

Infrastructure Impact in the City of Chicago

Hirons believes infrastructure plays an integral role in addressing multiple key determinants of social, physical and economic well-being (e.g., public safety, arts and cultural development, climate justice, food access, etc.). Infrastructure provides governments and municipal corporations multiple entry points for data collection and meaningful engagement with widely diverse audiences across a myriad of distinct neighborhoods. The right communications plan—one driven by data but defined by the people it aims to reach, which blends active listening with tailored, authentic messaging—will fully leverage these opportunities by expertly crafting and effectively distributing messages that reflect the hyper-local interests of residents in all 77 neighborhoods, while also affirming the collective vision for one Chicago.

The intersection of public infrastructure and community safety is often overlooked, despite a wealth of empirical evidence demonstrating that the built environment has a significant impact on the prevalence of violence in communities¹. However, the passage of the March 2021 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the November 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) created an unprecedented opportunity for municipalities to reframe local and regional discussions around infrastructure and community safety and build a bridge to an equitable recovery from the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Under the leadership of Mayor Lori Lightfoot, the City of Chicago has positioned itself to do precisely this, through creation of an integrated, multi-year plan that augments federal resources with \$600 million in local bond funds. The Chicago Recovery Plan is an equity-based, data-driven investment strategy designed to catalyze a balanced and sustainable economic recovery across Chicago’s 77 unique neighborhoods; it is supported and supplemented by the city’s Capital Plan, which utilizes data to prioritize safety, equity and cost effectiveness

while driving transformational infrastructure investments in areas of the city that have historically faced disinvestment.

Infrastructure spending and the concept of racial equity share a unique relationship: if well-executed, each holds the promise of improving quality of life for all members of a community, regardless of demographics or geography, and tends to be viewed favorably by the public; if poorly executed, each holds the potential to degrade quality of life for some in the community while elevating it for others, to alienate distinct audiences, and to further divide neighborhoods and neighbors.

Across the country and throughout Chicago, communities of color will doubtless recall how previous generations of infrastructure investments became tools of racial segregation and inequality². In these communities, announcements of new infrastructure projects may be viewed with skepticism or even animosity. Conversely, residents of predominantly White neighborhoods who have long been the beneficiaries of infrastructure investments may view new racially equitable strategies as unfairly “punishing” them for the policies of the past. If resident animosity toward either initiative becomes outright opposition, infrastructure projects and progress toward racial equity can stall or deteriorate.

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Hirons believes there is another key parallel between infrastructure and racial equity initiatives: the importance of place. Infrastructure investments are inherently place-based; so, too, were government’s racial segregation policies implemented in the U.S. from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights era. If one were to map the demographics of many of the nation’s most populated cities, including Chicago, what appears is likely to be strikingly similar to the “redlined” maps promulgated in the 1930s by the federal Home Owners’ Loan Corporation. Nearly a half century after these policies were outlawed, many major cities’ interstate systems, Superfund sites, or brownfield locations still fit fairly neatly within the old redlined areas so it’s quite easy to see how past generations of infrastructure investments were wielded as a tool to develop certain places/spaces within a city while dividing or even destroying others.

Intentional, thoughtful and forward-thinking communications are required to navigate these historically entrenched perspectives.

For better or for worse, cultural identities were also solidified by these place-based policies and investments. Community-based organizations rose to meet the needs of specific cultural groups and neighborhoods³, and the events of the past two years have seeded significant growth of grassroots organizations in many communities. Effectively messaging an equitable infrastructure investment strategy in this environment will require careful attention to this context, credible leadership and coordination with community-based organizations. The right communications partner will need to understand the hyper-local, place-based dynamics of the challenges faced by the City of Chicago and leverage the power of the place-based policy solutions the Lightfoot administration has set in motion.

Hirons offers a proven approach that can transform residents' potential animosity toward infrastructure policies into acceptance, subsequently moving them to become allies, then advocates, and, finally, ambassadors of specific initiatives or projects. Doing so will harness the power of a racially equitable infrastructure investment strategy to act as a tool of physical and cultural connectivity between and among Chicago's 77 distinct neighborhoods.

To ensure stakeholder buy-in, Hirons employs a "concentric circles" communications approach that carefully considers the progression of messaging across a given community. In this model, a target audience is assigned to each concentric circle, with the most informed and engaged constituents or stakeholder groups occupying the center. Information and messaging proceed from the innermost circle outward, with the goal of building consensus and developing members of the circle into allies (supports the initiative), then advocates (actively spreads message of the initiative), and finally ambassadors (contributes insights and builds community engagement).



Figure 1: Concentric circles diagram that depicts audience engagement and knowledge levels.

Hirons bring together two critical principles: empathetic understanding and data-led insights. Both are requirements of success. Commissioning exhaustive research, conducting hyper-local community listening sessions, building CBO partnerships and orchestrating public engagement events are essential elements in gaining a thorough understanding of the conditions that must be met to motivate key stakeholders to act⁴. It's only when we establish that comprehensive understanding of the concerns, cares and context of every audience that we can begin to craft strategic messaging that speaks directly to their needs and priorities.

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Hirons offers a full range of engagement strategies and tactics that are easily customized to fit the needs of Chicago's equitable infrastructure initiatives. Our experience is deep and runs across a wide range of infrastructure projects including interstate expansions, airport renovations, roadwork initiatives, community broadband connectivity, sewer and stormwater upgrades, water quality improvements and major economic development investments. Hirons is also deeply committed to elevating the work of diverse institutions in every community we serve and has been fortunate to collaborate with organizations like the Madam Walker Legacy Center, Marion County Minority Health Coalition, Indianapolis Race and Cultural Relations Leadership Network and the Center for Leadership Development.

The City of Chicago stands on the precipice of sustainable, generational, equitable transformation. With the right supports, the equitable infrastructure investment strategies crafted by the Lightfoot administration will come to be seen as national best practices for any community looking to build greater safety for all, greater economic opportunity for all and a greater sense of connectedness among all. Hirons is uniquely situated as a partner to provide those supports, ensuring these strategies reach their fullest potential and Chicago becomes a benchmark of all that it means for one city and its inhabitants to truly thrive.

Notes

¹Washington, S., Love, H., & Sebastian, T. (2022, March 30). *The infrastructure law's untapped potential for promoting community safety*. Brookings. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2022/03/29/the-infrastructure-laws-untapped-potential-for-promoting-community-safety/>

²Norwood, C. (2021, April 23). *How infrastructure has historically promoted inequality*. PBS. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/how-infrastructure-has-historically-promoted-inequality>

³Curren, R., Liu, N., Marsh, D., & Rose, K. (2016). *Equitable development as a tool to advance racial equity*. Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race and Equity.

⁴Updegraff, J. A., Sherman, D. K., Luyster, F. S., & Mann, T. L. (2007). *The effects of message quality and congruency on perceptions of tailored health communications*. *Journal of experimental social psychology*, 43(2), 249–257. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2006.01.007>

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