Case Highlights

**Description:** The largely minority Mexicantown community in Detroit, Michigan, was physically divided in 1970, when a section of freeway along I-75 was completed. During preparation of the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the I-75 Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project (Gateway Project) in the 1990s, the Michigan Department of Transportation (MIDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) identified reconnecting East and West Mexicantown across I-75 as a “need” to be addressed. As Bagley Street is one of the main links between East and West Mexicantown, support for a pedestrian bridge spanning I-75 at this location was embraced by the community. The Mexicantown community was engaged throughout every phase of the Gateway Project, including the design of the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge. Successful completion of the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge Project signified positive changes to come for the Mexicantown community linking the east and west sides of the neighborhood once again. The public ceremony for the brand new landmark and tourist attraction was marked by the joining of U.S. and Mexican government representatives, along with visitors from across the State and Mexicantown residents, to unveil the two stunning new works of art that grace the bridge's eastern plaza.

**Effective Practices:** Effective practices in addressing environmental justice include: mitigation for barrier-type impacts associated with transportation projects, use of public art in transportation, use of a community ombudsman, techniques for addressing limited-English-proficiency, best practices in early and ongoing public involvement, and the importance of consistency in project staff.
Introduction
The Bagley Pedestrian Bridge Project, located in Detroit, Michigan, was part of the larger I-75 Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project (Gateway Project) shown in Figure 1. The purpose of the Gateway Project was to address long-term congestion issues and provide direct access improvements between the Ambassador Bridge (a United States-Canada border crossing that spans the Detroit River), I-75, and I-96. The Gateway Project would also reconstruct I-96 and I-75, accommodate traffic for a potential future second span of the Ambassador Bridge, and provide access to a separate, but related project, the Mexicantown International Welcome Center and Mercado being constructed by the Mexicantown Community Development Corporation (MCDC).

The Bagley Pedestrian Bridge Project, an important non-roadway element of the Gateway Project, was designed to reconnect two sides of the Mexicantown community of Southwest Detroit after 40 years of separation. As Bagley Street is one of the main links between East and West Mexicantown, support for a pedestrian bridge spanning I-75 at this location was embraced by the community.

The completed Bagley Pedestrian Bridge is a “signature” bridge for its stunning introduction to Detroit as motorists depart the Ambassador Bridge and proceed on to U.S. freeways. It is the first cable-stayed bridge in Michigan, spanning 420 feet and supported by 15 tension cables radiating from a 150-foot concrete pylon, and incorporates extensive landscaping and other architectural treatments as context-sensitive-design elements. The theme of the Gateway Project was known as “Connecting Neighbors” as it sought to reconnect or enhance the connections between the United States and Canada, the cities of Detroit and Windsor, and the East and West Mexicantown communities. The pedestrian bridge provides a critical connection for local residents between the small downtowns that have continued to grow on the east and west sides of the freeway.
What Happened

The Region and the Community

Since the 1920’s, Mexicantown in Southwest Detroit has attracted Hispanic/Latino families to work in the automobile and other industries in the Detroit region. The community of diverse ethnic groups opened businesses like specialty grocery and retail stores, barbershops, and restaurants. However, the construction of I-75 and I-96 in 1970 split both the residential and commercial elements of the Mexicantown community when the section of freeway along I-75 from Clark Street to Rosa Parks Boulevard was completed (see Figure 2). The cohesion of the Mexicantown community continued to decline since the construction of I-75. Further changes over the years have exacerbated the split brought by the interstate, including:

- Tension between residential and expanding transportation land uses centered around and related to expansion of the international border crossing on the U.S. side of the Ambassador Bridge.
- The General Services Administration expanded the U.S. Customs facility, closing Lafeyette Boulevard, and later Porter Street east of 21st Street. This has been particularly hard on St. Anne’s Church, located at St. Anne (19th) Street north of Lafayette Boulevard, which relied on those roads for pedestrian and vehicular access. St Anne’s Church, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976, has the second oldest continuously operating Roman Catholic parish in the United States. Its current parish is primarily Hispanic/Latino and has parishioners from throughout the southeast Michigan region.
- Out-migration to Detroit’s suburbs—much like what many major urban areas in the United States experienced since the 1950s when people were seeking suburban areas with more space and within driving distance to their workplace as the suburbs developed—contributed to population declines that led to vacant land, changed school attendance, and altered church-going patterns.

