

Akron Innerbelt Planning Grant Narrative

A. Overview

1. Introduction

Sometimes referred to as “Akron’s Road to Nowhere,” Akron’s Innerbelt (State Route 59) was never fully completed, never saw the traffic counts predicted for it, and, like many of urban renewal projects from the 1970’s, its promises of revitalization never materialized for Akron and its residents. Over the past decade, the city of Akron has come to recognize that this road is a disruptive element in the physical and social fabric of the city. In 2017, the City took action to remedy this mistake by closing and decommissioning a one-mile section of the highway, with the goal of healing the scar left by the highway and putting this land to better use. The city of Akron is requesting \$1,000,000 in Reconnecting Communities funding to create a community-based master plan that will guide the transformation of this infrastructure liability into an asset that benefits all Akron residents.

Through the master planning process, short and long-term strategies will be developed to address the challenges posed by the Innerbelt. The 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 re-purpose this land to improve the future resilience and vitality of the city.

2. Background & History

With the boom of the rubber industry in Akron during the early 1900’s, workers flocked to the city to find jobs in the tire plants of Goodyear, Firestone, B.F. Goodrich, and General Tire. From 69,000 residents in 1910, Akron’s population skyrocketed to nearly 208,000 in 1920, making it the fastest growing city in the United States at the time. With the continued growth of manufacturing in the city, the population continued to climb through the 1930’s, 40’s and 50’s.

The era of urban renewal came to Akron in 1961 with the construction of several large renewal projects, including the Opportunity Park, Cascade, and Grant/Washington urban renewal plans. All of these projects followed a pattern of demolition and public investment for perceived “progress” that ultimately resulted in the devastation of urban communities. The development of the Innerbelt coincided with these other renewal plans. In 1963, the Akron Planning Department published “A Perspective of the Akron Innerbelt”, which promoted construction of a new highway through downtown Akron in order to spur economic growth, reduce congestion, and enable easier access to downtown jobs for suburban workers. The highway was to connect Interstate 76/77 (located south of downtown and running east/west) to Route 8 (located east of downtown and running north/south). Right-of-way acquisition for the Innerbelt began in 1971, and construction began in 1975. Ultimately, only a 3-mile section of the Innerbelt connecting Interstate 76/77 into downtown was completed.

The route of the new highway split several existing neighborhoods in half, displacing residents and businesses, and disrupting community connections. These neighborhoods included Summit Lake, Sherbondy Hill, and West Hill. According to Planning Department records, approximately 740 housing units were purchased through eminent domain and demolished for the project. Thousands of residents in primarily African American neighborhoods were displaced. Over 100 stores were closed or relocated. It is believed that the actual number of displacements was much higher. At the time, residents speculated that their neighborhood was chosen for the site of the Innerbelt as retaliation for the 1968 Riots which took place in the area.

By the time of the highway's completion in the 1970's, Akron's rubber industry was already ailing, and the city's population was declining. Akron's population reached its peak of 290,351 in 1960. Between 1975 and 1982, all four major rubber companies stopped producing tires in Akron. By the early 2000's, the city had lost more than a quarter of its population, declining to 216,853 residents. The highway that was designed for a capacity of 120,000 cars per day saw traffic counts of only 18,000 cars daily. It had literally become a road to nowhere.

It had become apparent that Innerbelt was underutilized, and the land it occupied could be put to better use. In 1999, the City proposed removing the one-mile section of the Innerbelt paralleling downtown from Exchange Street to Howard Street. This removal would afford the opportunity to reconnect downtown to the city's west side neighborhoods and make up to 25 acres of land available for reuse. Seventeen years later, in 2016, construction began on the one-way road pair of Dart and Rand Streets to reroute Innerbelt traffic. Since this work was completed in 2018, the roadbed of the highway has sat empty and unused. The Akron community now needs a plan for this vacant land.

