

# African American Discussion Groups

## Summary Report

February 4, 2020

### Introduction

On October 8 and 9, 2019, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) sponsored four discussion groups as part of its I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement Project. The groups were comprised of African American individuals in Portland, specifically those with ties to the Rose Quarter and Albina area. Acknowledging that the development of the Rose Quarter and Albina area has historically been at the expense of African American people in Portland, the purpose of these groups was to better understand community perceptions of the proposed project and learn about what this group envisions for the area.

Participants were recruited by the Portland office of Consumer Opinion Services (COS). COS manages space for research activities and also maintains a regional list of residents who are interested in community discussions or focus groups. COS used two resources to identify interested participants. First, they employed their internal database and second, they were provided a supplemental list of likely African American residents who lived in the project area and were registered to vote. Participants were invited to attend the discussion groups if they identified as African American and had a connection to the Rose Quarter and Albina area. Participants were grouped as follows:

- Group 1: Residents over 45 years of age
- Group 2: Residents under 45 years of age
- Group 3: Displaced residents or those with a close connection to someone who had been displaced
- Group 4: Displaced residents or those with a close connection to someone who had been displaced

A total of 39 residents attended the four groups. Although Groups 3 and 4 were specifically comprised of individuals who had either been displaced themselves or had family members who had been displaced, a majority of participants across all groups shared this experience as well.

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

Subgroup	Own or Rent	Gender	Family or individual displaced from the area?
<b>Group 1</b>	4 owners, 7 renters	6 women, 5 men	9 of 11
<b>Group 2</b>	4 owners, 4 renters, 1 other	4 women, 5 men	7 of 9
<b>Group 3</b>	7 owners, 2 renters, 3 other	7 women, 5 men	12 of 12
<b>Group 4</b>	4 owners, 3 renters	4 women, 3 men	7 of 7

Sessions were held at the Urban League on North Russell Avenue and lasted roughly two hours. At the conclusion of the groups, participants were given a gift card stipend of \$125 in recognition of their time and willingness to share their experiences and knowledge of the community.

Sessions were facilitated by Roberta Hunte, Portland State University, and Johnell Bell, Espousal Strategies. Notes were taken by Laura Peña, Envirolssues. To encourage candor, no ODOT employees were present during the sessions. The facilitators used a Discussion Guide (Appendix) to lead the conversation. Each participant was provided with a handout showing an aerial view of the project area.

## Key Themes Across Groups

The discussion groups revealed the following project-specific themes. These themes reflect sentiments shared among the 39 participants in these four discussion groups and are not intended to represent the opinions of all African Americans throughout the region:

- Recognition that congestion needs to be addressed** – Most participants agreed that congestion was a problem in the Rose Quarter area, and it should be addressed. However, the groups generally disagreed with the proposed design concepts. They thought that auxiliary lanes in the Rose Quarter area would not alleviate the problem without addressing the I-5 interstate bridge crossing first. A few participants suggested or asked about tolling.
- Limited support for the project elements** – Across all groups, there was limited support for the project design concepts or elements. Some saw the potential benefits to the region as a whole but did not believe that the proposed project improvements represented the needs or priorities of African Americans in Portland. The significant investment in additional bike lanes was a strong indicator that the current project will primarily benefit white people in Portland. There was a powerful sentiment that because of the historic and structural racism that has limited the economic mobility of African

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Americans, fundamental aspects of livability—such as housing affordability and education—should be prioritized before bike accessibility.

- **Distrust in ODOT and government** – The history of displacement and disenfranchisement of African Americans at the hands of ODOT and other government agencies, including the City of Portland, was a strong theme across all groups. Many individuals voiced the continued sadness, hurt and anger of being forced out of the Albina and Rose Quarter area due to decades of urban renewal programs and policies and rising property taxes driven by increasing development and gentrification.
- **Government agencies and project partners are not doing enough to address gentrification** - Many participants also felt that the goal of this project was less about addressing congestion and more about opportunities to spur the continued development of the Inner Northeast area for the benefit of wealthy corporations and populations in Portland. They felt that this project would further gentrify the area and displace the remaining African American people and businesses. In addition, there was widely held skepticism that the City of Portland’s Preference Policy would help mitigate the displacement of African American Portlanders in a meaningful way. All groups talked about a need for ODOT, the City of Portland, and other agencies involved in this project to commit to engaging with and making a concerted effort to serve the needs of the African American population in Portland and beyond.
- **The “African American community” no longer exists as it used to** – Participants in all groups spoke about how the African American community that used to exist in the Albina and Rose Quarter area no longer exists. One participant said that it is disingenuous to refer to the “African American community” anymore because the population has been splintered and relocated so many times. Some expressed skepticism that a true community could be restored, but most were interested in discussing investments and projects that would help support the remaining African Americans in the area and encourage others to return to Albina and the Rose Quarter.