The result has been a substantial area of vacant land on the east and west sides of the freeway. Many vacant parcels are now owned by the City of Detroit as property taxes have not been paid.

During preparation of the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Gateway Project in the 1990s, the Michigan Department of Transportation (MIDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) identified reconnecting East and West Mexicantown across I-75 as a “need” to be addressed. Conditions before and after the project are shown in Figures 3 and 4, respectively.

“The [Bagley Pedestrian Bridge] project didn’t start out as an Environmental Justice project… it was just trying to right a wrong done to the Detroit [Mexicantown] community a long time ago when I-75 divided it.”

- Lori Noblet, MIDOT
Figure 2: Gateway project vicinity showing Mexicantown.
Figure 3: Conditions in the vicinity before the Gateway Project.

Figure 4: View with the Gateway Project, and the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge in Detroit, MI.
Gateway Project Chronology

September 1995
The Michigan Department of Transportation (MIDOT), in cooperation with the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), officially initiated environmental and engineering studies for the Gateway Project. The study was guided by a Steering Committee composed of MIDOT, SEMCOG, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the City of Detroit, the Detroit International Bridge Company (DIBC), and the Federal cooperating agencies (U.S. Customs, and U.S. General Services Administration).

October 1995
Public meetings held to introduce project and solicit input on alternatives.

January 1996
Public meetings held to review alternatives.

February 1996
Formal scoping meeting held.

March 1996
Series of public meetings held to review the Evaluation of Illustrative Alternatives Report. Based on these meetings, a smaller set of options was carried forward.

May 1996
Meetings held to present the Preferred Alternative to the Steering Committee, the Community Involvement Group, and the public.

July 1996
Workshop held to obtain public input to refine alternatives that included consideration for a proposed Bagley Pedestrian Bridge.

August 1996
A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between the MIDOT, DIBC, City of Detroit, and the Mexicantown Community Development Corporation (MCDC) concerning implementation of the proposed Mexicantown International Welcome Center and Mercado—a separate, but related project—at the base of the U.S. side of the Ambassador Bridge. This MOU included the basis for ongoing and continuing cooperation with MCDC, and furthered opportunities/investments with the surrounding neighborhood, including related investments for the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge.

August 1999
EA/Re-evaluation Report completed to study the impacts of a revised plan that included refinements to the original plan approved in 1997. FHWA determined the 1997 FONSI remains valid and approved the modifications.

May 2002
MOU signed between MIDOT and MCDC for the proposed Mexicantown International Welcome Center and Mercado real-estate project. The MOU provided that MIDOT will consult with MCDC to coordinate the design of the Transportation Information Center (TIC) with the design and layout of the retail office building and with MCDC’s development plan for the Project Area.

August 2003
Public information meeting held to solicit input on the 2003 Revised Plan.

January 2004
EA/Re-evaluation Report completed to study the impacts of the 2003 Revised Plan, which included a reduced overall footprint, and improved geometry for the mainline and ramps over the plan approved in 1999. FHWA determined the 1997 FONSI remains valid and approved the modifications.

October 2008
MIDOT issued a Request for Qualifications, which launched the competition seeking an artist to design public art for the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge East Apron, to be funded by a Federal Enhancement Grant and MIDOT matching funds.

December 2008
Detroit Artist Hubert Massey selected among 46 applicants to create the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge art project.

August 2009
Letter issued to community in English and Spanish to provide notice about upcoming community meetings with Artist Hubert Massey to solicit ideas and thoughts about the public art project.

