



# Request for Qualifications: Innerbelt Master Plan

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2024 Reconnecting  
Connecting  
Communities Pilot  
Grant Program RFQ

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# Summary

The City of Akron is requesting qualifications from experienced urban design consultants to complete a Reconnecting Communities Master Plan for the Akron Innerbelt study area.

Akron, Ohio is a city of great contrasts. Settled in the early 1800s, its location at the highest point of the Ohio and Erie Canal made it a crossroads of transportation and trade. Within the span of a century, Akron went from being the fastest growing city in the country in the early 1900's, to a peak population of nearly 300,000 in 1960, to losing almost one third of its population by the year 2000. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, workers came to the city in droves to work in the rubber industry. This growth was later reversed when the factories closed. What was once a gritty global center of tire manufacturing is now just a few miles bike ride from the 33,000-acre Cuyahoga Valley National Park, created in 1974. Today, while Akron faces many challenges, the city is also a dynamic place to live and work, with vibrant neighborhoods, abundant parks, rich arts and cultural offerings, and a strong sense of community.

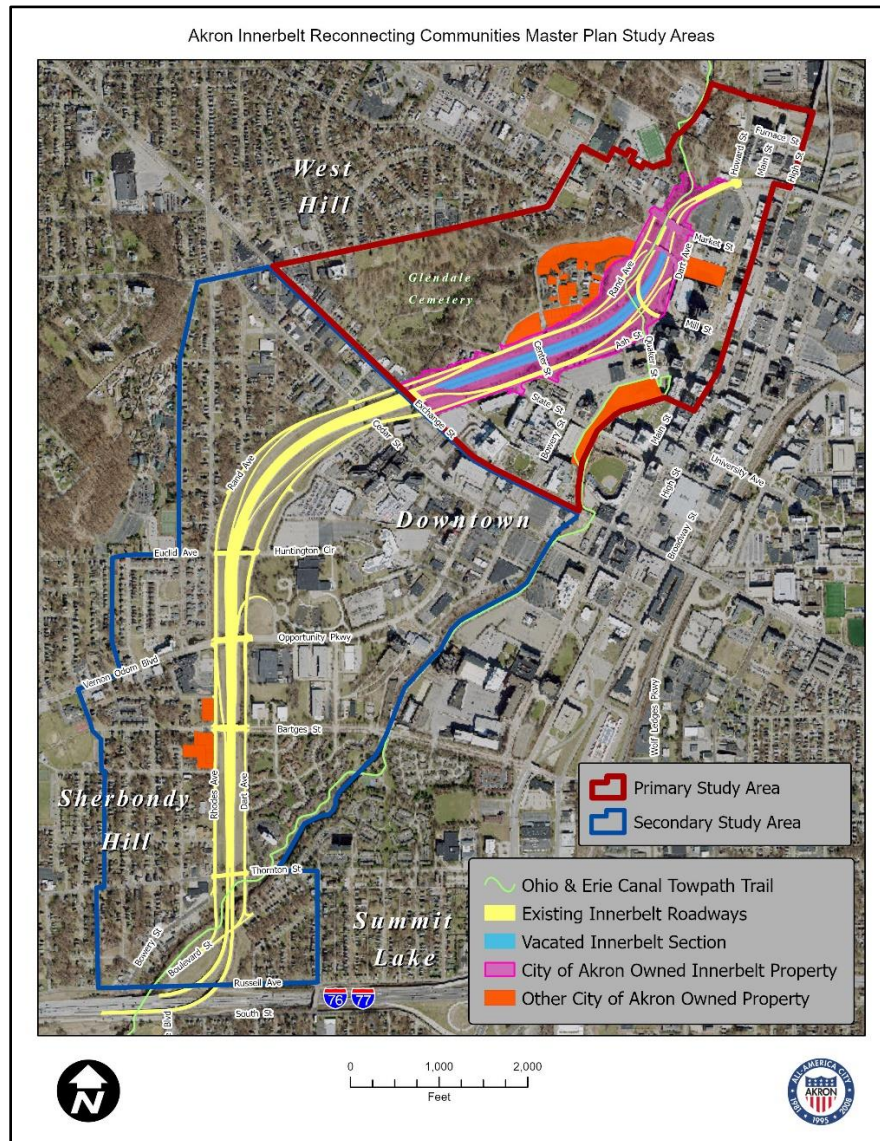
The Akron Innerbelt was constructed in the early 1970's in an effort to stabilize and reinvigorate Downtown. Coupled with several urban renewal projects, the Innerbelt cleared a wide path through the city. It also displaced a vibrant, predominantly African American community and split several neighborhoods. But like many urban renewal projects from that era, the Innerbelt never fulfilled its promise of revitalization for the city and its residents. By the late 1990s, this highway that was designed for a capacity of 120,000 cars per day saw traffic counts fall to only 18,000 cars daily. It had literally become a road to nowhere.

