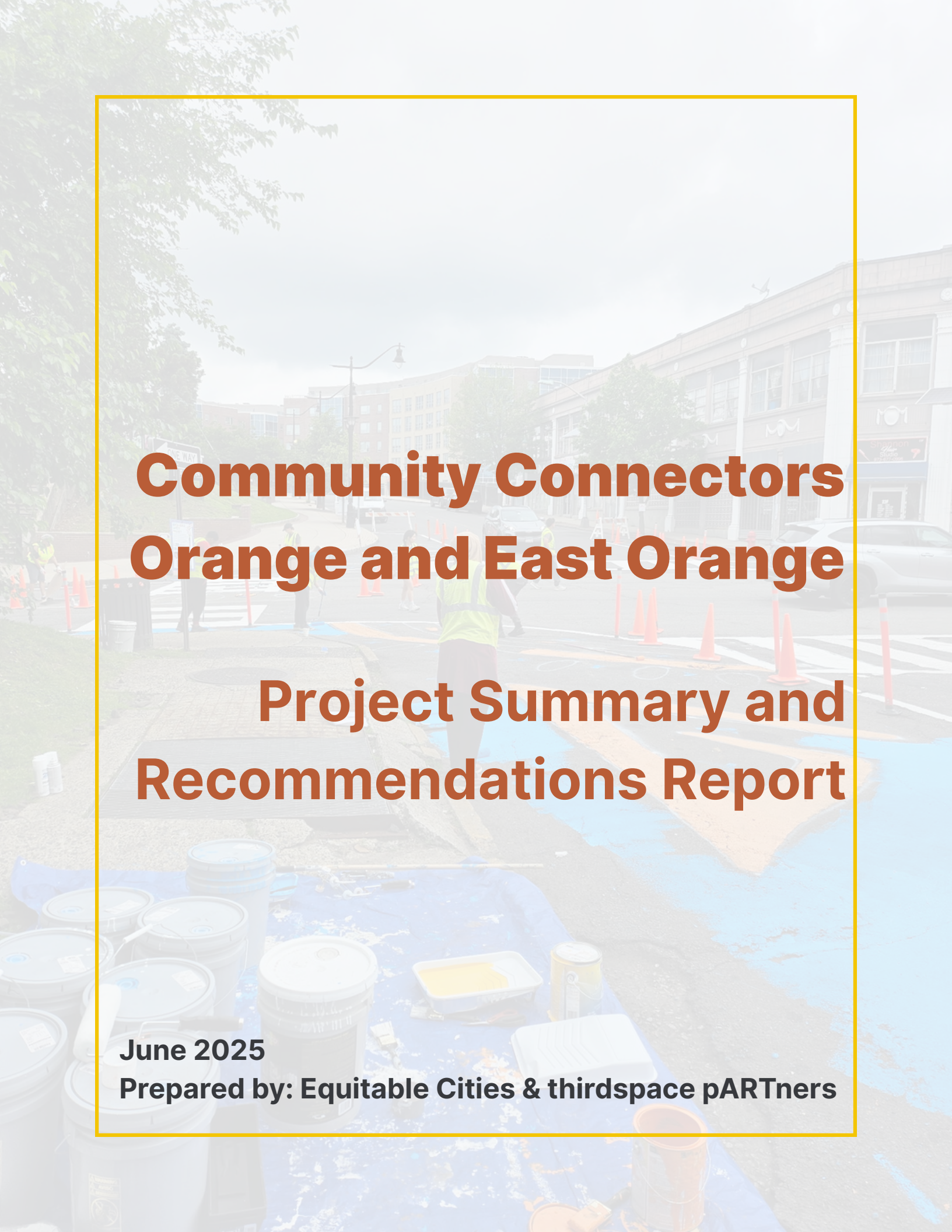




Community Connectors Orange and East Orange

Project Summary and Recommendations Report

June 2025

Prepared by: Equitable Cities & thirdspace pARTners

Table of Contents



1. Introduction	1
2. Project Summary....	2
3. Preliminary Findings	8
4. Recommendations.....	10

Introduction

The purpose of the Orange and East Orange Community Connectors project was to advance the short and medium term recommendations outlined in the 2017 **Freeway Drive & Station Area Safety and Public Realm Study** (“2017 Freeway Drive Study”). These included bike and pedestrian safety programming, placemaking, and infrastructure improvements, which became the focus of the Community Connectors work. This project was able to braid funds from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Community Connectors program and USDOT’s Thriving Communities Program, increasing the resources and technical assistance available to implement the recommendations outlined in the 2017 study. The two teams combined under the project name, “Freeway Drive for All”, which had unified branding and messaging to show residents that there was a cohesive effort implementing the full vision of a safe, walkable, and connected Freeway Drive.