September 2009
Community Input Forums for the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge held with Hubert Massey; follow-up meeting held to present art renderings.

2009
Construction of Bagley Pedestrian Bridge commences.

May 5, 2010
Mexicantown Bagley Pedestrian Bridge opened and Plaza Community Art Project unveiled to public on Cinco de Mayo. The public ceremony event was co-sponsored by MIDOT, the Southwest Detroit Business Association, and the Detroit Consulate of Mexico.
Community Involvement in the Gateway Project

The community-involvement program for the Gateway Project was unprecedented for MIDOT. The Mexicantown community was engaged throughout every phase of the Gateway Project, including the design of the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge. An overview of community involvement in the project development process is provided in this section, followed by a description of the specific ways the public influenced the pedestrian bridge element in the next section.

The planning, environmental, and engineering studies for the Gateway Project were led by MIDOT, in cooperation with the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG). Project oversight was provided by a Steering Committee composed of MIDOT, SEMCOG, FHWA, the City of Detroit, and the Detroit International Bridge Company (DIBC); and the Federal cooperating agencies (U.S. General Services Administration [GSA] and U.S. Customs and Border Protection [U.S. Customs]).

The complexities of multiple Federal, State, regional, and local governmental and private interests of the DIBC concerning the area were recognized before the Gateway Project began. The Steering Committee not only facilitated communication, but provided a forum for cooperation and support as well as on-going input from community leaders.

The outreach effort for the Gateway Project involved continuous communication during the life of the project. The side-bar contains a list of methods and approaches that were used for the Gateway Project outreach efforts. MIDOT involved the community formally through public meetings, print and broadcast media activities, brochures, maps, social-media activities, press conferences, and other activities that kept the community and motorists well informed day-to-day. The project also employed the services of a bi-lingual (English/Spanish) former MIDOT employee, who had been responsible for State highway projects in the Southwest Detroit community, as an ombudsman to help address any on-going issues and concerns. By so doing, trust within the community was elevated and enhanced. This, along with his understanding of MIDOT construction needs, greatly improved MIDOT’s integrity within the community.

A large emphasis of the community-involvement
program was to hold meetings in community locations. A sampling of venues within the community where project meetings were held is listed below to provide a sense of the types of community forums used.

- **Roberto Clemente Center** on Bagley in East Mexicantown, Family Latino Center (West Fort Street) and B.U.O.Y. Center (Vernor Highway) - Public meetings with the community regarding Environmental planning in conjunction with MIS and EA development.

- **Detroit Mexicantown International Welcome Center and Mercado** - second floor of Welcome Center building was used for meetings with the Southwest Detroit Business Association (SDBA), meetings with the public to provide construction updates and respond to questions about the project, the public art meetings and workshops with the community, assembly of mural by Hubert Massey with community participation, etc.

- **Mercado building** (adjacent to project) - local meetings to address project landscaping, and design and construction of the noise wall along the project west side between I-75 and the Hubbard Farms Historic District.

- **Webster Elementary School** (immediately west of I-75 adjacent to project) - meetings with the community to discuss project progress, along with specific inclusion of interested children to explain the EA process during the early planning and environmental document preparation with the Corradino Group, also presentations related to final design plans and construction phasing later in the project development.

- **St. Anne's Church facilities** (St. Anne Street next to project) - public meeting(s) to present the status of the project planning and development.

- **Mexicantown Community Development Corporation (MCDC) offices** (at least three different locations in Mexicantown) - coordination meetings with MCDC and community leaders related to the project, and coordination and development of the proposed adjacent Detroit Mexicantown International Welcome Center and Mercado.

- **MIDOT Michigan Intelligent Transportation Systems (MITS) Center** (Howard & 6th Street) - Project Steering Committee meetings.

- **Detroit City Council offices** (Coleman A. Young Municipal Center building on Woodward in downtown Detroit) - project progress updates and public hearings for approval of various street closures and/or abandonment, construction phasing, detours to maintain traffic, and various other permit approvals concerning community at large. These meetings were all open to the public and generally well attended.

