"Like Learning a Language"

Bringing the voices behind Baltimore's permitting and grantmaking systems into conversation

Morehead-Cain Summer Scholars
Maryland Philanthropy Network
Middendorf Foundation

Authors' Note

Dear reader,

The Baltimore that our team has come to appreciate is likely only a version of the city that you, perhaps a native Baltimorean, know. Our team of five university students from North Carolina has discovered what Baltimore has to offer that a guidebook may publish in glossy, full color. Between pages of turquoise photographs taken in the National Aquarium and amongst lists of Fells Point restaurants, we discovered a taste of Baltimore. One that included the sights of the Inner Harbor. The fireworks launching over Camden Yards just feet away that illuminate the summer sky. To any visitor, to any tourist discovering Baltimore, the past month has appeared not unlike a city vacation.

But to be a tourist would be to claim to know, to really know, this city after a visit to the Aquarium, a game at Camden Yards. That is not our intention. While we may take photos of local attractions and balk at eating whole crabs before diving in, mallets in hand, we also want to submerge ourselves in Baltimore as seen through the eyes of community members, who know Baltimore past the eight weeks we've found all too short. Although we may never be able to, we hope to find a knowledge akin to understanding.

Three months ago, we were assigned to work with Maryland Philanthropy Network and the Middendorf Foundation to consider the current systems for grantmaking and permitting in the relationship between the nonprofit sector and the Baltimore City government. Without a doubt, our task was and is inherently complex. How can we truly understand these philanthropic problems if we have never felt their weight? For as much research as we have conducted, for as many Baltimoreans we have listened to and collaborated with, the scope of what we can contribute is limited. In our attempts to expand our understanding with awareness and humility, we have seen nonprofits up close. We have heard the stories of the Baltimoreans making a difference, and we want to elevate their voices. In what is hopefully a respectful, conscious way, we take these findings to not make our mark but to make a mere comment on what we understand to be the truth.

The pages that follow, as they stand, are only an informed suggestion of how to address the challenges of permitting and philanthropy in the city. With your experienced judgment, we present our suggestions to you, dear Baltimorean, to do with as you see fit. We have sincerely grown to appreciate your city. We want to see Baltimore thrive in the face of the challenges that its nonprofit owners, business people, and city officials battle every day; however, Baltimore is a city that you know better than we do.

It's truly been a pleasure to have been welcomed to Baltimore with open doors and open arms. We hope this report, if anything, reflects the voices of the community and sparks a fresh dialogue that will continue long after we've returned to Chapel Hill.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Sincerely,
The Summer Scholars

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Abstract

The Morehead-Cain Scholarship at UNC at Chapel Hill has a Civic Collaboration Summer for rising sophomores, and we are five scholars that were assigned to Baltimore to work with Maryland Philanthropy Network and the Middendorf Foundation. This study looks to explore both the permit and grant processes from the perspectives of nonprofit organizations, foundations, and the Baltimore City Government. By interviewing various stakeholders, we gained insight and understood just how complex these processes were. All sides provided their experiences, which led our group to develop key takeaways and recommendations to create a more efficient system. To explore both systems, we chose to interview individuals from Baltimore nonprofit organizations and foundations as well as within the City's government on public grants. We then analyzed each interview for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analyses) and devised recommendations for addressing these facets on Feasibility vs. Impact Matrices. Through our analyses, we came to conclude that both the permitting and grantmaking systems in Baltimore are extremely complex and require each of the three above parties to work closely together in order to potentially implement our recommendations. The hopes are that this research can be used as a basis to further explore each of these processes.

Recognizing Our Perspective

Meet the Team

William Dahl (he/his)

William Bernard Dahl, originally from Wilmington, NC, is a Pre-Business Studies Major with minors in PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics), and Classical Humanities. At UNC, William spends his time outside the classroom working as a Business Analyst for UNC's chapter of Consult Your Community, an Advocate for the Community Empowerment Fund, and a writer for the Scholar Media Team. William hopes to utilize these varied experiences to one day enter the financial industry working in ESG investing.

Layah Clinton (she/her)

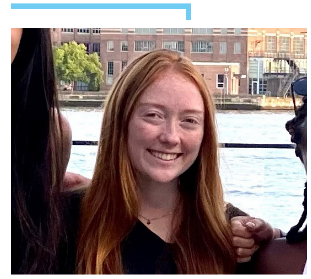
Layah Clinton, originally from Charlotte, NC, is a psychology major and chemistry minor on the pre-med track at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Outside of the classroom, Layah enjoys tutoring younger students in math and chemistry, as well as volunteering in her community. She also spends her time as an active member of the Black Student Union and of UNC's hip hop team, UNC Kamikazi. Upon completing her undergraduate degree, Layah hopes to continue her studies in medical school.

Willow Taylor Chiang Yang (she/her)

Willow Taylor Chiang Yang (she/her/hers), originally from San Francisco, currently studies a self-made major, American Political Economy and Society, and minors in Physics and Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. She seeks to continue her work in politics and government, having worked for U.S. Congressional campaigns and sitting Representatives, as well as national media outlets. She currently works for a professor on American demographic data and for another as an events assistant; she is also the incoming Treasurer for club volleyball and a North Carolina Fellow.

Margaret Kern (she/her)

Margaret Kern, originally from Asheboro, North Carolina, is considering majoring in mathematics while taking classes on the pre-med track. Outside of academics, Margaret spends her time playing piano and guitar, which has inspired her to minor in music at UNC. She enjoys getting involved and meeting new people through Campus Ministry. Margaret hopes to attend medical school after she graduates, specializing in orthopedics and treating children with disabilities.

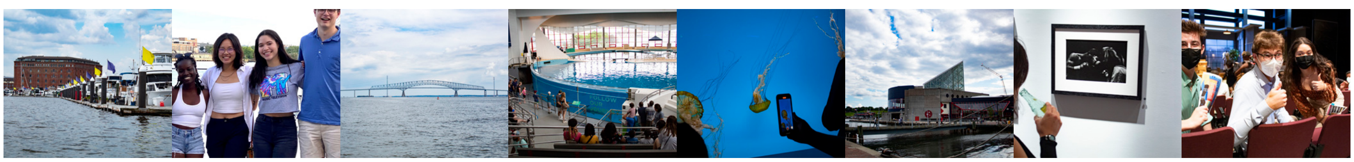


Liam Furlong (he/his)

Liam Furlong is a comparative literature and education major with a Hispanic Studies minor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Outside of the classroom, Liam creates and publishes weekly crossword puzzles in the University's newspaper The Daily Tar Heel. Upon completing his undergraduate studies, Liam hopes to expand the canon of world literature as a professor while contributing his own creative pieces as an author.

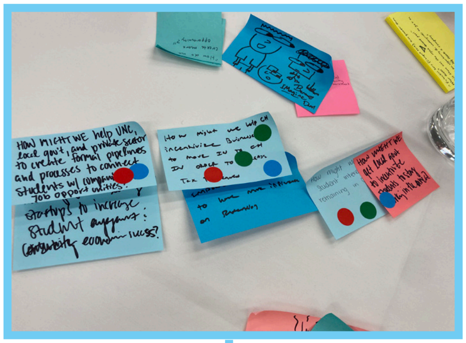
The Morehead-Cain

The Morehead Cain Foundation started in 1945 when John Motley Morehead III signed an indenture to create the John Motley Morehead Foundation. The scholarship began in 1951, with the hopes of attracting scholars to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It was the first merit scholarship program established in the United States at the first public university in the country. The Morehead-Cain scholarship implements summer enrichment programs and provides a Discovery Fund opportunities for each scholar. The scholarship application process is rigorous and has a 3-percent acceptance rate that selects "driven leaders possessing the rare combination of potential, principle, and purpose." We are five Morehead-Cain Scholars who hope to embody these expectations and are eager to embrace a variety of new opportunities that the Morehead-Cain provides.[1]



Civic Collaboration

Civic Collaboration is one of Morehead-Cain's opportunities and takes place during the summer before sophomore year. Groups of scholars immerse themselves in new cities and engage with the community to "propose possible solutions to that city's dilemma." Groups are challenged to explore their new city's identity and to explore the connection between a "city's economic, cultural, governmental, educational, political, and historical systems—and how leaders create change through them." The four pillars of Civic Collaboration are: embedding yourself in your city, collaborating, investigating and gaining insight, and contributing. This summer, we have made sure to honor all of these pillars by continuously immersing ourselves in the culture of Baltimore and surrounding cities through dining at local restaurants, going to theaters/shows, connecting with Alumni of MC located here, visiting museums to see history, art, and culture and just walking around the City of Baltimore. We conducted prior research on philanthropy within Baltimore and continuously gained new insight from our host organization on the goals they wanted us to accomplish. We built a network of important contacts and foundations that helped make this report possible and our hopes are that our findings positively contribute to the philanthropic, governmental, and nonprofit worlds in Baltimore.[2]



> **The steps used while using design thinking—discover, interpret, imagine, codesign, and engage—provide a holistic view of the topic and allow for well-thought-out ideas and solutions.**

Design Thinking

Throughout this project, we have used design thinking to create new ideas and evolve our understanding of the topic at hand. Design thinking greatly influenced our emphasis on how critical the research process was in determining important points of tension, which we would inevitably focus on throughout the project.

The steps used while using design thinking— discover, interpret, imagine, codesign, and engage—provide a holistic view of the topic and a space to create well-thought-out ideas and recommendations. Our team was introduced to design thinking through a weeklong training program in Chapel Hill where we learned various ways to apply design thinking to different topics. We were given topics related to issues facing the Chapel Hill community and used design thinking to brainstorm potential ways to improve them. Interviewing various community members as well as business owners and government officials allowed us to see a variety of viewpoints, as well as allowed us to immerse ourselves in and get to know the community. After analyzing information from the varying representatives, we brainstormed all of the similarities in our interviews in order to determine related points of tension across the different sectors. This process allowed us to expand our understanding of the issue at hand, creating roadmaps to potential solutions. Finally, we developed potential suggestions for the issues we were given.

After arriving in Baltimore, our team used the design thinking framework to guide our project. We used the tools we practiced in order to immerse ourselves within the Baltimore community and allow our ideas to develop. Interviewing various representatives from nonprofit organizations and the government sector provided insight into the different challenges people face in terms of permitting and public grantmaking. By applying a design thinking approach to our project in Baltimore, we were able to see varying viewpoints and identify similarities between the different sectors, giving us a deeper understanding of the issues at hand.

Middendorf Foundation

The Middendorf Foundation is guided by the principal ideals of founders, J. William Jr. and Alice Carter Middendorf. The Middendorf Foundation prioritizes Maryland's citizens by supporting institutions and projects that target areas of interest. These include: culture, education, environment, healthcare, historic preservation and social services. The Middendorf Foundation provides mostly capital grants, valuing almost $2.5mil/yr, all focused in Maryland and mainly Baltimore. Recent feedback from Grantees working with the Middendorf Foundation have stated that there needs to be a "Call to Action" in reference to the challenges they have faced when trying to acquire permits from the City of Baltimore.

Maryland Philanthropy Network

Maryland Philanthropy Network (MPN) is a vibrant community of funders who believe a connect-ed and informed giving community is essential to improving the quality of life for all Marylanders. MPN is a statewide membership association representing more than 110 private and community foundations, donor advised funds, giving circles, and corporations with strategic grantmaking programs. MPN acts as an organizing backbone and convener, bringing funders and partners together to promote alignment and action around issues affecting communities across Maryland and is supported by membership dues, grants, and earned income. Their mission is to maximize the impact of giving on community life through a growing network of diverse, informed, and effective philanthropists.

Project Background

Public Grant Background

Overview

One of the two primary facets of our project was delving deep into how the process of public grantmaking affected nonprofit and government efficacy. A key factor in our work was ensuring that we were not only immersing ourselves in the contemporary culture and environment of Baltimore, but also contextualizing Baltimore's grantmaking in local and federal history. A summary of the precedent and trends that are necessary to setting adequate background follow.

Background

Grants are a market-driven approach to fulfilling community needs; instead of the government creating public programs, they outsource the solution to organizations with more expertise and more ground-level, regular interactions with the challenge and its stakeholders.

Grants are financial awards provided to applying organizations for specific projects, oftentimes community-oriented projects, that are spearheaded by the applying organization. Contracts are deals that nonprofits or businesses enter into with the government in order to fulfill projects that are spearheaded by the government.

They allow for the government to spend time, money, and human capital on identifying some issue and choosing another organization with more expertise and therefore, hopefully, better odds of success to carry out a solution; they also prevent claims of "government overreach" by collaborating on the problem with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). From the nonprofit side, grants and contracts provide the ever-necessary and ever-scarce funding that they need to fulfill their mission.

Brief History of Grants/ Contracts in Baltimore

Historical background sets the cultural context for Baltimore and Maryland governments' relationships with grantmaking; as the rest of the country moved toward the nongovernmental outsourcing methods mentioned above, Baltimore did the same as it was amidst an era of rapid development and physical growth. The year 1958 saw the creation of the Charles Center Management Corporation, a public-private partnership between the city government and the business leader group Greater Baltimore Committee, in order to develop and revitalize downtown Baltimore.[3] The partnership worked on a number of projects and was the primary body that dictated the creation of the Inner Harbor, which, according to the Baltimore Planning Commission, is "[perhaps] Baltimore's most important invention since the railroad."[4]

The Charles Center is a landmark in the history of public-nonprofit partnerships, but is by no means the only one; other prominent and now-integral public works projects that required contractors and nongovernmental nonprofits included the building and expansion of highways in the 60s.[5]

The Baltimore public's relationship with its government also mirrored the rest of America's in its distrust, albeit on an exaggerated scale; the city government's history of racism, redlining, police brutality, and segregation had long harmed its citizenry, fostering a culture that relied more on community-based organizations rather than political institutions that were historically aggressive towards disadvantaged populations, particularly the Black community.[6]

Grants and Contracts in the Modern Day

Public-private and public-nonprofit partnerships remain integral to community efforts in Baltimore, particularly as public distrust of government remains at the forefront of the political and cultural landscape.

In equal measure, however, the patterns of eroded trust are also the result of challenges that the government faces, as well: chronic understaffing and financial difficulties, amongst other barriers that city officials have attempted to address or avoid, are issues that have only been exacerbated by the pandemic.[7] Federal teams have been called in to address backlogs of hundreds of medical examiner cases, and public servants in city government offices have regularly dwindled to unsustainable levels due to low pay, undercompensated overtime, and other challenges.[8 9 10] On a more day-to-day level, the City was forced in January of this year to change its recycling pickup to a biweekly schedule due to Covid-19 staffing shortages.[11] The challenges have thrown the importance of public-nonprofit partnerships into stark relief. "We've seen over the past two years the importance of our nonprofit partners in serving our communities throughout Baltimore City–and we know the devastating financial impacts of COVID-19 still continue," said Mayor Brandon M. Scott in a press release.[12]

While these issues persist, however, the government has devoted time and concerted effort over the past few decades to increase transparency and reduce corruptive factors that have affected its residents; one prime example is Citistat, an initiative by Baltimore's Office of Performance and Innovation that seeks to record data on the performance of local government in order to recommend improvements in agencies' internal processes. The initiative has "clearly raised the level and proficiency of agency accountability to mayoral leadership for achieving policy goals and objectives" and has subsequently spread to other cities.[13]

Public-nonprofit and public-private partnerships have been at the forefront of government initiatives to address local community challenges as well. According to the FY2022 preliminary budget plan for the city of Baltimore, a significant part of the primary budget items and legislative agendas rely upon public-community partnerships, like the use of the Maryland Community Action Partnership Centers for youth and family support.[14] Safe Streets Baltimore, a public health program that seeks to address gun violence through community organizations overseen by the City Health Department, and Civic Works, a nonprofit that works on housing and community development initiatives with the government, are among other prominent examples.[15 16]

Conclusion

Research and contextualization of grants in Baltimore reveal a system that continues to be a core and non-negotiable driver of community and government efforts to address challenges in Baltimore; at the same time, it also reveals the plentiful barriers on all sides that throw bureaucratic, financial, and organizational wrenches into the city's gears. As becomes apparent, the relationships in this system are delicate and complex, with more than a few decades of context that both strengthen community ties and deteriorate effective partnerships.

