

**How Nashville Grows**  
**Recommendations to Mayor O’Connell**  
**November 21, 2023**

**POLICY BRIEF**

Nashville is a growing city, and with that growth comes real challenges and opportunities. Today, too many Nashvillians feel they have not experienced enough of the latter.

Building a Nashville for Nashvillians will take intention and consistency. Mayor O’Connell charged this committee with making recommendations to help maintain that focus.<sup>1</sup> He also tasked us with making recommendations to ensure that the East Bank process and guiding principles serve as a prototype for what neighborhoods throughout Nashville can be – and a demonstration of how community members can be empowered to shape decisions that impact them.

With the East Bank, Nashville has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to redevelop 338 acres of underutilized property on the banks of the Cumberland River.<sup>2</sup> This effort is extensive in both size and timeline, to be measured not just in years but in decades. Few other projects of this scope and transformative potential exist in the United States today.

Work of this magnitude carries a correspondingly large duty of careful stewardship. In furtherance of that duty, this committee has aligned on a short list of recommendations to help guide Mayor O’Connell’s new administration as it continues its important work.

**I. Guiding Principles:**

We begin with the following guiding principles as references. We hope these ideals will help steer Mayor O’Connell’s administration well into the future.

- Metro should invest in infrastructure, affordable housing, and other community assets in neighborhoods throughout Nashville at a level that is equivalent in relative impact to the investments being made in the East Bank.
- Decisions about priorities for development in the East Bank and other Nashville neighborhoods should be open and transparent. Nashvillians should be able to easily access clear information about whether proposed projects will include community benefits such as affordable housing, multimodal transportation, or greenways; how projects will be funded, particularly if the city’s future revenue is implicated; and what sort of economic impact they will have. The community should be actively included in robust public conversations about these issues and others.

- Once plans are made, decision-makers should stay accountable to the communities that helped shape them. Nashvillians who provide input into planning processes should get regular updates about how their feedback was incorporated – or why it was not.
- In the East Bank and other Nashville neighborhoods, community-identified needs should not be subsumed by the goal of revenue maximization. Finding a balance between maximizing revenue and meeting community needs is critical.

## II. Policy Recommendations

While these recommendations vary in the time it will take to implement them, actions on each could begin in the near future.

### **A. The Mayor’s Office and its partners should clearly communicate the costs Metro will need to front for East Bank infrastructure investments and how, if at all, these costs can be recouped.**

East Bank negotiations are ongoing. Changing circumstances, e.g., recent reports about the potential cost of infrastructure, may require the O’Connell Administration to make decisions about how land there – much of which is Metro-owned – will be used.<sup>3</sup>

True community engagement requires Nashvillians to have visibility into the factors that influenced these decisions. To ensure transparency in decision-making, the Mayor’s Office should make an early commitment to provide regular East Bank updates to the community, including through Metro Council’s East Bank Committee. These updates should continue for the life of the project, which will necessarily outlast any one mayor’s time in office.

### **B. The O’Connell Administration should maintain its focus on the Imagine East Bank Vision Plan, ensuring that the East Bank becomes a vibrant neighborhood that reflects Nashville’s rich diversity and prioritizes affordable housing.**

The committee endorses Metro Planning’s Imagine East Bank plan, which prioritizes a transit hub, green space, walkability, bikeability, and deeply affordable housing.<sup>4</sup> As outlined in the plan, the East Bank should become a vibrant, diverse neighborhood that Nashvillians use year-around, not just on stadium event days. As this area develops, it should mirror the cultural and economic diversity of Nashville. In other words, it should not be an extension of Nashville’s tourism and entertainment district.

Metro and its partners should maintain a focus on keeping the commitments outlined in the Imagine East Bank plan. Rather than focusing solely on maximizing city revenue, decision-makers should seek to deploy assets to meet community needs. Specifically, locating a diversity of affordable housing in the East Bank should continue to be a priority. Further, the

East Bank should set a new standard for multimodal transportation options in Nashville, including bus rapid transit, protected bikeways, and a complete network of quality sidewalks.