- **Southwestern Detroit High School** (West Fort Street) - Presentations were made on many occasions regarding the Gateway Project implementation to help inform the public and answer questions in a larger forum of Southeast Detroit. This was done in conjunction with other major MIDOT planning projects and to strengthen the relationship between the DIFT and DRIC initiatives.

In addition to the formal community outreach, on-going, one-on-one meetings with local residents continued through all phases of
planning, design, and especially construction. Given the Spanish speaking dominance in the community, MIDOT accommodated needs by providing translators at public meetings, hearings, community input forums, and workshops, if needed. Additionally, interactive electronic kiosks were used to present the Gateway Project, design, phases of construction, maintenance of traffic, etc. at major public events like the Detroit Auto show. Contact information was also provided to users.

**Community Influence in the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge**

**Bridge design.** MIDOT conducted a National design competition for development of a “signature” pedestrian bridge. MIDOT’s goal for the pedestrian bridge was to design and construct a dramatic and significant structure, one that could become a focal point for the community, and a landmark or beacon for motorists as they crossed over the Ambassador Bridge from Canada. An award of $5,000 was made to the top five submissions, and the winner of the competition became part of the design team and overall design contract for the Gateway Project. The competition further engaged the community by utilizing a renowned panel of experts to judge the competition from locally recognized art and architectural colleges and universities from the Detroit metropolitan area.

**Bagley Pedestrian Bridge Public Art Project.** During the design phase, MIDOT decided to incorporate public art with the bridge by sponsoring a public art competition to select and commission an artist to design a mural and freestanding sculpture for the East Apron of the newly constructed Bagley Pedestrian Bridge. The Bagley Pedestrian Bridge Public Art Project ultimately helped to reconnect neighbors.

The Public Art Selection Committee (PASC) was formed to provide input and direction for the public art program for the project. The seven voting members of the PASC are listed below by key roles:

- **Aesthetics, Landscaping, and Roadside Development Professional**
  - MIDOT representative
- **Representatives of the community/neighborhood**
  - Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit – Founder and CEO
  - Matrix Theatre – Executive Director
  - Mexicantown Community Development Corporation
- **Artists/Arts Professionals**
  - College for Creative Studies – Director, Community & Public Arts: DETROIT and Artist
  - Wayne State University - Associate Professor and Sculptor
- **Design Professional**
  - InForm Studio – Project Architect

There were also eight non-voting members on the PASC. These non-voting members were not necessarily arts professionals; however, they were selected for their ability to provide guidance on community interests, project history, process, design, and construction of the project. Detroit Artist Hubert Massey was selected from 46 applicants to create the artwork.

Hubert Massey commenced a series of meetings and forums with the PASC and neighborhood
residents. Young college students and school-age children from the community were engaged to assemble the final mural for placement on the wall of the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge, and most of the project’s budget went directly back into the local Michigan economy for fees, services, rentals, and materials. Public forums were attended by community residents and MIDOT staff, which included local artists. Discussion topics at these forums included the history of Mexicantown, how the community was once a thriving Spanish-speaking community when it was divided by the adjacent opening of I-75 and I-96 in 1970, and how the construction of the pedestrian bridge would begin to mend the division of the community, and bridge the small downtowns that have developed on either side of the freeway. The conversations that took place during the public meetings and forums inspired the design of “The Spiral of Life,” a tile mosaic spanning 40 feet long and 5 feet high located on the eastern wall of the bridge (see cover photo) and “Spiral Kinship,” a 12-foot tall metal sculpture (See Figure 5).

**Bridge maintenance and enhancements.** A maintenance agreement was developed for the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge for snow removal, and decorative lighting was added to the bridge and apron areas to enhance pedestrian safety and use of the facility. These components were identified as priorities for the community.

