

Downtown Deck Plaza Interview Findings

MEMO . FEBRUARY 2023

Introduction

The City of El Paso (City) is conducting a feasibility study for a generationally transformative project to deck over a segment of I-10 that passes through Downtown El Paso, reconnecting neighborhoods and creating new opportunities for development, open space, and placemaking. The Paso del Norte Community Foundation (Foundation), in partnership with the City, is starting to engage the public on the Deck Plaza feasibility study as well as connectivity to alternative transportation opportunities like the Paso del Norte Trail and other regional amenities.

In preparation for the engagement effort and further visioning and planning of the deck, the Mend team performed a series of interviews and discussions with stakeholders in **JANUARY** and **FEBRUARY 2023**. Mend listened to neighborhood associations, residents, non-profits, small business owners, property owners, elected officials, and leaders in El Paso to learn what the key values held by the community are and how they felt about the Downtown Deck Plaza project.

Mend facilitated a total of **25 INTERVIEWS** with over **50+ PEOPLE** from El Paso.

The Mend team solicited unvarnished opinions, both positive and negative. This memo serves as a summary of the key themes we heard during these interviews. Everything in this memo has been anonymized, except quotes where we got direct permission from the interviewee. The main themes of the questions asked to the interviewees are listed below.

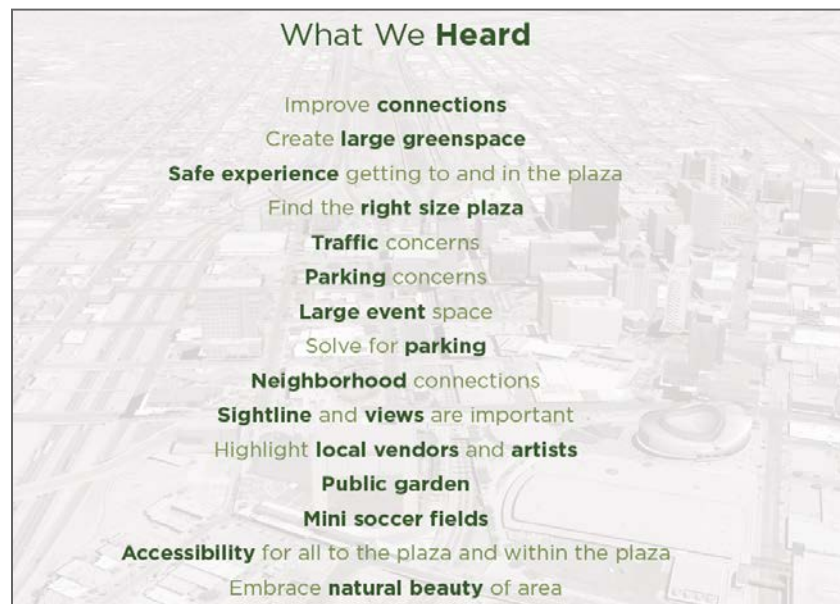
Interview Question Themes

- **Broad questions about El Paso**
 - What are the best things about El Paso today?
 - What are your favorite things about Downtown El Paso?
 - What are the biggest challenges facing El Paso today?
 - What are the biggest challenges facing Downtown El Paso?
 - What's working well for Downtown?
 - What are the biggest needs for the future?
- **Knowledge and values of the Deck Plaza Project**

3400 Bryant Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55408
612.702.2453

www.mendcollaborative.com

- How much do you feel you know about the proposed project?
- Do you feel that the 'What We Heard' summary adequately represents your thoughts on the project¹?
- Do you think it well captures the values and concerns of the community you represent?
- What might be missing from this list?
- **Engagement and outreach efforts in El Paso**
 - What do you think can be done to make the community engagement successful?
 - What people or organizations need to be involved?
 - What do you think the best methods of sharing information about the project would be to have the broadest reach possible?
- **Overall opinions on the Deck Plaza Project**
 - What's your overall opinion of the project right now?
 - What elements do you like?
 - What elements concern you?
 - Do you have any questions you'd like us to pass along to the technical team?
 - What do you feel needs to be answered for you in this phase of the project?



Interview Findings

After listening and documenting all responses to the interviews, the Mend team compiled the information and developed four (4) primary themes to organize the feedback. The themes that relate to the Downtown Deck Plaza project (the project) include:

¹ The "what we heard document" referenced was developed by OJB, a landscape architecture firm engaged to conduct initial visioning that led to the grant that made the current phase of work possible. See above.

1. The project needs to be authentically El Paso
2. The project needs to be contextualized
3. The project process needs to be transparent and the communications clear
4. The project engagement should be expansive

Each of these themes are then broken down into recommendations and supportive information to consider as the Downtown Deck Plaza project is explored further.

