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How to make infrastructure work for people
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(MUSIC)

PITA: Welcome to Intersections, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita. In May, during Infrastructure Week, the Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings brought together a group of civic leaders, including representatives from the public, commercial, and nonprofit sectors, for discussion of the role infrastructure systems play in wide reaching challenges, like economic inequality, social mobility, and environmental risks, or, in other words, how to make sure that infrastructure and urban and community planning, the built environment that people live, work, and get around in, actually works for the people who live there, in cities, suburbs, and rural areas. If that sounds interesting, and you're regretting that you weren't able to attend back in May, then you're in luck.

In today's episode, the leaders of those conversations will distill the debates and recommendations from those proceedings and address the innovations that turn infrastructure from individual elements of roads, pipes, rails, and cables into pathways for opportunity. I'm going to turn it over, now, to my colleague, Adie Tomer, who'll introduce today's guests.

TOMER: All right. How's it going?

MISRA: Good. How are you?

TOMER: Doing well. Good. Welcome to Brookings Institution. Everyone, this is Adie Tomer. I lead infrastructure work at the Metropolitan Policy Program, here at Brookings, and we are really excited to have Tanvi and Mitch, here, with us. So, Tanvi Misra is a writer at CityLab. Mitch Herckis is a writer and editor at Route Fifty; both of them under the Atlantic Empire, here, at the Brookings Empire, I guess, if you will, too. So, welcome; really, really, happy to have you all. Why don't you guys introduce yourselves really quick?

MISRA: Yeah, sure. So, I'm Tanvi Misra. I'm a staff writer, like Adie said, at CityLab, and I cover issues of equity within the urban, suburban, rural, all places. So, yeah, that's the perspective I'm coming from.

HERCKIS: Mitch Herckis, I am Senior Editor and Director of Strategic Initiatives at -- very long title -

TOMER: Yeah, fancy.

HERCKIS: -- at -- yeah, it sounds fancy, right, at Route Fifty. We focus on best practices,

innovation at the state and local level. Me, personally, I focus on our live events, contributed content, strategic partnerships, and, when I get a chance, I try and write.

TOMER: Right. It's not a overstatement because you're here. I mean, there's no slurping happening. We are huge consumers of what you both produce. It's so good to have you here, anyways.

HERCKIS: We love to hear it.

TOMER: Yeah. Well, good to know, right? Yeah.

MISRA: Yes.

TOMER: We did -- we send your stories around, too, right? Great to have you all here. It was really great to have you all at the event we did on May 15th, during Infrastructure Week, to kind of flip the tables a little bit, right, rather than just talk about, like, how much we can build and how much it's all going to cost, to have an event that really focuses on how people use infrastructure, right, and we had a -- I think it's okay to say -- a really strong set of panelists, folks from outside D.C., which is always good, right, the people coming from different kind of backgrounds professionally, right? So, it wasn't just folks who work at transportation departments or water utilities. It's people working in economic development, some of them from the private sector. You know, it's exciting to talk about some of those people, today, too, and what they said.

I think what we want to do here is talk about what are some of the major kind of challenges that we heard about making sure we build urban, suburban, even, in some cases, right, rural areas that work for people, and how can we make sure that the built environment does that, and we've hit a lot of the different notes, that day, that cover them, but let's start with kind of going, not necessarily formally, round robin, but go to you all. What were some of the biggest kind of notes that you heard coming from some of the panelists, while we were all sitting there as moderators taking it in?

MISRA: Yeah. I think the biggest sort of -- and this was really frontloaded, and I, then, think it became sort of a theme throughout all of the panels was that history matters, and I think that, in my panel in particular, which was -- I joked about it at the time as we were supposed to be complaining the whole time, and that, like, that was -- that was our mandate,

but I think that one of the biggest challenges was that we have created cities, suburbs that do not work for everyone, and really how to -- really thinking about how to reconcile that with how we are planning today. Jim McDonough, who was one of the panelists, he is a County Commissioner in Ramsey County, has done some really important work on this front, gave this one anecdote where I think really sticks with me, where he was in a community meeting, and someone who was from the local African American community really asked him to apologize for some of the highways, for example, that were built and went through their neighborhoods; thriving, middle class, vibrant neighborhoods, you know, in the '50s and the '60s, and I think that's really a good starting point because I think throughout -- I think it requires an acknowledgement of the things that went wrong in order to do them right, and I think that's what I was hearing from my panelists.