**Determination of Impacts**

The incorporation of the proposed Bagley Pedestrian Bridge into the overall Gateway Project was, in essence, mitigation for community cohesion and socio-economic impacts from the completion of construction of I-75 and I-96 in this location in 1970. While the pedestrian bridge is featured in this case study, it was just one example of how MIDOT considered the surrounding community in the Gateway Project development process. The 1997 FONSI determined that disproportionately high and adverse human health and environmental effects on minority and low-income populations were not anticipated. MDOT conducted subsequent Re-evaluations in 1999 and again in 2004. For all of the subsequent Re-evaluations, FHWA determined that the 1997 FONSI remained valid and approved the modifications associated with each Re-evaluation.

*Figure 5. “Spiral Kinship” sculpture on the East Apron of the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge in Detroit, MI.*
Effective Practices & Lessons Learned

Effective practices, lessons learned, and relationships formed during the Gateway Project paved the way for how project planning and design are carried out and outreach is done for MIDOT projects that followed.

Engage the affected community early and on an ongoing basis. As part of the community-outreach effort, it was critical for the project team to continue building upon relationships and developing community trust for future phases of the project (i.e., construction phases) and future MIDOT projects and programs. This was done through early involvement by the community, including collaboration with stakeholders and the community, as early in the planning and design phases as possible, throughout the project process, and during the construction phase.

The project team also identified that the public-art aspect of the project was a great opportunity to involve the public.

Maintain consistent project staff to the extent feasible. For various reasons, primarily design modifications to the Gateway Project, there were six Re-evaluations following the 1997 EA. However, over the last 16 years of the project history, one thing that has been constant is that it has always been about the community—providing trucks direct access from the Ambassador Bridge to the freeways (and off local streets) and linking east and west Mexicantown once again. Although the project has endured challenges that come with implementing a massive transportation project with a private bridge owner, during three U.S. presidential administrations, three Michigan gubernatorial administrations, and four Detroit mayoral administrations, and design modifications to address stricter security criteria following the 9/11 terrorist attack; the constant factors over the 16-year project history included project leadership by the community and MIDOT staff. This project benefited from the continuum of project staff, consultants, and community leaders, which contributed toward the success of the outreach program and, ultimately, the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge Project and the Gateway Project.

Consider the use of an ombudsman. The MIDOT team utilized an ombudsman throughout the public-outreach effort, and during the last and major phase of construction. The Gateway project ombudsman was essential, particularly when there were issues that needed resolution with the community, because the ombudsman understood spoken Spanish, and was accessible to and trusted by the community. Of equal importance to project-related communications, was that the ombudsman understood the community as well as MIDOT.

Extensive public outreach leads to assurances that the community understands the project...
and the process, and ultimately garners support through gathering of input. The public outreach effort for the Gateway Project has transformed the way that MIDOT engages with the community for its transportation projects. MIDOT staff that have since retired and current staff believe that the experience on the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge and Gateway Projects have definitely influenced future projects in terms of community outreach. Current MIDOT staff working on projects find themselves asking, “how did we reach out or consider, or fund the Gateway Project?”

Integration of the public-art component as a means to engage the community and add benefit for the community. Identify opportunities to integrate public art into the project early in the project to secure funds. Because the public-art component of the pedestrian bridge project was not envisioned as part of the project in the EA, it was not eligible for Federal funding as part of the Gateway Project implementation plan. The final outcome was that MIDOT’s Metro Region office provided $50,000 of State matching funds from the Region program along with a $50,000 Federal Enhancement Grant in order to fund the art project. This also benefited the community in terms of having a sense of ownership of the art that will be taken care of by the community into the future.

Benefits

For the Community

At the various forms of community meetings that were conducted for the Gateway Project, community members living and/or working within the study area were given the opportunity to provide input and express their concerns directly to MIDOT staff. The numerous meetings held over the 16-year life of the project have provided meaningful opportunities for the public to truly be part of the project decision-making.

