



# **Project CHANGE Feasibility and Connectivity Study RCP 2024**

**Submitted by:**

**City of Gastonia, North Carolina**

**Inquiries regarding this RCP Grant  
application should be made to the primary  
point of contact:**

**Randi P. Gates, AICP  
Director of Transportation  
City of Gastonia  
PO Box 1748  
Gastonia, NC 28053  
(704) 854-6604  
[randi.gates@gastonianc.gov](mailto:randi.gates@gastonianc.gov)**





## SECTION 1: OVERVIEW

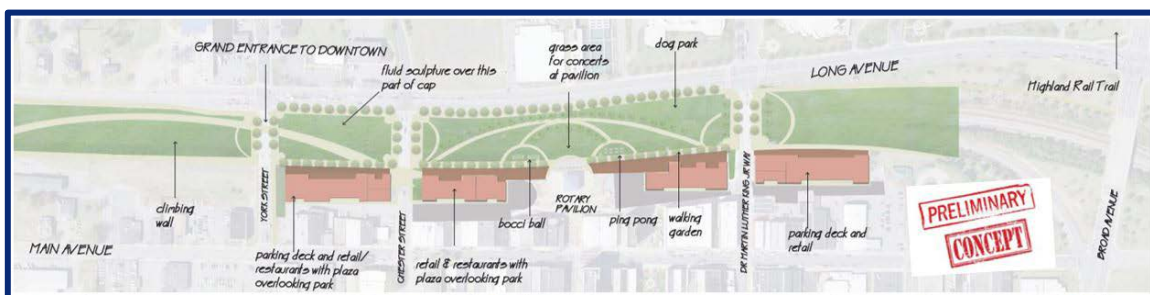
### Section 1.1: Project Description

The City of Gastonia is seeking \$2,000,000 in Reconnecting Communities Pilot (RCP) Discretionary Grant Program funds to undertake a crucial feasibility and connectivity study for **Project CHANGE—Connecting Highland: Access, Neighborhood Growth, Equity**. This initiative aims to address significant barriers to mobility and economic development in one of the city's transportation-disadvantaged communities, specifically those situated to the north of the railroad ditch that divides Downtown Gastonia from those living in the Highland Community Neighborhoods. The Census Tracts of the affected neighborhoods include 315, 319.01, 319.02, and 320. These areas are classified as **Economically Disadvantaged Communities** (CEJST), emphasizing the urgency for equitable access to resources and opportunities.

With the City of Gastonia committing \$500,000 (20%) towards this study, **Project CHANGE** seeks to explore the feasibility of capping the railroad ditch and improving NC Highway 7 (Airline/Long Avenue) as well as US 74 (Franklin Boulevard), which currently exacerbates connectivity issues. The study will assess the potential benefits of these improvements, including enhanced mobility, safety for pedestrians, and increased economic development prospects.

Capping infrastructure to reconnect communities is a proven concept seen in various successful projects nationwide, transforming previously divided neighborhoods into vibrant spaces featuring parks and civic areas. The City of Gastonia has incorporated this vision into multiple **planning documents**, yet has faced challenges in securing necessary funding. This feasibility and connectivity study is essential for evaluating technical and financial aspects and for laying the groundwork to implement transformative changes that foster equity and connectivity in the community.

**With the opportunity of funding through the Reconnecting Communities Pilot (RCP) Program, the time is now!**



*Figure 1: Railroad Cap Concepts*

The **Project CHANGE Feasibility and Connectivity Study** process will consist of:

