

Opinion: A bridge-turned-park in Southeast can be a national example of how to reconnect communities

Opinion by **Scott Kratz** and **Stephanie Gidigbi Jenkins**

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Largely overlooked in President Biden’s economic recovery and infrastructure plan is a sweeping effort to reconnect communities divided by urban highways. The [\\$20 billion](#) in aid Biden proposed in his [American Jobs Plan](#) would be a historic effort to correct the racism in how we built our highway system and lay the groundwork for [reinvigorating neighborhoods](#) — such as Anacostia in Southeast Washington — that have suffered for decades because of those decisions.

In many U.S. cities and rural areas, entire neighborhoods are historically divided by public infrastructure investment that often reflects the racial and economic inequities of the past. Interstate highways slashed through many thriving communities such as the [Rondo neighborhood](#) in St. Paul, Minn., destroying home values, undermining economic opportunities and imperiling families with toxic air.

Over the past few years, local and federal efforts have been made to reimagine aging infrastructure with the hopes of building more equitable public investment, including the [Every Place Counts Design Challenge](#) launched under the Obama administration.

None has been as big or bold as what the Biden administration proposed in its jobs plan, as it seeks to address our racial, climate and economic challenges. As that funding moves forward in Congress, one project in Southeast Washington offers important insights for communities across the nation that will soon be going through a similar process. What we’ve learned so far is this: It’s not about the concrete, steel or dirt fill; it’s about the people.

As with many urban freeways, Interstate 295 in D.C. was built [right through the historically Black Anacostia neighborhood](#), limiting residents from the rest of the city. After years of neglect, the old [11th Street Bridge](#) fell into disrepair. Sage city leaders and advocates began discussions to [turn the old bridge span into a park](#), one that would connect long-divided neighborhoods and serve as an anchor for equitable and inclusive economic growth.

With the help of the [city](#) and [outside funders](#), local leaders went to work ensuring the piers of the old bridge were saved to cut down on construction costs for the park. The city mocked up [dramatic conceptual designs](#) of what this park could look like. Since then, a stunning design took shape for a split-level, three-acre park including community-driven programming of a performance space, rain gardens, boat rentals and much more — benches and hammocks, play

equipment and an environmental education center.

But that was the easy stuff.

Outside analysts who examined the project say it could bring 1.2 million people a year to the site and, with that, more development. Swanky restaurants. Higher housing costs. New office buildings. All of it.

The goal from the beginning was to ensure that the 11th Street Bridge Park benefited those so long neglected in Anacostia. The first step was to find out what people wanted. Area residents, faith groups and community organizations led organizing efforts and identified what they needed.

Over the past five years, partners have invested more than \$60 million in equitable strategies, nearly the cost of the park's bricks and mortar, to address those human needs. So far, 88 families were given the help needed to buy homes; 185 young people received construction training; 218 businesses got technical help and loans, including pro bono accounting support that helped secure \$205,500 in emergency coronavirus relief aid. There are investments in place to that ensure resident-led, affordable housing will remain an option in the future.

Residents created murals and performed plays. The annual Anacostia River Festival has been a huge draw each spring — and is now the official closing program of the National Cherry Blossom Festival.

And though the pandemic pushed so many in the community out of work, Building Bridges Across the River worked with other nonprofits to provide \$1,100 a month to 500 families, ensuring they can stay in their homes and get enough food during these difficult times.

With these investments in the people and community, we are working to avoid the worst impacts of gentrification and ensure that those living there are the real beneficiaries of development just this once. It hasn't been easy, and change is going to come. But the hard work from the start is needed so we avoid the mistakes of the past, fusing the city together instead of hacking it apart.

So, with these investments in place, only now are we getting close to the construction of the actual park.

As we emerge into a post-coronavirus world, civic spaces such as the 11th Street Bridge Park will be places of healing, celebration and service to the community. The 11th Street Bridge Park is already acting as an example for civic leaders across the country. Now, with Biden's ambitious plan, we can invest in projects like this in dozens of cities, building spaces that support thriving neighborhoods and vibrant civic life — a place for all of us.

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