In 2022 the US Department of Transportation issued a Notice of Funding Opportunity for the Reconnecting Communities Pilot (RCP) Grant Program, Akron recognized it as an opportunity to create an equitable and healing-centered Master Plan vision for the vacant Innerbelt site. Akron's RCP proposal is one of only 39 planning grants awarded by DOT out of 435 applications. The City of Akron owns a significant portion of the Innerbelt study area, and extensive community outreach regarding the future of the site has been performed over the past three years. We are now ready to move forward with reimagining the Innerbelt site as a catalyst for positive change in our community. Successful completion of this Master Plan will give Akron a clear strategy for moving forward and will position the city well to apply for a Reconnecting Communities Implementation Grant in the near future.

The purpose of the RCP Program is to reconnect communities by removing, retrofitting, or mitigating transportation facilities that create barriers to community connectivity. The Akron Innerbelt Master Plan will achieve these goals by creating a shared and equitable vision for this land that allows it to contribute to the long-term economic viability and vitality of the city. Through these efforts, we can begin to heal the physical and emotional scars left by the highway, and move forward as a better, stronger community.

# Project Location

The Akron Innerbelt (State Route 59) is located west of Downtown and spans from N. Howard Street to I-76/77, as shown in the map on the previous page. The City owns the 51-acre Innerbelt site between N. Howard Street and Exchange Street. The Master Plan will primarily focus on the this decommissioned 1-mile portion of the Innerbelt highway and adjacent neighborhoods. The Innerbelt lies in a wide trench at grades as much as 35 feet below the level of the surrounding neighborhoods. The concrete roadway of the decommissioned highway remains, but it is closed to vehicular traffic. When the Innerbelt was decommissioned, one-way frontage roads (Dart and Rand Avenues), were rebuilt on either side of the highway to accommodate the traffic that formerly used the highway. The Master Plan will also include a high-level study of the still-operating portion of the Innerbelt and its environs, located between Exchange Street and I-76/77.



# History of the Innerbelt

With the boom of the rubber industry in Akron during the early 1900's, workers came to the city to find jobs in the tire plants of Goodyear, Firestone, B.F. Goodrich, and General Tire. Akron's population skyrocketed from 69,000 in 1910 to nearly 208,000 in 1920. The population continued to climb through the 1930's, 40's and 50's, reaching a peak of 290,351 in 1960.

By the early 1960's, funding for urban renewal projects across the country was being provided by the Federal government. In Akron, the city initiated several large urban renewal projects, including the Opportunity Park and Cascade Renewal Plans. In 1963, the Akron Planning Department published "A Perspective of the Akron Innerbelt", which proposed the construction of a highway through downtown Akron to connect Route 8 to Interstate 76/77. The Innerbelt was intended to support economic development and improve car access to Downtown. Right-of-way acquisition began in 1971, and construction began in 1975. Construction on the highway ended nearly a decade later, and it was never completed as planned.

The chosen route of the Innerbelt split several neighborhoods, including West Hill, Sherbondy Hill, and part of Summit Lake. The highway, along with the two adjacent urban renewal projects, caused extensive displacement, demolition, and the severing of social and cultural networks. As a result of the highway construction, numerous commercial establishments were closed or relocated. Hundreds of homes were acquired through eminent domain and razed to make way for the project. Thousands of residents in primarily African American neighborhoods were forced to relocate.