HERCKIS: For my side, I think that certainly is part of it, but our panel also talked a lot about how, while history might not repeat itself, it rhymes, right? So, a lot of the mistakes we've made in the past are things we've done in the past. We don't need to just acknowledge. We need to think about how they apply to today's lessons. We've been making infrastructure for years, in various forms, and many of that infrastructure has been utilized in various ways to -- as Mark Fisher put it, from Indianapolis. He's their Chief Policy Officer for the Indianapolis Chamber -- hem people off -

PITA: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

HERCKIS: -- almost. So, you know, how do you stitch together neighborhoods? How do you use it as an accelerator for people to come together to be more prosperous as a whole, as opposed to separate -?

PITA: Separate, yup.

HERCKIS: -- and I think that was the common theme throughout our conversation. I can't remember if it was Shawn Pierce or Stephanie, but I think one of them did bring up how some of the historical patterns that we've used in zoning, such as red lining -

PITA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: -- have really continued forward in different ways. So, the historical patterns of zoning, while we may not be using them intentionally in the same way to create some of the

mistakes in the past, some of those echoes still remain. I think it was just a productive and interesting conversation. For me, I mean, as a moderator, that's the kind of panel you want to have, right, people who can kind of take these ideas and run with it. I got to do more sitting back. I think you mentioned this to me afterwards. You said you kind of just were able to let them speak, which is, frankly, the ideal panel, instead of pulling people out. So, I was really happy with the folks on stage and some of the conversations we were able to have.

TOMER: Yeah, no doubt, and the back and forth was great on all three of them. I think we got web -

MISRA: Yeah.

TOMER: -- like on that bet.

MISRA: Yeah. To Mitch's point, I think there's, like, two other things on this front that I found super interesting. One of them was this not just thinking about how we are doing the opposite of what we were doing before, which is, you know, instead of separating people, actually bringing them together, but also how I think about the future, right? What are we planning for, the challenges that these same people who have been historically disadvantaged are going to be facing?

You know, as a result of climate change, are they going to be in the areas because, historically, they've been built on flat plains that are going to be more -- I mean, that was the theme, and I think Ellory Monks, who works on resilience, sort of talked about that, the importance of, again, like using that history and really informing or preempting challenges for the future, and one other thing, I think, is kind of interesting, you know, sort of when we're thinking about the way that redlining and segregation -- the housing segregation, specifically, has informed patterns that we're seeing today. I think one thing that Brooks brought up that, again, I think is really interesting is this idea that, okay, so we have these segregated communities, and now, as a result of newer city, you know, back to the city movement, you're seeing those same communities that were segregated in inner-city neighborhoods, and left there, and neglected because of white flight are moving to the suburbs, and then -- now they face, like, challenges with infrastructure that they're really not equipped to deal with, for example, transportation. I mean, these are the ideal transport users, right? These are the

ideal, public transit loyal fans, that agencies can really bank on, but then when they move to the suburbs, they really don't have those choices. They can't really keep those habits up. So, I think that's another interesting point that I thought was important.

TOMER: Yeah. We love to have any conversation bring up accessibility to economic opportunities by transportation. It's so wonky and so nerdy, but, if you think about it, it's what people do every day. You know, especially when, you know, smartphone penetrations at, like, something like 75%, you know, roughly. People open their phones, and they're like, "Where can I get to? How much time do I have?" Like -

MISRA: Right.

TOMER: -- you know, and we tend to think about that, I think, so casually, right, like, "Oh, like, what restaurant can I get to tonight?" right, or maybe it's more productive, like, "What's the closest playground?" right? I'm -- obviously, I'm a parent if I'm even saying playground. It's so weird, but, yet, you're totally right, Tanvi, and it came up on, I think, really, all three panels, this kind of concept of physical access and different ways. I want to touch on broadband in a second, or maybe in a few minutes, but this idea on transportation is we have really undersold, around the United States, what the costs are, financially, time-based, to have such a suburban nation, right -?

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

TOMER: -- and that's very real, and you're exactly right. I mean, we do other work, here, and other folks do a ton of it, too, picking up on the suburbanization of poverty, right -?

MISRA: Right.

TOMER: -- and we think of that, you know, the New York Times has done some really, you know, got a ton of play, partially because it's the Times, right, but talking about, "Hey, in California, with this housing crisis from a financial perspective, you've got to move two hours from your job -"

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

TOMER: " -- to get any kind of housing security." What does that mean for people, to have to take -- either drive it or they take Metrolink or Caltrain, up North, and it takes forever to get somewhere. I mean, that is a real cost on our society. It's a cost on our families, and it

was really -- it sounds wordy when I use the word exciting. It's not exciting. It's not good news at all, but it's important to have that conversation in a public way, and put it on the table, right?