El Paso is “the welcoming mat for so many people”.

- Osvaldo Velez

1. The project needs to be authentically El Paso

One of the key takeaways from the broad questions about El Paso was how similar participants, regardless of their views on this project, answered these prompts. Across the board, participants' deep love for their community and desires for good things were clear. This provides a useful starting point for building alignment on community values that can provide a foundation for the proposed Downtown Deck Park to be built upon.

The Mend team took the responses from all participants and made word cloud graphics to visually show this information, see **Appendix A**.

In summary we found **El Pasoans' VALUE: the lifestyle, the environment, and the context of El Paso**. The recommendations below build upon these key values.

- 1.1. Expand upon the elements that El Pasoans' value above and co-create* the vision/values for the project with the community.
 - During the interviews we heard these values that could be further developed in addition to what was already in the “What we Heard” graphic:
 - The environmental | climate | health impact of the project (see more detail below in 2.4)
 - The multigenerational project opportunities
 - The events and programming related to the project
 - Park for everyone
 - Free programming
 - The commitment to maintenance and management of the project for long term sustainability

***Co-creating a vision and values with the community requires a clear definition and understanding of what co-creation means for this project. Below is an example of what co-creation means for the Our Future 35 cap and stitch team:**

Community Steering Committee MISSION STATEMENT:

Our Future 35 endeavors to bring community members to the table in the creation of a Vision Plan for shared public spaces bridging Austin over I-35.

OUR
FUTURE
35

VISION STATEMENT:

New shared public spaces over I-35 are inclusive and sustainable; support economic opportunity and equity; celebrate heritage and cultural narratives; support community health and restorative natural spaces; encourage environmental stewardship; and promote safe and comfortable access to all citizens.



Equity & Inclusivity

Engage community members who have been impacted by and excluded from past infrastructure decisions, and ensure that new amenities are dynamic, sustainable, and welcome communities of all races and identities.



Health & Human Nature

Create spaces that enhance the quality of life and well-being of users, encourage active transportation, employ native and adapted resilient and restorative landscapes, and promote connection to nature.



Economic Affordability & Vitality

Foster design elements and activations for small and local businesses, and mitigate displacement and adverse cost of living impacts of the project on surrounding neighborhoods and communities of color.



Environmental Sustainability

Advance the Austin community's commitment to environmental stewardship, recognize broader climate action imperatives, and build the capacity to successfully maintain and adapt these spaces.



Community & Cultural Narratives

Celebrate the historical and cultural fabric of past and present communities surrounding I-35 while recognizing the city and highway's histories of fracture, and collect and amplify the narratives and histories of community members.



Safety & Connectivity

Connect community members to jobs, services, and each other and promote safe and comfortable hubs that provide access to, from, and across I-35, and foster modes of travel that welcome and support all ages and abilities.

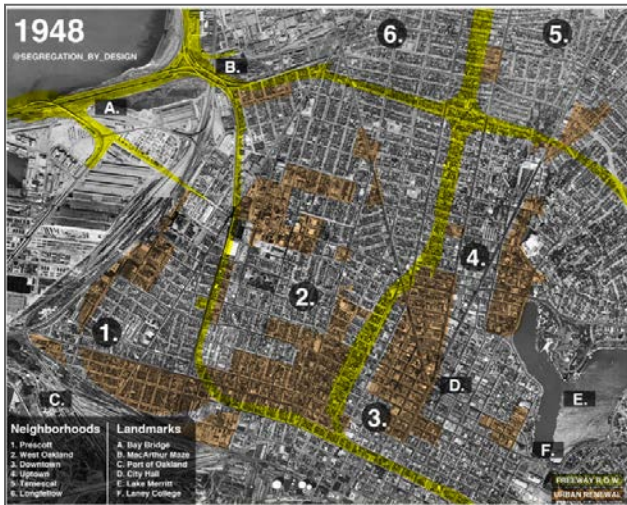
Source: www.ourfuture35.com/

- 1.2. Tell the history of El Paso and the downtown over time.
 - Understand the history around the highway and the core neighborhoods of El Paso (see more detail below in 3.1)
 - This history is not currently well understood and provides fertile ground for building coalitions through investigation.
 - Relate to the broader history of Central El Paso, including the historic neighborhoods adjacent to Downtown, and the history of the border.

