TAUBMAN COLLEGE
ARCHITECTURE & URBAN PLANNING

INFRASTRUCTURE BARRIERS TO SHARED EQUITY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN DETROIT

DIAMOND BATES

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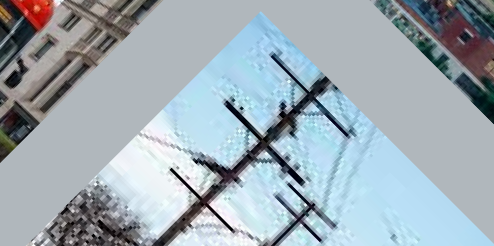

Introduction

Redeveloping vacant and underutilized land for shared equity housing and other community development projects requires more than funding and development interest. Successful redevelopment depends on understanding site conditions, infrastructure capacity, and the information needed to make informed investment decisions before construction begins. Across Detroit, infrastructure uncertainty continues to shape whether redevelopment projects move forward, how long they take, and how much they ultimately cost. Developers must navigate questions surrounding site conditions, utility availability, environmental concerns, demolition history, and existing infrastructure, all of which can delay projects and increase predevelopment expenses. Interviews conducted as part of this research reinforced that many of these costs occur before construction financing becomes available, creating a significant challenge for community-based developers.

These challenges are especially significant in Detroit, where decades of industrial activity, population decline, and widespread demolition have left many redevelopment sites with complex and often unknown infrastructure conditions. While substantial public and private investment continues to support neighborhood revitalization, redevelopment frequently begins with incomplete information about site conditions and the infrastructure needed to support new development.

Understanding these barriers is essential to creating a more efficient and predictable redevelopment process. This report examines the infrastructure challenges that commonly affect shared equity and community development projects in Detroit, explores strategies used by peer communities to address similar issues, and identifies opportunities that could strengthen site readiness and support future redevelopment efforts.

Methodology

This report draws on a review of local and national policy documents, Community Land Trust resources, redevelopment case studies, publicly available reports, and practitioner interviews. The recommendations presented in this report are not direct adaptations of a single peer community. Instead, they synthesize common themes identified across the research and apply them to Detroit's redevelopment context.

Common Infrastructure Challenges

Existing Site Conditions

Many redevelopment projects begin on sites with conditions that are not immediately visible. Buried foundations, abandoned utility connections, aging infrastructure, environmental contamination, and remnants of previous development can significantly affect project costs and construction timelines. Because these conditions are often discovered during predevelopment or construction, they can result in unexpected expenses and delays. Completing thorough site investigations early in the redevelopment process helps reduce uncertainty, but it also requires additional time and financial resources before construction financing is secured.

Limited Property Information

Accurate property information is essential for making informed development decisions.

Developers often need access to demolition records, utility information, environmental data, site history, and ownership records to determine whether a property is suitable for redevelopment. When this information is incomplete, outdated, or spread across multiple agencies, developers must spend additional time gathering information before moving forward. Improving access to reliable property information can reduce uncertainty and help organizations make more informed investment decisions.

Predevelopment Costs

Infrastructure-related expenses often occur well before construction begins. Environmental assessments, engineering studies, utility coordination, permitting, and other due diligence activities require substantial upfront investment during the predevelopment phase. For nonprofit developers, community development corporations, shared equity organizations, and affordable housing developers, these costs can present a significant financial barrier because funding sources frequently prioritize construction rather than early project planning. As a result, otherwise viable redevelopment projects may be delayed while organizations secure additional resources. This challenge was reinforced through interviews with Community Land Trust practitioners, who identified predevelopment funding, environmental testing, and site investigations as some of the greatest barriers to moving projects forward.

Agency Coordination

Community development projects rarely involve a single organization. Redevelopment in Detroit often requires coordination among the Detroit Land Bank Authority, the City of Detroit, Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, DTE Energy, environmental agencies, and other public partners. While each organization plays an important role, navigating multiple approval processes and coordinating infrastructure improvements can extend project timelines. Strengthening communication and collaboration among these partners can help identify potential issues earlier and create a more efficient redevelopment process.

Rather than replicating another city's approach, these opportunities synthesize common themes identified across the research and adapt them to Detroit's redevelopment context.

Opportunities for Detroit

The opportunities are organized around three stages of redevelopment: evaluating site readiness, investing strategically in infrastructure, and improving coordination throughout the development process.

Redevelopment Stage	Opportunity	Purpose
Evaluate	Detroit Site Readiness Initiative	Improve access to site information and reduce uncertainty during predevelopment.
Invest	Shared Infrastructure Partnership Pilot	Better align infrastructure investments that benefit multiple projects and neighborhoods.

Coordinate	Infrastructure Coordination Review Process	Improve coordination across agencies and maximize the impact of public infrastructure investments.

1. Launch a Detroit Site Readiness Initiative

One of the clearest findings of this research is that redevelopment decisions are only as strong as the information available at the beginning of a project. Across the peer communities reviewed, reducing uncertainty before construction helped developers identify infrastructure challenges earlier, improve project planning, and avoid costly delays later in the development process. Interviews with Community Land Trust practitioners also emphasized that conducting site investigations and utility assessments early helps reduce unexpected costs and improve redevelopment planning.