Although the city and project team met with New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) representatives and inquired about the possibility of advancing the Freeway Drive for All project to concept development, these efforts did not result in the approvals and collaboration needed to move forward with implementation on the state owned Freeway Drive. The Freeway Drive for All team pivoted to focus on city-owned streets that intersect with Freeway Drive, to demonstrate the potential for temporary quick build infrastructure and placemaking near the target road. With the positive press, robust participation, and excitement from community leaders and residents around the various activities at the “Street Art & Bike RideOut” event on June 7th, there is hope that the NJDOT will be encouraged to take an active role in supporting municipal efforts to make Freeway Drive safer for all.



Project Summary

Project Team

Equitable Cities, a national research, urban planning, and policy firm, served as the lead technical assistance provider for this project. The City of Orange lead representative was Chris Mobley, Deputy Director of Planning within the Department of Planning and Economic Development. The City of East Orange lead representative was Adrienne McCall, who serves as a Program Coordinator with the Community Development division of the city.

Street Plans, an award-winning transportation planning, urban design, and placemaking practice, was contracted by the cities to deliver the quick build pilot installation. For the community-centered placemaking and asphalt art component of the project, the cities contracted thirdspace pARTners, an organization with expertise in third space activations, public art, and community engagement. The organization was able to support local artists, Gina Rivas-Velazquez and Steve Green, who created the mural designs for Orange and East Orange, respectively. City Girl Farms LLC and EZ Ride were involved in the USDOT Thriving Communities Program initiatives focused on developing bike and pedestrian programming, including bike safety workshops and related community bike riding activities to engage residents and support data gathering efforts around safety along Freeway Drive.

Quick Build Community Engagement

A quick build is a temporary infrastructure project, often aimed at increasing pedestrian and bike safety, that is used to test the potential of similar permanent infrastructural changes. The Freeway Drive for All quick build process began with Street Plans performing a safety analysis based on quantitative traffic data. The team supplemented this analysis with community engagement and on-the-ground vehicle and pedestrian counts. Public engagement for this project included in-person and virtual community meetings, workshops, surveys, and asynchronous, interactive mapping opportunities on the Freeway Drive for All website, freewaydriveforall.org, to provide feedback on experiences biking, walking, and driving on or near Freeway Drive. Every form of engagement attempted to gather insights on three questions:

1. Are the findings from the 2017 study still representative of current community concerns?

2. How safe do community members feel along Freeway Drive?
3. What specific areas could benefit from safety improvements?

The Freeway Drive for All team hosted three formal community meetings during the project tenure. The first was held on Saturday, October 26th, in both municipalities, to gather community input from residents through surveys that aimed to identify particularly unsafe intersections on Freeway Drive. The project team distributed surveys to participants of the bike safety workshop, those taking the guided walking tours, and passersby at the Orange Train Station and the East Orange Public Library. While breakfast, lunch, and donated bikes were provided at the event, turnout was low. Roughly 20 surveys were completed and two, dedicated community advocates—Molly Kaufman, **Executive Director of University of Orange**, and Mindy Fullilove, a long-time civic activist and educator **in the Orange-Newark area—participated** in the guided walk in Orange.

The second community meeting was held on Wednesday, February 5th, in collaboration with community partners identified after the first engagement: University of Orange, The HUUB, Manufacturers Village Artists, and YMCA of East Orange. This engagement was focused on gathering insights on top safety issues, key themes, and cultural values that residents wanted to see reflected in the final mural designs for the asphalt art. The project team presented on the Freeway Drive for All project and then allowed most of the time to gather input from the crowd of over 35 people, including city council members, community advocates, interested residents, and both mayors. The last engagement was held virtually, on Monday, May 5th, with additional community partners, including leaders from Friends of Metcalf Park, NJ Bike & Walk Coalition, Black & Urban, Southwest Neighborhood Alliance, and Seven Oaks Society. The team used this video meeting to share the designs resulting from past engagements and allow participants to give input on preliminary asphalt art design proposals.