3400 Bryant Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55408
612.702.2453

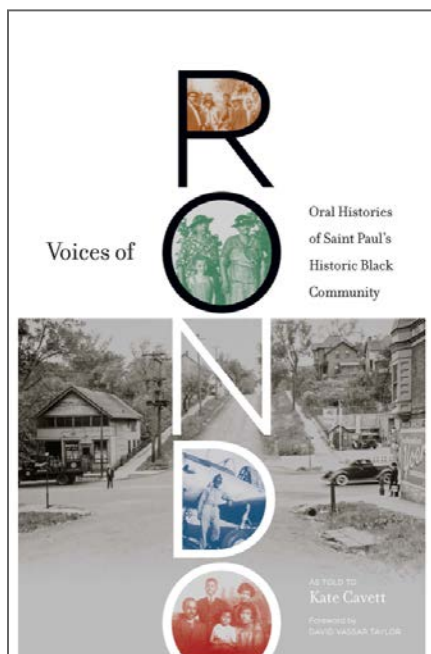
www.mendcollaborative.com

- Contextualize through the history of highways, redlining and urban renewal throughout the United States. Develop an understanding of the ways El Paso's situation is similar and different from those broader histories.



Segregation by Design is a website and social media channels that have been documenting the history of urban highways throughout the country. It is an invaluable resource for clear graphics that show the impact of highway design, such as the example below from Oakland, California.

- History related program Ideas:
 - Consider partnering with a digital archive program to gather stories about the area, much of this history is held by residents, elders, and community members.
 - Consider partnering with an organization to develop historic walking tours of the project area
 - Consider telling the story with art or murals in association with the project



The Minnesota Historical Society created a massive archive of oral histories relating to the removal of a historic African-American community in St Paul. These histories have provided a significant resource for the design of a proposed Cap Park.

3400 Bryant Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55408
612.702.2453

www.mendcollaborative.com

- 1.3. Reflect the unique, Chihuahuan Desert ecoregion and ecological context of El Paso in the project.
 - The environment was a key value for El Pasoans
 - Consider views to the mountains and landscape elements that fit in the desert context
- 1.4. Reflect the unique art context of El Paso in the project.
 - There is a rich history of mural arts in El Paso, consider finding opportunities within the project to complement the local artistic community
- 1.5. Where possible provide economic opportunities related to the project for residents and organizations in El Paso.
 - Engage with small business owners to explore opportunities for partnerships in the design, development, operations, and programming of the project
 - Engage with the local chambers to communicate with local entrepreneurs and find opportunities to collaborate

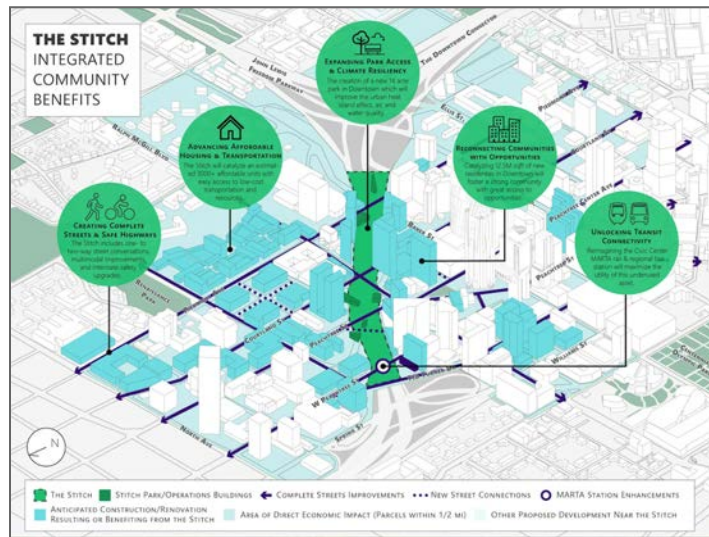
Let the project “build on traditions and build new traditions [in] El Paso”.

- Patrick McNeil

2. The project needs to be contextualized

Throughout the interviews, participants continually sought to tie the proposed Downtown Deck Plaza to its context and adjacent proposed projects. In order to build support for the project, the community will need a better understanding of the interconnections and opportunities relating to the project and how it will shape the downtown and core neighborhoods.

- 2.1. Utilize a holistic approach that explores broader opportunities of the project for neighborhoods along the Downtown I-10 and BOTA corridors.
 - Find opportunities to build upon and enhance the popular aspects of the Uptown, Downtown Plan
 - The project should be complementary to downtown and the core neighborhoods
 - Develop the critical mobility opportunities by showing the connections north-south and east-west that the project will provide



The Stitch, a similar project in Atlanta, has done an excellent job of framing community benefits, while also acknowledging the value of catalyzed real estate development adjacent to the proposed cap.