Capital Permit Background

Overview.

This summer our team had the opportunity to learn about the permitting process in the City of Baltimore, specifically the permits needed to enact capital projects for nonprofits. For the sake of this report, we will refer to these permits for capital projects as "capital permits.." We were tasked with learning about this necessary process and how nonprofits think it can be improved. In order to do our best to understand this multifaceted process, we first had to accrue knowledge on the history of these permits in Baltimore, the legislation affecting them, the purpose of these permits, and the value of studying them.

Background and Brief History.

A permit is an "official document which gives an individual permission to carry out an activity." [17]Permits can be issued for a plethora of different purposes, anything from allowing someone to drive a car to allowing a company to store restricted chemicals at their business.[18]

Permits fall under the larger umbrella of licensing, and therefore share many similarities to licenses. However, there are differences between permits and licenses. The first difference is the length of their legal validity. A license is permanent, while a permit is temporary. Permits are typically more restricted and require more inspections than licenses. "Licensing powers are concurrently exercised in the United States by federal, state, and local governments. The licensure of business operations through permits is traditionally a state or local power."[19] Therefore, when it comes to the scope of this project, we will be honing in on the state government of Maryland and the City government of Baltimore to understand permitting in Baltimore.

This process is essential to local nonprofits, especially those receiving capital grants. The funds they receive to acquire new capital or revitalize existing structures require permits. The turnaround on these permits also has a direct impact on the speed at which capital projects can be completed.

For the city, it serves as a revenue stream because applicants have to pay a fee to receive their permits[20], and an ability to make sure that any new construction or certain changes to capital are up to "Baltimore City Building Code."[21] We understand that this process is important to both sides and our goal in our subsequent findings is to find insights that respect all stakeholders.

Current State of Capital Permits in Baltimore.

The code that the City of Baltimore enforces comprises the local "Baltimore City Building Code, as well as state laws pertaining to construction and occupancy."[22] The overall purpose of these permits is to allow the city to provide approval of any "construction, alteration, electrical, mechanical and plumbing work in both commercial and residential structures."[23] Recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic, this entire process moved online through the service ePermits. This service allows applicants to "apply for a permit, send and receive messages about [their] permit, pay for your permit, and receive [their] permit via email."

Project Goals

This study has two primary foci:

1. To explore the successes and challenges in the public granting and contracting processes for both the Baltimore City government and nonprofits, with a specific emphasis on the application process and criteria.

2. To broaden and deepen understandings of capital permitting with the end goal of providing a more formalized report on vectors of tension and successful processes.

This report, above all, aims to elevate knowledgeable voices within the community and increase engagement with two issues that have direct impact on not only individual nonprofits and government departments but also Baltimore's relationship with its community members as a political and cultural structure.

Research Methods

Introduction

Our research began when we were tasked to look into the public grantmaking and capital permitting processes in the City of Baltimore by the MPN and the Middendorf Foundation. We listened to stakeholders' views on current pressure points in both processes and tried to learn about suggestions that would provide holistic and inclusive potential next steps for non-profits and the city to take. We wanted to ensure that our design thinking and diversity, equity, and inclusion training was utilized as much as possible throughout our process. In order to accomplish this goal, we decided to employ ethnographic research strategies within our interviews as the main way to gather information on stakeholders' views on these complex topics. We also did a plethora of supplemental research on these issues as well as the history of Baltimore as a whole. In all, we conducted over twenty-five interviews to identify trends in the pressures that exist in public grantmaking and capital permitting. In the subsequent sections, we will go into further detail into how these interviews were set up and conducted, as well as how the information gleaned from them was used.

Pre-Interview

We are given a list of people to contact for interviews from the Middendorf Foundation and the MPN. These lists consists of people who work with/have experience with the permitting process and/or the grantmaking process; they are also either members of the Baltimore City Government, nonprofit organizations, or foundations that all have experiences with these topics.

Once we are given the list of individuals to contact, the five of us divide the list equally and start contacting the potential interviewees. We then send an initial email, explaining who we are and why we are in Baltimore this summer, as well as explaining the scope of our project. Within these emails we attach a link to our individual Calendly's, which have our schedules and allow the interviewees to choose when and where they would like the interview to take place.

Within 48 hours of the interview, we send a follow-up email with terminology that will be used to guide the interview. This terminology includes the definitions of on-background, off-the-record, and anonymous, which the interviewee can use at any point throughout the interview to tell us how they want their information to be used. We also send a copy of an information release form, as well as a photo release form, which they can sign to give us extra assurance on permission to use the information/quotes from their interview in our final report.

Interview & Post-Interview

1 The first step in our interview process is to look at the Official Reach Out List and contact our assigned interviewee. Most of the interviewees were contacted via email. An initial email is sent out to explain who we are and why we are doing this project, as well as invite the interviewee to an interview with one of the five scholars.

2 Once a meeting date is established and the project is thoroughly explained, a secondary email is sent to the interviewee. This email includes information and photo release forms, sample interview questions, and terminology for the interview.

3 At the actual interview, the interviewer conducts the interview and has a device recording for accuracy. The interviewee is treated with the utmost respect and has the option for the information stated to be off-the-record, on-background, anonymous, etc. At the beginning and end of the interview, the interviewee is thanked for their insight and time.

Once we confirm a meeting date and time with a contact and take all preparatory measures, we conduct an interview that, ideally, yields fruitful data and maintains our standard of professionalism. To accomplish both goals, we adhere to the current "best practices" for ethnographic interviews. These practices include wearing business casual attire, extending a courteous greeting to the interviewee, and exhibiting positive, professional body language throughout the interview. To prepare the interviewee, we restate the project's ultimate goal and reiterate the context surrounding our research to best inform their responses to our questions. We then readdress the confidentiality definitions with the interviewee to clarify the research language (e.g. on-background, off-the-record, etc). Finally, we clarify the purposes of recording our interviewee's responses in addition to taking notes by hand before we proceed with the interview.

To ensure accurate reporting and quotations, we record each interview using the VoiceMemos mobile application. This application is free and user-friendly and therefore was the most logical choice to record interviews. Before we begin to record the interview, we ask the interviewee whether or not they consent to being recorded. If the interviewee does not consent, we do not use the conveyed information within our report or in shaping questions for other interviewees. If the interviewee consents to being recorded, the interviewer begins to run the recording on his or her smartphone.

The questions we ask during an interview depend on the organization we conduct the interview on behalf of. If the interviewee is a contact provided to us by the MPN, which requested information about the grantmaking process, we would opt to ask questions pertaining to grantmaking and public contracts. If the interviewee is a contact provided to us by the Middendorf Foundation, which requested that we research permitting and capital grants, we would then ask questions regarding the permitting process in the city of Baltimore. Additionally, the Middendorf Foundation connected us to family foundations within the city. Considering the differences between family foundations and our other genres of interview candidates, we would ask these foundations different questions regarding their grantees and any ongoing contracts. All three sets of questions are vetted and approved by both organizations and are enumerated in Appendix 1.

Interview & Post-Interview

4 After the interview, a follow-up email is sent to the interviewee containing any final thoughts, follow-ups or connections, and thanking them for their time and for the interview.

When the interview is complete and the recording is stopped, we still employ best practices to maintain the relationships between the interviewee and our host organizations. We let the interviewee know that we do not take their time and enthusiasm for granted; we truly appreciate their commitment to our project. Additionally, we invite the interviewee to ask questions about our project or to comment on any relevant topic that they see fit. Whether the interview is in-person or over Zoom, we strive to conclude any interview with a positive, forward-looking end that provides closure for all parties.

We then send a "thank you" email within four hours to express our gratitude and to follow up with any lingering items (e.g. collecting unsigned information and photo release forms). This email reiterates that we hold their discretion in high esteem and that we will not use off-the-record or on-background information in our report. Finally, we promise to keep our interviewee updated on the status of our final deliverable in hopes that our work may be made public for their benefit.

Zoom Interviews

We use Zoom recording software. We make sure the Zoom recording preset is downloaded to the device, not uploaded to the Cloud.

We do not use any crazy backgrounds (bokeh or plain or nothing).

We make sure we are in a quiet place with headphones.

We only use audio unless photos or other media are explicitly allowed.

5 The audio recording is uploaded to a transcription service and important quotes are highlighted and moved to a group document.

In order to streamline the intake of information for the team, the interviewer updates the document "Official Reach Out List" to indicate that the interview has been conducted. Additionally, the interviewer would transfer both the signed information and photo release forms to a shared folder.

To uphold the interviewee's integrity as well as the interviewer's accountability, the interviewer uploads the VoiceMemos recording to Otter.ai, an on-the-Cloud transcription site. This site has been vetted and approved for our usage by both Maryland Philanthropy Network and the Middendorf Foundation. Otter.ai transcribes our recordings with impressive accuracy and makes the synthesis and analysis of our findings more efficient and, by extension, more useful in our research.

6 A SWOT Analysis and Interview Debrief is conducted. Insight is discussed with the entire team to see if patterns and/or trends in the data have formed.

Terminology

The following terms are available for use throughout the entirety of the interview:

On-The-Record

Information provided during interviews can be directly quoted in our final deliverables, paraphrased, and used to guide further interview questions. The identity of the interviewee will be released at the discretion of our team and will be credited accordingly.

Off-The-Record

Information provided during interviews will not be used to guide further interview questions to other interviewees. The identity of the interviewee providing the information will not be used in any way. The information will not be used.

Anonymous

Information provided during interviews can be directly quoted in our final deliverables, paraphrased, and used to guide further interview questions. However, the identity of the interviewee cannot be disclosed to anyone.

On-Background

Information provided during interviews can be used to guide further interview questions to other interviewees, without mentioning the interviewee's name or identifying information.

The interviewee would ask for something to be on-background to protect that individual from being associated with the information. The interviewer would benefit because they can use that information to generate further questions.

If an interviewee says that some piece of information is "on-background," we would then clarify exactly which information is on-background. This can look like the following:

Interviewee: "...Apples are red. Oranges are orange. Bananas are yellow. Peppers are green, red and orange. Wait, can that be on-background?"

Interviewer:"Ok, which part? Starting from 'Oranges are orange' and ending with 'Bananas are yellow'?"

Or:

Interviewee: "...Apples are red. Oranges are orange. And this is off-the-record, but bananas are yellow. Peppers are green, red and orange."

Interviewer: "Bananas are yellow is off-the-record, right? But is 'peppers' off-the-record?"

We try our best to limit our impact on the quality and overall continuity during the interview and let the interviewee know when the recording is complete. As a final measure of discretion, as well as an informal method of feedback, we ask how the interview went to make sure that they are comfortable with the interview and the responses within.

Synthesis & Analysis

Due to the qualitative nature of our data, pure quantitative data visualization would not be possible without formalized coding, which was not possible within the timeline of the project. Subsequently, our analysis focuses on qualitatively pulling quotes and synthesizing interviews into a few "buckets" of themes and solutions, with some low-level, informal coding.

SWOT analysis

The SWOT analysis is a form of synthesizing interviews, conversations, and other qualitative work into four categories: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. (Hence, SWOT.) In our study, information and quotes obtained in the interview are dropped into one of the four categories in accordance with their impact or relevance to the process at hand (permitting or grant-/contract-making). Items in the interview that were challenges or successes in the process are categorized as strengths or weaknesses; items that were external to the given process are categorized as threats or opportunities.

SWOT analyses are done for every interview and informed the jumping-off point for the rest of the data analysis.

Pulling Quotes & Information

From our interview transcripts, we identify and take key quotes from the transcripts to organize and categorize. As we are not recording the number of instances in which an interviewee mentioned a topic, we identify these by isolating each separate (noncontiguous) individual thought that the interviewee expressed during the interview and then take information or quotes that informed that thought or the interviewee's overall opinion.

Creating theme and solution buckets

Theme Buckets

Pulled data is then categorized into thematic buckets based on what issue they relate to. These thematic buckets are created from the data itself: i.e. a new bucket is created if a piece of data refers to a novel concept.

Solution Bucket

The solution buckets are formed from a combination of ideas suggested to us by interviewees and ideas generated by the study team.

After creating the solution buckets, direct connections are drawn between an issue bucket that would be addressed by the given solution bucket, thereby creating a web-like understanding of which solutions would affect which issues.

Analyzing Solutions

We evaluated the solutions through four sets of criteria:

1. Their relevance to the identified issues
2. Their validity from the perspective of our interviewees
3. Their feasibility
4. Their impact and timeline

The major takeaways from this analysis stage is converted into a impact v. feasibility chart, where recommendations are plotted relative to each other on a Cartesian plane.

Each recommendation is also accompanied by an explanation of our analysis of its impact and feasibility.

Controls & Error

The fundamentally human nature of the data, analysis, and study itself poses difficulties in controlling for external and confounding variables, as well as statistical significance. The study's emphasis on exploration also requires, to some degree, flexibility in the research and analysis process in order to ensure that our research process is not leading or otherwise limiting for interviewees and community members.

Issues of error are, however, not unique to this project, and academic literature that specializes in ethnography and ethnographic interviews has developed best practices in an effort to control for low validity and unreliability.[25]

Methods used in this study are informed by such practices and include:

- Standardized sets of questions
- Collective and standardized terminology
- Co-analysis between researchers in this study to improve internal reliability[26]
- Mechanically recorded data (recordings)
- Frequent and clear communication and discussion with the Middendorf Foundation and Maryland Philanthropy Network to ensure internal validity as well as an extra layer of internal reliability[27]

What is perhaps most essential to the understanding of the validity of this study, however, is its status as a fundamentally exploratory document; the study seeks not to create an all-encompassing treatise on the state of Baltimore's philanthropic and governmental spaces, but rather seeks to bring to the forefront challenges and successes that NGOs, PSOs, and city officials have experienced in efforts to ignite discussion and provide a beginning platform for further study.

PERMITS

Key Takeaways

Applicants feel city government understaffed

Many say there is current understaffing of vital roles dealing with permitting within Baltimore's government, which **exacerbates preexisting points of tension**.

A consistent trend in our interviews was the sentiment from nonprofits that the city is currently understaffed. This issue, according to our interviewees, exacerbated pre-existing points of tension within the permitting process. Many have also voiced that this issue has been accelerated by the change in the employment market during the Covid-19 pandemic. Erin O'Keefe, Program Officer at the France-Merrick Foundation, said, "Because of the leadership shifts at DHCD, there's been a lot of turnover in staffing, they haven't been able to retain employees, even before Covid...So there was this huge backlog on the DHCD side."