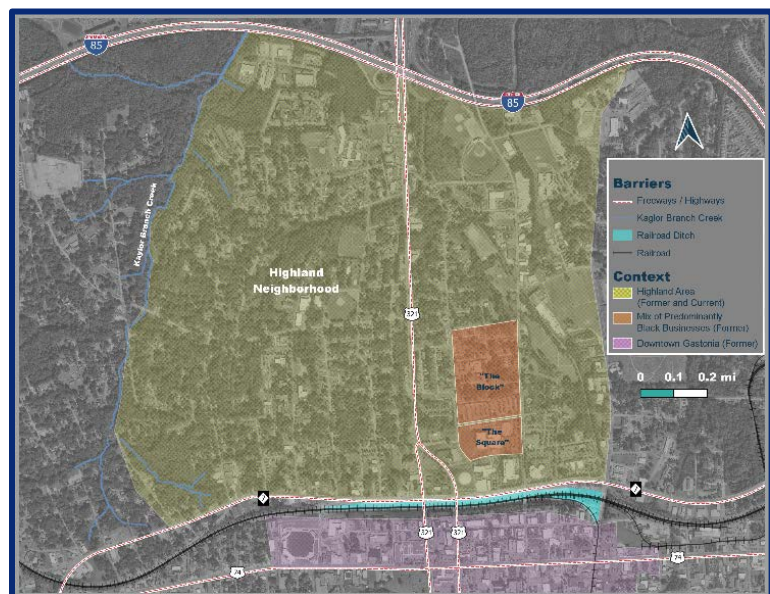
- Steering Committee and Stakeholder Identification
- Peer Review: National and Regional Capping Examples
- Existing Conditions
  - ✓ Site Overview
  - ✓ Land Use Patterns
  - ✓ Demographics
  - ✓ Transportation Infrastructure
  - ✓ Topography
  - ✓ Air Quality
- Goals and Objectives
  - ✓ Connectivity
  - ✓ Access
  - ✓ Health
  - ✓ Identity
  - ✓ Equity
  - ✓ Sustainability & Resiliency
- Community Participation Plan
- Technical Feasibility of Railroad Cap
- Highway Corridor Study
- Future Development Potential
- Equity Analysis
- Opportunities & Constraints
- Financial Feasibility of Railroad Cap
- Downtown Connectivity Study
- Funding Strategy

## Section 1.2: Project History

### Understanding the Community

Gastonia's Highland community, historically centered around the intersection of NC Highway 7 (Airline/Long Avenue) and the railroad ditch, has a rich but tumultuous history shaped by economic, social, and infrastructural changes. Encompassing an area that includes approximately 4,370 residents, the Highland neighborhood is predominantly African American, with **75.8% of its population identifying as a minority**. This community faces significant socio-economic challenges, as evidenced by a **poverty rate of 21.6%**—well above national averages—underscoring the persistent economic struggles of its residents.

The Highland Community is roughly divided into two sections by US Highway 321 (Chester Street), which runs north-south through the area. The original Highland neighborhood lies to the east of this thoroughfare, while the western section has historically been dominated by medical



facilities, including a hospital that once served as a cornerstone of community health. In its prime, Highland was a vibrant hub of economic activity and social interaction, often referred to as “Black Wall Street.” This nickname stems from the economic enterprises that flourished between Walnut Avenue and Page Avenue, anchored by institutions like the Excelsior Credit Union, which was founded to provide African American entrepreneurs access to capital. The Square boasted a variety of businesses—dentists, attorneys, theaters, beauty shops, and laundromats—all of which were vital to the community's fabric.

### Economic Decline and Urban Renewal

The decline of Highland began in the mid-1970s, coinciding with the national trend of urban renewal and the acceptance of desegregation. As residents began to migrate to other parts of Gastonia, the economic vitality that once characterized the area deteriorated. The local hospital's relocation to a suburban site further exacerbated this decline, stripping the community of essential healthcare services and the economic benefits associated with such facilities.

In response to these challenges, the City of Gastonia embarked on significant infrastructural changes, including the [Grade Crossing Elimination Project](#), which sought to lower the railroad tracks and mitigate congestion in the downtown area. This project, a collaboration between the City, the Gastonia Redevelopment Commission, and the Southern Railway Company (now Norfolk Southern), aimed to enhance safety and accessibility by constructing bridges that would allow vehicles to cross the railroad without delays. However, the outcome of this initiative was far from beneficial for the Highland community.