In addition to these formal meetings, the project team worked to increase awareness about Freeway Drive for All, particularly with local community advocates. The team attended existing community events hosted by local partners, including Manufacturers Village's Garden State Arts Weekend, potlucks hosted by University of Orange, Empower the Village and Trail Mix's Walk for Mental Health, Orange's Music City Festival, East Orange's Haitian Flag Day, and various events at the East Orange YMCA. Lillian Cho from Thirdspace pARTners, Chris Mobley from the City of Orange,

Adrienne McCall of East Orange, and local community advocate, Kweli Campbell also attended local and national gatherings related to the project goals, such as the New Jersey Bike & Walk Summit, the America Walks Summit, Smart Growth America's Community Connectors convening, and advisory meetings for Essex County/East Orange's Safe Streets for All, to gather information and promote the project. Through informal conversations with stakeholders and community leaders at these events, the project team was able to garner interest in the project with the aim of opening up the possibilities of a sustained Freeway Drive for All project after the Community Connectors grant period concludes at the end of June 2025.

The Freeway Drive for All website was also an important repository and resource that served to document the project as it progressed, offering an interactive map and surveys, in addition to important news about community events. The 12-question survey aimed to refine and update the 2017 Freeway Drive Study's recommendations to better understand what kind of quick build would best serve the residents of Orange and East Orange. This was the same survey that was shared at in-person events. The interactive map allowed respondents to leave a comment directly on the maps of the Orange and East Orange study area indicating where they thought safety interventions would be most beneficial. This online opportunity echoed activities available at in-person engagements.

Local Asphalt Art

The freshly painted asphalt art designs that have been installed in Orange and East Orange were direct responses to the motifs discussed during the various engagement opportunities. Five local artists, who were identified by local arts organizations and curators, were invited to submit design proposals. Two artists were then selected to work closely with thirdspace pARTners and Street Plans to translate their proposals into street murals that could work on the street at two pre-identified intersections. The final asphalt art designs incorporated themes and ideas generated by residents at community workshops. Artists integrated geometric textile patterns reflecting the diversity of African and Caribbean cultures and communities residing in the two cities, and captured ideas of unity, cultural pride, and connectivity. This project's emphasis on creating a beautiful artistic street mural design responds directly to the 2017 Freeway Drive Study's findings that community residents sought opportunities to create more pleasant public spaces and safer navigation along dangerous streets. Therefore, the Freeway Drive for All team worked to center community needs and aspirations, by engaging local artists, gathering public input about art motifs, and

involving community in the actual painting of the installations, to ensure that residents gained an even stronger sense of ownership and pride in their streets and neighborhoods.

The resulting temporary asphalt art demonstration is the first of its kind in both the cities of Orange and East Orange. Since the installation, the community response has been overwhelmingly positive, proving that activations of this kind can set a precedent for future community art initiatives to address both temporary and more permanent safety measures. The City of East Orange is currently pursuing funding for asphalt art near City Hall and along Main Street and community advocates in the City of Orange are organizing around hosting future community-driven activations.

Installation Event

The “Street Art & Bike RideOut Event” was the culmination of the Freeway Drive for All project, where residents were invited to help install the quick build and asphalt art, and join bike and pedestrian programming for all ages. The event demonstrated that community engagement can lead to visible results. In bringing together key community based organizations, local transportation advocates, and invested residents, the event was able to galvanize collaboration across various grassroots community groups. Despite focusing on a wide range of issues directly related to mobility and pedestrian safety, like affordable housing, transit access, or economic development, these groups had not previously joined forces.

An event of this caliber, across two cities, required significant collaboration, political support, and consistent outreach. While the quick build plans were drafted and asphalt art designs were chosen, the Freeway Drive for All team had to engage city council members, traffic safety officials, police departments, departments of public works, and the mayors of each respective city to receive the necessary approvals to install the quick build and asphalt art.

Adrienne McCall and Chris Mobley were key in keeping city representatives informed about the project and persistently contacting their colleagues to attain the endorsements needed to keep the project on track for installation. As both cities were dealing with budget cuts, which drastically reduced local capacity, the joint campaign made it slightly easier to coordinate the funding and keep the momentum going. Equitable Cities also coordinated with the communications teams for the marketing

and outreach, providing flyers and blurbs in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole, the predominant languages spoken in Orange and East Orange, to be distributed and posted on city-owned billboards. The Freeway Drive for All team compiled a large mailing list of contacts for E-blasts that promoted the event to various stakeholders and supported ongoing outreach to communities throughout the two cities.