O'Keefe expanded on the sentiment that the Baltimore government has had staffing issues by discussing her time working in Baltimore before working for the France-Merrick Foundation. She did a lot of permitting work overseeing a large state grant for commercial facade improvements. At that time there were two Commerical Code Enforcement Officers assigned to a specific quarter of Baltimore. "That was in 2010 and I worked really closely with those folks. By the time I left, I think there was one for the entire city of Baltimore."

With fewer City employees working within the permitting sphere, the efficiency of the entire process will be hampered. Many interviewees commented on the fact that staffing-up is an integral step in making holistic and inclusive changes to the current permitting system. The current systems in Baltimore are contrasted with other cities' systems like Seattle. "I've worked with some folks in the Seattle Department of Housing and Community Development, but they have a high capacity infrastructure, and their Department of Housing and Community Development and I would say, professionalized their systems and their technology probably 15 years ago." O'Keefe said.

The general trend in sentiments was that if the permitting process is going to change, staffing up the permitting sphere in the City government is an integral place to start. In doing so, stakeholders believe that the current process will become more efficient, as there would be more people to review permits and inspect sites.

> Because of the leadership shifts at DHCD, **there's been a lot of turnover in staffing**, they haven't been able to retain employees, even before Covid...So there was this huge backlog on the DHCD side.
>
> *Erin O'Keefe, Program Officer, France-Merrick Foundation*

[Pandemic exacerbates current challenges]

Sentiments from nonprofit leaders coalesced around their **frustrations with the permit process' timeline and the challenges of following up** and reaching out to officials, along with the understanding **that government officials also faced difficulties** by needing to work from home.

All of our interviews that referenced the pandemic's impact on the permitting process expressed frustrations with what they described to be a "slowdown" in the process, as Program Officer Jess Porter at the France-Merrick Foundation put it.

"It's always been a complex kind of system," Episcopal Housing's Executive Director Dan McCarthy recognized, "and it's exacerbated by the fact, of course, in that the last two years for the city offices, people have been working from home. So it makes it even more complex."

In addition to exacerbating preexisting staffing and funding issues already pervasive in City government, the pandemic limited what some nonprofit leaders have deemed to be the extremely useful, even crucial, option of meeting and following up with city officials in-person. Beth Harber, the Senior Program Officer of Community Development & Environment at the Abell Foundation, said that she felt the inability to follow up in person limited her ability to help one of Abell's grantees get their permit through.

"You couldn't just go walk down to the permit office, which would be my first instinct, because it wasn't open at that time. So I think that [the office being closed to the public due to Covid-19] really gummed things up," Harber said.

"Covid has definitely impacted things," said David Belew, the then-Director, now-Vice President, of Government Affairs and Grants at the Maryland Center for History and Culture. He said that in a current big fire suppression project, there have been some additional hold-ups in the permitting process due to the pandemic, specifically noting that while the suppression system has been approved, there was an electrical work permit that had been open for a year at the time of the interview. "We just haven't heard anything about it," he said, also mentioning that he understood that there were additional pressures mounted on city officials during this time.

> "Covid has definitely impacted things.
>
> *David Belew, Vice President of Government Affairs and Grants, Maryland Center for History and Culture*

Concerns have arisen that work-from-home policies and the confusion of pandemic work norms have potentially caused some work to fall by the wayside

"Covid played havoc in that [permitting] process," said Board Member Dan Bailey at the Manna House, "because reviewers were working remotely or they were not there to be able to manage the process as well as they would have."

Two interviews mentioned that phone calls made to the permitting office had not been returned.

Some interviewees emphasized the additional Covid-19 pressures and challenges that permit reviewers and government employees had to surmount.

"By necessity, COVID spurred a lot of agencies and organizations to create paperless processes and the e-permit and e-plan move the City in the right direction," Harber added after the interview.

Socioeconomic status may impact process

Organizations with **more resources and working in higher-income neighborhoods** of Baltimore **appear to have a smoother permit process** than those not working in those specific areas.

David Belew stands in front of an exhibit at the Maryland Center for History and Culture, at which he is now the Vice President of Government Affairs and Grants.
Photo by Willow Taylor Chiang Yang

I do think it's **harder for smaller institutions** that might not even have a specialized facilities person on staff.

David Belew, VP of Government Affairs and Grants, Maryland Center for History and Culture

According to the interviews conducted, permits for renovating nicer areas of Baltimore seem to have quicker turnaround times than permits influencing lower income neighborhoods. An anonymous nonprofit developer said, "We're trying to change the community, we should be the first ones to the table to redevelop our areas, not the ones that come in from other states with a larger backing of dollars [who are] going to the harbor to add more money to build a Whole Foods or to build all these nice restaurants." There appears to be a prioritization of high value dollars over improving lower income communities.

In terms of resources, larger permits or permits from larger organizations tend to take precedence over smaller permits, according to a number of interviews. Dan Bailey states, "The process is naturally bogged down by the fact that there's many different permit applications that come in on any given day, both small and large, and sometimes the large ones that are big and politically supported find the front row." This gives larger nonprofit permits an advantage over permits from smaller organizations which influences timelines and the ability to completely fulfill their missions. There is also resource inequity when some organizations are able to afford expediters to help them move efficiently through the permit process.

[Underrepresented communities may be further underserved]

Some stakeholders feel permits going into **neighborhoods with larger Black communities faced lengthier turn around times and more barriers within the permit process** than those with larger White communities.

During the interview process, racial inequities were highlighted as one of the challenges faced by nonprofits going through the permit process. Southwest Partnership (SWP) is a nonprofit that obtains permits to develop and improve areas of Southwest Baltimore. After going through the permit process numerous times, they are one of many organizations who have faced barriers in trying to obtain permits for renovating marginalized areas of Baltimore. Despite SWP being a larger organization and investing in the community for over eight years, they have yet to receive the same treatment and opportunities as those working in high dollar neighborhoods. One of their developers emphasizes the question, "Why does Southwest Baltimore, or other specific areas that are marginalized, or have underrepresented communities that eat live, work and play in these areas, not have the incentives or the capabilities of these great developments, so that they can bring in more of that dollar value, to make it more walkable, to make it more safe, for people to want to be engaged and live in these areas?" As other organizations are able to work on improving certain areas of Baltimore, those serving the underrepresented SWP are confused and frustrated that the permit process seems to make it hard for them to help the communities they are a part of.

"

These communities deserve the same TLC, if you will, and development as other sectors of Baltimore. If you really want to drill down to the aesthetics of it, it's not solely just Baltimore in general, I think it's some bias and inequities across the board.

Developer, Southwest Partnership

"

Looking at the inequity when it comes to urban development, it's **a bigger monster** than what we see here.

Anonymous Nonprofit Developer

Perceived lack of formalization may impact expediency, transparency

Concerns with the perceived informal process appears to center around a few concerns:

1 A lack of a clear roadmap, which would include next steps and contacts, amongst other pieces of information that nonprofits feel would smooth the process

"Clear points of contact seem to be an issue or consistent points of contact in terms of checking on status and getting updates more regularly seems to be a challenge and a fresh point of frustration for the grantees that I've worked with that have had permitting involved in their projects," said Jess Porter, a Program Officer at the France-Merrick Foundation.

2 A want for frequent/regular updates on status on permits in the review process.

BARCO Director Leon Pinkett said that some members of City government or City Council have taken on informal, officially unrecognized roles as "point-people" for nonprofits seeking to check in on their permits, as Pinkett put it, speaking on his experiences working for the local government, including in the Mayor's Office and on City Council, for two decades. He said that, in the Mayor's Office in particular, he became that point-person and that a "significant" part of his job was unofficially facilitating the movements of big projects through the permitting process.

"Once someone goes to different agencies, it can get kind of confusing about who is actually responsible for reviewing and how that approval process is happening," Pinkett said. "If somebody's not there monitoring, it is highly, highly likely that projects won't get through."

3 The seeming necessity of having the unwritten rules, networks, and information in order to get a permit application processed and approved as quickly as possible.

"I've been doing this for 25 years, so I kind of know it and understand it, and have relationships with many of the people that are looking at our project," said Dan McCarthy, the Executive Director of Episcopal Housing. He said that this "informal knowledge that gets built up over time" has become critical to nonprofits seeking a faster permit process—he said that there should be, instead, "a clear roadmap as to what you need to do, as opposed to relying on people."

Another France-Merrick Foundation Program Officer, Erin O'Keefe, also highlighted that Baltimore's permitting process, in their experience, was much more reliant on being plugged into informal networks than some other cities.

"[In] Seattle, for example, all you have to do is go onto a website and click a button, no names; you don't need to know all the contexts of a local neighborhood, and you don't need to necessarily have any special information or information that isn't very, very transparent," they said. "Baltimore operates very differently than a Seattle that perhaps is just much more transparent how you apply for things."

4 Perceived discord and disorganization with the way the city schedules and assigns appointments, which sometimes results in conflicting information, missed appointments, and perceived inefficiency.

Southwest Partnership's Tony Scott experienced instances of this, where several inspectors review the same project and they've had to go through several iterations of the same review process when they feel that having one inspector who could retain necessary context would create a more expeditious process.

Nonprofits experiencing these needs have felt that they needed to resort to tactics external to the permitting process in order to complete necessary community work.

"There's definitely instances where we just have done our due diligence and have submitted the paperwork, and it's become untenable to wait any longer.We do our due diligence. We've sent the email, we sent the application. It's been six months. At what point are you going to keep waiting?" One anonymous interviewee in the nonprofit sector said,"There have been some instances where we had to do emergency work and [we] just try to ask for forgiveness instead of permission, because we have to jump right in."

> There's definitely instances where we just have done our due diligence and have submitted the paperwork, and **it's become untenable to wait any longer.**
>
> *Anonymous, nonprofit sector*

The interviewee said that continuing without a permit, while not necessarily frequent, would not be atypical. It should be noted that the instances where a nonprofit would proceed without an approved permit were mentioned to be for smaller projects or events, as opposed to larger, more potentially tenuous projects.

A major aspect of the stressors in the informal process appears to be what interviewees saw as a lack of adequate communication. Pinkett had a good experience with a large project 10 years ago on a multi-family, market-rate development, the positives of which he emphasized were due to a clear meeting with everyone involved, from permit office representatives to developers, at the beginning of the project and frequent updates thereafter.

"For me, that was an example of how it could and should be done. I think that at the end of the day, everybody wants their process to be as quick as possible, but they also want some certainty," said Pinkett. "If I couldn't get it through yesterday, I at least want to know, realistically, when I should expect for it to be reviewed. And so I think that's really when the issue comes in: when it doesn't happen as quickly as you want, there's no certainty when it's actually going to happen."

> I think that at the end of the day, everybody wants their process to be as quick as possible, but **they also want some certainty.**
>
> *Leon Pinkett, Director, BARCO*

[Knowledge gaps between nonprofits create inequities]

Nonprofits that are knowledgeable about the permitting process tend to get through the process quicker, whereas nonprofits who are new to the permitting process have to learn as they try to get their application processed.

A consistent trend in our interviews was that smaller nonprofits have a harder time getting permitting applications approved because they do not have much experience with the permitting process. Nichole Battle of Govans Ecumenical Development Corporation (GEDCO) said that the permitting process "is really about timing and experience." Large nonprofits can afford to hire more staff and tend to have expeditors and employees that specialize in getting permits for the organization. David Belew, the Vice President of Government Affairs and Grants at the Maryland Center for History and Culture, said that "usually it goes the easiest for us when we have the budget to pay for a third party facilitator. When we were doing our signage project [to rebrand], we worked with a company that had experience with the permitting process, and they just set it off for us."

However, when a nonprofit does not have those resources, employees juggle both their typical workload as well as trying to understand the permitting process. A common theme shared across the interviews was that relationships are incredibly important in facilitating the process, specifically relationships with members of the government who have the means to check in on the permit and make calls on the nonprofit's behalf. Gary Williams, a Program Officer at the France-Merrick Foundation, said a hold-up in the review process is "when you have to lean on the City Council and hope your city council person has good constituent services... A lot of smaller nonprofits [working on their] first project don't know that.

> "
>
> A lot of **our grantees for bigger projects** have something called an owner's representative. [The construction process] is **a complicated process... It's helpful for somebody else to do that.**
>
> *Beth Harber, Senior Program Officer of Community Development & Environment, Abell Foundation*

So the first project is almost always learning and headaches. And they know that going forward, but it does cause, like I said, delays and delays cost money, right."

Many interviewees noted that the permitting process takes experience and connections to get through efficiently, and that it can be difficult for new, smaller nonprofits.

[Some see process as relationship-reliant]

Many permit applicants feel that the current permitting process exists not as a standardized procedure, but rather as one grounded in personal connections.

Relationships in Baltimore's permitting world, according to many nonprofit employees and executives, range from being a mere helping hand to a borderline necessity. When the goal is to receive a permit as expeditiously as possible, calling on a local council person or expeditor can often impact a project's future. "It wouldn't be unusual as a council person," said Leon Pinkett, a Director at BARCO and a former councilman himself, "to get a call asking for support on getting a project through. I think every administration needs an individual that can make those calls and can monitor projects to make certain that they're going through."

These invaluable relationships often incentivize organizations to hire an expeditor, an independent liaison who puts city architects and permit reviewers on the same page. Expeditor Lou Catelli says his line of work "helps the permit office to speak the same language" as architects in order to shorten the time between permit application and permit acquisition. Knowing a well-connected expeditor like Catelli when undergoing the oft-overwhelming permit process adds the reassuring, human aspect that Pinkett proclaims as "invaluable."

While these relationships benefit many organizations, others who may not be equipped with such connections feel that the current permitting process is "a little too difficult to manage without professionals who are 'in the know' on your side," as Chris Maynard from Tuerk House expressed. He also described how the tight bonds between reviewers and well-connected can leave some organizations at a disadvantage. Erin O'Keefe of the France-Merrick Foundation corroborated this on the permitting facet, saying, "If you don't have a relationship with your City Council person and their staff, you're not getting your permit any time soon."

While this trend is largely consistent with the narratives of our interviewees, some Baltimore nonprofit leaders' experiences with permitting may not be as contingent on relationships as others.

> "[The process is] a little too difficult to manage without professionals who are 'in the know' on your side.
>
> *Chris Maynard, Director of Philanthropy, Tuerk House*

Volume of permits may benefit from streamlining

Baltimore permit applicants are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of permits required for their projects and question if some of said permits are necessary.

After interviewing several nonprofit owners and executives, some individuals are calling for internal review of which permits may have outlived their relevance. "I think there probably really should be a review around permitting and figuring out which ones are extraneous," said France-Merrick Foundation Program Officer Gary Williams. Williams remarked that doing so would limit the hoops both reviewers and applicants would have to jump through as well as cut costs of extraneous permits. David Belew of the Maryland Center for History and Culture agreed, commenting how as the then-Director of Government Affairs and Grants at Maryland Center for History and Culture, he has seen how "we have such a large portfolio of things that do require permits that people are just choosing not to engage in the process." The volume of paperwork and energy for applicants may turn them off from interacting with the city government, which fosters a disconnect between the city and those applying to permits.

While the city government has pivoted permitting to online portals, which has streamlined this process for some applicants, some interviewees have still experienced challenges in the process.

Independent expeditor Lou Catelli has found that the sprinkler systems are particularly difficult to source permits, which span many departments. "There is no consolidated board for doing a sprinkler system," said Catelli. "It's not like these other portals; there's no one unified relay system. It's very, very challenging." While some have found the shift to online portals does help to streamline the permitting process, the volume of permits remains a point of contest.