### Impact of Infrastructure Change

In total, the project involved moving 1.4 miles of rail corridor an average of 200 ft. northward and burying it in a large ditch that now runs through Downtown Gastonia. The relocation of Airline/Long Avenue into a five-lane thoroughfare intended to improve east-west traffic flow came at a steep cost—67 businesses and 77 homes were either relocated or lost entirely. Many businesses could not find new locations and subsequently closed, contributing to a vacuum of economic activity that the community had once relied upon.

**“ALONG AIRLINE AND LONG AVENUES AND AROUND THE SOUTHERN RAILWAY TRACKS, THE ONCE FLOURISHING BUSINESS DISTRICT HAS DWINDLED TO ALMOST NIL. ALL IN THE NAME OF PROGRESS.”**

**“THE GETTING HAS BEEN GOOD FOR SOME PEOPLE, NOT SO GOOD FOR SOME OTHERS. MANY OF THE BUSINESSES THAT HAD TO RELOCATE THAT BEEN AT THEIR OLD LOCATIONS FOR YEARS, AND MOST OF THEM WERE FAMILY-OWNED.”**

**RAILROAD PROJECT GETS BACK ON TRACK GASTONIA  
GAZETTE, JUNE 12, 1983**

The changes to the transportation infrastructure inadvertently deepened the divide within Gastonia. The railway corridor, previously a connective lifeline, became a stark barrier, reinforcing socio-economic disparities. While the city aimed to enhance connectivity, the actual result was a further disconnection of Highland from the downtown area, exacerbating the challenges faced by its residents. Property values plummeted, and crime rates began to rise as investment dwindled, compelling many to seek opportunities elsewhere.

### Neglect and Abandonment

Following the infrastructural overhaul, Highland suffered from a lack of investment and attention. Many properties were acquired by absentee landlords, who rented out homes as low-cost



accommodations with minimal maintenance, further degrading the community's living conditions. The area's overall environmental standards declined, contributing to a cycle of neglect that has persisted for decades.

Moreover, the Airline/Long Avenue corridor transitioned into the county's civic center, housing government, law enforcement, and social service facilities. While this development may have served broader city interests, it did so at the expense of Highland, fostering resentment among residents who felt that their community had been sacrificed for the sake of urban planning.

### **Historical Context and Community Resilience**

Highland's history of resilience is noteworthy. Despite significant economic and social challenges, the community has continually sought to preserve its cultural heritage and identity. The area's transformation from a vibrant, mixed-use neighborhood to one marked by disinvestment reflects broader systemic issues related to race and economic inequality. The once-bustling commercial strip along Airline Avenue, with local businesses such as Smith Drug, Costner Funeral Home, Mr. Nobody Tire and Auto, Lytten Locksmith, Dixie Glass, Gastonia Gazette, Holsum Bakery, Rogers Produce, Whitten's Supply Store, Sunrise Dairy, and others have largely disappeared, leaving behind a fragmented community struggling to regain its footing.

Historically, the neighborhood thrived due to its strategic location along the railroad, which facilitated trade and social interaction. Postcard images from the pre-ditch era showcase a level of development comparable to that found along Main Avenue today. This rich legacy is crucial for understanding the transportation needs and proposed improvements outlined in **Project CHANGE**.

### **Section 1.3: Transportation Needs in Gastonia: Addressing Barriers and Enhancing Connectivity**

**Project CHANGE** is strategically located in Gaston County, North Carolina, within the growing Charlotte Metropolitan Statistical Area. Gastonia, with a population of approximately 82,000, has earned recognition as a three-time All-American City and has received accolades for its livability. However, despite its growth and development, the city faces significant transportation barriers that hinder access to economic opportunities, particularly for its Economically Disadvantaged Communities.