By the time the Innerbelt was completed, Akron's rubber industry was ailing, and most companies had stopped producing tires locally. The decline of manufacturing jobs led to an exodus of 73,498 residents from Akron by the year 2000. Over the past decade, the City of Akron has come to recognize that the highway is a disrupter of the physical and social fabric of the city. And it has become apparent that the land occupied by the Innerbelt could be put to better use. In 2016, the City took a first step toward addressing this problem by acquiring the northern one-mile section of the highway from the State of Ohio and decommissioning it.

In 2021, the City hired design and spatial justice consultant Studio O to conduct an outreach process on the future of the Innerbelt site. The consultant led an extensive multi-year dialogue with residents about the history of the site, the neighborhoods that were displaced, and resident aspirations for the future of this vacant land. Based on these conversations, Studio O prepared a report on community preferences and high-level recommendations for the Innerbelt site. More information on this initiative can be found at the [Reconnecting Our Community website](#).

# Goals

- **Develop an equitable and healing-centered vision for the site that reflects the values and goals of the Akron community.**
- **Promote prosperity and wealth-building opportunities for residents in the neighborhoods adjacent to the Innerbelt site and throughout the city.**
- **Promote equity, both in the physical interventions proposed and in the benefits to the community.**

## *Additional Priorities:*

- 1) Conduct an equitable and comprehensive community-engaged design process.
- 2) Identify community wealth-building strategies that support economic investment in the area and improve the lives of current and former residents.
- 3) Create a neighborhood form that encourages active lifestyles and supports the use of transit, biking, and walking as alternatives to car use.
  - Promote walkability and equity through complete street design and a connected street network.
  - Calm traffic and improve pedestrian safety.
  - Study reconfiguration or removal of existing roads and bridges as necessary to achieve the priorities above.
  - Promote walkability and neighborhood vitality by regulating the form and physical attributes of any new development.
  - The well-used 101-mile Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail passes through the study area. Evaluate the multipurpose path's route and ways to improve access to it for commuting and recreation.
- 4) Complement, connect to, and support the viability of downtown, Main Street, and West Akron businesses. Interweave priorities and principles from both the West Akron and Downtown plans.
- 5) Identify possible residential and commercial infill development opportunities that would benefit nearby residents, downtown businesses, and the city.
  - Identify possible locations and strategies for achieving affordable and mixed-income housing in the study area.
- 6) Study whether public greenspace is needed and appropriate on the site.
  - Quantify recommended type, size, and location.
  - Compliment and connect to the existing greenspace network, including Cascade Plaza, Lock 3 Park, Locks 2 and 4, Summit Lake, the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail, and the Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

- 7) Generate environmentally sustainable solutions that reduce carbon emissions and improve the climate resilience of the city. This may include green stormwater infrastructure elements and other strategies to improve sustainability and neighborhood self-sufficiency.
- 8) Commemorate and capitalize on the history and the cultural assets of the area, including the Ohio and Erie Canal, Glendale Cemetery, Glendale Steps, the former Howard St. business district, and the portions of the city that were lost to demolition.
  - Identify ways to reflect the history and cultural legacy of the neighborhoods displaced by the Innerbelt through public art, storytelling elements, and other amenities.
- 9) Additional priorities may be developed as part of the community visioning process.

***The Plan will investigate a range of strategies for improvement.***

- A range of strategies will be developed – from low- and medium-cost investments to a complete reconfiguration of the site and its infrastructure.
- The equity-centered Master Plan will identify interventions that can be immediately implemented to have positive impacts on residents’ lives.
- It will also look at longer-term opportunities to improve the resilience and vitality of the city.
- The most effective approaches to phasing should be identified.