"

It's very Byzantine. I think that's what makes it expensive to renovate and build locally. It's because time is money.

Gary Williams, Program Officer, France-Merrick Foundation

"

I think that taking a bird's eye look at how many permits are required for different things, and pruning it a bit and saying, **"Does this truly require a permit?"** would be a good exercise.

Anonymous Nonprofit Developer

[Miscommunication may contribute to delays, bureaucracy]

Applicants feel that departments and agencies within the government could **increase communication with one another**.

A common theme that was noted across the interviews was the sentiment that the transition from paper permitting to online systems was greatly appreciated. Nichole Battle from GEDCO said, "I think the new electronic system has really helped people get applications through a little bit better than [they] used to in the past."

However, the transition to using the online ePermitting eliminated the reason for people to communicate with each other directly throughout the permitting process. Dan Bailey, a board member at Manna House, said, "Baltimore City really worked hard to help streamline that process, especially on the electronic side. Again, what happened is that the human side started to collapse as a result of that."

This caused a disconnect between the people applying for permits and the departments within the government that review their applications. Problems have occured, such as applications being under review for months because the application has to go through different departments and agencies that it doesn't even need to go through, or backups happening and uncertainty as to which department currently has that application.

> "Sometimes you can just feel like **you're being taken with the waves**? That's how I felt through this whole construction project, never super clear on a process.
>
> *Jane Lindenfelser, Executive Director, Patterson Park Public Charter School*

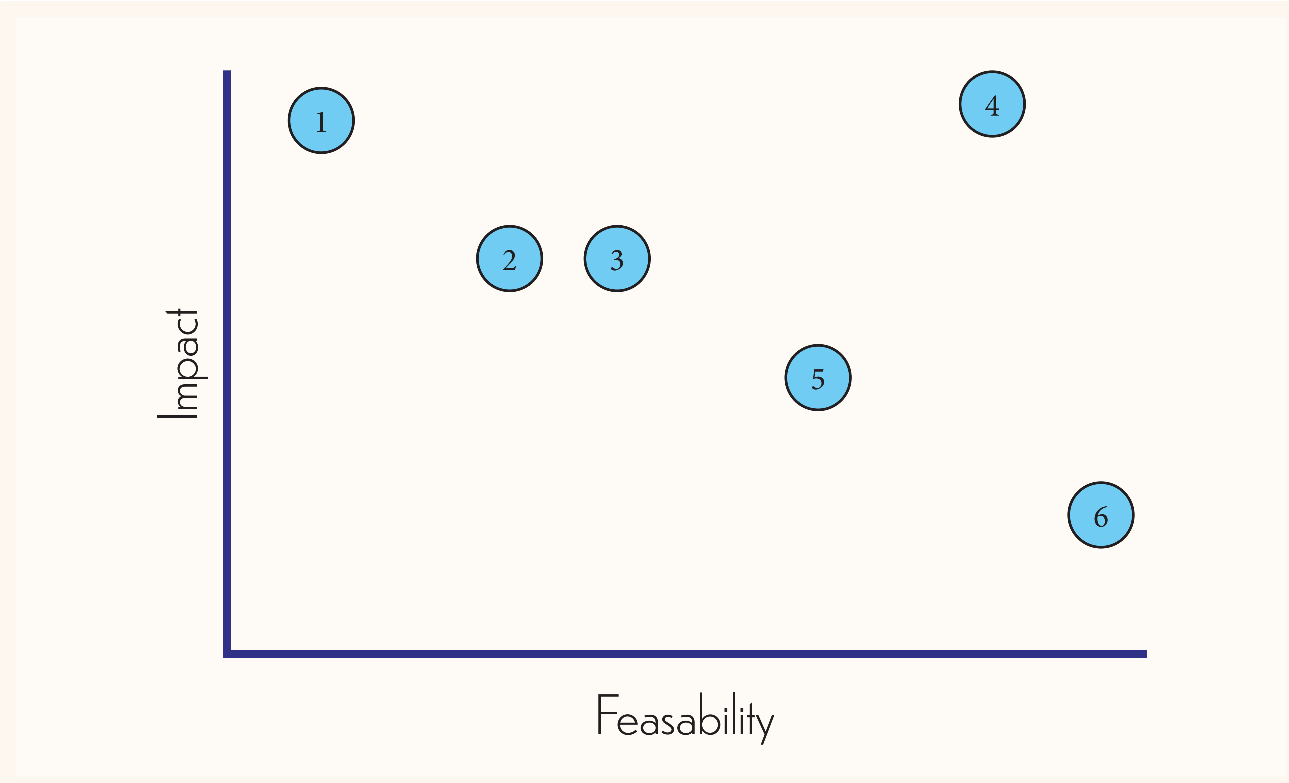
The disconnect between departments becomes even clearer when there is no continuity on the requirements that applicants need to meet in order to get an application approved. Unclear expectations for the permit applications are given to the applicants, causing even more confusion due to the lack of continuity across departments. Inspectors not having the same guidelines was an example of this issue that was brought to light in some of our interviews. Bailey said, "Part of the permitting process is that the reviewers are reviewing that very thing and making sure that you're compliant. But when the inspectors are not knowledgeable in that, there is a huge disconnect." If representatives in different departments do not have the same guidelines, the permitting process becomes even more confusing for applicants.

PERMITS

Recommendations

For city government

Feasibility vs. Impact Matrix



Recommendations Key

1 Fully Staff Baltimore's Permitting Offices

2 Create a Community Liaison Position

3 Create a Permit Point-Person Position

4 Bolster ePermit and ePlans Process

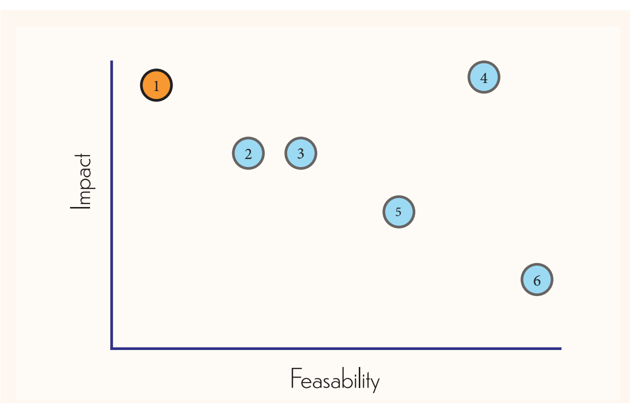
5 Create New Training Systems Promote Current Resources

6 Conduct an Internal Review of Current Permits

Fully Staff Baltimore's Permitting Offices

"It just really seems like there needs to be a priority and emphasis on the funding model for staffing and infrastructure for permitting, if there's an expectation that anything's going to change... that would be the place where things need to start," said Jess Porter, Program Officer at the France-Merrick Foundation. Our team found a large trend that there was widespread concern surrounding what appears to be the understaffing of Baltimore's permitting positions, which affects the expediency of the permit process. This recommendation would touch on many of the key takeaways talked about earlier in the report. Not only would it essentially solve the "staffing-up" issue, but also may have the capability to further formalize the process. If there were enough staffers to fully take on the demand for permits, there would be no need to develop relationships to expedite the process. Therefore, we would see a decline in the relationship-based networks surrounding this vital process (which was also listed as a key takeaway above). It is important to note that the government may already be taking steps to re-staff these positions, in which case we would suggest a larger emphasis being placed on these goals.

> "[This] would be the place where **things need to start**.
>
> *Jess Porter, Program Officer, France-Merrick Foundation*



Impact vs. Feasibility

Our team decided that the feasibility of this plan to fully staff up these positions is inherently low. We deduced this due to the overall capital that would need to be given to recruiting and paying these new city employees, and the current state of the job market as of the publication of this report. It is important to note that although feasibility is very low, there would be less of a need to invent new processes or create new standing positions within the city government. Therefore, it may seem easier to some stakeholders to fill current positions than to create new positions and hire fewer employees. We still believe that the current state of the labor market and the capital needed to attract and retain these employees still create large barriers for the City.

The impact, however, of this recommendation, is incredibly high. We believe that if positions are fully staffed with well trained employees, the entire process can work better without any major alterations to existing structures. There will be an increase in the overall efficiency of the permitting process.

Create a Community Liaison Position

If the Baltimore City Government creates a community liaison position, Key Takeaways 3 and 4 could be partially addressed. This person would represent nonprofits working in the neighborhood they represent and have enough connections to where they can expedite the permit process, not allowing race to be a factor for longer turnaround times.

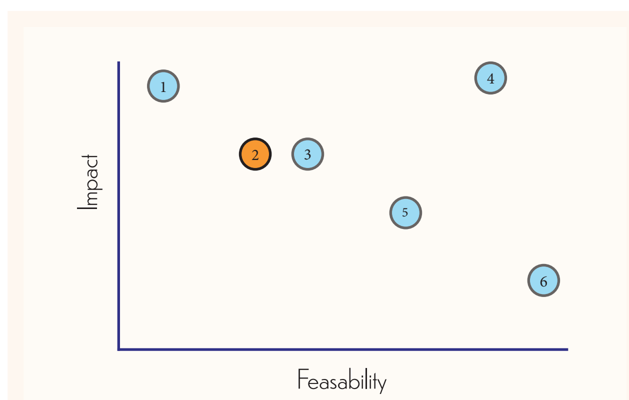
They would be assigned based on the geographical location of the organization and advocate for them and their communities. An example of this can be seen by the Baltimore City Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation. They have staff that do permit reviews for specific neighborhoods. This same strategy could be used to categorize neighborhoods for nonprofits.[1]

> The strongest message in this conversation would be having an advocate in the permitting department as **someone who is helping us help the community.**
>
> *Developer, Southwest Partnership*

In terms of racial inequity, if nonprofits who are experiencing delays because of the "blacker neighborhoods" they are working in hire a community liaison, this person could be an advocate for the needs of those organizations. Many developers have emphasized the importance of accountability and recognizing the inequities in the permit process. An anonymous developer said, "From that point, looking at the inequity when it comes to urban development. It's a bigger monster than what we see here. So those officials need to be called to the carpet to be held accountable, and to answer to some of those inequities." Therefore, a big part of the community liaison's job would be to hold other officials accountable if racial/ socioeconomic inequality is seen.

Impact vs. Feasibility

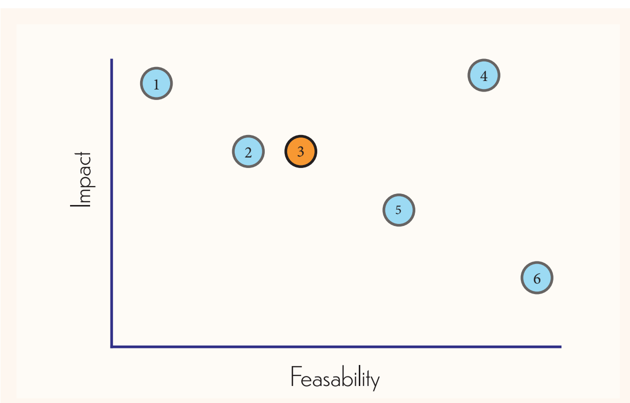
In the solution's feasibility and impact chart, the creation of a community liaison has relatively low feasibility with potentially high impacts. Hiring community liaisons or having a neighborhood liaison planner would take a sufficient amount of time and planning. There would also have to be a system in place to ensure that there is no bias towards certain organizations, liaisons, or their communities. However, once the system is fully functioning, the impact would be very high. It could hopefully address some racial and socioeconomic inequities by giving each organization a chance to be equally represented.



[1] https://chap.baltimorecity.gov/staff

Create a Permit Point-Person Position

Disconnection between departments and agencies was a common issue seen across the interviews, along with the issue of applicants not knowing who to contact within the government to get updates on the status of their applications. A possible solution to combat this issue would be to have an employee within the government whose main job is to monitor the status of permit applications and track its status as it makes its way through the different departments and agencies. This employee would become involved with a nonprofits permitting process at the start of the application and monitor the status of the application by giving the applicants updates throughout the process. This would also be a cross-departemental position, meaning that the employee would have contacts throughout all of the departments and agencies involved in facilitating the application through the process. Dan Bailey, a board member at Manna House said "There needs to be somebody within the system who helps to manage that process, and to make sure that it doesn't get stalled in any given department." When an issue occurs with the application, it would be that employee's job to see where the issue is coming from, and they would be the contact person for the applicant to get information about how to proceed as efficiently as possible.



Impact vs. Feasibility

On the impact to feasibility graph this solution is labeled as number five. While synthesizing the impact that this solution would have on the overall issue of permitting we concluded that it would have high impact considering facilitating the permitting process across all departments would greatly improve the efficiency of the process. In regards to feasibility, we thought that this solution would fall in the middle considering hiring a new employee and establishing a new position would be time consuming. However, it would be worth it in the long term because this position would help facilitate the permitting process in a way that is more transparent to the applicants as well as prevent back ups from happening between departments and agencies.

> "[Having] **somebody that can act as a mediator** between the entity submitting, or the professional submitting, and the permit process ... **would be of significant help** so that if we see a delay, we can contact an individual who is by his very job required to respond quickly."
>
> *Dan Bailey, Board Member, Manna House*

Bolster ePermit and ePlans Process

Bolstering the ePlans process and increased digitization could include:

1. Creation of rough timeline as a part of the E-Plans evaluation.

2. Creation of a permitting "dashboard," open for viewing within the permits portal.

   A number of interviewees mentioned that while they had challenges with the process, they understood that government officials also struggled with understaffing and the volume of applications to be processed. Pinkett mentioned it could be helpful to see the numbers of permits in each stage of the process, as it would increase transparency and perhaps understanding both amongst nonprofits and for those reviewing the permits.
   This may potentially be the simplest to implement, as it would only need to display within the portal the number of applications in process, the number of submitted but not reviewed permits, etc, which the portal already keeps track of internally.

3. Further streamlining of the application and review process by having autofill and automated applications rather than manual entry.

4. Centralization of documents, contacts, and relevant departments on the front end.

5. Centralization of applications, inspection schedules, and timelines on the back end.

   A new inspection scheduler, with which applicants could schedule an inspection time, was recently added to the ePermits portal with the DHCD; as the technology already exists in the ePermits system, a back-end conglomeration of scheduled appointments, along with inspector information and permit applicant information, could be feasible and could prove useful to permit reviewers seeking to provide inspector continuity to permit applicants and seeking to uphold inspection schedules.

There is currently an industry centered around simplifying permit processes for permit applicants and the government, with a number of different software options, and some products have had successes with local governments across the country. One such piece of technology, SmartGov from the Brightly software company, has seen success with the City of Delano in California, which was dealing with backlog due to their previous permit-tracking process, and the Kentucky ▸

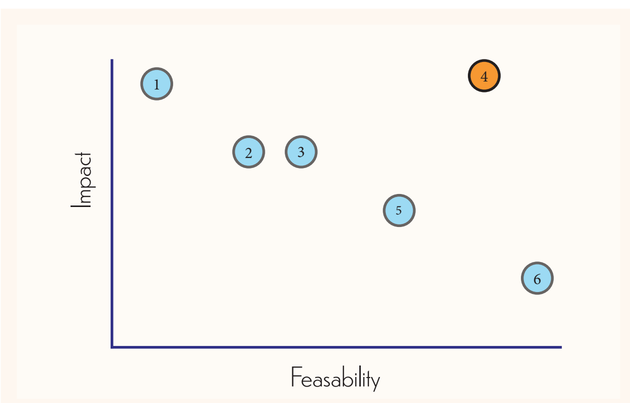
> "When you try to mitigate the schedule issues by trying to make a call or contact or find out what's going on, **you often run into a brick wall.**"
>
> *Dan Bailey, Board Member, Manna House*

Department of Housing, Building, and Construction.[4] [5] [6] Other cities and local municipalities have used one of a plethora of other brands of software, such as OpenGov, GovPilot, and a product from Oracle, which all seek to address the same issue, with some success stories.