HERCKIS: I think that actually talks to some of the things that came up in your panel, also -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: -- and has come up, frankly, CityLab a lot, which is the fact that, really, the solution to the spread out, low density thing is to build high density areas, particularly around transit, right, and, of course, there's this strong aversion in many places to doing that, let's say, NIMBYism, but it also has a lot to do with social norms about what people expect to come out of that -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: -- and I think that also lends itself to the conversations that went across all three panels, really, around how people's perceptions of the past, really, and infrastructure of the past shape their world view and their fears of how it -- changing it for differences in the future.

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: I know you all have done some work on that, and your panel, frankly, talked a lot about NIMBYism. So, I'll -

MISRA: Yeah.

HERCKIS: I'll let you, kind of, add on that.

MISRA: Yeah. I think we've done a lot of -- one, I mean, sort of, common, sort of, coded, very coded, misconception is getting a new transit line's going to bring crime, right -?

HERCKIS: Right.

MISRA: -- and that has built into it. For example, there's no research that actually shows that, but I think it's important to recognize, sort of, the coded assumptions about the racial groups that are going to benefit from something like that, and really acknowledge that some of those reasons or assumptions might be knowingly or unknowingly playing into some of those efforts to push back against projects like that.

I think the other, sort of, context that this came up, in my panel, was in the context of

community engagement, but I think, you know, again, in all panels, it was a super, super, big team. It came out as something really important that has not been done to the extent that it should have in the past, but, really, local governments, city leaders, activists need to be thinking differently about this, and really meeting people where they are, using new technologies, et cetera, but the flipside of that, someone brought up in a question, was this very idea of, like, there are some already super-empowered local communities that have a lot of political capital, and will push back against things like that for seemingly innocuous reasons, seemingly agnostic, “Oh, this will increase congestion.” I don’t know why it would do that, but, you know, or like these other sort of ideas that seem that they are completely separated from issues of race, issues of discrimination, but are very much playing into them as well.

TOMER: Yeah, totally. I think there’s -- okay.

HERCKIS: Oh, just to add onto that, you know, I think there’s also the value of who’s able to have a powerful voice, who has the time to have a powerful voice on these issues, as well -

MISRA: Right. Absolutely.

TOMER: Uh huh.

HERCKIS: -- is a big part of it, who has the activity and bandwidth to come forward on these things. One of the things, just to pull that a little bit farther, that was interesting, that came up a bunch on our panel, was how much more public-private partnerships are getting involved in the cities that get it around these things. So, I think -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: -- and when there is political capital and will in the community to make changes to transit, and they get to that point, they’re able to bring in the business community. They’re able to kind of stitch together those kind of conversations and educate to the point -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: -- you brought up, and really build political will to even pass whether it be a sales tax, locally, or -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: -- some sort of revenue generator to build these out on their own, and that

seems to be a relatively new phenomenon, at least for modern history, where people were saying, “Well, we’re going to wait and get, you know, a match from the Federal government, and then -”

MISRA: Yep.

HERCKIS: “ -- if we can get it.” It seems to be, more and more, people are just saying, “You know, let’s get the will locally, and make it happen.”

TOMER: Yeah. It was really interesting. You have this conversation in D.C. People are coming in from out of town. I don’t think one person asked for more Federal money.

HERCKIS: You know, they were kind of like, “Funding’s going to be a challenge, right?” Jim McDonough mentioned it.

MISRA: Yeah.

TOMER: I remember it, and I think Ellory pushed back a little bit, which is also great -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

TOMER: -- you know, kind of being like, you know, like, that’s one side of things. We also have to make sure we got financing set up, too, and that’s the bit, right, you’re bringing up, Mitch. I mean, financing is so central to these conversations, in how it connects, too, to what you brought up, Tanvi, of, like, are we funding the right kind of projects? Are we involving people in that process? How do we make sure those voices are heard? So, even if you have a tremendous amount of money sloshing around, which is what’s happening in a lot of these -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

TOMER: -- you know, relatively dense, really economically successful, especially at the top, coastal markets.

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

TOMER: You know, there’s money around -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

TOMER: -- right? You know, Boston would probably push back a little bit, here. They’re in a lot of fiscal challenges, but, besides them, there’s money around, but they don’t necessarily know what work they want to get done -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

TOMER: -- and that really came up here.

HERCKIS: I will add, though, to that, that on my panel there was an acknowledgement that there's -- not every community has the ability to do that -

MISRA: Yeah.

TOMER: Totally.

HERCKIS: -- and there is a role for the Federal government, and the pullback -

MISRA: I see. I see.

