

Project Narrative

Section I – Introduction and Overview

The MacArthur Park and Hanger Hill neighborhoods were once culturally, socially, and economically thriving communities within downtown Little Rock, Arkansas. During the 1950s, these neighborhoods benefited from a connectivity with the downtown, municipal parks, and the Central Business District. Little of these connected and prosperous neighborhoods remain today due to the “Urban Renewal” project of I-30 in 1961. The once flourishing neighborhoods disproportionately felt the burdens of I-30 construction resulting in a fractured area that lost housing, businesses, churches, and green spaces, significantly impacting the future economic, educational, and social development of these neighborhoods.

The impact of this fracturing, segregation, and the disenfranchisement of black communities in schools, businesses, and neighborhoods still reverberates in Little Rock today. The proposed project will reconnect the neighborhoods divided by I-30 and will be another step toward equity and opportunity for every citizen in Little Rock.

I-30 is one of the most traveled roadways in Arkansas and passes through the heart of downtown Little Rock. The footprint of I-30 presents a substantial physical and socioeconomic barrier to the communities it divides. When originally constructed, I-30 eliminated direct, at-grade access for the residents and businesses on the east side of the interstate to the more numerous and developed amenities on the west side. The entire eastern half of the Study Area (encompassing a half-mile radius surrounding the proposed Deck Park location) is now identified as an *Economically Disadvantaged Community* (per EJScreen). Decennial 2020 census data shows that the eastern half of the Study Area has higher poverty, higher disability rates,

and lower education rates than many areas within the city, county, and state, with the area also faring far worse than the west side. Within the Study Area:

- The percentage of families below poverty level on the **east side** of I-30 ranges from 200%-400% greater than the city, county, and State of Arkansas averages, while the **west side** of I-30 is less than or equal to the city, county, and state averages.
- On the **east side** of I-30, the percentage of households with one or more persons (ages 5-64) with a disability is 58%-79% greater than the Little Rock city average while the west side of I-30 is slightly less than the city average.
- The percentage of individuals who have obtained a Bachelor, Master, or Doctorate degree on the **east side** of I-30 is 82% lower than the Little Rock city average, while the percentage of individuals on the west side of I-30 with this level of education attainment exceeds the city average by 33%.

The robust public involvement in the recent 30 Crossing project, which planned improvements pass through the Study Area, initiated public discussion regarding the barrier I-30 poses to the Little Rock community. It was during this process that the differences between the east and west sides of I-30 in the downtown area was brought to the attention of the Arkansas Department of Transportation (ARDOT) 30 Crossing Study Team. ARDOT expanded its outreach and engagement process for this project, working with the community to understand their concerns and the unique needs of the community. During this 30 Crossing public involvement process, the local community indicated support for a Deck Park as a unifying solution for the I-30 corridor between 6th Street and 9th Street.



Scan or click [here](#) for access to graphics used throughout this document.

This Reconnecting Communities Pilot (RCP) Planning Grant will allow the city to fully explore the feasibility of a Deck Park between 6th and 9th Streets. Building and expanding upon the recent public outreach from the 30 Crossing project, a RCP Planning Grant will allow the City of Little Rock to address opportunities to rejoin these two communities and take steps to bridge the economic and social divide created by I-30.

The City of Little Rock will use RCP Planning Grant funds to accomplish the following:

- Through community engagement, partnership, and input, the project will **inventory and propose innovative ways to address the equity, mobility, safety, connectivity, and shared prosperity impacts** that resulted from the initial 1963 construction of I-30 in downtown Little Rock. Community input will be implemented and facilitated per an established **Community Participation Plan (CPP)** under the direction of the City of Little Rock with assistance from the **Community Advisory Board (CAB)**.
- Under the advisement of **ARDOT** and other partners providing technical expertise, the project team **investigate the practical and economic feasibility of a Deck Park spanning I-30**. The **I-30 Deck Park** will be located between the 6th Street and 9th Street bridges in downtown Little Rock, reconnecting the nearby communities on the east and west sides of I-30.
- With continued CAB and ARDOT input, **the conceptual design of a Deck Park** will be developed. The design will mitigate the adverse impacts identified in the I-30 Deck Park Planning Study (hereafter “Planning Study”).