The other option explored in this section could be an all-internal systems evolution that would include the timeline, centralization, streamlininag, and creation of the dashboard. This may look like changes within the current ePlans portal, which most interviewees have found to be helpful, or a reformation of the ePlans portal to better streamline documents, permits, inspections, and schedules on both the front and back ends, along with the creation of a dashboard.

> Once someone goes to different agencies, it can get kind of **confusing about who is actually responsible** for reviewing and how that approval process is happening.
>
> *Leon Pinkett, Director, Baltimore Arts Realty Corporation (BARCO)*

Impact vs. Feasibility



Funding and the logistics of what could be a system overhaul would be the primary challenges for implementation.

For the outsourcing option, the biggest concern would be up-front funding; as it is a largely automated system, subsequent upkeep funding may be significantly less. Upkeep funding may center around some city employee who creates rough timelines at the beginning of the permit process, which would exist in both options' scenarios. (See Create a Point-Person Position.) While it may be a software overhaul, transition difficulties may be mitigated by the software company's team.

Addressing such concerns with paper or low-tech solutions would perhaps take much more staffing, funding, and time for a potentially less long-lasting and sustainable result. The current website may prove challenging to adjust and staffing specifically for the website may need to be brought on. However, the goals listed above could be tailored to the current ePlans portal, and up-front funding for demos and software would not need to be produced.

These types of tools seek to streamline the permitting process by funneling all documents and applications through a singular portal that is accessible to applicants as well as backend reviewers, inspectors, and other officials. The centralization of the process could address one of the primary facets of the concern around the informal nature of the current permit process, as well as the concern that the backend could benefit from increased organizational powers and a more involved tracking system. However, even a successful solution that doesn't use an external, ready-to-use software would better formalize the permitting process and address many of the underlying challenges mentioned by the nonprofit leaders interviewed in this study.

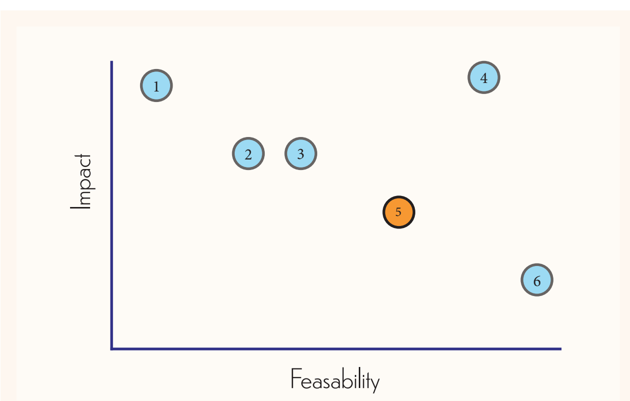
[4] https://ci-delano-ca.smartgovcommunity.com/Public/Home
[5] https://www.brightlysoftware.com/sites/default/files/file/2022-02/Brightly_GOV_city-of-delano_case%20study%5Bfinal%5D.pdf
[6] https://dept-hbc-ky.smartgovcommunity.com/Public/Home

Create New Training Systems Promote Current Resources

Numerous nonprofit officials, during interviews, commented how they wished educational resources were at their disposal during the permitting process. However, many resources do exist. The lack of awareness of officials, leaders in the Baltimore philanthropic realm, indicates that these resources could be promoted more. For instance, expeditor Lou Catelli suggested that "YouTube channels could be brilliant. You have somebody, give him a little script, and just make a series of YouTube videos." Baltimore's Department of Housing and Community Development has published the "Permit like a Pro" workshop on YouTube to introduce the ePermit process last year. The fact that no interviewee has mentioned this video series, as well as the series's low count of 1000 viewers, suggests that more intensive promotion is needed.

> "I would think that class of that end **would** be and **should** be well attended.
>
> *Chris Maynard, Director of Philanthropy, Tuerk House*

Furthermore, many nonprofit officials have suggested the creation of community networks or even nonprofit management classes to educate newer organization leaders. Catelli shed light on the lack of communication between expeditors, sharing how there is no network of expeditors that a nonprofit owner can call and ask for service. To find someone like Catelli, one must resort to word of mouth or personal connections—not a streamlined, standardized process. Creating such a network would remove the logistical barriers of hiring an expeditor as well as any disadvantages for nonprofits just starting up their businesses. Chris Maynard of the Tuerk House suggested that, because nonprofit management is difficult, current "success stories" in the industry should lead classes demonstrating the practices that guide their success. Maynard advised newcomers: "If you think you have everything in place, you probably still don't," adding, "I would think that a class of that end would be and should be well attended." If the creation of such resources proves feasible, many Baltimorean leaders would likely be inclined to agree.



Impact vs. Feasibility

Our team decided that the feasibility of this plan to fully staff up these positions is inherently low. We deduced this due to the overall capital that would need to be given to recruiting and paying these new city employees, and the current state of the job market as of the publication of this report. It is important to note that although feasibility is very low, there would be less of a need to invent new processes or create new standing positions within the city government. Therefore, it may seem easier to some stakeholders to fill current positions than to create new positions and hire fewer employees. We still believe that the current state of the labor market and the capital needed to attract and retain these employees still create large barriers for the City.

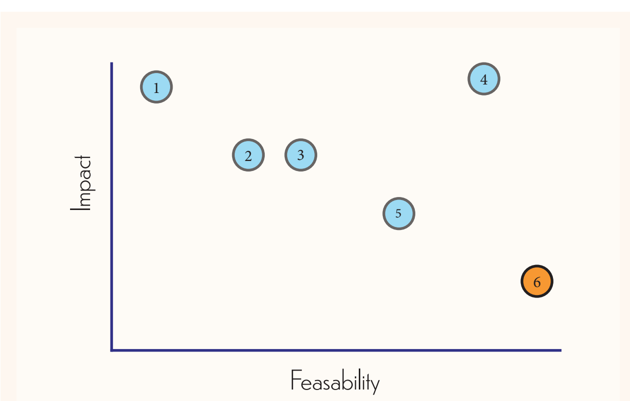
The impact, however, of this recommendation, is incredibly high. We believe that if positions are fully staffed with well trained employees, the entire process can work better without any major alterations to existing structures. There will be an increase in the overall efficiency of the permitting process.

Conduct an Internal Review of Current Permits

Many Baltimore nonprofit owners agree that many permits facilitate safe and necessary action to better their city via capital projects; some, however, believe that some of these permits can be scaled back in practice. As our study found that the volume of permits, some of which applicants viewed as outdated, leaves some individuals frustrated, an internal review could prove to have positive impacts. Some permit requirements from decades past are no longer relevant to capital projects today, as one anonymous Baltimore resident mentioned while speaking on the state permit on pinball machines that was established in the 1900s. "Why is that really necessary? I think people would like it if they could have pinball machines that didn't require the city government coming in," they said. Although this requirement comes from the state and not Baltimore, the sentiment remains intact that outdated permits past their point of use are still being adhered to today. The government has also recognized this need; earlier this year, the state of Maryland repealed the pinball machine law, effective in October.

> "I think there probably really should be a review around permitting and figuring out which ones are extraneous.
>
> *Gary Williams, Program Officer, France-Merrick Foundation*

An internal review and subsequent streamlining of permits would also pave the way for applicants and reviewers alike to spend their time and resources on the permits of larger consequence and, by extension, larger impact on the common good. "It's bogging the system down on both ends," said Jess Porter, "for people that have these types of projects, and for the agencies approving them." As Program Officer at the France-Merrick Foundation, Porter applies for permits very frequently and also questions why "nobody is stopped and asked 'do we need to do them [extraneous permits] anymore?"



Impact vs. Feasibility

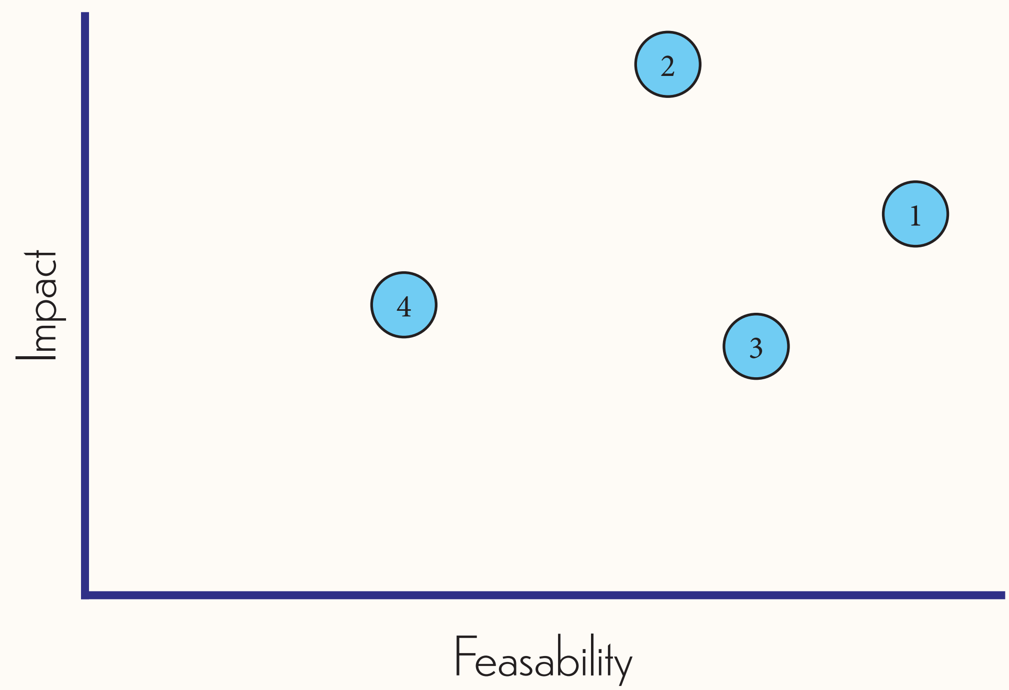
Our team positioned an internal review on the Feasibility vs. Impact Matrix as having high levels of feasibility against a moderate level of impact. In terms of being feasible for city officials to carry out, the capital needed to conduct such a process is entirely contingent on who is hired by the city to conduct it. The level of impact, on the other hand, we believe to be contingent on the action taken after the internal review. Should no action be taken to amend the existing permits, the impact would be net zero for the greater community of applicants. However, should action be taken to consolidate or revise permits, the impact would be greater than we have illustrated.

PERMITS

Recommendations

For nonprofits and foundations

Feasibility vs. Impact Matrix



Foundation and Nonprofit Recommendations Key

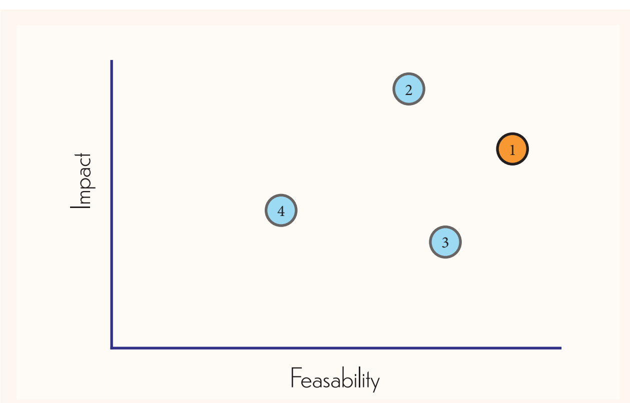
1. Foundations Develop a Network of Expeditors
2. Foundations Aggregate Grantee's Permit Data
3. Foundations Consolidate Literature on Permitting
4. Nonprofit first steps: Contact City Council and Expeditor

Foundations Develop a Network of Expeditors

As we found throughout our research, expeditors serve as an effective way for nonprofits to speed up the permitting process. "We actually hired an expeditor because it's so time-consuming to deal with city permitting," Amy Cavanaugh, Executive Director at the Maryland Art Place said. However, we heard from several sources that there is no current network of expeditors, which makes it challenging for nonprofits who have never applied for a permit to know who to reach out to. Lou Catelli, local expeditor, expanded on this theme when he said, "It's all word of mouth...there's no centralized database of expeditors."

> "There's **no** centralized database of expeditors."
>
> *Lou Catelli, Independent Expeditor*

We believe that foundations could collaborate with their grantees and with each other to develop a comprehensive list of expeditors within Baltimore, this would allow grantees to know who to contact in order to get their permits in a more efficient way. This new list of contacts would serve as a living document that can be continually amended to include all adequate expeditors in the area.



Impact vs. Feasibility

We believe that this would be a feasible option for foundations to take because it would only require them to reach out to their grantees and hear if they have been working with an expeditor and if they know what their contact information is. They would then interact with other foundations to generate a holistic database of expeditors within Baltimore. Although there would need to be a fair amount of communication from grantees to foundations and then foundations to other foundations, this type of communication is already commonplace.

We also believe that there would be a large impact if this network was created. This would address many of our key takeaways, mainly it would shrink the knowledge gaps between nonprofits that create inequities. The knowledge gap would shrink because all grantees would not only be aware of the fact that exhibitors are an essential part of the current permitting system in Baltimore, but they would also have access to multiple contacts within the field of expediting.

Foundations Aggregate Grantee's Permit Data

Another major takeaway from our findings was that there was a large sentiment that the process for obtaining permits was not transparent. Jess Porter, Program Officer at the France-Merrick Foundation, expanded on this point when she said, "clear points of contact seem to be an issue or ... getting updates more regularly seems to be a challenge."

Knowing that this is a pressing sentiment within the nonprofit community, we decided to try and offer a suggestion that may allow nonprofits to have a clearer view of the permitting process. We decided, similarly to the first solution, that key permitting data should be pooled together by foundations from their grantees and then shared on a larger database. The data collected could include the type of permit applied for, the length it took to get the permit, whether or not an expeditor was used, the location at which the permit was applied for, etc. If enough data is compiled, nonprofits can utilize it to understand how long the process should take for them.

Utilizing the two hypothetical sets of data on the page, let's say that we are "Nonprofit X" applying for Permit "A" in Location 2. With this data, we could have some insight that, on average, Permit "A" takes nonprofits 2.5 months to acquire. We also know that permits from Location 2 take two months on average, compared to the average wait time of 2.5 months for the average permit in the City of Baltimore. This means that permits in Location 2, based on our fabricated data, are acquired by nonprofits 20 percent faster than an average permit in Baltimore. Using this data, "Nonprofit X" could assume that it will probably take them less than 2.5 months to get Permit "A".

Now, this is an incredibly oversimplified version of the plethora of variables that would need to be accounted for in order to make an actual prediction of how long the permit process would take. However, if a wide variety of variables are compiled using sufficient data sets, we believe that an accurate prediction can be made.