3. Barriers posed by the eligible facility

In total, the Innerbelt cut a swath of land through existing neighborhoods that ranges between 400 feet to 600 feet wide and stretches for three miles. The highway restricts resident mobility and limits access to jobs, schools, parks, family, and friends. Several factors have inhibited reuse of this land. First, the roadway lies in a wide trench at grades as much as 35 feet below the level of the surrounding neighborhoods. The steep slopes of the highway berms limit visibility and access into the space. The highway acts as a gully between once-connected communities. Second, because the Innerbelt is a limited access highway, route choices between neighborhoods are severely diminished, especially for pedestrians. When the Innerbelt was constructed, it severed the existing street grid. The streets have been cut in half and dead end at the highway. Third, the highway roadbed lies between a one-way road pair where traffic moves at high speeds. These roadways were designed to keep traffic flowing. They do not support safe pedestrian crossing and access to the project site. Finally, several remaining bridges, tunnels, and other infrastructure elements reinforce the feeling that the space is still a highway, despite its closure.

Significant physical interventions and investment will be needed to make the vacated land accessible and useful. The RCP planning grant will help the city and its residents create a new vision for this land, and a clear roadmap for implementing that plan.

B. Location & Map

1. Location of eligible facility that creates barriers to community connectivity

The vacated section of the Innerbelt is located immediately west of downtown Akron, north of Exchange Street. South of Exchange Street, the still-operational portion of the highway continues south and intersects Interstate 76/77 two miles south of downtown. See attached Map 1. Google Streetview: <https://goo.gl/maps/tEtg1BSfKyUtNDtX7>

2. Detailed description of surrounding community impacted by the facility

The location of the Innerbelt directly impacted the Summit Lake, Sherbondy Hill, and West Hill neighborhoods, located south and west of Downtown (see attached maps). Census data shows that these neighborhoods suffer economically compared to the city as a whole. Overall, 85 percent of

the residents in the seven census tracts abutting the Innerbelt are of low to moderate income. The LMI rate in the impacted areas ranges from 73 percent to as high as 98 percent. This is much higher than the 60 percent of the residents in the entire city that are low to moderate income. In terms of race, 67 percent of the current residents living in the areas impacted by the Innerbelt construction are African American. While African Americans account for 30 percent of the overall city population.

3. Detailed geographic description and map of the facility location with elements of existing transportation network identified

See attached maps pages 9 and 10.

C. Response to Merit Criteria

Criteria #1 - Equity, Environmental Justice, and Community Engagement

The city of Akron recognizes that the Innerbelt is a separator of neighborhoods and a barrier that must be removed. To that end, the city already owns and has vacated a 1-mile section of the former highway. The project goal is to use this land to reconnect the fabric of the neighborhoods that were severed by the highway. This master plan will reveal actionable steps that can be taken towards repairing the physical, social, and cultural damage caused by the Innerbelt construction.

The highway has exacerbated inequity within the community. The highway acts as an impediment to the free movement of residents, due to its deep cut through neighborhoods, limited crossing locations, and fast-moving traffic on frontage roads. These conditions are especially detrimental to pedestrians, cyclists, persons of limited mobility, and those without access to a car. Additionally, the highway's noise and air pollution have negative impacts on the health and well-being of nearby residents. These factors reduce property values and resident wealth, intensifying harms previously set in motion by the construction of the highway.

The city of Akron has taken significant steps to address inequity throughout the city and specifically as it relates to the Innerbelt highway. The City vacated a portion of the Innerbelt in 2018 because it recognized that the construction of this highway was a mistake and a historical injustice to the people of Akron. In June 2020, Mayor Daniel Horrigan established the Racial Equity & Social Justice Task Force. The mission of the taskforce is to build trust in the community by formulating meaningful policy recommendations to create a more racially equitable, socially just community, and to bridge racial wealth divide locally. The City is taking pro-active steps to carry these initiatives forward into the planning of the future of the Innerbelt.

In 2021, the City hired consultant Liz Ogbu, an architect and urbanist who focuses on issues related to community building and spatial justice. Ms. Ogbu and the city have initiated a dialogue with residents about the history of the Innerbelt site, the neighborhoods that were displaced, values and aspirations for the future, and approaches to engaging the broader Akron population in this issue. As part of this process, a 13-member Innerbelt Advisory Group was formed, representing a diversity of stakeholders from across the city. Importantly, half of the group membership are people who were directly affected by the construction of the Innerbelt. Ms. Ogbu, along with the city's Long Range Planning Division, facilitates monthly discussions with the group. Based on these conversations, Ms. Ogbu is preparing a report on community preferences and high-level

recommendations for the Innerbelt site. This community process acknowledges that any future visioning requires reckoning with the past through a deep and intentional dialog with all residents.