One of the primary goals of the city and its public, business, and community partners is to transform Little Rock into a more prosperous, equitable, and attractive place

to live, work, study, and play. To achieve this goal, public input is crucial. To facilitate input from community partners during the Planning Study, the city has partnered with the Coalition of Little Rock Neighborhoods (hereafter “Neighborhood Coalition”) as a joint applicant. The Neighborhood Coalition will assist in the organization of engagement opportunities and will direct the CPP and the formation of a CAB. The integration of public safety into the project plan is also important. As an additional joint applicant and partner, ARDOT will provide technical assistance and guidance to the city, ensuring a safe and long-lasting I-30 Deck Park.

The following sections of this narrative provide:

- A description of the barriers posed by I-30 and the history and character of the impacted communities.
- A description of how the Planning Study and subsequent I-30 Deck Park design and construction activities will effectively engage the community and stakeholders and implement their ideas to address the merit criteria of the RCP Planning Grant.
- A description of how the community involvement and activities included in the Planning Study will be a springboard to the next phases of the design and environmental phases (NEPA) and will ultimately lead to the construction of the I-30 Deck Park.

Section II – Facility and Community Description, Location, and Maps

Description of I-30 Facility/Barrier

I-30 is a crucial part of the nation’s interstate highway system. Within Arkansas, I-30 begins in the southwest corner of the state, passes through Little Rock to its terminus, connecting to I-40 in North Little Rock. Within Central Arkansas, I-30 has major interchange connections to I-430, S. University Avenue, I-530, I-440, I-630, and I-40.

Figure 1 shows the existing highway network in the Little Rock area, including I-30. In addition to its role as a transportation facility for regional and interstate traffic, I-30 provides significant local access to downtown Little Rock, including the Study Area (**Figure 2**).

Despite their significant facilitation of improvements to vehicular transportation and the movement of freight, it is documented interstates/highways can be physical barriers to mobility, access, community connectivity, and economic development.¹ Interstate/highway barriers are even more pronounced in high population areas such as downtown Little Rock. Construction of I-30 in the Study Area was completed circa 1961, which was prior to the implementation of NEPA. The community impacts resulting from the physical and cultural barriers created by I-30 were not a required consideration during the original project's planning and design process.

The right-of-way footprint of I-30 includes adjacent frontage roads, extends almost 400 feet in width, and is a physical and geographical barrier to the communities it divides. To accommodate increasingly higher traffic volumes, improvements to I-30 are ongoing via the 30 Crossing project. Prior to the current construction activities, I-30 had six travel lanes (three in each direction) with two-lane, one-way frontage roads. Once 30 Crossing construction is complete in 2025, I-30 will be eight travel lanes (four lanes in each direction) and frontage roads will be retained (with added crosswalks at the 6th and 9th Street–frontage road intersections). All existing and planned future I-30 travel lanes are 12 feet wide and are depressed approximately 20 feet below the surrounding grades and the adjacent frontage roads. Because of the significant grade differential, retaining walls run parallel to I-30 on both sides and are located between the travel lanes and the frontage roads.