Multiple Organization's wait times for permit "A"

Organization Name	Wait time for Permit A
Nonprofit 1	1 month
Nonprofit 2	3 months
Nonprofit 3	2 months
Nonprofit 4	4 months
Average wait-time	2.5 months

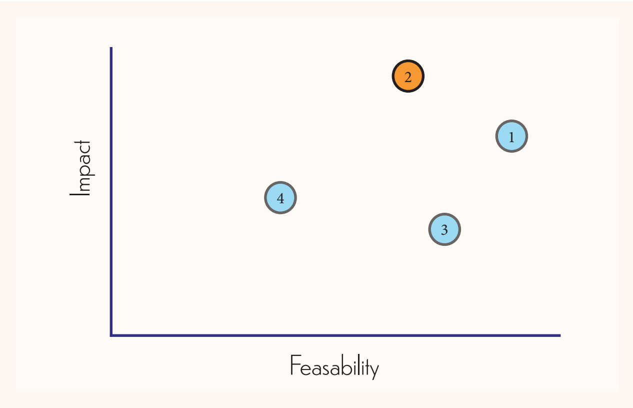
Average wait time for permit by location

Location	Average wait time for permits
Location 1	3 months
Location 2	2 months
Location 3	2 months
Location 4	5 months
Average wait-time	2.5 months

Impact vs. Feasibility

Although we see this option as being the least feasible of the three proposed suggestions for foundations to take, we still think it is feasible as long as a coalition of energized foundations is created. Foundations would need to first decide what variables they wish to measure. Next, they could create a form to send to their grantees to record their experiences with the permitting process. Once these preliminary steps are taken though, filling out these forms would be very easy. Hopefully, if a wide enough coalition of foundations and grantees is established, there will be a huge data set to work with to create deep insights.

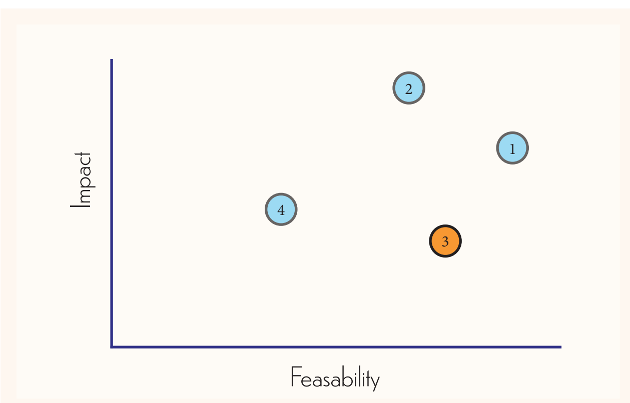
We also believe that there will be a large impact if this suggestion is carried out. Nonprofits will have a much deeper understanding of how long the process will most likely take and that will allow them to make solid timelines for their projects. In all, by using this big data set, nonprofits will be able to understand the timing of the permitting process much more.



Foundations Consolidate Literature on Permitting

Another key takeaway that was touched on throughout this piece was the knowledge gaps that are prevalent throughout the permitting process. Many nonprofits feel unaware of important literature that currently exists. Speaking from personal experience, we sympathize with these feelings. We tried to conduct an intensive literature review when we first began this project and were discouraged by the seemingly limited information that exists currently. When we did find important literature, like the "Permit like a Pro" workshop on the Department of Housing and Community Development's YouTube to introduce the ePermit process, we were surprised to see less than 1000 views on the video.

Once again, if foundations can talk to each other and develop a shared list of resources that currently exist for permitting, and maybe even contact government officials to make sure that the folder of literature they have assembled is exhaustive, then nonprofits will be much more aware of important resources for this process. This would also help with the takeaway that smaller nonprofits or nonprofits less experienced with the process are at an unequal starting point.



Impact vs. Feasibility

The feasibility of this suggestion is relatively complex. On one end, it seems as though if a team of people just research hard enough, they will be able to develop an adequate sample of consolidated literature on permitting. However, speaking from personal experience, we have seen just how challenging this feat can be. But we also believe that if a strong coalition of foundations comes together and shares the pertinent documents that they already utilize, then this goal would not be incredibly challenging.

We believe that there will be a solid impact as a result of this suggestion. This is because nonprofits who have never applied for a permit before will be able to gain a much deeper understanding of the complex process before embarking on it. This is an opportunity that they are not currently afforded.

Nonprofit First Steps: Contact City Council and Expeditor

When thinking about possible suggestions through the lens of what nonprofits could do, we decided to focus on the first steps that they can take. Based off of our interviews, we believe that before entering the permitting process, nonprofits should immediately contact their City Council person and get an expeditor.

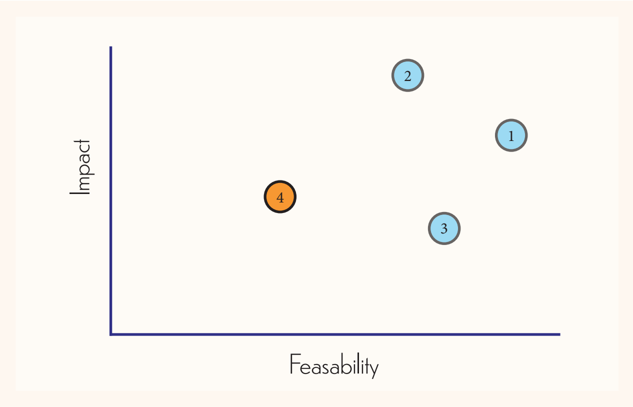
> "Hope your city council person has good constituent services.
>
> *Gary Williams, Program Officer, France-Merrick Foundation*

The first aspect of this is to contact their City Council person. Gary Williams, Program Officer at the France-Merrick Foundation, said that nonprofits "have to lean on the City Council and hope your City Council person has good constituent services... A lot of smaller nonprofits [working on their] first project don't know that. So the first project is almost always learning and headaches. And they know that going forward, but it does cause, like I said, delays and delays cost money." There are immediately important aspects of this suggestion to note, first off you have to, as Williams said, "Hope your city council person has good constituent services." If there is a new City Council person, they may not have the relationships that are needed to expedite the permitting process. It is also important to note that if every nonprofit begins contacting their respective City Council person's constituent services offices, then a new staffing issue may be created. We assume that if there becomes too much of a demand for constituent services office's help throughout the permitting process, then another backlog will form. In a sense, this avenue that currently speeds up the process may be another roadblock later on. However, we would still advise any nonprofit applying for a permit to immediately contact their City Council person's constituent services representatives and enlist their help.

Leon Pinkett, a Director at BARCO, stands in Open Works, one of his organization's nonprofit grantees.
Photo by Willow Taylor Chiang Yang

We also believe that when embarking on this process, a nonprofit should immediately hire an expeditor. Amy Cavanaugh, Executive Director at the Maryland Art Place, when asked what she would do if she had to apply for a permit again, would "just call an expediter." She then expanded on this point by saying, "I would never have time to do this... I would have no choice but to hire an expediter. Let me put it that way." With an expeditor, many of our interviewees experienced a much easier process. With this in mind, we would recommend that all nonprofits applying for a new permit immediately get in contact with an expeditor.

Impact vs. Feasibility



We believe the feasibility to be relatively high for these two steps. There is some uncertainty on how receptive a city council person will be to any given nonprofit or if they will have the necessary connections, however, if they do they can be extremely helpful. Even if they do not, exhausting this avenue is still a worthwhile endeavor. Getting an expeditor is also very feasible if you have a connection to one; however, if you do not, it can be rather tough to find one. Lou Catelli, local expeditor, said, “It’s all word of mouth...there’s no centralized database of expeditors.” But again, hopefully, a nonprofit will be able to hire an expeditor if they can find one. With this hiring, however, there is a cost, which again could be prohibitive to certain shops that may not have the cash on hand to enlist the services of an expeditor. In this case, we would suggest they focus even more of their time on their City Council person.

There may be significant impact for an individual nonprofit if they are able to successfully utilize both these suggestions. Based on what we heard, they will save time and energy within this process. However, it is important to note that these two suggestions do not fundamentally change the system and are instead workarounds on the takeaways listed earlier. Due to this fact, we would say that there would be less of an impact on the system than other suggestions.

PUBLIC GRANTS

Key Takeaways

[Treatment based on nonprofit size may contribute to inequity]

Interviewees say there are both institutional and individual barriers for nonprofits that are smaller, are socioeconomically disadvantaged, and/or serve underrepresented communities within the grant application and awarding process. There appear to be a few primary points in which these barriers have been noted: **(1) nonprofit track record; (2) project size; and (3) existing infrastructure and on-hand resources.**

Track Record

Discrepancies between smaller and larger organizations in terms of their track record in applying for grants and carrying out projects seem to be either financial or reputational.

On the financial side, grant applications tend to require internal audits and financial records from the nonprofit, which not only precludes new nonprofits from receiving funding but may also prevent less-staffed nonprofits from applying due to the time-intensive nature of the financial reporting process.

"Probably for most of the city's grantmaking the city is only making grants to audited nonprofits," said Celeste Amato, Chief of Staff to the Comptroller, "which we could discuss as a barrier for nonprofit organizations, because should nonprofits all have to be audited in order to receive grant money?"

Will Holman, Executive Director of Open Works, says the process can create yet another disincentive for smaller organizations to apply to public funding.

"I understand why those rules are in place: so they don't get accused of waste, fraud, and abuse on the back end because they gave a bunch of money to an unvetted organization that blew it," said Will Holman, Executive Director of Open Works. "But if you flip it around to an equity lens, each one of these hoops you have to jump through just disqualifies more and more organizations."

Having a reputational record also helps get an application approved, said Director Leon Pinkett of BARCO.

"There's a familiarity with organizations that have been previously funded. I don't know if I could say that there's a particular personal relationship with the reviewers, and I can't speak for the reviewer, but I would be more inclined to continue supporting an organization or project that's had proven results," said Pinkett, who worked for two decades in city and local government, "which probably is a challenge to new organizations, because you might have to figure out how to prove yourself in your application or other supports to show that this is a worthy project."

In both the financial and reputational situations,

Will Holman stands in front of Open Works, at which he is Executive Director.
Photo by Willow Taylor Chiang Yang

Pinkett says, foundations and grantmaking organizations like BARCO can step in to help their grantees and smaller partners by supporting them operationally as well as applying for public funding in their place. BARCO's involvement in Motor House, a $6 million renovation of a 1914 car dealership into an arts hub in 2015, was one example.

"We ended up being the entity that the grants come through in order to go to Motor House. We provide that accounting," he said, with the caveat that BARCO does not take this role often. However, BARCO and other organizations can also serve smaller nonprofits in a more removed way, too, by lending their operational support as well as reputation by associating their name with a project.

"That's a critical piece that probably becomes a tremendous impediment for smaller nonprofits," he said. "How do you do that, unless you are able to partner or identify a group that can come alongside you and provide that?"

> On some level, the services most of us provide are fundamentally somewhat inefficient and full of friction. We're generally serving folks that are hard to serve and trying to solve problems that are hard to solve.
>
> *Will Holman, Executive Director, Open Works*

Project Size

As some interviewees noted was understandable, larger-dollar projects may be favored in the granting process over small-dollar projects. As larger nonprofits tend to be able to propose and handle larger projects, smaller nonprofits unable to do so and going up against larger-dollar projects may experience added difficulty.

Issues of equity could also be exacerbated by potential discrepancies in treatment based on size. Smaller nonprofits, particularly those serving historically disadvantaged populations, may "have better or more thorough understandings of their community" than larger organizations, Holman said. "You're also probably missing a vast population, because you're not engaging," he said of the institutional barriers within the granting process.

Existing Infrastructure and On-Hand Resources

A lack of financial and/or human capacity may lead to missed or unavailable opportunities for smaller nonprofits unable to garner the human or financial resources necessary to complete all the day-to-day functions, much less the work related to grants.

Ann Coy of Healing City Baltimore has felt this acutely.

"We would love to expand; we'd love to hire another person. I have the title coordinator. I'm also the coordinator for all of the legislation implementation. And so I'm doing five people's jobs. I love it," she said. "But it would be great to have more community impact [if] you're bringing in someone else who can really help focus on either the community side or the legislative side."

Holman says that, even if they are awarded funding, smaller organizations face difficulties in diligently reporting back to the government due to their size and lack of human and financial resources.

"Data reporting on the backhand... is one of those administrative overhead costs that are not considered [by the grant]. In the context of mid-grant, I'm probably spending 10 hours a month just on invoice, participant data collection, and reporting back. Doesn't seem like that much, right?" Holman said of one project Open Works recently embarked on, which provided workforce development training and had just graduated their first cohort in June, "But that means 40 hours a cohort, say 80 hours a year, and I don't think the grant even covers that much stuff. Now, it's assumed, again, a lot of these larger organizations will have case managers, social workers on staff that're doing that. But because of our scale, whatever we don't have staff for, I just have to do."

Amato also noted the difficulties with financial and human infrastructure, saying that the grant application process "can be a real burden" for smaller nonprofits, particularly with the large influx of grant cash as a result of Covid and ARPA funding. Even for city departments like the Health Department, the system to process and actually use grant funding is "so far behind" due to staffing shortages.

"That's a real barrier for small nonprofits who can't buy without cash flow," she said.

Reimbursement grants, in particular, appear to be another point of stress for smaller nonprofits; organizations without a solid asset base may find themselves unable to pay the up-front costs of project implementation, even with the future promise of government funds.

> The city owns a lot of the time lag. But nonprofits own it, too.
>
> *Celeste Amato, Chief of Staff, Office of the Comptroller*

"All of that [the advance payment system for reimbursement grants] is a real strain if you don't have your own significant cash flow," said Michelle Geiss, the Executive Director at Impact Hub Baltimore.

Open Works also experienced challenges with a reimbursement grant for its aforementioned workforce development course, for which they received a $223,000 reimbursement grant from the Mayor's Office on Economic Development (MOED) to be used for four cohorts over 2 years. Peer organizations who do these kinds of projects more regularly, Holman said, have higher operating budgets.

"This is new for us. So this operational cost plus to our budget; the only dollars I had for this program were the dollars from MOED. So this presented a massive cash flow problem for us. Running one cohort costs about $50–$60,000, and I have to pay teachers, pay stipends to students, operational overhead costs, partner costs, materials, licensing the curriculum—all that stuff we had to eat," Holman explained. Opening lines of credit was not an option, as the interest rates would not have been covered by the grant. In order to "avoid that cash crunch," he asked one of Open Works' regular funders, the Deutsch Foundation, to provide their annual grant money up-front, instead of the usual quarterly installments. If they did not have a regular funder or could not get the money up front, Holman said, it would be "impossible."

Holman felt, however, that his options were limited. "This is a huge equity problem with the city," he said. He was concerned that the nature of the payment process that he experienced could disqualify smaller applicants. He also noted that the process could also pose more barriers for those from underrepresented groups.

"It especially disqualifies the vast majority of nonprofits led by women, people of color, people without a development director, people without the human infrastructure to even accomplish this labyrinthian application process," he said. "It's shifting, essentially, all this cost burden onto the constituents that [the city is] theoretically serving."

Despite the added challenges for smaller nonprofits, however, applying to and receiving public funding may oftentimes be a necessity. Private or nonprofit funding can make up a significant portion of the finances for a given project but, as Pinkett put it, "you just can't do these types of projects without some other types of funding." These other funds tend to be public, for which research, applying, and monitoring can be high-effort.