Criteria #2 - Mobility and Community Connectivity

The alignment of the Innerbelt highway literally cut through the core of several city neighborhoods that were home to African American and low-income communities. These neighborhoods include Summit Lake, Sherbondy Hill, and West Hill. The proposed master plan will create a realistic strategy for the reconnection of these marginalized communities.

The plan will study multiple ways to achieve improved mobility and connectivity between the impacted neighborhoods, as well as connecting these residents to the businesses, amenities, and opportunities available in downtown Akron. Strategies to create a more equitable, multi-modal, and pedestrian-friendly environment include:

- Increase walkability by reconnecting the street grid that was severed by the highway and by reestablishing the historic block lengths of 300 to 500 feet.
- Calm traffic and improve pedestrian safety by converting frontage roads at the edge of the project site to slower, safer, two-way Complete Streets. This intervention will be in alignment with the City’s Complete Streets ordinance, adopted in 2017.
- Remove roadways that are physical safety impediments to circulation between the adjacent neighborhoods and the site. Study removal of the underutilized Mill St. and Glendale Ave. “highway style” overpasses that loom over the space and negatively impact the quality of the outdoor experience for residents and visitors.
- Possible new infill housing development on the site would allow residents to lead active lifestyles that take full advantage of nearby transit, bike, and walking options. A primary bus route with 15-minute frequency is within a 5-minute walk of the project site. Infill housing construction along this primary bus route is a major goal of Akron Metro Regional Transit Authority’s 2020 Strategic Plan. Metro RTA strongly supports this planning initiative. See attached support letter.
- Promoting a more multi-modal transportation system will reduce car use and thus help limit carbon emissions that cause climate change.
- Identifying additional neighborhood access points to the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail for both commuting and recreational purposes. This 98-mile trail is an important regional and national multi-purpose path that passes directly through the project site. It connects Akron residents to the Cuyahoga Valley National Park and Cleveland to the north and to the cities of Barberton and Canton to the south.
- Identifying ways to include public art, storytelling elements, and other amenities that honor the cultural legacy and vibrancy of the neighborhoods that were lost, and enable that history to have a relevance in the present.

The plan will investigate opportunities to incorporate public greenspace within the project to achieve the following environmental, public health, and economic security benefits:

- A greenspace would remove impermeable highway pavement in the center city and replace it with permeable landscaping. This would help mitigate the urban heat island effect, improving resident health and reducing their energy cost burden.
- The plan will investigate ways that a greenspace could be used to provide green infrastructure elements to address stormwater runoff issues. This work would support the

Akron Waterways Renewed project, a nearly \$1 billion effort to reduce combined sewer overflows and improve water quality in the Cuyahoga River watershed and Lake Erie.

Criteria #3 - Community-based Stewardship, Management, and Partnerships

Perhaps the greatest strength of Akron’s proposal is that the City has already begun an intensive community outreach initiative about the future of the Innerbelt. Through this dialogue, the City is looking at possible ways to rectify the damage, heal, and build a stronger community going forward. Outreach activities include:

- Creative placemaking: 500 Plates Dinner on the Innerbelt in 2015; planting of the Innerbelt Forest in 2018; and pop-up art activations along the Towpath Trail through the project site.
- Hiring of community-building consultant Liz Ogbu in 2021, to lead a resident-engaged initiative that is developing community recommendations for the future of the site.
- Creation of the Innerbelt Advisory Group in late 2021 to discuss and review the city’s ongoing efforts relating to the future of the Innerbelt. The Advisory Group will provide continued community input and guidance throughout the RCP master planning process.
- Oral History Project, 2022. Conversations with former residents and family members to hear and preserve the stories from life before, during, and after construction of the Innerbelt. These oral histories will be housed at the nearby public library and accessible both in person and digitally.
- On-site community events, Fall 2022, to engage residents with the former Innerbelt site. Events included a Jazz Festival with community dialogue and an Open Streets family day.
- Community Vision meetings, scheduled to take place in late 2022 and early 2023.
- Analysis of community preferences and recommendations for interim and long-term site transformation, due mid-2023.
- Additional information about this outreach initiative is available at the project website: <https://www.akroninnerbelt.com/>

