



# COMMUNITIES OVER HIGHWAYS GRASSROOTS SUMMIT

**IMPACT REPORT 2025**



**America Walks is a leading national champion for prioritizing communities over highways.** We're building a nationwide movement to reconnect communities divided by highways, wide roads, and overbuilt arterials. Since 2022, we have hosted the work of the Freeway Fighters Network, a coalition of advocates and community organizations seeking to stop the damage highways cause to communities and repair the harm. The Network exists to connect local organizations so they learn from each other as well as collectively develop strategies that advance the national freeway fighting movement.

In 2023, America Walks hosted the first-ever in-person Freeway Fighters Grassroots Summit, which brought together members of the Freeway Fighters Network. Together we created the Communities Over Highways Principles, a platform for guiding federal transportation reauthorization conversations. Over 200 organizations signed on to the Communities Over Highways Principles, including a myriad of community-based organizations and larger national organizations like the Sierra Club, the Sunrise Movement, and the NRDC.

# OBJECTIVES

2025 COMMUNITIES OVER HIGHWAYS SUMMIT

The 2025 Communities Over Highways Summit sought to build on the success of the 2023 Freeway Fighters Grassroots Summit. The Summit Steering Committee set three objectives:



## 1. Strategize on expanding the movement even further

Since the first Summit, the Communities Over Highways Summit added 13 new community-based organizations and enlisted support from national allied organizations. Expanding the network is central to expanding influence.

## 2. Support peer-to-peer learning

Experience network members, of necessity, have developed expertise in reconnecting communities and stopping highway expansions. Summit sessions prioritized sharing that experience, to leveling up the ability of both new and ongoing network members

## 3. Develop a vision for a national apparatus for supporting local freeway fighting and reconnecting communities efforts

Network members often feel isolated and alone in their local efforts, as they fight a deep institutional bias towards highway and roadway expansion. This is despite broad public support for “fix it first” and transit, biking, walking and housing investments. A coordinated and supportive national framework can help change the local conversation, and the national conversation.

WHAT THE 2025 COMMUNITIES OVER HIGHWAYS SUMMIT

# ACCOMPLISHED

The 2025 Communities Over Highways Summit brought together

107

Advocates

21

Different states  
plus the District of  
Columbia

2x

Over double  
the number that  
attended the 2023  
Summit.

Attendees came away from the Summit feeling inspired by the great work their peers have been doing across the country:

“Being in a room that was diverse fighting different battles for the same cause was very motivating and inspiring. I learned more at this conference in two days than I ever have on my own. Very excited for the network I made at this event and can’t wait to bring back everything I learned with my team and community.”



“One week later, and I am still feeling so inspired and energized by the Communities Over Highways summit! Thank you for organizing such a powerful grassroots event. In a time of uncertainty, being able to come together in person and see the real power that this movement has is so important.”



WHAT THE 2025 COMMUNITIES OVER HIGHWAYS SUMMIT

# ACCOMPLISHED

Attendees also learned tangible strategies and tactics to use in their organizing efforts, as well as successful policy solutions they can advocate for at the state level. The Summit featured workshop sessions on communications and messaging, hosting rallies and events, how to set up organizing infrastructure, and how to grow local movements beyond transportation advocacy. Panel conversations offered thought leadership on the intersection of environmental justice and highways, laws to reduce vehicle dependency like Minnesota's 2023 state transportation package, and litigation strategies to influence state-level policy like the settlement from *Navahine F. v. Hawai'i Department of Transportation*.

Attendees also shared what support they need to be successful: primarily financial resources, national coordination, and channels for requesting support and collaboration.



# WHAT WE LEARNED

## ABOUT THE COMMUNITIES OVER HIGHWAYS MOVEMENT

The Summit showed just how passionate the community advocates who drive this movement are. At the same time, we heard repeatedly that this type of advocacy can be lonely work and advocates often feel like they are reinventing the wheel locally with limited guidance and resources.

Advocates also feel like they have limited control over what happens at the federal level, which highly impacts their local fight. For many who are fighting highway expansion, they want to litigate, but they're not sure where to start or what is likely to work.