HERCKIS: -- and state governments. So, that's important, too, and the pullback that's going on will disproportionately affect those communities. Just to kind of add a layer to that, we do, every year, a management survey of state and local government officials, and only 35% of our respondents agreed with -- our Federal, state, and local government partners have provided predictable financial support for our organization's missions, while over 90% said they collaborate in one way or another with other levels of government. I just thought that was such a low number, that only a third were saying, "Yeah, I can rely on my other government partners to know what's out there." and I think that speaks to why many of these P3s and why many communities are going it alone. Shawn, and maybe others, mentioned that, you know, that's not a choice for everyone.

MISRA: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah. I would definitely say that those points came up in my panel as well, where Ellory for -- but, you know, she was the one who said, "Funding, you know, there's nothing available." It's not the biggest problem, and, you know, you can't just, like, stand up, and be like, "Ah, there's no money." -

HERCKIS: Right.

MISRA: -- but she was very careful to acknowledge that, as someone did in your panel, mention that. It really did depend on technical capacity, and local governments, you know, many local governments are not equipped to really think creatively about how to get that funding.

The other thing that I wanted to mention was that there was some pushback against -- well, there was an acknowledgement that I think P3s are, you know, more and more cities are looking towards them to at least jumpstart important infrastructure projects. Particularly, Jim

pushed back on this, where he did reiterate that, at the end of the day, private money has private money, and it comes with strings attached, and I think that he really wanted to drive home the point that public infrastructure is a public good that actually needs to be recognized by, you know, both business leaders, private companies, and more by Federal and state governments as a public good that will attract more investment. So, it's sort of the seed that will give rise to a booming sort of economy, as opposed to the booming economy then funding. You know what I mean? So, he wanted to flip that -

TOMER: To -- yeah. Absolutely.

MISRA: -- and make sure that people understand, like, where what's coming from.

TOMER: Yeah, totally. Well, I love this point about technical capacity, too, because it comes up all the time, right? I mean, the world is changing so fast. The panel I moderated, right, was about technology, and a lot of it was really affirmative, but what came up right at the beginning, right, is that there are so many new physical innovations out there, and government just does not have the staff, yet, to really manage that transition, but it also connects to your point, here, too, Tanvi, about how do we make sure we know exactly what we want to do, as well, right, the public good? Okay, well, what is the public good?

MISRA: Right.

TOMER: What are we trying to promote, right? Is it more people being able to connect to jobs quicker in through, let's say, more sustainable modes of transportation? I mean that in, like, an environmental way, right, or even a more affordable way? Is it to Ellory's point, like, we need to protect all communities, like, well if you don't have that straight, then you don't even necessarily know which technology you want to kind of put out in the marketplace, right, and that affects the public-private partnerships on that side, right, so. So, who do you kind of set up your contracts with, let's say?

HERCKIS: And then, even if you get that tech out there, is your staff ready for it? Do they know what to do with it?

TOMER: Right.

MISRA: Yeah.

HERCKIS: You know, it -- are they up to kind of the task of understanding higher

volumes and velocity, if you will, of data flows -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: -- how to put that into old systems, right? You know, fixing potholes, if you think about it, I mean, yeah, right, Domino's is the news right now. They're fixing potholes around the country, I mean, which is, you know, it's cute, if you will, right? It's not a solution for scale. I guess they are everywhere, but -

TOMER: You know, yeah, but, like, fixing potholes is pretty direct, right, but if we're talking about -- we want to help get people to work and daycare and other essential services more equitably, I mean, that's a complicated kind of performance measure.

HERCKIS: Sure.

TOMER: It carries a lot of inputs. I think I was kind of hearing, from the conversation through out the day, I don't know if we are there yet, and ready.

HERCKIS: No, I don't think we are, frankly. I think that leadership is getting more aware of the value of data, and I think there's a lot of reason for that. I think national organizations, such as Brookings, other foundations -

TOMER: Thank you.

HERCKIS: No, no, no -- and, also, just a lot of the associations that leadership belong to, and they've seen the results from some of the evangelicals. For instance, Mayor Greg Fischer, in Louisville, has been a huge advocate of utilizing data, and his folks have done a great job of it. We did an event with them, recently, highlighting that, but at the same time, I think your average cities do not have the staff. Competent capabilities on staff requires training to do good work with data. I certainly -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: -- wouldn't know where to start. I know there's people who are good at it, but I certainly couldn't do it. Our management survey, actually, also asked about that. Over half of the individuals surveyed thought the staff did not have the tools to appropriately use data to make data-based decisions. So, I think that that might even be an underestimate because a lot of people tend to overstate their abilities. I have no evidence of that, but I think to get to that point is going to take a lot of training and a lot of workforce development, and,

frankly, a lot of norms changing, right, and, even after that, you're going to have to get the social buy-in.