In Gastonia, transportation challenges stem primarily from the railroad ditch and NC Highway 7 (Airline/Long Avenue) and connection issues with US 74, which act as significant barriers isolating neighborhoods from the Central Business District (CBD). This disconnection particularly affects communities in Census Tracts 315, 319.01, 319.02, and 320, characterized by high poverty rates and limited transportation options. Residents face long travel times and complex routes to access essential services like healthcare and employment, hindering economic growth and mobility.

The design of NC Highway 7 further exacerbates the situation, as its high traffic volumes and inadequate pedestrian infrastructure make it unsafe for walkers and cyclists, discouraging active transportation methods and deepening residents' isolation. The historical context reveals that past urban renewal projects, such as the [Grade Crossing Elimination Project](#), have perpetuated segregation and disinvestment, leading to business and home losses in the Highland community.

This neglect has resulted in decreased property values and increased crime rates, leaving residents with fewer resources and diminished opportunities for economic advancement.

To tackle these pressing issues, **Project CHANGE** proposes to investigate the feasibility of capping the railroad ditch, creating a vital link between Highland and the CBD. This initiative aims to transform the ditch from a barrier into a community asset, enhancing access to public transit and promoting economic revitalization. Additionally, the project emphasizes the need for safety improvements along NC Highway 7 as well as connection improvements with US 74, exploring redesign strategies that accommodate pedestrians and cyclists while ensuring efficient vehicle flow. Implementing safer crosswalks, bike lanes, and pedestrian-friendly spaces will not only improve mobility but also foster greater community interaction and economic activity.

Gastonia's transportation needs are intricately linked to historical injustices and current socio-economic challenges. **Project CHANGE** offers a significant opportunity to address these barriers, promoting equity in mobility for the Highland community and beyond, ultimately revitalizing Gastonia's economy and creating a more inclusive environment for all residents.

#### **1.4 Proposed Improvements: The Path Forward With Project CHANGE**

**Project CHANGE** seeks to rectify some of the historical injustices faced by the Highland community by exploring the feasibility of capping the railroad ditch, improving NC Highway 7 and improving the connection with US 74. The goal is to reconnect neighborhoods, enhance mobility, and foster economic opportunities that have long been stifled by infrastructural barriers. This feasibility and connectivity study will assess both the technical and financial implications of such improvements, ensuring that community voices are central to the decision-making process.

Successful examples of similar projects across the nation demonstrate the potential for revitalization. Capping infrastructure to create parks and civic spaces has proven effective in reconnecting divided neighborhoods and enhancing quality of life. By prioritizing the needs of its residents, **Project CHANGE** aims to lay the groundwork for a more equitable and connected Gastonia.

The history of Gastonia's Highland community serves as a powerful reminder of the impacts of urban planning decisions and the ongoing need for equitable development. The legacy of the railroad ditch, combined with the socio-economic challenges faced by residents, underscores the urgency for transformative change. **Project CHANGE** represents a critical opportunity to not only improve transportation infrastructure but also to restore the community's vibrancy, fostering an environment where residents can thrive and reconnect with their rich heritage. Through thoughtful planning and community engagement, Gastonia can begin to heal the divisions of the past and build a brighter future for all its residents.

## **SECTION 2: PROJECT LOCATION AND MAP**

### **Section 2.1: Geographical Description**

**Project CHANGE** is located in Gaston County, North Carolina, which is in the Southeastern United States and in the southern Piedmont region of North Carolina. Located within the Charlotte Metropolitan Statistical area (MSA) – also known as the Charlotte Metro Region, Gaston County is bordered by four (4) counties: Mecklenburg, Lincoln, and Cleveland Counties in North Carolina

and York County in South Carolina. The project is located within the planning area for the Gaston-Cleveland-Lincoln MPO. Specifically, the project is located in the heart of Downtown Gastonia, NC, **reconnecting Justice40 Communities to the Central Business District**.

Strategically located just minutes west of Charlotte, NC and midway between Atlanta, GA and North Carolina's Research Triangle in Raleigh, on the I-85 Corridor, Gastonia is the largest city in Gaston County and the 13th largest in the state. Gastonia has been the economic heart of the county for many years. Growth continues along its edges as undeveloped land is built upon and annexed. Gastonia is an evolving suburb of Charlotte and is projected to see continued growth and economic expansion due to its strategic position within the Charlotte Metro area.