"It's going to be time consuming," Pinkett said, "but it's necessary."

However, nonprofits can also exacerbate timing for the government.

"As a grantee," Pinkett said, "you've got to make certain that you respond appropriately. You never want to be in a situation where somebody's asking you for paperwork that was supposed to be a part of submission." In order to mitigate challenges with the review process for government officials later on, he says nonprofits have to do a "tremendous job" with organization, bookkeeping, and other necessary documents.

Amato also noted that "keeping up" with documentation was a necessary facet of participating in the grant process. "The city owns a lot of the time lag," she said. "But nonprofits own it, too."

Government may be understaffed, impacting timelines, clarity

The current understaffing of vital roles dealing with grants within Baltimore's government exacerbates preexisting points of tension.

Due to understaffing in the government, many nonprofits have experienced an elongated grant awarding process, which has not only impacted organizations and their ability to fulfill their mission, but also negatively affects the relationship between nonprofits and the government. Nonprofits have stated, "It's hard to implement community work when the timeline is so long that the timeline is unreliable." One of the reasons the timeline for this specific grant was unreliable is because the grant process couldn't start until someone in that department was hired to look at the application. Ann Coy, Coordinator for Healing City Baltimore states, "Yes, I'm an optimistic person, but it's hard to identify anything that's going very well... I think a lot of it has to do with staffing in the office. They were not staffed up to process the awards. And their system wasn't clear." Because the government was not staffed up to process their award of $1.5 million in ARPA dollars, Healing City Baltimore has had to press pause on many internal operations and events.

Photo by Willow Taylor Chiang Yang

> "I think a lot of it has to do with staffing in the office, they [the govenrment] **were not staffed up to process the awards**. And their system wasn't clear.
>
> *Ann Coy, Coordinator, Healing City Baltimore*

Specifically in regards to ARPA, some nonprofits feel that the government is unequipped to handle the volume of new ARPA contracts that have been approved. Coy has expressed these concerns, along with Executive Director of Open Works, Will Holman. Holman states of nonprofits whose grant applications have been approved, "But every month that goes by, it becomes less and less realistic that any of these other organizations are going to be able to launch whatever they've proposed and get it done with the amount of time they're chipping away at the grant period with each delay." Elongated timelines and general unpreparedness of incoming ARPA contracts may be delaying original plans and contributing to the narrative of unreliability in public grant timelines.

Grant guidelines may not recognize nonprofit infrastructure

Many nonprofit applicants feel that the parameters of public grants are restrictive, oftentimes posing logistical challenges for smaller organizations.

Public grants ideally exist to benefit all sizes of do-good organizations that choose to apply. Many applicants, however, feel that the requirements accompanying these funds often outweigh the benefits. Michelle Geiss, Executive Director at Impact Hub Baltimore, detailed in an interview that "there's more burden that is placed on everybody with public grants because they have a lot more requirements." More paperwork and documentation demand a level of thoroughness that smaller nonprofits like Impact Hub find difficult to take on. Celeste Amato, the Chief of Staff for Comptroller Henry, corroborated this, saying how the application process with all its requirements "is a very messy and inconsistent system that is also not efficient."

In addition to enforcing strict requirements on the front end of the application process, a quick turnaround period to spend awarded funds poses another potential challenge. When speaking on the city's ARPA application, grant recipient Will Holman, Executive Director at Open Works, talked about the rapid turnaround time to spend his organization's newfound dollars. "For an organization of our size, this grant is almost 10% of our annual operating budget," he detailed. "The notion of choking on large quantities of money and the speed at which you have to use it just rolls downhill." Furthermore, these spending deadlines create a snowball effect that starts with the grantmakers in government agencies struggling to allocate their funding. "The agencies are under pressure, and then it puts the nonprofits under pressure," commented Holman. Based on Holman's insights, rapid spending deadlines coupled with application requirements may create a perceived climate of stress for many parties involved.

As more requirements create a heavy-ladened application on both the front and back ends, some organizations have been discouraged from applying for public grants for these very reasons. "We passed on federal ARPA dollars that were coming from the city," said Michelle Geiss. "We felt that it was going to be an onerous and taxing process to go through." Although Geiss's organization did eventually receive ARPA funds through the Baltimore Development Committee, a network of organizations that applied for ARPA funds collectively, Impact Hub's passing on this large public grant indicates that the public grant application process can be too overwhelming for some nonprofits to pursue.

> "When you're a small team and we stretch to try and do things, we're often making cost benefit analyses around **whether we even have the labor to apply or whether we have the labor to manage it**.
>
> *Michelle Geiss, Executive Director, Impact Hub Baltimore*

Expectations for public, foundation applications may cause discord

Differences in the grant application and awarding process causes frustration for both applicants and government officials.

When a nonprofit applies for a public grant after previously receiving grants from a foundation, they sometimes carry the expectations and requirements from that experience with a nonprofit foundation to their public grant process. They expect the same experience from both sectors and the process to move the same way. However, as an employee from the Baltimore City Department of Finance says, "A lot of nonprofits expect a quick turnaround on a lot of things. And that's almost impossible, because of the different internal processes that a lot of things have to go through."

There are differences in the process such as turnaround times and expected behaviors. Some nonprofits are unaware that since their grant needs to go through departments A,B, and C instead of through a singular board, the process will naturally be longer, or that continuously reaching out to officials to check in on the grant may expedite the process.

On the government side, they have experienced frustration from receiving a bad reputation regarding grant turnaround times specifically due to false expectations. They also revealed concerns about foundations' grant requirements and the audit process being too different from theirs, so they hope to collaborate with foundations in the future to limit confusion and frustration from applicants.

> If philanthropy can rein down in terms of what their requirements are, as well as collaborate with us, **it would help to curb the mindset that, regardless of the type of funding, be prepared for the same set of requirements.**
>
> *Gary Williams, Program Officer, France-Merrick Foundation*

> **People are used to certain processes.** They try to, in a sense, apply that across the board. When it doesn't apply to certain things, it's frustrating.
>
> *Employee, Department of Finance*

Lack of clarity, centralization of grants may contribute to confusion

The process nonprofits have to go through in order to get a grant and general grant information given to them may be unclear.

A common theme across our interviews was that nonprofits have a lot of confusion about grant information and the grant process is unclear. There appears to be a lack of consistency in how the grant process is operated across different agencies. An employee within the Baltimore City Department of Finance said, "If we were able to simplify processes and have agencies use the same process across the board for grants, it would help the grant awarding process move along quicker."

Problems regarding grant funding not being rewarded on time have been brought to light throughout the interviews due to this lack of urgency and consistency from agencies. Celeste Amato, Chief of Staff to the Comptroller said, "Different people control different pieces, or use different systems to manage what should be one process and that has led to a lot of frustration... but certainly for nonprofits who have less ability to work with the city and carry out their operations without getting the grant happening on time or getting paid on time." Lack of transparency enhances this issue by making it difficult for nonprofits to know who is reviewing their grant applications. Will Holman, Executive Director at Open Works said, "The review process is very opaque. I have no idea who's looking at these, what the criteria are, or anything. And there's no human you can talk to, it's very frustrating."

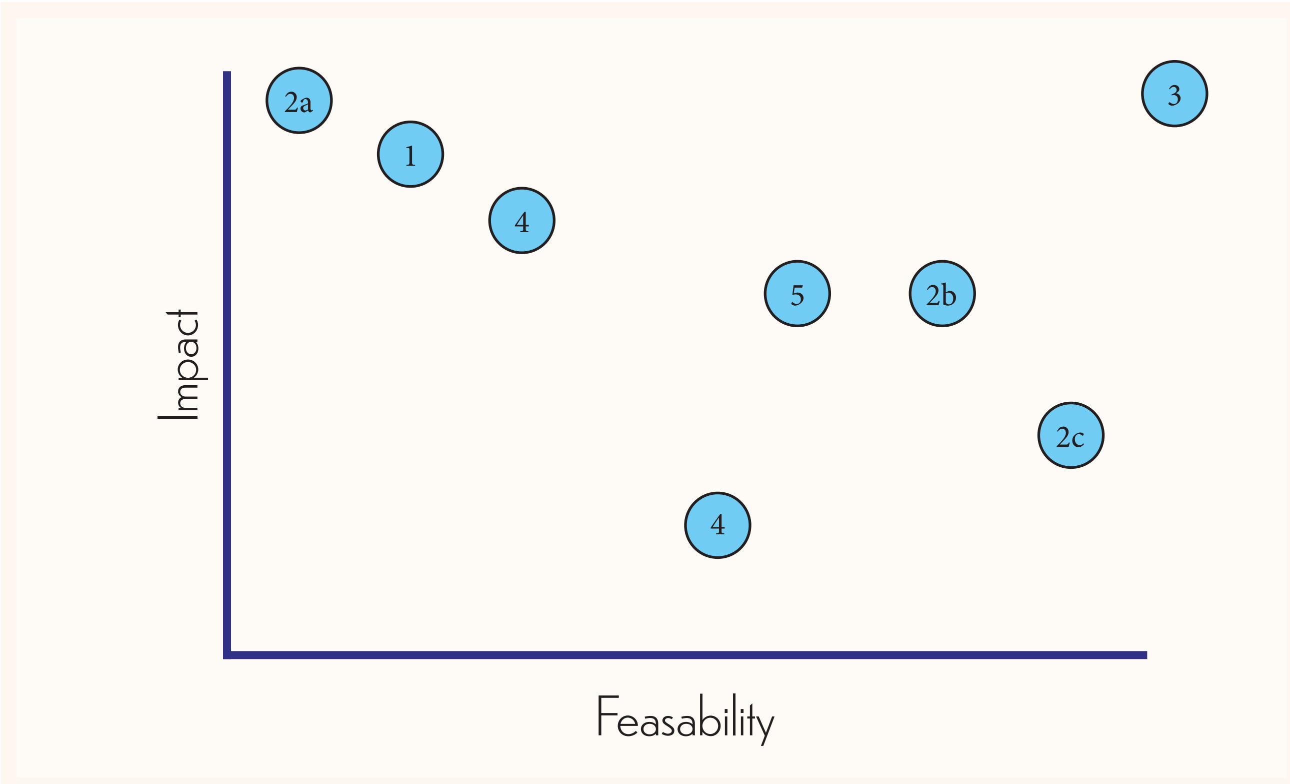
> Different people control different pieces, or use different systems to mange **what should be one process and that has led to a lot of frustration...** but certainly for nonprofits who have less ability to work with the city and carry out their operations without getting the grant happening on time.
>
> *Celeste Amato, Chief of Staff, Office of the Comptroller*

Grant opportunities are also unclear to nonprofits and a large part of that confusion comes from the fact that there is no centralized place where nonprofits can learn about grant opportunities. Will Holman said, "There is no one place you can find all [grant] opportunities." This frustrates nonprofits who are trying to find all opportunities possible and do not know where to look for possibilities. "Next steps" for nonprofits who have grant applications under review are hard to find as well. Ann Coy with Healing City Baltimore said, "No one is communicating to give me any sort of like, 'Oh, here's the next steps. Here's what you can anticipate.' And so that's been really frustrating just from a relationship standpoint." This lack of consistency looks very different and depends on the situation, however, the sentiment that better consistency would allow for better efficiency holds true for the experiences brought to light in the interviews.

PUBLIC GRANTS

Recommendations

Feasibility vs. Impact Matrix



Recommendations Key

1 Increase Accessibility to Smaller Nonprofits: City

2c Centralize Grant Opportunities with Portal: Foundations

2a Centralize Grant Opportunities with Portal: Government

3 Digitize Current Grant Process

2b Centralize Grant Opportunities with Portal: Nonprofits

4 Conduct an Internal Review on Grants

5 Promote Awareness of Nonprofit Coalitions

6 Consciously Reach Out to Smaller Nonprofits: Foundations

Increase accessibility to smaller nonprofits: City

While the government does have grants specifically geared towards supporting underrepresented populations or neighborhoods that have not seen a lot of economic development efforts, there appear to remain some barriers for smaller nonprofits to get more broadly focused public funds. Smaller nonprofits that do not have years of internal financial documentation or large operating budgets capable of asking for a reimbursement grant may be more intimately acquainted with the communities they serve, or may serve a population that has yet to receive recognition.

"A lot of these smaller, less formal grassroots organizations that exist in the nonprofit ecosystem in Baltimore have better or more thorough understandings of their community than we do," said Will Holman, Executive Director of Open Works. "You're also probably missing a vast service population, because you're not engaging."

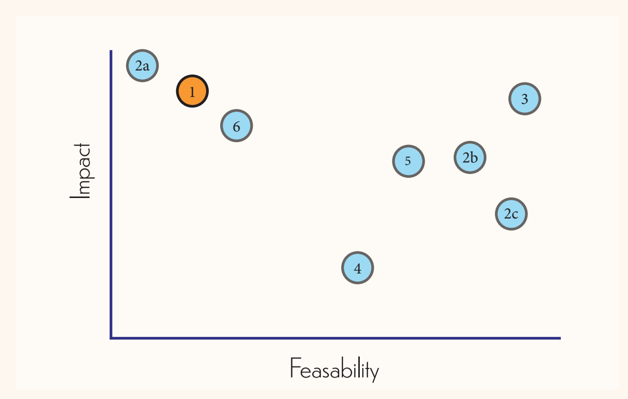
"There's a real barrier for small nonprofits who can't buy without cash flow," said Celeste Amato, Chief of Staff to the Comptroller.

Government could adopt a system where—for some grants, other than those specifically set aside for underrepresented groups—smaller nonprofits or those that serve and are led by underrepresented communities are provided with extra support to increase the accessibility of the application process. Smaller nonprofits without financial documents or with operating budgets of less than a designated number could be able to work with a coordinator to complete the application or could receive second looks by reviewers after the application is submitted. These may be particularly helpful for community organizations operating with just a few employees without much experience.

"I raised a lot of money for a living; I've gotten very good at writing a grant application," Holman said. " But, when you have a community based nonprofit, like [an organization] up the street, and the director never went to college or is too busy running summer camp, the application process itself is sort of the first filter of equity."

Such an idea may also mitigate concerns surrounding the validity of smaller nonprofits who don't have a history of success or legitimacy, as a coordinator would also serve as a check, while also providing necessary and more accessible opportunities for all in the nonprofit sector.

Therefore, a big part of the community liaison's job would be to hold other officials accountable if racial/socioeconomic inequality is seen.



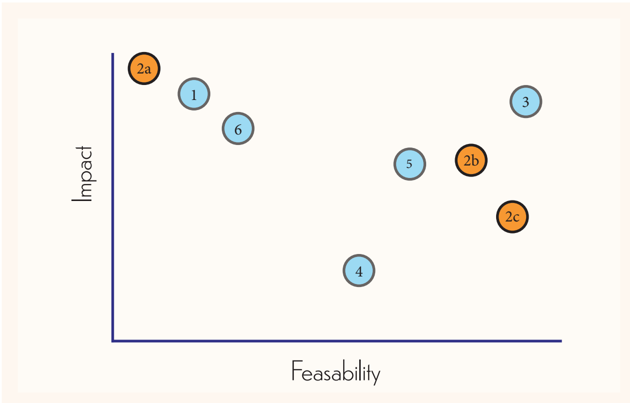
Impact vs. Feasibility

The initial primary feasibility issue would be the potential initiative itself—increasing equity, particularly in application processes, can be fraught with tension. In the case of creating a coordinator position, staffing and financial resources may also pile on as potential challenges. A coordinator position with an emphasis on helping smaller nonprofits with the grant application process may also result in logistical complexities, as the position may be a large systems change and as such a role may require vast organizational powers.