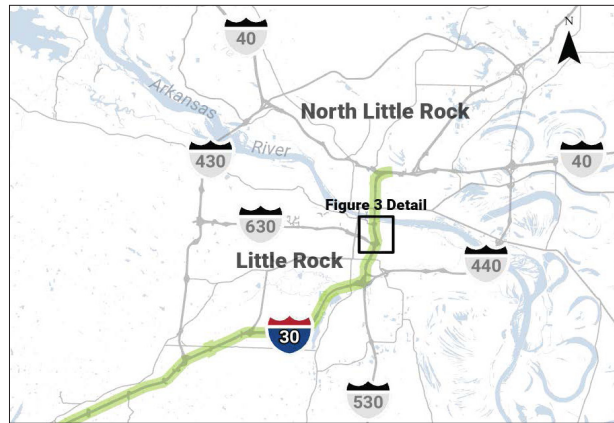


Figure 1: Highway Network in Little Rock Area

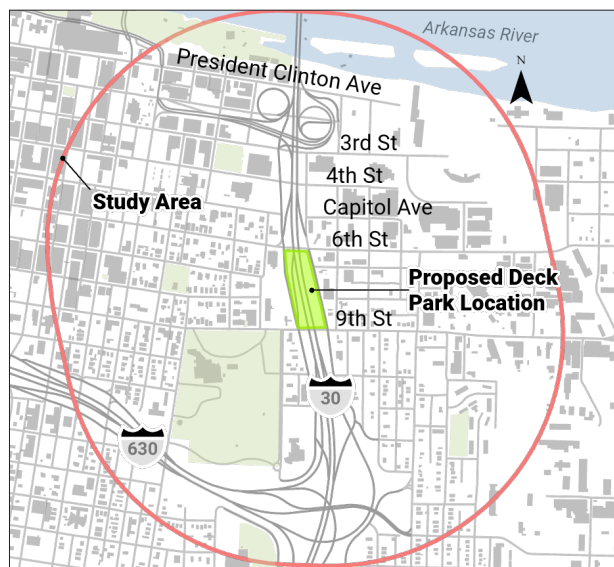


Figure 2: I-30 in Downtown Little Rock and Proposed Deck Park Location

Figure 3 on the following page shows the plan view and typical section of I-30 after 30 Crossing is complete. Adding a Deck Park in this area will address the non-vehicular mobility and access barriers to the community by providing continuous access across this sunken roadway section of I-30. This significantly improves the accessibility and mobility elements designed into the 30 Crossing project from the Arkansas River to 4th Street and also into the new 6th and 9th Street bridges.

¹ Evans, Farrell. "How Interstate Highways Gutted Communities-and Reinforced Segregation." History.com, A&E Television Networks, 20 Oct. 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/interstate-highway-system-infrastructure-construction-segregation>.