TOMER: But being able to show these things with data, which other people can help cities do -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

TOMER: -- certainly can help with public opinion, at very least, which is part of the battle, as we were saying before.

MISRA: Yeah. Yeah. I think it came up in our panel as, like, this idea of storytelling, and, like, supplementing not just data, and, like, the challenges of, like, actually collecting, and analyzing, and then presenting that data, but also, like, people stories, like coming back to this idea that it's people who use this, and Ellory said something very interesting, which is that if stuff works, usually you ignore it, right, like the lights switch on. You can make your breakfast. Everything is fine, and so you sort of ignore it. It's only when something bad happens, when it becomes a story, and so we're trying to flip the script on that, and helping tell those stories in a human way, success stories at least, in a human way, so that you can -- and, well, also, like, the stories that are, you know, disasters, all of them, like, really being able to package what's happening on the ground in a way that engages people and helps them understand, you know, sort of, how it impacts their lives, and then using that to set the priorities, right? I think one thing that I was trying to push for, with my panel, was trying to understand how to, like, try to really lay out how they're thinking about priorities and, obviously, when -- I think it was Jim who said this, but really looking at everything, every single project, from an equity and economic development lens, from the get go, right -

TOMER: Right. Right.

MISRA: -- instead of, like, just sort of tacking that on at the very end is one way to do that. Another sort of thought on this that we didn't really get to impact as much in the panel, but this idea that when we're looking at success, when we are measuring impact, that we're looking at the places that need it most because those are the places that are going to benefit most, and then you can actually quantify that benefit, right? In Jim's case, the places that had most unemployment, and then connected to the places where their Light Rail Initiative, over

the last decade, are now connected to the people, to the big Fortune 500 companies in the suburbs that have -- that are aching for entry-level employees. That's a measurable social impact that you can, then, go and tell the constituents, and then show them the -- get more buy-in for other projects like that.

HERCKIS: Yeah.

TOMER: Yeah, totally. The storytelling bit came up really well in our panel, both on like a bad and kind of a positive side, if you will. So, Angela Seifer, from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, I mean, she had this great line about, like, "If I hear one more person ask me of, like, does the internet matter, I'm going to pull my hair out." right -

MISRA: Yeah.

HERCKIS: Right.

TOMER: -- which is just -- it just seems astonishing. I mean, all of us around this table are in our, probably 30s or 20s, right? So, for us, it's like, we grew up with this, almost, right, and it certainly weren't younger than us, but, you know, it's hard to even imagine that, but, you know, as her and I have talked about in the past before, what really resonates is instead of saying, "Does the internet matter?" it's quite literally, sometimes, a picture of those students sitting outside a library or a McDonalds in their family car. They're downloading data to do their homework, right -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

TOMER: -- and that just touches a nerve, right, and how are we going to -- now, all of a sudden, infrastructure, and in this case telecommunications, is actually creating fissures between opportunity for people -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: Right.

TOMER: -- right, and that is tough to hear. On the flipside, and it's a problem per se, but it's about solutions, right? Tom Shank, the Chief Data Officer from the city of Chicago, he talked about how they can use data again, right, to effectively predict which houses are most likely to have lead paint.

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

TOMER: So, we can get in there to mitigate, and effectively back to creating those fissures of opportunity, actually remove them. So, the kids who are more likely to be exposed to lead paint, who can have a lifetime of reductions, of course, in their IQ, right, they can get that out of there, right, and create more pathways to opportunity for people, and that just -- I mean, that kind of stuff makes you smile, right? You know, the paint was there. There's nothing you can do about it now, except get rid of it, and the idea of using data for public good like that is really exciting, but, again, back to what you talked about, Mitch, right, you've got to have the right staff, got to have the right systems in place, right, and you've got to have the right alignment, or it's not going to happen.

HERCKIS: And Stephanie Judivi actually talked a lot about some of the things that are harder to quantify and measure, but kind of very similar in line with that, you know, with Spark. They're working on supporting regions on racial equity, health, climate. Those are things that disproportionately affect the poorest among us, the most vulnerable populations among us, whether it be around emissions and Asthma, or issues of just economic game, when you're talking about it, racial equity, and who is having access to jobs in their neighborhood. Food deserts are a real thing in many communities, and not having access to fresh foods impacts your health.