## Section 2.2: Project Location Map



## SECTION 3: MERIT CRITERIA: ADDRESSING KEY OBJECTIVES THROUGH PROJECT CHANGE

**Project CHANGE** aims to tackle critical transportation barriers in Gastonia, North Carolina while addressing the merit criteria outlined in the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO). By focusing on equity, access, community engagement, and sustainable development, this initiative is poised to create meaningful improvements in the lives of residents, particularly those in Economically Disadvantaged Communities.

### Section 3.1: Equity and Justice40

Equity is at the core of **Project CHANGE**. The proposed improvements will directly benefit marginalized communities historically affected by disinvestment and infrastructural neglect. By investigating the feasibility of capping the railroad ditch, the project seeks to eliminate a physical barrier that has isolated these neighborhoods from the Central Business District (CBD) while also making multimodal connectivity improvements to NC Hwy 7 and US 74. Census Tracts of the project area include 315, 319.01, 319.02, and 320, all classified as **Economically Disadvantaged/Justice40 Communities**.

This initiative will prioritize equitable access to resources, ensuring that residents can fully participate in economic opportunities and community life.

The **Project CHANGE Feasibility and Connectivity Study** will be in accordance with the Justice40 Initiative and in adherence to the [City of Gastonia's Title VI Plan](#).

Following the fundamental principles of environmental justice which guide DOT, the City will:

- ✓ Develop strategies to review, consider, and address disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority and low-income populations.
- ✓ Ensure the full and fair participation by all potentially affected communities.
- ✓ Provide minority and low-income communities access to public information and an opportunity for public participation.
- ✓ Prevent the denial of, reduction in, or significant delay in the receipt of benefits by minority and low-income populations.

Understanding the demographic profile of the project area is foundational to effectively assessing potential EJ impacts. In addition to utilizing [FHWA's Screening Tool for Equity Analysis of Projects \(STEAP\)](#) and [EPA's EJ Screening and Mapping Tool](#), the Gaston-Cleveland-Lincoln MPO (GCLMPO) has conducted a demographic analysis to complete [At Risk Population Profiles](#) for each Census Block Group within the project area. Equal access is a significant concern for residents of Highland, particularly those in zero-vehicle households, who face long and complicated journeys to essential services.

The City of Gastonia is working to shape a city where everyone can thrive by advancing equity and inclusion and dismantling systemic inequities. Through a dedicated Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Department, the City is committed to the integration of DEI into the delivery of public services in pursuit of equitable and just outcomes for everyone. The City features inclusiveness as one of its core values and commits to collaborating with community partners to facilitate a coordinated and innovative approach to this ongoing cause.

### Section 3.2: Access

**Project CHANGE** aims to improve mobility and access by reconnecting communities and facilitating easier access to grocery stores, healthcare facilities, schools, and job opportunities. By improving US 74 and NC Highway 7, as well as capping the railroad ditch, the project will create a more integrated transportation network. This initiative will not only promote public transit options but also support active transportation modes, such as walking and cycling. Residents will benefit from improved connections to the Bradley Transit Station, bike lanes, and pedestrian pathways, making it easier to reach vital resources and services.



The emphasis on reconnecting neighborhoods will particularly benefit those who rely on public transportation, ensuring that all community members have equitable access to the essential services they need.

The railroad and railroad ditch that runs through Downtown Gastonia, along with the directly adjacent NC Highway 7, creates a layered barrier to mobility, connectivity, access, and economic development to the transportation disadvantaged communities to the north.

The completion of the **Project CHANGE Feasibility and Connectivity Study** is imperative to understanding the technical and financial feasibilities of capping the railroad ditch while looking to maximize public benefits by way of better mobility and connectivity. The study will also look at ways to improve the designs of NC Highway 7 (Long Avenue) and US 74 (Franklin Boulevard) to mitigate its divisive impact on the community while improving safety for bicyclists and pedestrians.