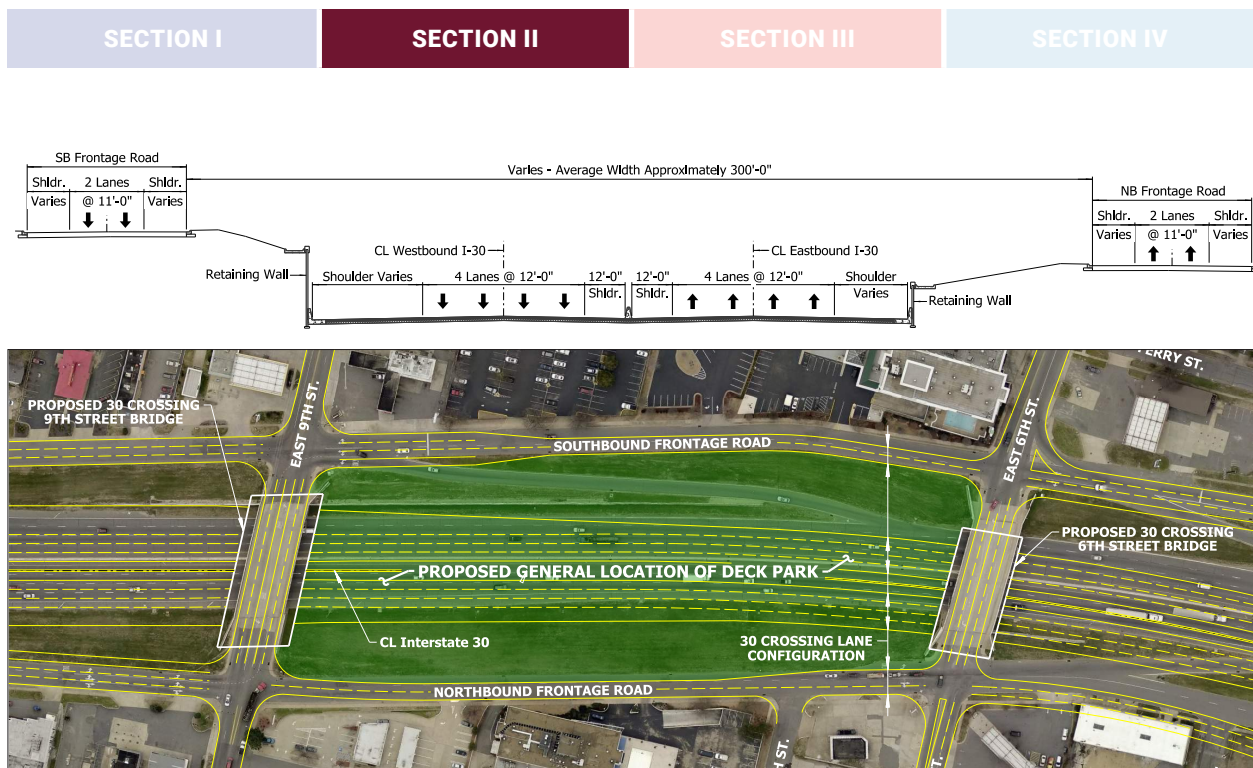


Figure 3: 30 Crossing I-30 Plan View and Typical Section

Within the Study Area, the average daily traffic (ADT) on I-30 was 126,000 vehicles in 2020, and the projected traffic volumes are 167,000 in 2045. The posted speed limit on I-30 is 60 mph. The high traffic volume and speed necessitates restricted access between the adjacent communities. Opportunities for vehicular, public transit, bicycle, and pedestrian mobility across the corridor are limited to those cross streets that were not permanently severed by the initial construction of I-30. The I-30 corridor between the I-630 interchange and the Arkansas River (approximately one mile in length) offers only six street crossings of I-30: 9th Street, 6th Street, 4th Street, 3rd Street, 2nd Street, and President Clinton Avenue. (See Figure 2).

As well as a prominent physical barrier, I-30 has unfortunately also evolved to be a significant socioeconomic barrier. The entire eastern half of the Study Area is defined as an *Economically Disadvantaged Community* (per EJScreen's Socioeconomic Indicator for low income, block groups in the 80th percentile or above; see Figure 4). Moreover, 2020 census data estimates in Table 1 on the following page

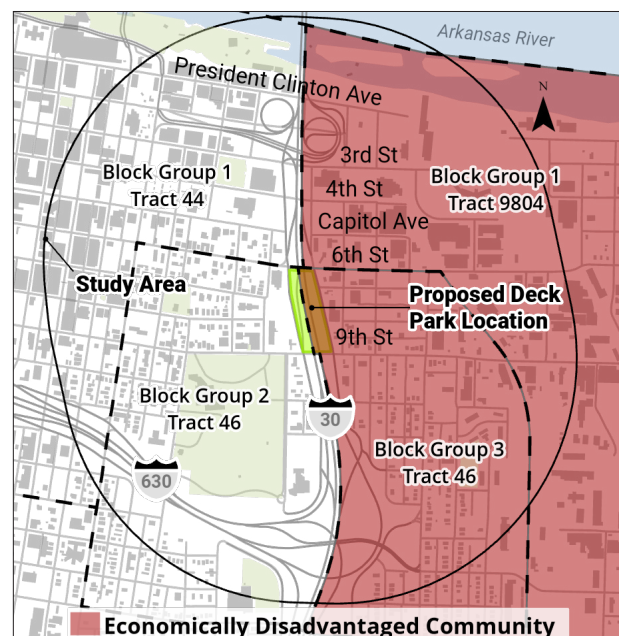


Figure 4: EJScreen Socioeconomic Indicator within Project Study Area or Project Location

show this area of the city has higher poverty, higher disability rates, and lower graduation rates than other areas within the city, county, and state, with the east side of I-30 typically faring worse than the west side (also see Figure 5).

Table 1: 2020 Census Data

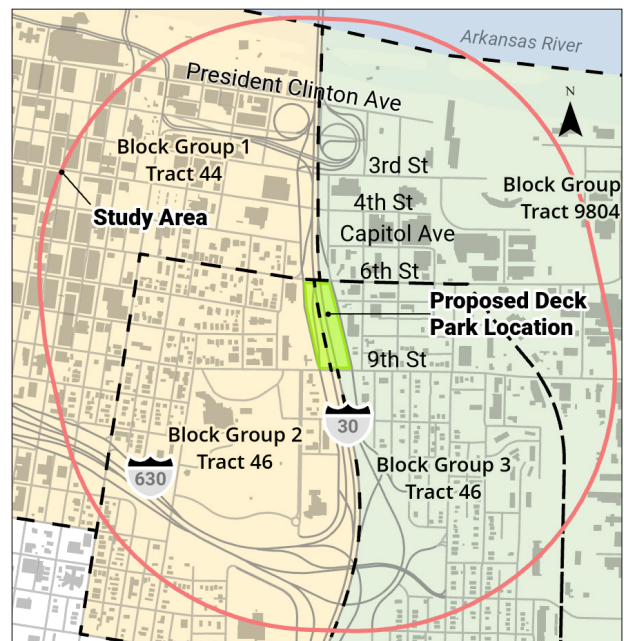
Geography	Families Below Poverty*	Households with Individuals		
		making \$75,000+*	1+ disabled persons	with a college degree
Block Group 1 Tract 44	12%	38%	23%	52%
Block Group 2 Tract 46	6%	17%	18%	52%
Block Group 3 Tract 46	62%	0%	38%	0%
Block Group 1 Tract 9804	36%	9%	43%	7%
City of Little Rock	11%	36%	24%	39%
Pulaski County	12%	35%	28%	33%
Arkansas	12%	31%	34%	22%