**C. The Mayor's Office and its partners should empower Nashville's neighborhoods to articulate and advocate for their priorities.**

Today the East Bank has no permanent residents. But it is adjacent to residential and commercial neighborhoods, many of which contributed to the Imagine East Bank plan.<sup>5</sup>

A more replicable model of community engagement can be found in Wedgewood-Houston, where neighbors came together to create a community-built framework that maps community assets and outlines community needs. Structures like this one allow neighborhoods to ensure that development is consistent with a community-based vision.<sup>6</sup>

Working with a strengthened Mayor's Office of Neighborhoods, Metro Planning, Metro Council, and community partners, neighborhoods across Nashville should have access to tools that allow them to create similar frameworks. They should include a broad range of input from neighbors, including those who are traditionally underrepresented. While any vision for a particular community will of course need to work in concert with Nashvillians' overall needs, when taken as a whole these visions can help shape a Nashville for Nashvillians.

**D. The O'Connell Administration should identify or create a team or entity that can bring Metro's plans to reality.**

Community plans only benefit communities when they are implemented. But today, too many of Nashville's plans fail to move from vision to action, which undermines Nashvillians' trust in Metro's ability to keep its promises.

The East Bank visioning process required Metro Planning to do implementation-related work that traditionally has been outside its purview. This illustrates the need for a new and adequately resourced entity – or a new team of leaders from existing entities – that focuses on implementation and publicly communicating the timeline and details of Metro-funded projects.

From parks and greenways to transit to solid waste, Metro has most of the plans it needs.<sup>7</sup> Now the Mayor's Office should work closely with Metro departments, neighborhood leaders, and other stakeholders to determine the best way to get these plans – and others like them – implemented. Whatever its form, this new entity or team should ensure that the public has access to regular progress updates, and it should place a special focus on ensuring continuity between mayoral administrations.

Until the new process can be fully implemented, the Mayor's Office should regularly convene leaders at relevant Metro departments to start moving current plans to reality.

**E. The O’Connell Administration should maximize the utility of underused, Metro-owned land and buildings.**

Imagine East Bank addresses uses for the approximately 117 acres of Metro-owned property within its scope.<sup>8</sup> The O’Connell Administration should accelerate efforts to do the same for other underutilized land and buildings throughout the city.

Specifically, it should support and advance ongoing efforts to identify Metro-owned property that would be suitable for affordable housing. Through Barnes Fund grants to nonprofits, ten former Metro properties are being developed for affordable housing, and fourteen more such properties are available for future development. This is a good start that should be expanded as much as possible.

The O’Connell Administration should also formalize Metro’s approach to working with the community to determine the highest and best use of surplus property. Current efforts like this are underway at the Global Mall, 88 Hermitage, and former schools on Brick Church Pike and in Bellevue.

Further, it should facilitate early dialogue between Metro departments about how to fit Metro services and building design within community surroundings, such as is underway with the Southeast Police Precinct and the replacement of Fire Station Two downtown. It should also accelerate the development of master plans that pair new Metro facilities and services with the rapidly densifying areas that need them.

The Mayor’s Office should form a steering committee to coordinate initial recommendations around these decisions. Over time, a more formal solution – one with the capacity to oversee and resource these processes – may be needed.

**F. The O’Connell Administration should prioritize investments across Nashville that are equivalent in impact to those made in the East Bank.**

The East Bank project will outlast any single mayoral administration, as will the need to ensure that neighborhoods throughout the city benefit from equally impactful investments.

The Mayor’s Office should work with Metro Planning and other Metro departments, along with community stakeholders, to identify a priority list of rapidly transforming areas throughout the city and to craft a vision for their growth. Nashville Next is a good foundation for this effort.

They should then partner with communities in those areas to create a list of concrete investments that meet community needs and can happen within the next five years. To ensure that communities start seeing changes as soon as possible, this process should focus on projects already included in the Capital Improvements Budget.

### **III. Acknowledgements**

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- Jim Hawk, Executive Director, Neighbor 2 Neighbor
- Jeff Haynes, Managing Partner, Boyle Investment Company
- Odessa Kelly, Executive Director, Stand Up Nashville
- Lucy Alden Kempf, Executive Director, Metro Planning Department
- Bob Mendes, Chief Development Officer, Mayor's Office
- Colby Sledge, Local Policy Principal, Grounded Solutions Network

We appreciate Mayor O'Connell's invitation to provide these recommendations. We are proud to share them with his administration and hopeful that they will yield positive change.

- David Esquivel (chair)
- Adolpho Birch
- Jacky Gomez
- Robert Higgins
- Mike Hodge
- Clay Richards
- Wesley Smith
- Kinika Young

## Endnotes

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