Detroit could build on existing property information maintained by the Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA), BSEED, and other City departments by piloting a Detroit Site Readiness Initiative for publicly owned properties. Rather than creating an entirely new system, the initiative would organize existing information into a standardized framework that better supports shared equity and community development projects by improving redevelopment planning and investment decisions.

The pilot could include three complementary tools designed to improve redevelopment decision-making:

- **Site Readiness Score** that evaluates redevelopment readiness using known site conditions, infrastructure availability, environmental considerations, and other key redevelopment factors.
- **Redevelopment Property Profile** that consolidates utility information, demolition history, environmental records, zoning, ownership, and other redevelopment data into a single resource.
- **Site Readiness Checklist** that identifies additional studies or due diligence needed before redevelopment begins.

Beginning with publicly owned properties would allow the City to refine the framework, improve data consistency, identify information gaps, and evaluate the pilot before considering broader implementation.

Potential Impact

A standardized approach to site readiness could reduce uncertainty during predevelopment, improve transparency, and help both developers and public agencies make more informed decisions about redevelopment opportunities.

2. Pilot a Shared Infrastructure Partnership Pilot

A second lesson from this research is that infrastructure investments often create benefits beyond a single development project. Water and sewer improvements, utility upgrades, roadway reconstruction, and environmental remediation frequently increase redevelopment potential for surrounding properties, yet the upfront costs are often concentrated on the first project to move forward.

Several peer communities have explored ways to distribute these costs more strategically. For example, Chicago's Shared Cost Sidewalk Program allows property owners and the City to share the cost of sidewalk improvements, while Seattle Public Utilities' Utility Cost Sharing Program provides a framework for sharing the cost of utility infrastructure improvements that benefit multiple properties or future development. Although these programs address different types of infrastructure, they demonstrate how shared investment models can reduce financial barriers while recognizing that infrastructure improvements often create benefits beyond a single project.

Detroit already invests in housing and neighborhood revitalization through several existing programs. Building on those efforts, a Shared Infrastructure Partnership Pilot could focus specifically on infrastructure improvements that unlock redevelopment opportunities for multiple sites or create broader neighborhood benefits. A pilot could begin within a targeted redevelopment corridor or on publicly supported housing projects to evaluate how coordinated infrastructure investments influence redevelopment outcomes before considering broader implementation.

Rather than functioning as a traditional development incentive, the initiative could prioritize infrastructure investments that:

- Support multiple redevelopment projects within the same corridor or neighborhood.
- Increase development capacity through coordinated utility improvements.
- Align public infrastructure improvements with planned housing or commercial redevelopment.
- Address site preparation or environmental conditions affecting multiple publicly owned properties.

As redevelopment activity expands, Detroit could also evaluate financing approaches used in other communities, including cost-sharing partnerships, reimbursement agreements, or utility participation models, to determine whether similar tools could support future infrastructure investments in Michigan.

Potential Impact

Viewing infrastructure as a shared neighborhood investment rather than solely a project expense could improve project feasibility, encourage coordinated public and private investment, and maximize the long-term value of infrastructure improvements across Detroit neighborhoods.

3. Pilot an Infrastructure Coordination Review Process

Perhaps the strongest lesson from this research is that infrastructure barriers are often created by independent planning rather than a lack of investment. Agencies including the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), DTE Energy, the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), the Detroit Department of Public Works (DPW), the Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA), and other public partners each manage capital improvement projects, maintenance schedules, and redevelopment priorities. While these investments are essential, they are frequently planned independently, limiting opportunities to coordinate work, leverage existing investments, and reduce duplication.

Detroit could explore expanding existing development review processes, such as Preliminary Plan Review (PPR) or permit review, to include an Infrastructure Coordination Review for projects meeting established thresholds. Rather than creating another regulatory requirement, the review would provide an early coordination checkpoint where agencies could identify opportunities for coordination, align construction schedules, and leverage planned infrastructure investments before work begins.

The review could consider questions such as:

- Are multiple agencies planning work within the same corridor or neighborhood?
- Can utility improvements be completed before roadway reconstruction to avoid repeated excavation?
- Can planned infrastructure investments better support nearby redevelopment projects?
- Can agencies coordinate construction schedules to reduce costs and neighborhood disruption?
- Are there opportunities to leverage one public investment to support multiple redevelopment projects?

These questions would not create additional approval requirements but instead provide agencies with an early opportunity to identify coordination opportunities before projects move forward.

Potential Impact

Rather than treating infrastructure as a project-specific responsibility, this approach encourages agencies to view infrastructure as a shared neighborhood investment that supports long-term community development. Better coordination has the potential to reduce duplication, improve project sequencing, maximize public investment, and create a more predictable redevelopment environment for community-based developers.

Conclusion

The opportunities presented in this report are intended to strengthen the systems that support redevelopment rather than focusing on individual projects. Together, they represent a shift from reacting to infrastructure challenges after projects begin towards a more proactive approach to site evaluation, infrastructure investment, and interagency coordination.

While each initiative would require additional planning and collaboration, piloting these strategies on a limited scale would allow the City and its partners to evaluate their effectiveness, refine implementation, and build on successful approaches over time. By improving site readiness, investing strategically in shared infrastructure, and strengthening coordination across agencies, Detroit can create a more predictable redevelopment process that supports community-based developers, shared equity organizations, and other redevelopment partners while maximizing public investment and advancing long-term neighborhood revitalization.

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