The **NC-7 Corridor Study**, completed in 2018, shows that no other transportation corridor in Gastonia is as interconnected regionally, yet disconnected locally as NC Highway 7. It has direct access to I-85, US 321 and US 74, and connects the County's two largest employment hubs, Downtown Gastonia and CaroMont Regional Medical Center. Yet, the rail corridor and adjoining street network limit the connections to this advantageous situation and as a result the corridor's potential is left unrealized both for the City and those who live and work along it.

**"WERE IT NOT FOR A SERIES OF WELL INTENTIONED, BUT SHORT SIGHTED ACTIONS OVER THE YEARS, A STRONG ARGUMENT COULD BE MADE THAT THE NC-7 CORRIDOR WOULD HAVE DEVELOPED, OVER TIME, INTO A THOROUGHFARE OF EQUAL IMPORTANCE TO US 74 (FRANKLIN BLVD.) AND AS HISTORIC AS MAIN AVE."**

**NC-7 CORRIDOR STUDY**

Over the last 30 years, the decline of the neighborhoods north of the railroad ditch are a direct indication of the lack of connectivity and accessibility. According to the GCLMPO, 25% of households in the Highland Community do not have access to a personal vehicle and 46% of the residents have one (1) or more disability. Improving bicycle and pedestrian access across NC Highway 7 through Complete Streets and capping the railroad ditch will provide a direct connection to the Bradley Transit Station, improving equitable access to public transportation for everyone in the Highland area.

### **Section 3.3: Facility Suitability**

The railroad ditch and NC Highway 7 create detrimental barriers to mobility, connectivity, access, and economic development for the Justice40 communities to the north, making it poorly suited to the needs of the community. Not only do these two transportation facilities create a physical divide, but also a psychological divide in the community, isolating neighborhoods and limiting opportunities for growth and connection.

The project will evaluate the existing transportation facilities in the project area to identify necessary improvements to enhance safety and accessibility. The current ditch averages 195 feet in width, and 40 feet below street level and has three (3) crossings downtown. These evaluations will focus on creating pedestrian-friendly environments, such as safe crosswalks, bike lanes, and public spaces, making the area more conducive to various modes of transportation. Part of the environmental burden from the current ditch can be seen with the amount of polluted stormwater

runoff from the impervious surface of the concrete that makes up the walls of the ditch (over 14 acres of concrete surface). Other things that impact the environmental burden on the area include the air pollution created by the trains passing through.

### **Section 3.4: Community Engagement and Community-based Stewardship, Management, and Partnerships**

Community engagement and participation in decision-making is a fundamental principle of Environmental Justice and is a foundational component of **Project CHANGE**. Low-income and minority communities have historically borne disproportionately high or adverse human health or environmental effects of infrastructure projects, as was the case with the City's Urban Renewal projects and prior decisions to lower the railroad and relocate Airline/Long Avenue.

The planning process will involve residents, stakeholders, and community organizations to gather input and ensure that the project reflects the needs and aspirations of the community. Their input will be gathered in a multitude of ways; including using social media, like NextDoor, and opt-in web surveys. This participatory approach not only empowers residents but also fosters a sense of ownership and stewardship over the improvements, encouraging long-term commitment to maintaining the infrastructure.

The City of Gastonia is striving to foster community enrichment and pursue a higher quality of life for all citizens of Gastonia through partnerships and collaboration between citizens and the local government by way of neighborhood and community recognition. With the [Alliance for Community Enrichment Program \(A.C.E.\)](#), the City of Gastonia believes that the quality of life, personal interaction, and the sustainability and inclusivity of communities and neighborhoods within its City limits are core drivers for the overall health, citizen engagement, and future of the City. As a Recognized Community in the A.C.E. program, the Highland Neighborhood Association (HNA) is committed to partnering with the City to identify solutions to community concerns, provide information, receive updates regarding City services, share feedback on public improvement projects, and participate in City sponsored programs and events. For several years, the HNA has dedicated itself to tackling root causes that have a detrimental effect on the neighborhood's health and overall quality of life. They have been diligently crafting comprehensive interventions that are shaped by the input and perspectives of community members.