*Income values based on 2020 inflation-adjusted dollars in the Past 12 Months

Description of Impacted Communities

Despite the physical and socioeconomic barriers to the impacted communities, an opportunity remains to reconnect the surrounding region to Little Rock's neighborhood, economic, and natural amenities. The Little Rock-North Little Rock Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) is the political, economic, and transportation center of Arkansas. Little Rock is the state capital, largest city in Arkansas, and county seat of Pulaski County. Little Rock has over 125 parks that cover more than 5,000 acres. The Arkansas River navigable from east of Tulsa to the Mississippi River flows past the downtown area.²

Little Rock is home to large and small innovative companies in various sectors, many with headquarters and offices located near the Study Area. The city has also benefited from the development of the Clinton Presidential Center and Park, the Little Rock Tech Park with its FinTech accelerator, the internationally recognized Museum of Discovery, the Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts with its world renowned collection, the forthcoming Artspace Windgate Campus and headquarters for the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, and other business and philanthropic enterprises and engaged residents

**Figure 5: Block Groups within Project Location**

who call downtown Little Rock home. As shown in **Figures 5 and 6**, the Study Area is centered on the proposed Deck Park location and extends a half mile in all directions, with the southern limits near the I-30/I-630 interchange and the northern limits at the Arkansas River. This half-mile radius surrounding the proposed I-30 Deck Park contains the communities historically impacted by I-30 and who are anticipated to benefit most from the proposed I-30 Deck Park.

² "Experience Outdoors." Little Rock Regional Chamber, <https://www.littlerockchamber.com/live-here/experience-outdoors/>.

The Study Area is urbanized and primarily comprised of commercial and residential properties, with majority of the residents consisting of black and brown communities.

Across the country, during the late 1950s through the 1970s, more than 475,000 households and over a million people were displaced because of federal roadway construction.³ Minority communities disproportionately lost churches, green spaces, homes, and businesses that provided jobs and kept money circulating in areas already struggling from racist zoning policies, disinvestment, and white flight. The impact of I-30 construction was no exception.

Figure 7 shows historical images of I-30 to reference the before and after impacts of the interstate system on the local communities. Due to the construction of I-30 and I-630 in Little Rock, many of the surrounding neighborhoods experienced a decline, and only a few original buildings remain today in these areas. These hardships fell on communities already suffering from socioeconomic disparity. For example, in 1949, the median income of whites in Little Rock was \$2,122 and only \$881 for blacks. Today, much of Little Rock, including portions of the Study Area, are identified by the DOT as Historically Disadvantaged Communities.

The I-30 Deck Park location stands to benefit minorities who have been historically impacted in Little Rock. As shown in **Figure 6**, I-30 is the boundary between two such affected neighborhoods: MacArthur Park (located west of I-30) and Hanger Hill (located east of I-30). Both neighborhoods are located within the northern portion of Census Tract 46, with MacArthur Park located primarily in Block Group 2 and Hanger Hill in Block Group 3 (See **Figure 5**).