This master planning process will build upon Akron’s long history of collaboration between its institutions, philanthropic organizations, and residents for the betterment of the community. Many of these organizations have stepped up to engage in the Innerbelt re-envisioning process, including the Knight Foundation, GAR Foundation, Downtown Akron Partnership, Akron Urban League, and all three major local healthcare providers. See attached letters of support.

- The Knight Foundation has been involved in the community since the Knight newspaper chain was founded here. Akron is one of eight communities in the country where the Foundation focuses its inclusive and equitable engagement activities. The Knight program director in Akron has requested \$50,000 from the Foundation as part of the city’s matching funds requirement for the RCP planning grant.
- The project site is within the focus geography of Akron Civic Commons, a partnership organization that “seeks to build a city for all people, regardless of their race, income, gender or age, through the development of great public spaces where all citizens can gather, exchange ideas, play and build relationships with one another.” ACC works to reimagine and reconnect economically diverse neighborhoods, build civic pride, and advance environmental sustainability. These goals align well with those of the RCP program, and ACC is embracing this opportunity to reimagine the Innerbelt site.

- The Akron Urban League has worked for nearly 100 years in Akron to improve the quality of life of for its citizens, and particularly African Americans, through economic self-reliance and social empowerment.

Criteria #4 – Equitable Development and Shared Prosperity

To achieve the goals of this criteria, several approaches for reusing the site will be considered, with community input. Strategies for reuse could include residential and/or commercial infill development, capitalizing on historic assets near the site, and improved recreational space and beautification. The solution will likely be a combination of these options.

1. Infill Development

The master plan will study opportunities to promote walkable infill development that benefits residents, supports local businesses, and addresses climate change.

- The project site would be attractive for development due to its close proximity to Downtown workplaces, retail, entertainment, and recreational amenities.
- Infill residential development would provide additional customers to support the economic viability of locally-owned Downtown businesses.
- New dwelling units would increase resident access to the more than 26,000 jobs available Downtown.
- To ensure development patterns are walkable, equitable, and sustainable, infill development will comply with Form-Based Zoning Code requirements for the site. These code provisions will extend the work the City initiated in 2021 to modernize its 100-year-old zoning code to meet Best Practices in zoning.

The planning framework will use targeted strategies to align redevelopment efforts with equitable outcomes that benefit all residents, and especially those who have been most impacted by the highway construction and its aftermath.

- To keep existing residents in their homes and prevent gentrification, the City is developing a strategy to freeze property taxes for legacy residents at a pre-development level. This policy will extend to the project area and surrounding neighborhoods.
- Infill development will strive to include an affordable housing component, seeking funding sources such as state Low-Income Housing Tax Credits. The City has already begun working with a partner developer towards this goal via a plan to build 196 mixed-income housing units on city-owned land just north of the Innerbelt site at Center St. The development will include 55 units of workforce housing to serve some of the 7,000 employees at two major hospitals on the southeastern edge of the project site.

Over the past several years Akron has embarked on several initiatives to increase the strength of the city’s neighborhoods, small business districts, housing stock, and economic resilience. Many of these programs will be applicable to development on the project site.

- Residential property tax abatement incentive, 2017. Increased new and rehabilitated housing units in the city by over 700 units.
- Great Streets Akron, launched in 2018. This program provides assistance and grants for physical improvements to small, locally-owned retail establishments within 13 neighborhood business districts. Since its inception, the program has awarded over \$3 million in grants and has helped 219 small businesses.