So, you know, being able to kind of stitch that all together, utilizing data to identify some of it, and make it clear to people, and tell that story, right -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: -- is part of it, but also kind of finding ways to change those norms, sometimes through investment, sometimes through infrastructure and transit. It's not a small problem. I - - unfortunately, we probably won't solve it on this podcast, but, you know, I think it was a good conversation. I'm glad we started it.

TOMER: Yeah. I want to stay on data for a second.

HERCKIS: Oh, sure.

TOMER: Go back to you because I know, Mitch, you guys have been doing some work on it anyways, and then maybe throw it over to Tanvi, too. On your panel, right, Shawn, from Minneapolis, mentioned opportunity zones. I think there's a legal requirement, if you work in

the urban space, to talk about opportunity zones right now, right? What have you all been learning about it, too, and because it connects to so much of this, right, using data to recognize areas that need better investment, but, honestly, some real questions, right, are what are the outcomes going to be, once we're done with all this work?

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: Yeah. There's been a lot of excitement and fear around opportunity zones, is how I'd put it. We've been following them pretty actively as they get announced. Now, all 50 states have announced where their opportunity zones will be. Unfortunately, technically, they already exist, and they're ready for investment. However, the IRS Treasury have not explained, to these opportunity zone venture capital funds, how it's going to work.

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: So, no one's putting out money yet. The other tricky thing about this is local governments have no clue how this is going to work, or what the impact is going to be. I was at the U.S. Conference of Mayors a week and a half ago. They are pretty aware that this is going to be something that falls to them, as mayors, really, to manage in many ways. At the Federal level, as one speaker put it, there are no guardrails around this.

TOMER: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: Mayors and local governments, because it may be a county leader, are going to have to use a lot of their tools, whether it be zoning, whether it be creating new policies that direct the investment, or being proactive and going to these opportunity zone venture capital funds, which, by the way, self-certify. There's all sorts of things on how they work, or how they show results, which is another issue for another time, but really kind of -- the mayors and county officials, and even state officials, are really going to have to step up and say, "What do we want this to look like?" and scramble to get it right, whether it's being proactive with a list and saying, "Here are the investments we think are going to be most impactful in our community and help you as well." However, the question is are they going to just -- they could, technically, just park a lot of money in real estate as -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: -- a tax shelter, through these opportunity zones, which in areas which do

have higher poverty and do have lower cost of housing, may create higher housing costs as well as, perhaps, push people out of housing that they can't afford. So, there's a lot of what if's here. There could be really beneficial investment for jobs, for communities, and kind of renewal and revitalization for communities that need it most. It could also act, as one person put it at the U.S. Conference of Mayors, many people might see this as their investment opportunity to get in on the next Williamsburg, Brooklyn, right -

MISRA: Right.

TOMER: Right.

HERCKIS: -- which is not necessarily a thing for the residents who live there now, but the next wave of gentrification.

MISRA: Yeah. I think some of the work we've done, basically, we've looked at -- I laughed because it's not going to provide any answers, and it's just going to be more complaining, but, yeah, I think it really supports what Mitch was trying to say, which is that we've looked at some of the other similar, not the same, because that's not -- that hasn't happened -- a similar sort of initiatives, not just in the U.S., but in, sort of, some European cities. It does seem like there are major questions about -- the research shows that there are major questions about the impacts for the people who are actually now in those distressed communities, and whether, in the long term, whether some of that worked at all, in terms of alleviating poverty, in terms of improving employment rates. A lot of, for example, enterprise zones in the U.K. didn't really seem to make much of a difference, from decades on, and these were sort of tested, I think, I believe, in the 1980s, and I reported, myself, on the similar sort of idea in France, which was these zones that have funding for education, and a lot of funding for security, and then all of these other things in the Bonneuil, and, in fact, there's been quite a negative effect because the idea is that these zones are sort of almost stigmatized, even more, because of having that label and being portrayed as places that are distressed of their -- I mean, that's a whole different sort of -

HERCKIS: Mm-hmm.

MISRA: -- can of worms that I don't necessarily want to open, but it just seems that there are just a lot of questions about who this is going to benefit, you know, whether that

benefit actually materializes at all, and so I think, yeah, I mean, everything that Mitch has learned from, in going to -- reporting on -- yeah. Go ahead.

HERCKIS: Yeah, and -- no. I was going to say Shawn Pierce, on our panel, called and she said, "You know, Minneapolis is working as hard as they can to get out ahead of this -"

MISRA: Yeah.

HERCKIS: " -- and create the right zoning, and things like that, to shape it." but they just don't know -

MISRA: Yeah.