***The Master Plan will study two sub-areas.***

- The primary focus of the work will be on the one-mile section of the Innerbelt spanning from N. Howard Street to Exchange Street. This phase will examine in detail the best ways to repurpose the decommissioned site that the City currently owns. This work will comprise approximately 80% of the project.
- The second part of the plan will develop high-level strategies for the future of the still-active two-mile section of the Innerbelt that extends from Exchange Street to Interstate 76/77. This work will study potential future modifications to the layout of the roadways and infrastructure to improve existing conditions, strengthen connections to the east and west of the site, and realize the project goals. It will also study the surrounding neighborhoods to identify interventions that will benefit these communities. This portion of the work will comprise approximately 20% of the project.

# Project Scope

## **1. Condition Analysis**

The consultant team will explore historical data, population, economic factors, historic and current cultural conditions, former and current land uses, environmental issues, existing infrastructure, circulation, community assets, and natural resources in and immediately adjacent to the study area. This phase will also include a market analysis of viable residential and commercial development opportunities. The consultant team will review current and previous planning studies of the Innerbelt and surrounding areas. The consultant will review the community-engaged process, data, and recommendations in the report recently completed by Studio O and incorporate these findings into the work going forward.

### **Deliverables:**

- The consultant team will produce a State of the Planning Area Report, including a Market Analysis of the Innerbelt Study Area and adjacent areas.

## **2. Vision and Principles for the Innerbelt Study Area**

The consultant team will undertake engagement activities to share the findings from the State of the Planning Area report with residents, businesses, property owners, and other stakeholders. The consultant team will work with designated City staff to engage all stakeholders in developing principles for redevelopment that can guide decision-making on any improvements to be made within the study area. The consultant team will also collaborate with City staff to engage all stakeholders in exploring potential visions for the study area. These discussions will inform future master planning activities.

### **Deliverables:**

- The consultant team will produce an Engagement and Outreach Plan containing the strategy for engaging and documenting feedback from key stakeholders and broader constituencies.
- Consultant will be expected to engage in creative approaches to outreach activities to ensure the participation of harder to reach and underrepresented groups, including but not limited to former residents and youth.
- The consultant team will produce a Vision and Principles for the Planning Area Report based on all community feedback activities.
- *This task will include a minimum of 2 community meetings.*
- *This task will include a minimum of 6 one-hour meetings with Key Stakeholder groups or organizations that have specific relevance to the project.*

### **3. Preliminary Master Plan Scenarios**

Based on community feedback and the resulting Vision and Principles Report, the consultant team will develop several possible Master Plan approaches to the project.

- These should include short-term (1-5 years), medium-term (5-8 years), and long-term improvement strategies.
- They should include a range of low-, medium-, and higher-cost interventions.
- Approaches should include possible physical improvements, as well as social, cultural, arts, and economic development initiatives.
- Scenarios should apply an equitable development lens to proposed uses, development frameworks, and programmatic and policy strategies.

#### **Deliverables:**

- At least five conceptual Master Plan scenarios, with site plans and at least three conceptual renderings for each scenario, phasing diagrams, and narrative of proposed equitable development strategy.
- *This task will include a minimum of 2 - 3 community meetings where the Vision and Principles are confirmed, and Master Plan scenarios are tested. This work will likely include a community charrette and ongoing public engagement.*

### **4. Verification of Preferred Master Plan Scheme**

Based on community feedback received at the meetings for the previous step, the consultant team will develop a preferred Master Plan scheme.

#### **Deliverables:**

- Overall site plan for preferred Master Plan scheme, including short, medium, and long-term scenarios.
- Three illustrative renderings of the overall Master Plan scheme.
- Plans for recommended modifications to the circulation network.
- Preliminary open space and greenspace plan.
- Preliminary strategies to support equitable economic investment, wealth-building opportunities, and development.
- Preliminary cost estimates and financing strategy for the proposed short, medium, and long-term interventions.
- Preliminary recommendations for complementary policies, programs, and initiatives to support equitable development and community wealth-building.
- *This task will include at least two community meetings.*



## **5. Innerbelt Master Plan**

The consultant team will complete the equity-centered Master Plan for the study area.