The discussion group participants emphasized the following themes related to values and what would be meaningful investments for African Americans in Portland:

- **Opportunities to build generational wealth** – All groups spoke at length about the importance of having opportunities to build generational wealth for their families. Many people expressed that the loss of properties going back decades has severely impacted African American families’ ability to pass assets down to future generations, thereby exacerbating the racial wealth gap. The primary methods discussed by the groups to help address this issue were through property ownership and new, sustained business opportunities.
- **Housing that is affordable** – There was an important distinction between affordable housing and housing that is affordable among all groups. The groups expressed a desire to have programs that support homeownership on an individual basis. Several participants shared their experience of exceeding income requirements for units

designated as “affordable housing,” but that rents and mortgages in the area are still out of reach for them. One participant shared that even having qualified for Portland’s Preference Policy, she was not able to afford a home in her original neighborhood.

Most participants were skeptical of the Preference Policy. Several people had had negative experiences with the application process; others felt that it was too little, too late and it wasn’t a worthwhile investment in a community that has been fragmented so many times.

- **Prioritizing African American-owned businesses** – Conversations about African American-owned businesses were closely tied to housing. All groups supported the prioritization of and investment in African American-owned businesses wherever possible as a way to build generational wealth. The conversation included minority contractor opportunities, but there was a clear emphasis on more sustained business opportunities that could result from the increased development of the Rose Quarter area around the highway covers.
- **Prioritizing the health and education of young people** – All groups expressed deep concern for the well-being of the students attending Harriet Tubman Middle School. Many wondered about adverse health effects as a result of bringing the highway closer to the campus and what steps could and should be taken to address them. Suggestions ranged from an improved HVAC system to completely relocating the school to a safer location nearby.

Prioritizing the education of African American and other children of color was also discussed in all groups. Most participants agreed that they would prefer to see government agencies allocate funding to education—including investments in buildings, teachers and job-training programs—rather than fund bike lanes.

- **Increased involvement and representation** – All groups said that they were grateful to be a part of the conversation and expressed a desire for continued involvement. In addition, they advocated for increased representation in this Project, at ODOT and in decision-making bodies across all agencies. Participants were interested in knowing how their feedback from these discussion groups would be used. There was uncertainty that the discussion would affect meaningful change. Some participants suggested the formation of an African American advisory committee for the project as well as increased internships and apprenticeships for African American and minority populations at ODOT to build long-term representation.

## Additional Sentiments and Themes by Group

Group	Notes
<b>Group 1: Over 45</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Highest representation of community elders and people who had personally been displaced and witnessed the removal of the African American community from the area</li><li>• Strongest connections to the area</li><li>• Held the deepest grief, recalled the vibrancy of the community when it was intact</li><li>• Emphasized the need for African American gathering spaces to rebuild a sense of community</li><li>• Agreement that it would have been helpful to know the specific topic of conversation to be able to prepare for the discussion ahead of time</li></ul>
<b>Group 2: Under 45</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Very interested in the specifics about the Project including funding, timeline, how long and by whom it had been studied, etc.</li><li>• Most had not heard about the Project and were eager to share the information they had learned with their family and friends</li><li>• Encouraged ODOT and the City of Portland to look to the Urban League and Self Enhancement, Inc. as organizations that have truly prioritized and helped African Americans succeed in Portland</li><li>• Concern around a lack of parking in the Project area, especially near Moda Center</li><li>• Interest in how the decision makers at ODOT identify with the Project area</li></ul>
<b>Group 3: Displaced</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Included a range of ages from 19-80</li><li>• Primary theme was centered around generational wealth building through home and business ownership</li><li>• Dissatisfaction with how ODOT has engaged MWESB businesses from personal experience</li><li>• Skepticism that ODOT is making a genuine effort to work with Albina Vision</li><li>• Interest in the racial diversity among ODOT's design and planning team</li></ul>
<b>Group 4: Displaced</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Included a range of ages from 33-60</li><li>• Concern around further displacement, especially of the few remaining African American-owned businesses in the area</li><li>• Prioritized the employment of African Americans</li><li>• Suggestion to name the pedestrian bridge after an African American, Avel Gordly in particular</li><li>• Concern that the highway covers would attract more transient and homeless individuals</li><li>• General feeling that ODOT will do whatever is in their own best interest regardless of public input</li><li>• Concern that the Project will increase vehicle traffic around Moda Center</li></ul>

## Group Ideas and Recommendations

A non-exhaustive list of ideas and recommendations from the discussion groups:

- Prioritize home ownership for African Americans through:
  - Programs that take individual income and situations into account that can help those of very low income (less than \$20,000 per year) as well as people who do not qualify for existing programs
  - Create a community land trust that prioritizes African Americans
- Prioritize African American-owned businesses through:
  - Affordable and/or subsidized leases
  - Food carts on the highway covers
  - Business incubators including business classes and mentorship opportunities
- Prioritize African American employment through:
  - Maintaining a high quota of African American and minority contractors throughout the Project
  - Increasing opportunities for African Americans to have gainful employment at ODOT through internships and apprenticeships
  - Creating a job training center in the Project area
  - Bring long term jobs to the area to provide long term employment for African Americans
- Prioritize the health and safety of the kids at Harriet Tubman Middle School by:
  - Relocating the school to the land that remains unused by Legacy Emanuel and create a closed campus that includes Tubman, an elementary school – Kairos Elementary specifically, a shared playground and cafeteria, after school programs, and other social services such as a job-training and community center.
  - Upgrading the HVAC system
  - Building a sound wall/physical barrier between the highway and the school
  - Redirecting polluted air away from the school using fans
  - Extending the highway cover to run past the school
- Involve and have higher representation of African Americans and other people of color in this and other projects:
  - Form an African American advisory committee
  - Recruit African Americans to serve on land use and transportation committees
  - Share 5, 10, 20-year plans with the community and gather input on potential future projects before plans are formed
  - Continue to have focus and discussion groups
  - Create a true partnership between ODOT and Albina Vision to design a project that will be genuinely beneficial to African Americans in Portland
- Other ideas and recommendations:
  - Support the creation of gathering spaces for African Americans in the Rose Quarter area including features such as basketball courts, performing arts centers, and Afrocentric art
  - Look to Urban League and Self Enhancement, Inc. for examples of organizations that have truly prioritized and helped African Americans succeed in Portland

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- Provide monetary compensation to individuals who were displaced by urban renewal projects in the Albina and Rose Quarter area
- Conduct a market study to determine the potential economic impact of the Project and subsequent development
- Name the pedestrian bridge after Avel Gordly
- Use sustainable and long-lasting materials for construction to reduce future maintenance

## Conclusion

From the discussion groups, it is clear that participants have a range of perspectives around this project. Participants said that this project, as it stands, would not benefit the African American community, nor would it bring African Americans back to this area in its current form. Participants did offer strategies and areas of focus that could prioritize the concerns of African Americans should this project progress.

Discussion group participants expressed a deep-seated distrust of ODOT, the City of Portland, Prosper Portland and other government agencies stemming from a long-standing history of displacement and disenfranchisement of African Americans in Portland. As a result, there are concerns about the Project as it stands. Participants did not feel that this Project had been designed with them in mind and did not see how bike lanes or additional parks on the highway covers would benefit them. However, most participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to take part in the discussion groups and a desire for increased and continued involvement. To make this Project beneficial for the African Americans of Portland, most participants agreed that it will be necessary to employ creative solutions and collaboration across agencies to prioritize significant investments in housing affordability, African American-owned businesses, education and representation.

The final takeaways for this report, as summarized by the group facilitators, Roberta Hunte and Johnell Bell, are:

- 1) **Listen to the authentic voices from the community.** The list of recommendations was derived from discussion groups with community members ranging in age from 19 to 80 plus. The majority of participants had some long-standing relationship with the area. We recommend that ODOT use this as an opportunity to lean into the recommendations of the community to change the way that it both engages community input and utilizes community recommendations.
- 2) **Convene a think tank of African American policy and community stakeholders** to review the recommendations from this report. Have this group prioritize the listed recommendations and work with ODOT to incorporate these into its workplan. Implementing this reprioritized workplan would require the participation of Portland Public Schools, City of Portland, Metro, Prosper Portland and Multnomah County as well as community stakeholders to leverage funds for a more holistic and community centric project.
- 3) **Involve African Americans.** Participants said repeatedly that they would like to be involved in early idea generation and decision making around this and future projects. This desire is for participation at both the policy and grassroots levels.

## APPENDIX: Discussion Guide

### Project discussion

1. Let's start by talking about what your history is in the project area.
2. Before today, what had you heard about the I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement Project, if anything?
3. What reactions are you having now that you've seen and read more information about the I-5 Rose Quarter project?
4. How do you currently use this area?
5. After the project is complete, how do you think your usage of this neighborhood would change?
6. What design components of the highway covers do you feel strongly about?
7. What opportunities do you see in this project for the Black community?
8. What unintended challenges do you see?
9. Thinking about the Black community, what types of development or use in this area would create stronger connections with each other?
10. What kind of community asset would be good to leave here? What kind of development would you not want to see here?

**Broader visioning discussion**

11. Development in the Rose Quarter/Albina area has historically been at the expense of the Black community. This project, coupled with other development projects in the area are a chance to ensure ODOT will not make the same past mistakes. Our next questions seek to draw attention to the future and the past. What are the values that you want to inform development efforts in this area? *(one of the facilitators take notes of these values on poster boards)*
12. Thinking about the values listed what would it look like for these values to be implemented?
13. Thinking broadly about this area and beyond ODOT's current scope of work, what types of development would benefit the black community - both those who are still in the area and could bring more black people into the area or enhance economic opportunities.
14. Now that you've heard more, what questions do you have or where would more clarity help with your understanding of some of the technical details?
15. Is there a question you thought we should have asked but didn't?