HERCKIS: -- and I think, you know, this is a big unknown, and it's also frontloaded, the way the incentives are, is that the -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: -- tax benefits are best for those who get in first.

MISRA: Yup.

HERCKIS: So, the money's going to flow in real fast, and -

MISRA: Yeah. There's not much of a -

HERCKIS: -- everybody's got to hang on.

MISRA: -- margin to -- yeah -

HERCKIS: Yeah.

MISRA: -- really think, be thoughtful about it.

HERCKIS: Right, totally.

TOMER: I want to kind of throw it back to -- flip the tables here. I feel like we've, as you said in the beginning, Tanvi, same as you did that day, it's going to be a complaint session, right? What were some of the most positive innovations that -- not even necessarily even heard that day, right, but I mean you all are what's a, you know, this is the jealousy from our side, as you get to talk to even more people than we do, right? You're on the beat all the time, looking for new angles, new innovations, as well as those new challenges. What are you seeing in this space that's getting you really excited, either whether you heard it that day, right, or you've just kind of been -- as you watch the country and internationally, right, innovations that are going to make a difference to make sure that the built environment helps connect more

people to opportunity and makes it more resilient, maybe, too?

HERCKIS: For me, you know, I would have to say I think the fact that these conversations are constantly happening -

MISRA: Yeah.

TOMER: Yeah, that's great.

HERCKIS: -- issues around whether it be structural racism, whether it be about inequity, becoming a common conversation among not just local governments, but state governments and at the Federal level, it says something because that conversation wasn't happening five, 10 years ago, and, yes, the problem has become exacerbated, but this is not a new problem by any stretch. So, I think that the fact that you all worked into your Infrastructure Week conversation the fact of equity and infrastructure, which is a real issue when it comes to Metropolitan areas.

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

HERCKIS: I mean, it is a underlying fact that's been there for a long time, and I think Stephanie had, like, the line of the conversation when she said, "You know, imbedded in the concrete of America's infrastructure are social inequities."

TOMER: Oof, yeah.

HERCKIS: You know, I -- that was, for me, the line of the entire conversation, but I think that the fact that these conversations are ongoing, and people are active, and it's not just a, "Oh, that was an interesting conversation six months ago and it faded out." This conversation's not fading away, and I think that says a lot about the direction we're heading.

MISRA: Yeah. I wish I had gone first because I -

HERCKIS: Sorry.

MISRA: No. I mean, I think that's such a -- such an important -- I was going to highlight that, too, because I think it's really heartening to hear that happening. I don't know if it has caught up, really, in every -- might not -- you know, sort of, we were talking about infrastructure, generally, and I would -- remembered when you approached us about this. I was like, "Ah, that's so big, like, there's just so many -"

TOMER: Right.

HERCKIS: Right. Yeah.

MISRA: I don't know if it's really caught up everywhere to the extent that it needs to, but, for example, it is heartening that these, you know, data, I'm going to take one of them and I can, sort of, maybe, just focus Mitch's point a little bit on something that I've been seeing in my reporting, and which is kind of heartening is cities are really thinking about -- a couple of years ago, data was, like, "Oh my God, we can do so much with this, right? Like, we can go and look at lead paint in people's homes. We can see --" I was at the CityLab Conference, in Paris, last year, and the people talking about, like, how many times people (inaudible) can say things about their income, like -

TOMER: Hmm.

MISRA: -- just like really interesting --

TOMER: Wow.

MISRA: -- ways of collecting, and sorting, and analyzing data, and what that can do for social good, and I think that's super heartening, but I think, more and more, people are applying the equity lens to that, and, like, thinking about privacy, thinking about consent. I mean, I think that those are conversations, again, like, they're sort of -- despite the fact that these conversations are on a mega or meta scale happening in the infrastructure space, I think when it comes to actually applying them to people's actual work and job, and, like, policymaking, I think we're still doing a little bit of catching up, but then, you know, but I just wanted to say that, like, some of my reporting over the last, like, maybe a year or -- has been looking at exactly that, where there have been activists and community members who are really being able to have their voices heard on these matters, and making sure that their local representatives are being responsive in the way that they should be.

So, I think I would take it from that data space, take it from, like, just that these conversations are happening, and bring it to some of the community work that's being done on these fronts, and when it comes to transit equity, when it comes to data equity, I think there's just some really great community work being done, and I think that governments are actually listening, which is nice.