Should the implementation be successful, however, the impact may be very large as it addresses directly most of the equity issues that interviewees mentioned as well as some of the concerns with the clarity of the application process.

Centralize Grant Opportunities with Portal

When discussing suggestions for how to make the grant process more efficient the idea of a grant opportunity portal came to mind. This portal would be accessible to any nonprofit who is eligible for grant funding. Different agencies who have grant opportunities would be able to post these opportunities onto the portal, along with who is eligible for these grants, the requirements a nonprofit must meet in order for an application to be approved, and who would be reviewing the application once it is submitted to the government. This potential solution would allow for smaller nonprofits to spend less time trying to navigate the process in terms of finding grants for which to apply, understanding the requirements of that grant application, and tracking the application as it makes its way through the government. Will Holman gave the suggestion, "perhaps a monthly or quarterly webinar, or some kind of format to say, here are upcoming opportunities." This suggestion would make the grant application process more transparent for nonprofits and hold them accountable for getting all documentation in order to make the process go as smoothly as possible on the government side of the process since they now know all of the grant requirements beforehand.



Impact vs. Feasibility

3a) Agency integration of the portal: In terms of different agencies being able to come together and work from one centralized source, the feasibility of that would be quite low. Trying to create, build, and manage a framework for which the agencies could work out of would take a lot of time and effort to do successfully. However, if it could be done, the impact would be incredibly high considering it would centralize the entire discovery process for nonprofits and make the process more efficient. The State of Maryland has a database like the one suggested already in use. This database posts different grant opportunities and deadlines from various agencies, as well as allows for grant opportunities to be posted. This database would be a great guideline for the Baltimore City Government to use while designing a system similar to this.

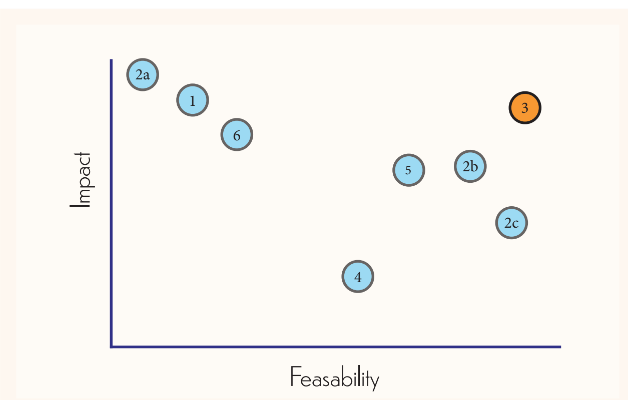
3b) Nonprofits requirements: An issue that was common throughout our interviews was that nonprofits sometimes have difficulty in providing/keeping up with all of the documentation and paperwork needed to successfully get a grant application approved. The use of this portal would allow a nonprofit to have full transparency on the documentation and requirements needed to obtain funding. This would have relatively high feasibility because once the platform is built, nonprofits would be able to join easily and see all the paperwork and tasks that need to be completed. This would have high impact due to the fact that there would be full transparency of the grant application process to nonprofits, eliminating extra time spent trying to learn and navigate the process.

3c) Foundations: Foundations could also use a portal like this to alert nonprofits of grant opportunities. This would have pretty high feasibility since the foundations themselves would be creating the database. This would also have mid to high impact considering it would be just another way to make grant opportunities more accessible to nonprofit organizations.

Digitize Current Grant Process

The Baltimore City government has expressed that they want to expedite the grant process. They are currently working on an online grant system in which the point "person makes a review, clicks a button and it goes to the next person," said an employee at the Department of Finance. A few months ago, the Department of Finance transitioned to emailing paper contracts, which has helped with efficiency in that process. Before ePaper contracts, the employee said, "you would have to print copies, submit to the law department for review, submit to the Audit Department for review, etc." If they can form a similar electronic process for grants, it would speed up the approvals between departments/agencies since they won't have to be physically transported and the ePortal could ensure that the grant directly goes to the correct department. The city recognizes these benefits and is currently in the process of creating an ePortal. They hope to have the system running in the next couple of months to a year, and hope to have internal city agents help them with that process.

> "Hopefully in the next few months to a year, we should have that system in place. We just want to make the grant process simpler.
>
> *Employee,*
> *Baltimore City Department of Finance*



Impact vs. Feasibility

The digitization process has high feasibility since it is already in process. However, feasibility may be impacted by implementation related to technological knowledge, onboarding, and other potential potholes. Assuming success, once the grant process is completely online, it will have a high impact because it could make the process more efficient for all involved. It could decrease processing times by reducing unnecessary red tape and potentially get grantees their funds faster; these positive results could increase equity for smaller nonprofits who cannot afford long processing times and could resolve some concerns surrounding clarity in the grant process.

Conduct an Internal Review on Public Grants

To address the perceived stress that Baltimore nonprofit leaders face when applying for public grants, our team recommends that the city government conduct an internal review of reporting requirements and spending deadlines. Specifically, this review would seek to make requirements proportional to the amount of funding received to ensure that the "costs" of applying for grants do not outweigh the benefits. Michelle Geiss, the Executive Director of Impact Hub Baltimore, reported a quality experience with such proportional requirements. "We have one funder that only requires us to have phone calls with her in order to satisfy our reporting requirements," said Geiss, "and that feels appropriate for the level of funding that she's giving." Although Geiss's funder potentially comes from a private organization instead of a public one (information unclear), this sentiment of proportional requirements remains consistent in either case. Additionally, revisiting the spending deadlines via an internal review could potentially give organizations more time to spend smartly, therefore maximizing the impact that city dollars can make on the city itself. While larger grants may be entitled to more rigorous reporting requirements, reducing requirements that may fatigue grantees could greatly reduce the stress that comes with the current application process.

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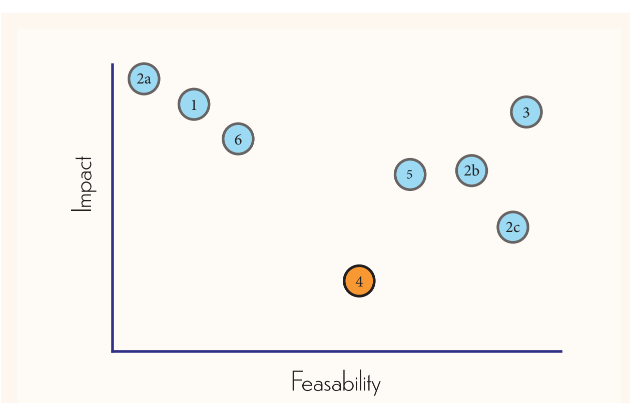
>
> *Michelle Geiss , Executive Director, Impact Hub Baltimore*



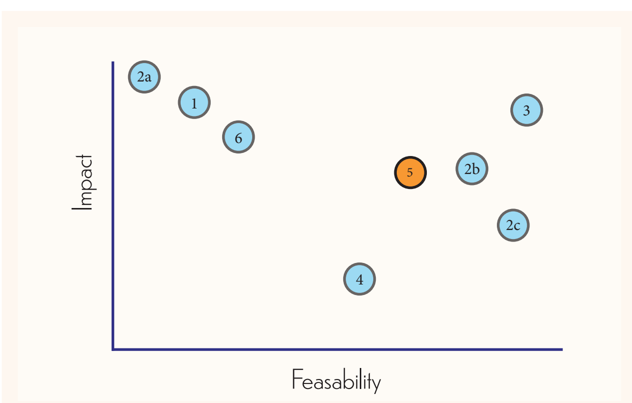
Impact vs. Feasibility

Our team positioned an internal review on the Feasibility vs. Impact Matrix as having moderate levels of feasibility against a moderate level of impact. In terms of being feasible for city officials to carry out, the capital needed to conduct such a process depends on who is hired by the city to conduct it. Moreover, bringing multiple city departments together to evaluate each requirement will take copious levels of time and logistical planning. The level of impact, on the other hand, we believe to be contingent on the action taken after the internal review. Should no action be taken to amend the existing reporting requirements on public grants, the impact would be net-zero for the greater community of applicants. However, should action be taken to consolidate or revise reporting requirements, the impact would be greater than we have illustrated.

Promote Awareness of Non-profit Coalitions

Coalitions act to obtain funding for smaller, often underrepresented nonprofits while channeling advice from industry leaders. Michelle Geiss, the Executive Director at Impact Hub Baltimore, recently obtained ARPA funding by applying for the city grant through the Baltimore Development Corporation, one of such coalitions. “We’re operating as a network, we’re funded as a network, we haven’t had to apply for those dollars ourselves because one person at the BDC is applying for those dollars,” said Geiss. Not only is Geiss now collaborating with fifteen other nonprofits to boost each other’s organization in a less-competitive atmosphere, many of the perceived burdens of the application process are lifted from Impact Hub’s shoulders. Geiss elaborated that “they [BDC] lend their credibility and infrastructure to be able to do a lot of the management. It’s still demanding, but instead of it being demanding for fifteen separate organizations that all have different infrastructure, it’s demanding for one large institution that has a lot more clout, influence, and infrastructure to be able to manage public dollars.” Coalitions, at least in Impact Hub’s experience, make the application process much more digestible for smaller nonprofits, a need our team has consistently seen within interviews.

However, many community leaders are often unaware of the benefits that come with coalitions. Promoting a coalition’s influence as a nonprofit, even through social media platforms, could make flexible funds more accessible to smaller nonprofits. These organizations help to address a possible inequity of resources for applying and absorbing large funds. “It’s allowed for very intentional collaboration,” said Geiss, “and that has allowed for much better results and outcomes.” Potentially, many other organizations could be saying the exact same thing.



Impact vs. Feasibility

Our team positioned the promotion of Nonprofit Coalitions on the Feasibility vs. Impact Matrix as having moderate levels of feasibility against a decently high level of impact. Some coalitions, such as the BDC, already exist and are gaining traction in light of successfully procuring ARPA funds. Through social media networks, events, and websites, nonprofits can share their success stories in coalitions to incentivize other nonprofits to join and reap their rewards all while contributing to a more unified nonprofit sector. This unification will take immense amounts of time and planning, but the impact of its successful execution would make so many smaller nonprofits viable applicants for larger, oftentimes more flexible funding.

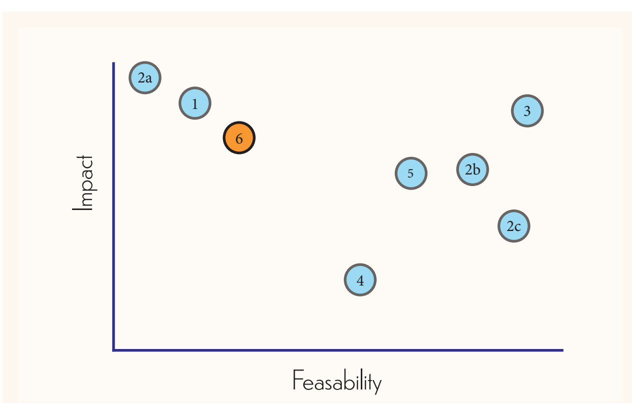
Consciously Reach Out to Smaller Nonprofits: Foundations

Foundations are uniquely able to serve smaller, underrepresented nonprofits, as foundation funding is necessary for most projects and as involved foundations are able to take on roles as the advocates and support for operational knowledge that smaller nonprofits need. They provide opportunities for associated nonprofits from a reputational as well as promotional side.

Contributions that foundations could make to addressing inequities for smaller nonprofits in the public grant space could include:

1. Creating or increasing specific reach-out to smaller nonprofits.
2. Creating structures of support, like a designated support role within the foundation, for smaller nonprofits that may have trouble applying to foundation grants.
3. Getting more involved and providing more human, reputational, and financial support in their grantees' and affiliated nonprofits' application processes to public funds, if that is a need that those organizations express.

Some of these support structures do already exist in some organizations. However, formally identifying and reaching out to nonprofits that would benefit from support could further contribute to creating a more equitable nonprofit space.



Impact vs. Feasibility

As models for this kind of relationship and support already do exist, we know there is infrastructure in place at some foundations for successful implementation. The primary barrier, then, could fall under the question of universalizability—while some foundations have seen success in the past, other foundations may not have the staff or the experience to embark on this kind of project.

Another feasibility concern could be ensuring that foundations that do not already specialize in this kind of outreach towards underrepresented communities actually choose to implement such programs. This barrier could be exacerbated by the fact that the responsibility of this recommendation would fall squarely on the foundation.

As foundations make up significant portions of many nonprofits' budgets, however, the impact could be outsized, particularly for the target nonprofit, which may not see much funding.

Conclusion

Next Steps

We hope that our investigation kindles more research on Baltimore's complex processes by future researchers. Should a research team wish to expand on our initial findings, we suggest that such a team consider implementing these next steps.

Permits

When investigating the permitting process, we encourage this research to continue to be collected by further interviewing nonprofit representatives on their experiences. A wider range of information from various different nonprofits would only improve and contribute to the research that we have conducted during these past eight weeks. Additionally, we encourage future research teams to conduct more interviews within the Baltimore City government in order to better understand its representatives' positions and duties when carrying out the permitting and grantmaking systems. After developing a set of recommendations for all stakeholders, these ideas can be discussed with government officials to refine them and make them as feasible as possible to potentially be implemented. Finally, a vital next step in researching the permit process could be conducting interviews and reviewing the permit processes of other cities. Comparing cities would be statistically similar to Baltimore, and could perhaps bring to light new practices that the Baltimore City Government could use to further improve their systems.

Public Grants

When studying Baltimore's public grantmaking systems, we encourage future research teams to conduct more interviews within the Baltimore City government in order to better understand its representatives' positions and duties when carrying out the permitting and grantmaking systems. After developing a set of recommendations for all stakeholders, these ideas can be discussed with government officials to refine them and make them as feasible as possible to potentially be implemented. Additionally, we recommend further evaluation of the way that the State of Maryland announces grant opportunities. Use of the recommended portal, like the one mentioned in this report, or something similar, would greatly impact the way that the City of Baltimore alerts grant opportunities and requirements to nonprofits organizations. Furthermore, we also suggest that researchers take the absence of ARPA dollars into account when studying Baltimore's future philanthropic landscape. This landscape changed dramatically at ARPA's introduction and will change again at the grant's disappearance. Future researchers should prepare themselves to study trends and ask questions about new funding methods that may take this grant's place. We encourage this research to continue to be collected by further interviewing nonprofit representatives on their experiences. A wider range of information from various different nonprofits would greatly improve and contribute to the research that we have conducted during these past eight weeks.

We see this document as the beginnings to a larger conversation on public grantmaking, permitting, and the nonprofit-government relationship. The next steps serve as a platform from which future researchers may dive into the field that we have explored these past eight weeks. As the landscape of Baltimore's nonprofit and government spaces continues to evolve, we hope that this report may grow alongside it.

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Acknowledgements

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Developers at Southwest Partnership
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Jess Porter, Program Officer for the France-Merrick Foundation
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Nicole Battle, Chief Executive Officer at GEDCO
Terry Staudenmaier, Senior Program Officer, Health & Human Services for the Abell Foundation
Tony Scott, Executive Director of Southwest Partnership
Will Holman, Executive Director at Open Works

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