Through the course of the Summit, four main inspirational wins emerged that advocates found they wanted to replicate:

### **Inner Loop Transformation (Rochester, NY)**

In Rochester, New York, after years of local advocacy, the City of Rochester invested \$22 million to fill the sunken  $\frac{2}{3}$  mile-Inner Loop East in 2017 and replace it with Union Street, a walkable, context-appropriate street. Freeing up 6 acres of land, the project catalyzed over \$400 million in private investment and led to the creation of more than 530 units of mixed-income housing. The project was so successful that the City is now pursuing the removal of the northern part of the Inner Loop, with an explicit emphasis to reconnect Downtown Rochester with several Rochester neighborhoods, to restore a more pedestrian- and bike-friendly street grid, and to foster opportunities for equitable economic and community development. The efforts of Hinge Neighbors, Inc. have greatly steered the city's vision for the project.

### **Community Grid/I-81 Removal (Syracuse, NY)**

In Syracuse, NY, the New York State Department of Transportation is beginning to remove the mile-long stretch of Interstate 81 through downtown Syracuse, a viaduct that divided a working-class Black neighborhood for more than 50 years. Advocacy from the New York Civil Liberties Union is pushing the city and state to use the nearly 20 acres of land freed from the highway to be used for community benefits, including the creation of a community land trust. Although the Syracuse story is still developing, it shows the possibility of removing a mainline highway through an American city.

# WHAT WE LEARNED

ABOUT THE COMMUNITIES OVER HIGHWAYS MOVEMENT

## Maine Turnpike Authority drops Gorham Connector project

After the advocacy organization Mainers for Smarter Transportation convinced several town councils to withdraw support for the Gorham Connector, the Maine Turnpike Authority officially dropped the project. Now Mainers for Smarter Transportation are pursuing state legislation to permanently repeal the project with additional reforms for the Turnpike Authority.

## Oregon DOT's long-delayed I-5 expansion in Portland

For over 8 years, No More Freeways and its allies in Portland have delayed ODOT's I-5 expansion into the Albina neighborhood. No More Freeways has spent a little over \$100,000 in their opposition to the proposed \$2 billion Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion, a sum orders of magnitude smaller than the tens of millions ODOT has spent hiring lobbyists, consultants, and planners to promote the project. With this limited sum, NMF has kept ODOT at bay, stalling an expansion which estimates suggest would release an additional 14,400-21,902 tons of GHG emissions each year. That's an incredibly effective investment in decarbonization, and it's inspiring to imagine how much carbon we could avoid emitting if groups like No More Freeways were fully resourced to stop similar boondoggles across the country.



# NEEDS

THE FREEWAY FIGHTING MOVEMENT

On the Summit's second day, we held a forum for attendees to voice what type of support they need to be successful in their efforts. Much of what we heard was a desire for increased national coordination.

## National Communications Strategy for Freeway Fighters

A plan to create shared branding and messaging to carry the national movement, that draws on and uplift local fights and stories. This includes a revision of the [freeway-fighters.org](https://freeway-fighters.org) website to increase its profile on the web and be a real-time repository for the status of the different freeway fights/reconnecting communities efforts across the country.

## National Legal Strategy for Freeway Fighters

The creation of a legal guide to fighting freeways that's accessible to both advocates/organizers as well as local lawyers who are often representing them either pro bono or at low cost. The guide would create an easier point of entry for those who wished to pursue litigation strategies. Simultaneously, a push for novel legal approaches at the state and federal level to reform transportation policy (like *Navahine F. v. Hawai'i Department of Transportation*).

## Grants for Local Partners

A 2023 survey of local freeway fighters showed nearly 60% of groups surveyed are volunteers without any paid staff or substantial funding. Only 17% of respondents reported receiving any support from philanthropy, despite the work being at the epicenter of climate, justice, and health. Many attendees echoed the need for funding, but are limited in their capacity to either fundraise or manage grant reporting.

## Capitol Hill Day

While much of their work is at the state and local level, attendees expressed a strong desire to establish relationships with their members of Congress to educate them on sustainable and responsible transportation priorities and how they would affect their communities.

## Freeway Fighters Organizing Playbook

A playbook that shares what local organizations have found successful when organizing to fight freeways/reconnect communities, so new members of the movement can get up to speed. Also covering the NEPA process, opportunities to make an impact, and tools and resources available to local organizers.



# CONNECT



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## STAY IN TOUCH