Participants, including council members, seemed thrilled to have a role in the quick build and art installation, involving their kids, family and friends. Teams of resident volunteers showed up despite the rain, which forced the latter half of the event to be delayed. The project team returned later in the week, joined by a few community volunteers, to complete the asphalt art installation. Several participants joined the bike ride, led by EZ Ride and City Girl Farms, which brought people to the Orange quick build site, while others participated in the bike safety training near Orange City Hall.

Equitable Cities deftly managed the complex coordination of numerous partners and stakeholders on the Freeway Drive for All project team, to guide the efforts into a successful installation event. The quick build plan, asphalt art installation, and bike and pedestrian programming came together to create one cohesive milestone that brought East Orange and Orange one step closer to realizing the implementation of key recommendations made in the 2017 Freeway Drive Study.



Preliminary Findings

As part of the “Street Art & Bike RideOut Event”, the project team installed posters near the quick builds to explain the modification to the intersections and gather input on how residents felt about the change. These evaluation surveys, the more general surveys about traffic safety, and lessons learned from the entire project tenure have informed the findings below. Throughout the project, the Freeway Drive for All team interacted with more than 200 Orange and East Orange residents, many of whom have provided input that will build the recommendations. As this number does not reflect a significant cross section of the municipalities, we offer these findings with an understanding that more research is needed to gather insights from a more representative sample of the population.

Residents are interested in continuing the momentum of this project. Of the five respondents of the evaluation vey, at the time of the writing of this report, all of them feel that the quick build asphalt art projects make it easier to cross the intersections in Orange and East Orange. They also indicated that they would like to see similar, permanent safety infrastructure improvements in the project areas. In Orange, the respondents particularly appreciated the addition of crosswalks, which they indicated were “sorely needed”. In East Orange, artists and muralists are wondering how to continue to be involved. For Orange, one respondent left a comment about hopes to address the bottleneck that often occurs at the intersection of Freeway Drive West and Essex Avenue. The respondents ranged from 25 years to over 65 years of age, and represented frequent visitors of both Orange and East Orange and residents of each respective city. With more time to collect additional data points, these numbers could be impactful to convince NJDOT and city officials to continue efforts to make Freeway Drive safer for all.

Time is a consistent constraint. Though we were able to achieve several aspects of the 2017 Freeway Drive Study recommendations, time proved to be a persistent challenge. The Freeway Drive for All team would have liked to conduct more community engagement and reach a wider audience with more frequent and consistent touch points. Nevertheless, as finalizing the project work plan and contracting took longer than expected, the timeline of the overall project was reduced. Therefore, the team had limited lead time to educate the public about the overall project, promote upcoming events, and pivot if engagement events did not attract target numbers of participants. The temporary stop work order

in February on USDOT's Thriving Communities Program, also significantly disrupted the project, as the program financially supported the asphalt art components of the quick build.

Persistent outreach leads to fruitful collaboration. Despite the time constraints and disruptions, thirdspace pARTners and City Girl Farms worked to connect and create relationships with local advocates, artists, and interested organizations. The on-the-ground outreach and attendance of community events were key to building trust and supporting the goals of Freeway Drive for All. These efforts greatly increased the events' turnout and started to build a group of people who are interested in advocating for the continuation of the project after the Community Connectors grant period concludes.

Emphasizing local organizations brings pride to the project. This work intends to celebrate local culture and coalesce people to work together towards a safer Freeway Drive. All of the project events collaborated with community partners and hired local food vendors and businesses, such as Sandwiches Unlimited and DJ David Champagne. Selecting artists from the area was also impactful, as it demonstrated a commitment to local talent and allowed artists to give back to their community.