The Gateway Project will also have lasting economic impacts to the local community by virtue of its locale. By providing better access to I-75, I-96, and other freeways, the Gateway Project will ensure that goods that cross between the U.S. and Canada arrive at their destinations quickly and reliably, encouraging businesses to continue to use the Detroit-Windsor crossing—a vital trade link—rather than choosing alternative routes, which would affect the local economy. The Gateway Project also ensures job growth and job retention for the 221,500 Michigan jobs, including jobs in the local community that are supported by binational trade. Further, by providing a direct connection from the Ambassador Bridge to the proposed Mexicantown International Welcome Center and Mercado, the Gateway Project makes Mexicantown and southwest Detroit a gateway for visitors, inviting tourism in Detroit.

The safety and aesthetics effects of the Gateway Project will also have lasting benefits to the community. The Bagley Pedestrian Bridge has finally reconnected the East and West Mexicantown communities with a state-of-the-art cable stayed pedestrian bridge, spanning I-75 giving residents and visitors a safe crossing between the two small downtowns and making businesses throughout the southwest Detroit community accessible. The pedestrian bridge also showcases public art created by a local artist, and that was inspired and influenced by the local community.
The Gateway Project responded to safety concerns associated with truck traffic that previously exited the Ambassador Bridge to travel across local city streets in Mexicantown on the way to area freeways. Upon completion of the Gateway Project, trucks will exit the bridge and move directly to the freeway, decreasing traffic on local streets and increasing safety for community residents.

Successful completion of the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge Project—recognized as mitigation for impacts caused by the completion of construction of I-75 and I-96 in 1970—signified positive changes to come for the Mexicantown community linking the east and west sides of the neighborhood once again. The public ceremony for the brand new landmark and tourist attraction was marked by the joining of U.S. and Mexican government representatives, along with visitors from across the State and Mexicantown residents, to unveil the two stunning new works of art that grace the bridge's eastern plaza. The event, cosponsored by MIDOT, the Southwest Detroit Business Association, and the Detroit Consulate of Mexico, coincided with the celebration of Cinco de Mayo in Mexicantown.

For the Agency

MIDOT has learned so much about the community, about outreach and the value of public information techniques and methods, and value of outreach to project success. As discussed previously, MIDOT’s outreach experience on the Gateway Project had lasting influence on future transportation projects that it carried out. Although the robust community outreach efforts were beneficial to the community, of equal importance were the benefits for MIDOT, including opportunities for the MIDOT to present project design ideas and, later, implementation plans to the public.

Awards

The Gateway Project has garnered a number of regional and National architecture and engineering awards, including:

- 2011 Engineering Eminent Conceptor Award, American Council of Engineering Companies of Michigan
- 2010 Outstanding Civil Engineering Achievement Award, American Society of Civil Engineer, Michigan Section
- Top 10 Bridges of 2010 (Bagley Pedestrian Bridge), Roads & Bridges Publications
- 2009 Design Award Winner for the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge, Detroit Chapter of the AIA

Additional Resources

- Gateway Project Website: [www.michigan.gov/gateway](http://www.michigan.gov/gateway)
- Link to Gateway Video: [www.dptv.org/ondemand/special/mdot.shtml](http://www.dptv.org/ondemand/special/mdot.shtml)

References


Personal interview. Andy Zeigler (Retired), Project Manager for the Gateway Project which included the Bagley Pedestrian Bridge, Michigan Department of Transportation; Lori Noblet, Environmental Justice and Planning Specialist, Michigan Department of Transportation; Denise Brazer, Planning Technician, Michigan Department of Transportation; Brenda V. Peek (Retired), Communications Specialist, Michigan Department of Transportation; Ruth Hepfer, Engineer, Federal Highways Administration; Eric Polvi, P.E., HNTB Corporation; Cory Lavigne, Architect, In-Form Studio; and Bonnie Chiu, ICF International. April 5, 2012.

Personal interview. Lori Noblet, Environmental Justice and Planning Specialist, Michigan Department of Transportation; and Bonnie Chiu, ICF International. April 4, 2012.


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