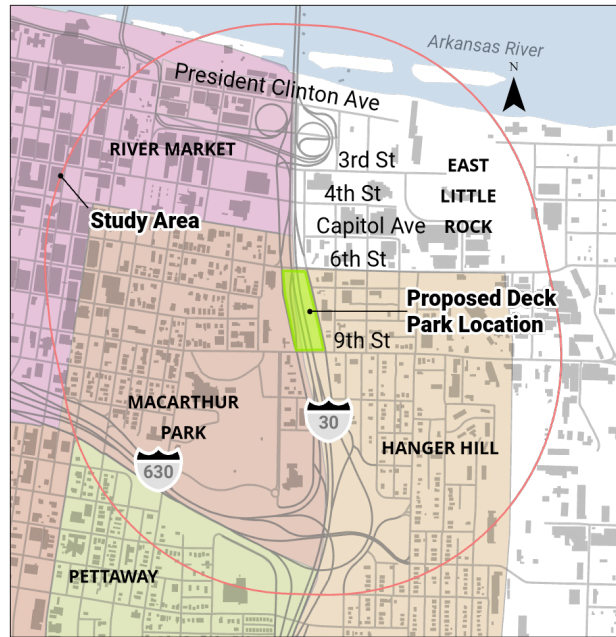


Figure 6: I-30 Deck Park Study Area and Surrounding Neighborhoods



Figure 7: Pre and Post Construction of I-30 within the Study Area

Overall, the Study Area contains a population of approximately 2,363 people. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2020 Decennial Census data, the most prevalent racial or ethnic groups within Census Tract 46 are: (1) black 56%, (2) white 35%. Between 2010–2020, there was a 13% decrease in population within the Study Area, approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ of the population leaving the area is black.

³ Evans, Farrell. "How Interstate Highways Guttled Communities and Reinforced Segregation." History.com, A&E Television Networks, 20 Oct. 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/interstate-highway-system-infrastructure-construction-segregation>.

The physical division of the once close-knit community has resulted in demographic disparities reflected in race and age, as shown in the **Table 2** below (2020 Census).⁴

Table 2: 2020 Census Data

Geography	Minority Population	Population < 18 yrs. old
Block Group 2 Tract 46 (west side)	45%	9%
Block Group 3 Tract 46 (east side)	89%	31%

MacArthur Park Historic District

MacArthur Park Historic District is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Little Rock. The district is approximately 50 blocks and has numerous properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The district is located on the west side of I-30 and is an important community for the Study Area. The district was first settled in the 1830s and is comprised of many Antebellum and late Victorian era homes, which serve as some of the most architecturally significant structures in Arkansas.

Today, the district includes many Greek Revival homes of the 1840s, grand Italianate homes of the 1870–1890s, churches and schools, and the 1917 craftsman-style Fire Station #2. The district also contains MacArthur Park, originally called City Park. It is the city’s oldest municipal park and serves on-site institutions, surrounding residential neighborhoods, and nearby business corridors. It was established as the city’s first public park in 1892. Constructing I-30 and I-630 created a permanent barrier along the east and south sides of MacArthur Park, significantly restricting park access. Beginning in 1961, the Central Little Rock Urban Renewal Project delineated two ‘project areas’ for demolition and clearance.⁵ The first was the development of the Little Rock–North Little Rock Expressway (I-30). The second was the construction of the 8th Street Expressway (I-630).

The creation of these two facilities resulted in long-term effects such as loss of park patrons, activities, and upkeep.⁶ The impact of I-30 “renewal project” is dramatically illustrated in **Figure 7**. I-30 became a dividing wall separating once thriving communities.

Hanger Hill Historic District

Hanger Hill Historic District is located on the east side of I-30. Platted in 1869 as Hanger’s Addition, this area was largely developed by the early 20th century. The district was nominated for the NRHP in 2007 for its early 20th architecture. The district is located between the downtown area, industrial park, and airport zone in a working-class neighborhood. The district is bounded by 9th Street on the north, the railroad on the east, Oakland & Fraternal Historic Cemetery Park on the south, and I-30 on the west. Compared with the MacArthur Park Historic District, very little historical information on the Hanger Hill District is available. Similar to the untold history of many predominantly black communities, much of Hanger Hill’s black history is undocumented and inaccessible. However, many stories have been told of prosperous black business corridors and residential neighborhoods such as the Ninth Street Corridor not far from Hanger Hill. It is slightly over a mile away from the edge of Hanger Hill to the entrance to the Historic Ninth Street.