- Downtown Akron Vision + Redevelopment Plan, 2018. This community planning process made recommendations for all of Downtown, as well as high-level recommendations for the future of the Innerbelt. The RCP Innerbelt master plan will expand on these recommendations and study the potential of the project site and its specific challenges at a fine-grained level.
- Bounce Innovation Hub, 2018. This downtown entrepreneurship incubator has created 435 new jobs and generated \$164 million in revenues.
- Planning to Grow Akron 2.0 Housing Strategy, 2021. Multi-pronged approach to stabilize existing neighborhoods and increase the city's population.
- Housing Rehabilitation. \$10 million in ARPA funds dedicated for housing rehab to strengthen existing neighborhoods. Launched in June 2022, over 3,000 applications have been received to date. Rehab work is starting in Fall 2022.

2. Celebrate Historic and Cultural Assets

The master plan will study ways to capitalize on the important historic and cultural assets within and near the Innerbelt. Telling the story of these assets helps residents understand the role that these physical artifacts had in the formation of their hometown. Incorporating history into residents' daily lives gives these assets deeper relevance.

a) Ohio & Erie Canalway Heritage Area

- The Ohio & Erie Canal was pivotal in the foundation of the city of Akron, allowing farmers and businesses here to transport their goods to markets throughout United States. The master plan will study the possibility of daylighting portions of the historic Canal currently channeled within a culvert under the Innerbelt. Water amenities can bring vibrancy to public spaces. This strategy would expand the already successful use of the historic Canal as a placemaking element as it passes through Downtown at the existing Locks 2, 3, and 4 Parks, which lie just southwest of the Innerbelt site.

b) Glendale Cemetery

- This 85-acre cemetery park, modeled after Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Boston, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The master plan will study ways to improve resident and downtown worker access to this underutilized greenspace.

c) The historic Glendale Steps

- This 242-step sandstone staircase was constructed by out-of-work Akron residents during the Great Depression. The WPA project connected the West Hill neighborhood to Downtown, but it was cut off by the construction of the Innerbelt. The plan will aim to reutilize this asset as a connective element between neighborhoods.

d) Former Howard St. business and entertainment district

- Remember and commemorate this business district that was home to many Black-owned enterprises, including the Hotel Matthews, the first Black-owned hotel in Akron, and several jazz clubs where the likes of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Ella Fitzgerald performed. The business district was demolished to make way for the Cascade urban renewal project. One of the main justifications given for building the Innerbelt was to improve traffic flow and access to the Cascade office project.

3. Greenspace and Beautification

Public greenspace can help connect people to place, build a sense of shared community, and provide an amenity that attracts newcomers and encourages existing residents to remain in the city.

The master plan will investigate conversion of part of the former highway into a greenspace asset that improves the health and quality of life of residents in surrounding neighborhoods. A public greenspace would knit the neighborhoods divided by the highway back together, providing common ground for community interaction.

- Improved park access would increase existing home values and restore some of the financial equity that was lost due to the original highway construction.
- A new greenway would effectively extend the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, a 45,000 acre green oasis that lies just north of the city, into downtown Akron. A new greenspace would allow residents of the Sherbondy Hill, West Hill, and Downtown neighborhoods to have direct access to the National Park's assets via the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail that runs through the Innerbelt site.
- Public greenspace would provide opportunity for climate resilience and stormwater management interventions as mentioned in Merit Criteria #2 above.