### **Deliverables:**

- Overall site plans, including short, medium, and long-term scenarios.
- Five illustrative color renderings of the overall proposed Master Plan.
- 3-D flyover and street-level walk-through of proposed interventions.
- Detailed plans for recommended modifications to the circulation network. Include thoroughfare types, typical street sections, and preliminary grading fit plans.
- Provide a preliminary traffic study demonstrating the impacts of any proposed street reconfiguration. Include origin/destination data for traffic within the study area. Identify potential level of service (LOS) changes.
- Conceptual site plan for the southern two-mile section of the Innerbelt. Provide two illustrative color renderings of this portion of the study area.
- Open space and greenspace plan.
- Evaluation of existing utility infrastructure capacity and recommended utility infrastructure modifications that may be required to support the Master Plan proposal. This includes water, sanitary sewer, stormwater, power, fiber optic, and District Energy Systems.
- Proposed zoning modifications. Format should be compatible with the City of Akron Form-Based Zoning Code.
- Schematic development scenarios for at least five specific sample sites, chosen in consultation with the City. Includes site plan with building footprints and one illustrative color rendering for each sample site.
- Proposed strategies to support economic investment that results in equitable outcomes and promotes wealth-building opportunities.
- Recommended equity-informed policies, programs, and initiatives to support local businesses and improve the lives of current and former residents. These initiatives may involve the participation of multiple City departments and outside partners.
- Strategy of specific implementation steps to achieve the vision of the Plan.
- Provide specific strategies for the ongoing interim use and expanded activation of the Innerbelt site.
- Cost estimates for the proposed short, medium, and long-term interventions. Identify possible funding sources to achieve the proposed interventions.
- A Master Plan Final Report detailing all findings.
- *This task will include at least one community meeting.*
- *In addition, the consultant team will present the Master Plan to the Planning Commission and to City Council in person.*

## **6. Prepare Application for Reconnecting Communities Pilot Implementation Grant**

### **Deliverables:**

- The consultant team will complete all necessary documentation for submittal for the RCP Implementation Grant.

## **7. Ongoing Tasks throughout the duration of the work.**

- Provide regular communication with the public via a variety of media types.
- Project updates will be communicated via the existing [Akron Innerbelt website](#). Consultant will provide content updates on a monthly basis throughout the project.
- Bi-weekly Teams meetings with City staff. Provide minutes and a list of action items following each meeting.
- During each of the first four Project Scope milestones above, meet at least once with the Reconnecting Our Community Advisory Group, made up of community stakeholders, and review project progress.
- At each of the first four Project Scope milestones, meet in person with the Mayor, Planning Director, Economic Development Director, Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and other cabinet members as designated by the Mayor.
- Meet reporting requirements of the RCP grant.
- Consultant representatives will attend all community meetings in person in Akron.
- Community meetings will provide a combination of in-person and online engagement activities.

## **8. Anticipated Project Timeline**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Due Date</b>	<b>Duration</b>
Notice to proceed	Monday, August 19, 2024	
Complete Master Plan Report	Friday, September 5, 2025	12 ½ months*
Submit RCP Implementation Grant Application	Friday, September 26, 2025 (estimated)	3 weeks

*\*Final year to apply for RCP Implementation Grant is 2026. Project duration is negotiable up to 14 months given that project will achieve the prescribed scope of work and community engagement. Schedule may be adjusted if necessary.*

## **9. Budget**

- \$1,200,000.00

# Consultant Submission Requirements

The response to this RFQ should include the following:

1. Description of lead consultant and other consultants on the team. Include consultant backgrounds, firm size, and nature of services provided.
2. Resumes of consultant project leaders and other personnel who will be assigned to this project.
3. Organizational chart that indicates the team roles and responsibilities of the project leaders and personnel.
4. Relevant experience and examples of at least 3 similar completed projects.
5. Description of approach to community-engaged design along with specific examples of how that process has been successful on previous projects.
6. Recommended adjustments to the proposed Project Scope and timeline.
7. At least three client references.

## ***Qualifications Submittal***

Qualifications shall be labeled “RFQ 2024 Akron Innerbelt Master Plan CONSULTANT NAME”

Qualifications must be received by the City of Akron no later than 11:59 p.m. EDT on June 10, 2024.