⁴ Bureau, U. S. C. (2022, July 22). Data. Census.gov. Retrieved July 23, 2022 from <https://www.census.gov/data.html>

⁵ Petty, Matthew. “MacArthur Park District Master Plan.” University of Arkansas Community Design Center, University of Arkansas Community Design Center, 12 Apr. 2019, <http://uacdc.uark.edu/work/macarthur-park-district-master-plan>.

⁶ MacArthur Park Historic District. Encyclopedia of Arkansas. (2021, January 28). Retrieved August 5, 2022, from <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/macarthur-park-historic-district-9116/>

Section III – Response To Merit Criteria

Merit Criteria #1 – Equity, Environmental Justice, and Community Engagement Plan

The communities east of I-30 are identified as *Economically Disadvantaged Communities*.⁷ It is no coincidence these communities are historically considered to have no voice or say. Because of this, community engagement will be the foundation of the Planning Study, and the design will be rooted in one that is community outreach. One of the primary goals of the Planning Study is to further understand the equity, mobility, safety, connectivity, and shared prosperity impacts that resulted from I-30. This will be accomplished through the below-described data collection coupled with the Impact and Mitigation Evaluation.

To gain a preliminary understanding of the community, initial research was conducted to ascertain the historical burdens placed on the community due to the impacts and displacements imposed by the original construction of I-30 and on similar impacts caused by the construction of I-630. An initial inventory of the project area has been conducted to assess community composition, amenities, public transit features, churches, and daily destinations. This general inventory, combined with future community input gathered by the Planning Study, will be used to assess the community value of the proposed I-30 Deck Park and its amenities.

The Planning Study will conduct additional data collection to establish a baseline of existing conditions and populations in the project area and to gain a true understanding of the communities involved, how the proposed benefits can best mitigate historical impacts, how best to engage community members, and ultimately facilitate strengthening the community.

Most of this data collection will be achieved through the CPP. The CPP will be implemented by a CAB, which is further discussed in Merit Criteria #3. The CPP will target the designated Environmental Justice (EJ) areas, especially the communities east of I-30 that have existing socioeconomic disparities and are identified as *Economically Disadvantaged Communities*. To achieve meaningful engagement, the CPP will incorporate lessons from past projects in the area, such as the original construction of I-630 and the recent 30 Crossing project.

One of the most important lessons from the 30 Crossing project is engaging local community advocates in the process. Therefore, the CPP outreach will begin by reaching out to community leaders identified in 30 Crossing and securing those leaders as advocates to disseminate information. Additionally, the Planning Study will include conversations with local entities (such as churches, schools, businesses, and residential and neighborhood organizations) to identify appropriate points of contact within the community. Identified leaders can provide feedback as to the most effective measures to facilitate and increase involvement in this specific community (e.g., in-person meetings within community gathering spaces, door flyers, online surveys, the provision of childcare during meetings). Additional outreach goals include building relationships with community leaders, equitably disseminating information to the community regarding how they can provide their feedback and achieve meaningful public engagement.

The public involvement efforts initiated by this Planning Study can be incorporated into the NEPA process that will occur in a later project phase. Therefore, the CPP will adhere to ARDOT's NEPA standards. Language assistance will be offered at all public meetings to provide equal opportunities for participation.

⁷ EPA Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping tool (EJScreen), Socio-economic indicator for low income, block groups in the 80th percentile or above, compared to the State.

The public involvement will include outreach techniques such as hand delivery of flyers, publishing newspaper ads, and having both Spanish and English radio public service announcements. It is anticipated that in addition to direct stakeholder contacts and meetings, multiple in-person public meetings will be held, with virtual components also offered. The city will host an interactive website where the public can provide comments via email, phone, letter, or electronic form.

Merit Criteria #2 – Mobility and Community Connectivity

During public engagement for 30 Crossing, the public expressed the importance of increasing mobility, removing conflict points, and having more accommodations for improvements to mass transportation and bike/pedestrian facilities as well as interest in a future Deck Park at this location. Due to this previous feedback, large-scale public support for the I-30 Deck Park is anticipated as this project prioritizes many of these past topics.

The Deck Park and the amenities it will provide will reconnect the east and west communities along I-30, creating a common space and encouraging residents of the separate communities to come together as one community to live, play, and build relationships that reconnects the fabric of the city. This is an important priority for the City of Little Rock and the Neighborhood Coalition.