The Highland Neighborhood Association is a committed partner of Project CHANGE and will be utilized to ensure a **community solutions-based approach** is achieved throughout the planning process, making sure the leaders of the community influence how the city communicates with the residents to ensure their buy-in for the project as a whole.



This project also exhibits wide support from the region's elected officials, businesses, and civic organizations. [Letters and Resolutions of Support](#) have been or are in the process of being secured from U.S. Senators Ted Budd and Thom Tillis, U.S. Representative Jeff Jackson, the local NC General Assembly delegation, the Highland Neighborhood Association, Gaston Business Association, GCLMPO, NCDOT, and many other local businesses and support agencies.

### Section 3.5: Equitable Development

**Project CHANGE** aligns with the principles of equitable development by focusing on areas that have historically been marginalized. By enhancing connectivity and access to economic opportunities, **Project CHANGE** seeks to foster revitalization in the Highland community, mitigating the impacts of past urban renewal projects that contributed to segregation and disinvestment. This focus on equitable development will create pathways for economic mobility and foster an inclusive environment where all residents can thrive.

#### Land Use and Zoning Considerations

Strategic land use and zoning practices will be integral to the project's success. By prioritizing mixed-use developments, the project aims to create vibrant neighborhoods that accommodate both residential and commercial needs, promoting economic diversity and community engagement. Zoning policies will be designed to protect affordable housing and incentivize the development of community-centered spaces, ensuring that the needs of existing residents are met while attracting new businesses and opportunities.

#### Strategies to Prevent Displacement

To defer any potential displacements, several strategies will be implemented:

**Community Engagement:** Involving residents in the planning process to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are prioritized. Regular forums and workshops will provide platforms for feedback.

**Affordable Housing Initiatives:** Committing to a percentage of affordable housing units within new developments, along with programs to assist current residents in securing stable housing.

**Tenant Protections:** Strengthening tenant protections to prevent eviction and displacement during the revitalization process. This includes rent control measures and support for low-income renters.

**Economic Empowerment Programs:** Developing workforce training and small business support initiatives that prioritize residents, enabling them to benefit from new economic opportunities.

**Phased Implementation:** Implementing changes gradually to allow residents to adjust and monitor impacts closely, ensuring that community needs remain a priority throughout the process.

Through these strategies, **Project CHANGE** aims to foster an inclusive environment that not only respects the history of the Highland community, but also paves the way for a more equitable future.

### Section 3.6: Climate Change Mitigation and/or Adaptation and Resilience

The grade crossing elimination project was constructed in a manner that resulted in over 14 acres of concrete slab with no vegetation or storm drain detention through the downtown. **Project CHANGE** will have a myriad of positive impacts to the climate and environment, including:

**Reduced Greenhouse Gas Emissions:** Covering the railroad ditch will help reduce greenhouse gas emissions by preventing emissions from trains from escaping directly into the atmosphere.

**Improved Air Quality:** By preventing emissions and dust from railroad operations, the cap will lead to improved air quality in the surrounding community.



**Noise Reduction:** Rail operations can be noisy, and the cap will act as a noise barrier, reducing noise pollution in nearby communities.

**Urban Green Space:** **Project CHANGE** will incorporate the creation of green space, improving the environment and contributing to carbon sequestration and increased biodiversity. With the current ditch containing over 14 acres of concrete surfaces, a heat island exists, leading to higher temperatures. The green spaces created by this project will help mitigate the heat island effects by providing shade and evaporative cooling.

Gastonia has been a designated “Tree City” for twenty-two years, and has committed itself to preserving the urban forestry. Gastonia’s commitment to the value that trees provide to urbanized areas would also be applied to **Project CHANGE**.