TOMER: Yeah, that's a good sign, too. We, a few minutes back, almost, like, criticized the data side and how hard it's going to be, but I like the way you kind of put it, Tanvi, there,

right, that there's very clear opportunities, too, mentioned what Tom and his team are doing in Chicago around the lead paint, really cool ID work there, too, right? It's just cool to hear it, right? It's like we are sensitive to the social problems here, in Chicago, and across the country. So, we don't want to track you, necessarily, on like an ID-basis, but we want you to have a, like, almost like an encrypted number, and we're starting off with transportation, your library card, right? I mean, that is so cool. It makes it, like, that actually -- we kind of don't like the phrase. It seems like no one does, right, but, like, that actually sounds like a smart city, right -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

TOMER: -- like, that kind of idea that we can interchange like that. To give credit to Shoshana Lew, who is the former USDOT Chief Financial Officer, now working up in Rhode Island, you know, she's been passionate. She's talked about that day, but elsewhere, on better asset management -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

TOMER: -- right, like, and that doesn't seem necessarily that equity-driven, but if they know exactly which -- and I'm not putting words in her mouth. This is where I'm going with it. If we know all, let's say, especially in her line of work, if we know where all those -- back to potholes. We know where all those bad conditioned roads are. We can make sure that, actually, it's not that preferred corridor that always gets the repaving and the snowbelt -

MISRA: Mm-hmm.

TOMER: -- but it's all the roads, especially in, maybe, our more economically disadvantaged areas. So, they don't, then, have to deal with upkeep and maintenance on their cars even more frequently than someone else, right, and those kind of hidden costs that can be out there, exactly as you mentioned, Mitch. To even have that conversation is so, so powerful.

I know we're getting close to time, here, and I really appreciate you guys coming down here. So, I want to give a chance for you to give a plug on what you're working on, anyways, right, and to make sure that our listeners can go check it out, both at CityLab and Route Fifty.

HERCKIS: At Route Fifty, we finally are -- we've expanded our staff significantly in the last few months. So, we're even more able to kind of hone around the entire country and look at more things, both in the kind of what's going on, generally, sense, as well as I'd expect a few

more deep dives in the future. We're also working on a few research surveys, right now, that we have, one that will be coming out next week, I believe, on what are the actual priorities for local governments right now. We collaborated with the U.S. Conference of Mayors around that. We forced choices for folks in the local government level to choose between most important, least important, to -- there is -- future of their cities, which, in many ways, may not be always the fairest question, but they have to make unfair decisions all the time.

TOMER: Right. Right.

HERCKIS: So, those results are fascinating to me, and I think it's going to be exciting to get them out there into the world.

MISRA: So, I'm definitely going to be continuing to cover, like, interesting things that are happening in the data equity space, but, apart from that, I think I will definitely urge people to check out our transportation coverage. It's been amazing. A lot of the transportation and infrastructure, Kristen, Laura, Laura Bliss, Kriston Capps, my colleagues, have been really doing an amazing job with that. We recently had an amazing series that I particularly enjoyed, that's been really important to me since I reported on how immigrants used transit a while back, and it was like, sort of, a really deep -

TOMER: It's great.

MISRA: -- dive into just the changing patterns, why immigrant -

TOMER: Mm.

MISRA: -- transit ridership has just plummeted over the last couple of decades for a number of reasons, one of which we mentioned, the suburbanization, and, recently, we've launched a series. It's called Bus Week. Although, the weeks, sort of, have never ended, which is great because it really goes back to something that we discussed, I think. It has come up in all of our panels, on this day, which is how are we prioritizing infrastructure projects, right, and what can we do better? What's working for the people who need it most, and buses is a really great example of that, super unloved, apparently, of -

TOMER: Right, dropping ridership all across the country, right?

MISRA: Right, and, I mean, I think it's more than ode to why that is bad, and why it, like, matters to invest more in buses, you know, have more routes, have more reliability. Make the

stuff that works better for the people who are using that stuff, which is usually lower-income. A lot of immigrants use buses. So, I would definitely urge people to check that out, and then I would say CityLab does a lot at -- one of our verticals is -- is life, and so, you know, just -- I think it might be fun to check out some of the stories that we're doing that are not super, like, wonky, and policy heavy -

TOMER: Mm-hmm.

MISRA: -- because sometimes, you know, it's just nice to get a reminder of why cities are fun, so.

TOMER: Yeah. Yeah.

MISRA: So, yeah. That's -- I'm going to end on that one.

TOMER: Good way to end on a positive spin.

HERCKIS: Absolutely.

TOMER: Tanvi, Mitch, thanks for helping do the event. Thanks for stopping by today.

MISRA: Thank you so much for having us. Yeah.

HERCKIS: Thanks for having us.

TOMER: Appreciate it.

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