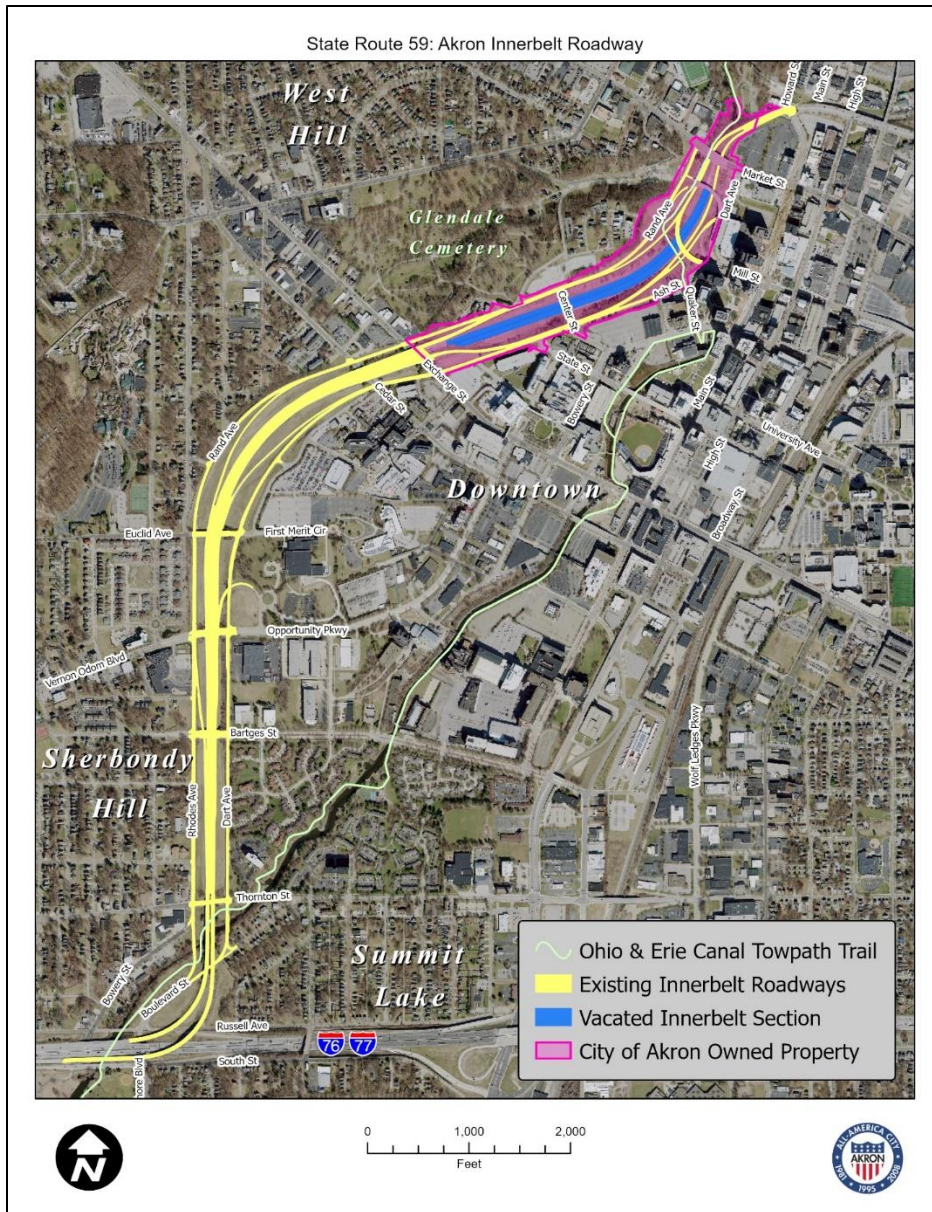
D. Conclusion

The city of Akron is grateful for the opportunity to apply for a planning grant under the Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program. We are confident that USDOT will receive many fine applications for worthy projects. But we do believe that our application is special. Through the RCP program, many communities will be taking the first steps toward investigating a potential highway removal. We believe that what sets our application apart from many others is that we are not just planning for a potential highway removal. Akron has already demonstrated its commitment to the goals of the RCP program by taking the huge first step of actually removing a portion of the highway that has divided our city for 50 years. We have also taken the equally important second step of initiating an extensive and ongoing community engagement effort, specially tailored toward those who were initially displaced by this highway.