Proposals must be submitted electronically:

- (a) Upload using the link provided on the [Innerbelt Master Plan project webpage](#).

# Evaluation and Selection

The City of Akron Department of Planning & Urban Development and relevant stakeholders will review and evaluate qualifications received by the due date and make its recommendation to the Mayor. Any agreement will be subject to the approvals of City Council and other applicable boards or commissions.

## 1. Evaluation

The City will consider the following information when evaluating submitted qualifications to determine which consultant team, in the sole judgment of the City, is best suited to perform the proposed work:

<b>Evaluation Criteria</b>	<b>Points</b>
The consultant best suited to help achieve the stated goals of the Master Plan and produce equitable outcomes.	15
The consultant's substantial experience in working on similar projects.	25
Quality of consultant's work on similar projects.	30
The consultant's depth of experience and success in equitable community engagement.	15
Strength of consultant's client references.	5
Local consultant (within 200 miles of Akron) on the project team.	5
Women-owned or minority-owned business on the project team.	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

## 2. Qualifications Review Schedule

The following schedule represents the anticipated timeline for review of the RFQ submissions. If the need arises, the schedule may be altered by the City of Akron. During this process, the City may seek additional information from the responders.

Activity	Due Date	Duration
RFQ Release	April 10, 2024	
Deadline to submit RFQ Questions	May 8, 2024	4 weeks
Reponses to Questions Issued	May 24, 2024	2½ weeks
Qualifications Due	June 10, 2024	2 weeks
Review of Qualifications	May 28–June 25, 2024	4 weeks
Issue Consultant Shortlist	July 9, 2024	
Interview Shortlist Consultants	July 24-26 2024	2½ weeks
Final Consultant Notification	August 13, 2024	2½ weeks

The City will conduct interviews with the top 2 – 4 rated consultant teams. Interviews will take place in person, in Akron. The interview process may also include a public presentation open to the Akron community.

## Disclaimers/Miscellaneous

The City of Akron reserves the right to:

- 1) Accept the consultant which best serves the interests of the City.
- 2) Modify, waive, or vary terms of the RFQ at any time, including and not limited to submission deadlines and requirements.
- 3) Reject any or all submissions.
- 4) Cancel or withdraw the RFQ at any time.

Additional Notes

- 5) The City will assume that the any respondent submitting qualifications has familiarized themselves enough with the project scope to submit a knowledgeable proposal.
- 6) Respondent shall work with the City of Akron, prior to execution of a contract, to modify the project scope as necessary to best meet the interests of the City.

- 7) In submitting a response to this RFQ and in the performance of any resulting award, each respondent warrants that it has complied with and/or will comply with all federal, state, and local laws, ordinances, and lawful rules and regulations thereunder. Respondents further agree:
- a) Not to discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment because of age, race, color, creed, religion, national origin, ancestry, disability, marital status, familial status, sex, gender (including gender identity), sexual orientation, or military status.
  - b) That every subcontract related to the Project will contain a provision requiring non-discrimination in employment as specified above.
- 8) The respondent, by submitting their qualification, agrees that any cost it incurs in responding to this RFQ or in support of activities associated with this RFQ, are to be borne solely by respondent, and are not the responsibility of the City. The City will incur no obligation or liability whatsoever to anyone by reason of issuance of this RFQ, or action by anyone relative thereto.
- 9) All questions about this RFQ should be directed by email to Project Manager Daniel DeAngelo at [ddeangelo@akronohio.gov](mailto:ddeangelo@akronohio.gov). Questions must be submitted no later than May 8, 2024, as listed in the Review Schedule.

All responses to questions will be posted to the “Innerbelt Master Plan” page of the City’s website: [akronohio.gov/departments/planning\\_urban\\_development](https://akronohio.gov/departments/planning_urban_development)

Useful Links:

- [Downtown Akron Vision and Redevelopment Plan](#)
- [Akron Beacon Journal Article on the History of the Innerbelt](#)
- [Reconnecting Our Community Report by Studio O](#)
- [City of Akron Form-Based Zoning Code](#)