**Protection of Water Quality:** This project offers an opportunity to improve storm water runoff controls and quality. The project will identify methods to reduce the severity of storm water runoff to lessen the impact of erosion in receiving streams. These methods could include on site storm water detention, bio-retention cells, or other emerging technologies. By preventing runoff from railroad operations, **Project CHANGE** will help protect nearby water sources from contamination.

Specifics on how the cap will work as well as what the green spaces will look like will be determined by the study itself. This holistic approach not only addresses current transportation needs but also prepares the community for future environmental challenges.

### **Section 3.7: Workforce Development and Economic Opportunity**

The study will assess how transportation improvements can spur economic opportunities for residents. By enhancing access to the CBD and promoting local businesses, **Project CHANGE** aims to create a more vibrant economy that benefits the entire community, and the city as a whole. This focus on workforce development will involve collaborating with local organizations to ensure that residents are equipped with the skills and resources necessary to take advantage of new job opportunities that arise from the revitalization of the area.

Incorporating Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) requirements will be a crucial component of our workforce development strategy. These requirements aim to ensure that minority-owned, women-owned, and other disadvantaged businesses have equitable opportunities to participate in federally funded projects as well as have the ability to have business representation in the newly constructed spaces. By adhering to DBE guidelines, **Project CHANGE** will:

**Encourage Local Business Participation:** The City will actively seek to engage DBEs in all aspects of the project, from planning to construction to service contracts, ensuring that local businesses benefit from the influx of investment.

**Job Creation and Skills Training:** The City will collaborate with local workforce development organizations to create training programs specifically tailored to meet the needs of businesses participating in the project. This will ensure that residents can access jobs created by DBE participation, fostering economic mobility.

By integrating DBE requirements into the workforce development framework, **Project CHANGE** not only addresses economic disparities but also fosters a more inclusive and resilient local economy. This comprehensive approach will empower residents and businesses alike, creating lasting opportunities for growth and community revitalization.

### Section 3.8: Planning Integration

**Project CHANGE** was identified as a project in the [NC-7 Corridor Study and Plan](#) and will integrate with existing planning frameworks in Gaston County, including the Gaston-Cleveland-Lincoln Metropolitan Planning Organization's (GCLMPO) objectives. This also includes improvements to US 74 to facilitate a better connection to the downtown area. By aligning with regional transportation and land use plans, the project ensures that improvements are not only beneficial at the local level, but also contribute to broader goals for sustainable growth and development in the region. This integrated approach will foster collaboration among all the stakeholders and ensure that the project's outcomes align with long-term community visions. A letter of support from the GCLMPO has been submitted as an attachment to this grant application.

### SECTION 4: CONCLUSION

**Project CHANGE** represents a transformative opportunity for Gastonia, addressing critical transportation barriers that have historically marginalized the Highland community. By focusing on equity and justice, the project aims to reconnect Economically Disadvantaged Communities to the Central Business District, ensuring that all residents have access to essential services, economic opportunities, and vibrant public spaces.

Through comprehensive community engagement, **Project CHANGE** will prioritize the voices of residents, fostering a sense of ownership and stewardship over the proposed improvements. By enhancing the design and safety of NC Highway 7 and US 74 and investigating the feasibility of capping the railroad ditch, the project will create a more integrated and accessible transportation network that encourages active transportation methods.

Furthermore, the initiative aligns with principles of equitable development, workforce opportunity, and climate resilience, ensuring that the benefits of revitalization extend beyond immediate infrastructure improvements. By integrating with existing planning frameworks, **Project CHANGE** positions itself as a model for sustainable growth that supports the community's long-term vision.

Ultimately, this project not only aims to rectify past injustices but also fosters a more inclusive and connected Gastonia, where all residents can thrive and participate fully in the social and economic fabric of their community. By investing in transportation equity and revitalization, Gastonia can pave the way for a brighter, more equitable future for generations to come.