- 2.2. Invest and undergo studies that benefit existing communities in the long-run, and address what challenges related to the project must be mitigated.
 - Undergo a displacement study to understand how the residents around the project will be affected
 - Undergo a housing study that focuses on recruiting current El Pasoan families to the city core
 - Explore economic models that reinvest in the communities of El Paso and existing residents living near the project
 - Work with the City to develop codes and policies related to the project that support the community
 - Develop complete streets plans / streetscape improvements to create north / south connections
- 2.3. Illustrate that the project will result in better highway design, improve mobility options, and will create a safer condition around the highway.
 - Work with TXDOT to create better highway conditions downtown
 - Understand the broader context of the highway project on the whole of the city
- 2.4. Understand the environmental, climatic, pollution, and resilience impacts of the project.
 - Undergo studies to explore the heat and sound impacts of the project
 - Explore opportunities to capture water and incorporate other sustainable design element in the project

2.5. The project elements should meet needs not currently available in downtown and central El Paso, here are some of the suggestions we heard during the interviews:

- Residential housing
 - Affordable housing
 - Student housing
 - Family housing
 - Senior citizen housing
- Access for all
 - Accessible mobility options
- Shopping and Dining
 - Affordable clothing stores
 - Farmers market / mercado
 - Small local, business and vendors
 - Restaurants
 - Vintage market
- Cultural Facilities
 - Senior citizen center
 - Venue / programing space
- Recreation center and recreation opportunities
 - Walking loop(s)
- Grocery store / bodega
 - Affordable fresh food and produce
- Art
 - Murals
 - Digital art
 - Local artists
 - Storytelling
- Restrooms
- Parks

Can we “give El Paso permission to have nice things?” - Brad Taylor

3. The project process needs to be transparent and the communications clear

During the interviews, multiple participants mentioned that large projects in El Paso have met resistance because of misinformation. Interviewees suggested a clear and transparent project process for the Downtown Deck Plaza. The project also should strive to have a consistent and disciplined approach to the project messaging across all the partners.

- 3.1. Communicate and tell the story about why this project opportunity exists for El Paso.
 - Communicate the generational opportunity that will not come again for 50 years. Highways were designed during the same time period across the United States need repairs and rebuilding regardless of decisions relating to the Cap. Highways have a 50-60 year life cycle
 - Communicate what the area looked like before the highway was built and how it affected the community (e.g. loss of foot traffic across the bridges impacting downtown businesses)
 - Communicate the difference between the Downtown Deck Plaza project and the TXDOT project(s)
- 3.2. Consider rebranding / renaming the project with the community.
 - The current focus on Downtown in the project name creates an assumption that real estate interests are driving the project
 - The renaming of the project should be easy to translate between Spanish and English
- 3.3. Provide strong communications throughout the full duration of the project from ideation to full completion of the project.
 - Develop timeline with key milestones for the project
 - Communicate during the construction phase including street closures and traffic plans
- 3.4. Clarify what decisions need to be made by the community and when.
 - What decisions regarding the cap and highway are “path dependent” and which are not?
 - When will these decisions be made and by whom?
 - There is a strong desire to understand how the Cap will be funded and maintained
- 3.5. Consider hiring a communications / public relations director to steward the engagement process.
 - The director should be the main contact for the community and stay connected with El Paso Neighborhood Associations & Coalitions

- The director may act as a liaison with the city elected officials and reach out to other city departments / staff to align with other city goals
- Consider developing a 1-page annual progress report on the project for elected officials, stakeholder, and the community

"Don't build [the project] for us, without us."

- Scott White

4. The project engagement should be expansive

Engagement is a critical component of the Downtown Deck Plaza project. Interviewees expressed an interest in continuing their engagement with the project and suggested expanding the conversation throughout El Paso. The participants also suggested diversifying the means of communicating and finding ways to engage with different stakeholders, including residents that are underrepresented in large public project development.

- 4.1. Set demographic and geographic representation goals for the project.
 - Track progress and report back results of the outreach, consider adding this information to an annual progress report (see recommendation 3.5)
- 4.2. Expand engagement effort for the project.
 - Use bilingual communications to reach out to the community
 - Spend time with organizations that already exist and build messaging with them, do not build your own audience
 - Once the community has provided enough feedback to suffice for drawings and renderings, create a series of materials that tells a story about the project where people can visualize the change
 - Make project engagement multigenerational
 - Consider starting a young professionals group or committee that can steward the project and see it through to final completion
 - Reach out to elders in the direct vicinity of the project
 - Perform outreach on campuses
 - Reach out to families with kids throughout the city
- 4.3. Reach new audiences by finding leaders, storytellers, and influencers to advocate for the project.