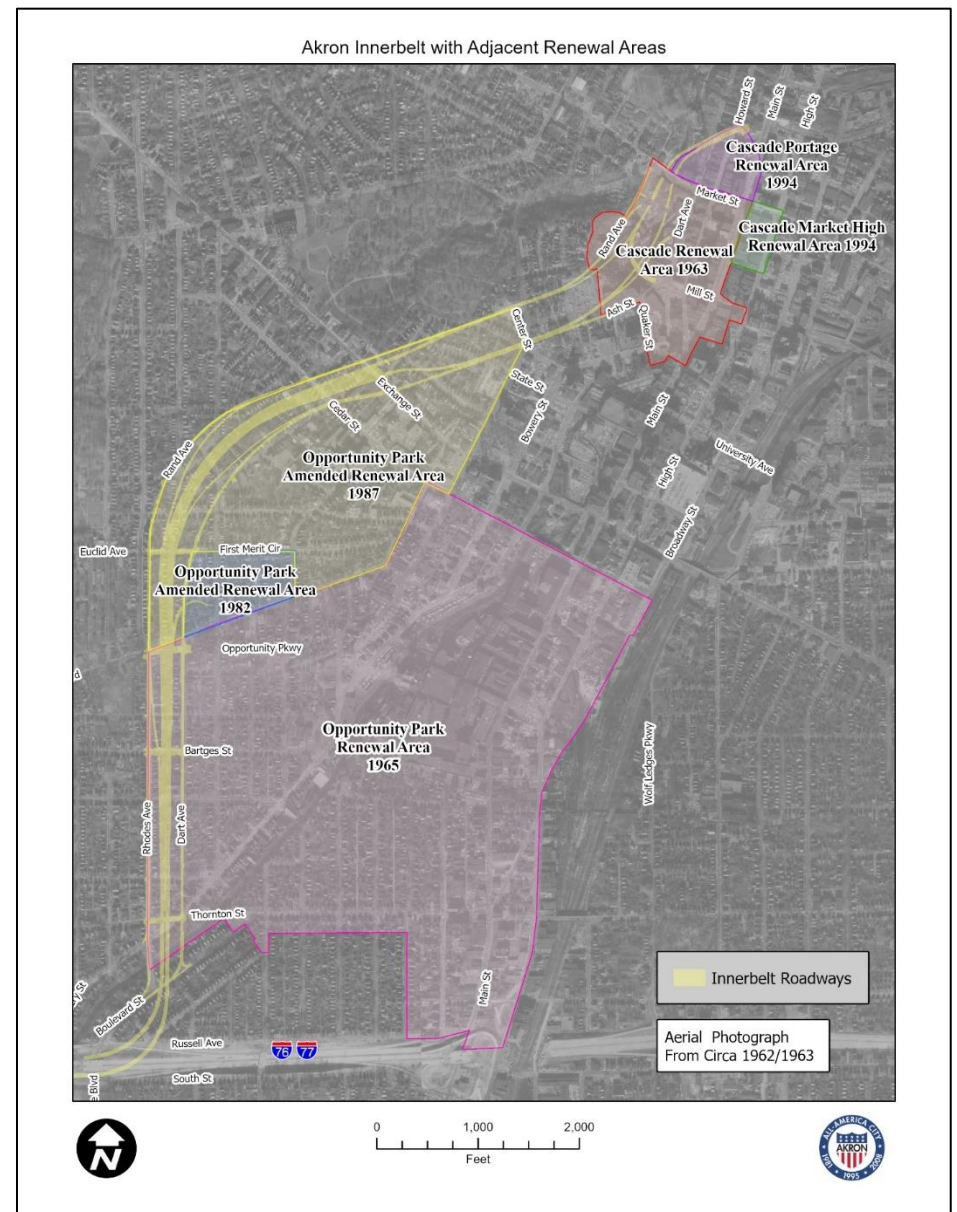
We now want to build upon these tangible actions, and use the RCP planning grant to determine what comes next:

- How can we best alter the remaining roadway infrastructure and topography to knit our community back together?
- What is the highest and best use of the nearly 25 acres of land that has been made available in the former highway right-of-way?
- And most importantly, how can we do these things in a manner that is sustainable, equitable, and creates shared prosperity for those who call our community home?

We believe that getting the right answers to these questions, through a comprehensive and thoughtful master plan funded by this vital new federal program, will help to heal the core of our community and make it a better place to live. For this, we respectfully request your assistance to further this very important work.



Map 1



Map 2



Innerbelt looking east from West Hill neighborhood



Innerbelt looking south



Innerbelt view south towards Center St. Bridge



Access from Downtown to the Innerbelt site is a challenge