It will also provide additional avenues for a safe crossing of I-30 for cyclists and pedestrians. Little Rock will assess its Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan and plan for new opportunities to connect the I-30 Deck Park with existing bike/pedestrian efforts. Metroplan, the regional metropolitan planning organization, and Rock Region Metro also will look for opportunities to connect to the I-30 Deck Park and enhance the usability of transit. Existing transit stops are located on 9th Street and along the

frontage road on the west side along I-30 but not on the east side.

Along with safer operations for pedestrians, the city will also evaluate the need for improved lighting and structures to make the Deck Park a suitable and popular attraction. For example, the Park will include bike/pedestrian accommodations that will comply with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards, providing positive and equitable benefits to the population.

The I-30 Deck Park is an ideal community space for local schools to utilize; therefore, schools will be heavily involved with the Planning Study. Six schools are within a 10-minute walk to the proposed I-30 Deck Park, and 12 schools are within a 15-minute walk.

Merit Criteria #3 – Community-Based Stewardship, Management, and Partnerships

This project is backed by support letters from ARDOT, the Neighborhood Coalition, and community and neighborhood participants. Numerous community members have mentioned that the Deck Park has the potential to “spur development on vacant and blighted areas, attract more businesses, office[s], and residents to the area.”

The I-30 Deck Park project will involve a multi-agency partnership and a dedicated public engagement process. The formal partnerships will consist of the City of Little Rock, the Neighborhood Coalition, and ARDOT. From these formal partnerships, coupled with community and business members, a CAB will be formed. The CAB will be part of creating a robust CPP to engage residents by including the public, agencies, and stakeholders throughout the entire planning process. The CAB will coordinate and collaborate to make sure the I-30 Deck Park efforts have adequate and equal community and technical support. More importantly, the CAB will focus on

identifying the community's needs by engaging as many members as possible. The outreach methods will also incorporate the outreach methods that were effective during the 30 Crossing public involvement.

Merit Criteria #4 – Equitable Development and Shared Prosperity

One of the city's goals is to transform Little Rock into a more prosperous, more equitable, and a more attractive place for its residents to live.⁸ The I-30 Deck Park will make the community a safer and more enjoyable place to walk, run, and bike for recreation and transportation purposes. Creating the I-30 Deck Park will foster both community restoration and community stabilization, and add value to the surrounding communities that transcends the monetary investment.⁹

The I-30 Deck Park is anticipated to spur economic mobility by providing opportunities to uplift small and local businesses. Small and local businesses are anticipated to benefit from the I-30 Deck Park, as parks have been known to benefit the local economic development of a region and build community wealth.¹⁰ The Planning Study will determine if the public is interested in the presence of vendors or public market space. The presence of such features can improve economic opportunities, affording the potential for community members to become entrepreneurs. The Planning Study will also assess what opportunities are present for utilization of Disadvantaged Business Enterprises, Minority-owned Businesses, Women-Owned Businesses, or 8(a) firms.

Section IV – Conclusion

If provided, RCP Planning Grant funds will be instrumental in initiating the City of Little Rock's first steps toward implementing the Biden-Harris Administration's policies and priorities established with the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. A new I-30 Deck Park in Little Rock will achieve many of the objectives set forth in the USDOT's Strategic Plan Goals by addressing the past harm caused by the I-30 infrastructure and building on the synergy of the public engagement and design of the 30 Crossing improvements between the Arkansas River and I-630. The I-30 Deck Park will transform the surrounding disadvantaged communities by reducing inequalities and improving safety and economic strength. Critical partnerships are in place to address the intended objectives, and the commitments of financial backing have been procured to secure the readiness of the project to move into the Study Phase and beyond.

⁸ <https://www.littlerock.gov/residents/bikeped-little-rock/>

⁹ <https://www.planetizen.com/features/103315-preventing-crime-one-park-time>; <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0013916501333002>; https://www.como.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/nrpa-report_juvenile_crime_reduction.pdf

¹⁰ EPA Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping tool (EJScreen), Socio-economic indicator for low income, block groups in the 80th percentile or above, compared to the State; National Recreation and Park Association, 2022. The Economic Impact of Local Parks. Available online at: <https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/research-papers/the-economic-impact-of-local-parks/>