Recommendations

Though additional data is needed to make stronger claims, these recommendations are a starting point for the cities and local advocates to consider as future leaders of this work. Each recommendation below intends to leverage and reinforce the 2017 Freeway Drive Study recommendations. The Freeway Drive for All project has helped further all of the short term goals of the study, including murals, traffic and pedestrian safety education, and pilot programs. Although the quick-build demonstrations were installed on streets adjacent to but not on Freeway Drive itself, the demonstrations support the study's medium-term goal of operational traffic improvements by temporarily modifying roadways for increased pedestrian safety. While there are many opportunities to build on the current project to execute additional short and medium-term projects, the Freeway Drive for All team's focus on executing this activation was intended to serve as a catalyst, laying the groundwork for future operational and permanent traffic infrastructure improvements on Freeway Drive. Our recommendations include:

1

Leverage the installed quick builds to continue gathering data.

The team has placed multiple posters accompanying the two installations featuring project information and a QR code link to the Freeway Drive for All website. During the 3 to 6 month duration of the temporary installations, interested residents and visitors will have an opportunity to learn more about the project and fill out an evaluation survey, which will continue to be a useful tool in gathering more data to help build increasingly robust recommendations and convincing arguments for NJDOT to install similar interventions on Freeway Drive. The cities, in partnership with residents and community advocates, can plan additional engagements on the sites to gather more detailed information from residents and passersby. Consider analyzing numerical traffic and pedestrian data with the lived experiences and opinions of residents to build a robust understanding of the project's impact on safety.

2

Continue to engage community residents to ensure that the 2017 recommendations are updated based on contemporary needs.

There are opportunities to host additional traffic and pedestrian safety activities, paint more asphalt art, and introduce various new pilot programs around the cities of

Orange and East Orange. By continuing to engage with the community, you can work to implement several of these 2017 Freeway Drive Study goals and advocate for this project as a priority to local elected officials, NJDOT, and to the new incoming New Jersey governor. Government stakeholders are also members of the community and should be kept in the loop, if not fully engaged. As you continue to generate momentum and develop the data sets to support the work, you can build a large, coordinated effort, which is more likely to sway **hesitant** officials.

3

Hire or assign a dedicated staff person to projects related to Freeway Drive.

Consider finding someone to take the reins and be the lead contact person for any projects related to Freeway Drive. Because the cities grapple with capacity issues, finding the funding to assign a point person to pursue Freeway Drive goals will expand opportunities and help reduce burdens by coordinating disparate efforts. Timing is also important as the Essex County/East Orange Safe Streets for All action planning initiative is currently underway, and **the** NJDOT is planning for projects that seem to include Freeway Drive. This person should represent both of the cities and have strong community support to promote continued collaboration on next steps. There is too much excitement and momentum around this project to let it end with the Community Connectors grant period.

4

Make it easier for transportation agencies to incorporate the pedestrian experience in the Freeway Drive permanent changes.

NJDOT has indicated that they plan for improvements along Freeway Drive, but it is not clear what these entail or how they will be determined. Stay abreast of their efforts and find opportunities to leverage community engagement data as an incentive for NJDOT to collaborate with Orange and East Orange to work more closely on their planned safety improvements. Project leads can be advocates for the walkers and bikers of Freeway Drive and work to keep safety for all users a top priority across projects.

5

Continue to center the arts in future demonstrations and permanent infrastructure projects.

Based on the success of the asphalt art installation in Orange and East Orange, community-led public art can be an engaging and galvanizing way to involve residents and increase citizen pride in their cities. Working with local artists is another way to invest in the community's existing assets, acknowledging the wealth of creativity and talent that exists among its residents. Having these artists work with local residents fosters a sense of cohesion as residents co-create and help install something beautiful that becomes a shared vision. Murals can be a vital expression of a city's people, community, and cultures. The cities have an opportunity to use the community engagement process that street murals require, to bring the community together around a joyful activity, build community pride, and encourage residents to participate in the shaping of their cities. Together, the city and its people can also use the art, as recommended in the 2017 Freeway Drive Study, to make the case for implementing long-term permanent projects that are overdue.

6

Pursue funding opportunities to continue the goals of Freeway Drive for All.

While funding constraints and NJDOT's cautious approach have posed challenges to advancing the goals of the 2017 Freeway Drive Study, these obstacles also present an opportunity to pursue innovative, external funding strategies. Consider leveraging multiple sources of funding, as was done with Community Connectors, to fill in gaps in overall capacity and secure the level of support and involvement from various community stakeholders that a long-term complex project like this requires. Highlight the successes of past initiatives, like this one, to demonstrate the potential impact of funding this work.

