

A Report from the USC Price School
and USC Dornsife Public Exchange

Aligning Infrastructure Investments with Impact:

A Scorecard for Multi-Benefit,
Community-Focused Infrastructure in
Los Angeles County



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Disclaimer

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Project Summary

Across Los Angeles (LA) County, practitioners involved in infrastructure development consistently emphasize the need to better integrate multi-benefit objectives and community engagement into project design and implementation. To address this gap, this study pursues three goals:

- 1)** Collecting data from infrastructure practitioners in LA County to capture insights from their professional experience
- 2)** Identifying key challenges and opportunities in evaluating infrastructure projects that aim to deliver multi-benefits and meaningful community engagement; and
- 3)** Developing practitioner-informed metrics to help identify projects that advance these objectives. Interviewees include practitioners with current or prior experience in infrastructure development in LA County for a nonprofit organization (such as a community-based organization), a consulting firm, or a governmental agency.

As reflected in the scorecard, practitioners view evaluation as most effective when it centers community-defined needs, captures climate and ecosystem benefits, and assesses the quality of community engagement. At the same time, they highlight the difficulty of creating an equitable scoring framework that can accommodate the diversity of project types, community contexts, and implementation realities across the County.





Introduction

In 2024, the Infrastructure Justice for Los Angeles (IJLA) Coalition issued a call to engage academic partners in developing a scorecard for use in identifying climate-resilient, multi-benefit infrastructure projects that deliver overlapping social, environmental, and economic outcomes. In response, IJLA partnered with the University of Southern California's (USC's) Sol Price School of Public Policy and Dornsife's Public Exchange (PX). The first phase of this collaboration examined how LA County agencies currently define and evaluate multi-benefits and community engagement across four major infrastructure funding measures: Measure W (water), Measure H (housing services), Measure A (parks), and Measure M (transportation).¹ This study found limited, inconsistent guidance on how to identify or weigh multi-benefits in project selection.

Building on that foundation, this second phase of research develops a theoretically grounded and

practice-oriented scorecard informed by the perspectives of practitioners who plan, design, advocate for, and implement infrastructure across LA County. By collecting their insights, the study aims to produce metrics that can support project developers in better meeting community needs and help public agencies direct investments toward projects with the greatest potential impact.

To generate these insights, the research team conducted interviews with practitioners working in advocacy, design, and implementation roles. The interviews explored three areas: 1) how multi-benefits and community engagement are currently considered in project evaluation, 2) the challenges and opportunities practitioners encounter when developing multi-benefit, community-engaged projects, and 3) how future infrastructure development processes could be improved.

¹ For more details on the first phase of research, see: Building for Impact: A Framework for Evaluating MultiBenefit and Community-Engaged Infrastructure Projects Under Existing Policy in Los Angeles County. USC Dornsife Public Exchange. Available at: <https://publicexchange.usc.edu/la-infrastructure/>



LA County is a compelling context for this study. Home to diverse communities and complex infrastructural challenges, LA County faces mounting climate pressures, aging infrastructure, and persistent equity challenges. Earlier research focusing on Measures W, H, A, and M found that the measures do not offer clarity on what counts as a “multi-benefit” when multiple project goals are at stake. With public dollars in play, the region needs better tools to ensure investments address this range of challenges.

This study, therefore, asks the following overarching research questions:

1. How are multi-benefits and community engagement being considered by practitioners in infrastructure project evaluation and development in LA County?
2. What do practitioners recommend for evaluating these priorities in infrastructure project selection?

Because infrastructure systems frequently overlap, the findings are intended to guide the evaluation of multi-benefit projects broadly,

rather than serving as in-depth analyses of individual infrastructure sectors.

When public agencies and project implementers meaningfully integrate multi-benefits into planning, infrastructure can more effectively address the multifaceted challenges communities face. Multi-benefit approaches can make neighborhoods healthier, safer, and more resilient, especially in communities that have long faced disinvestment. Community engagement is therefore not ancillary, it is fundamental. When community engagement helps shape project priorities and design choices, the project is more likely to be useful, equitable, and supported over time.

Practitioners—whether project managers, leaders of community-based organizations (CBOs), governmental officials, or planners—hold critical knowledge about what enables or limits the development of integrated, community-focused projects. Their experience provides essential insight into what is working and where gaps remain, and how scoring frameworks can more accurately capture what matters most for multi-benefit, community-engaged infrastructure.





Research Design

The study team conducted semi-structured interviews with 45 practitioners involved in infrastructure development, implementation, or advocacy in LA County. Interviewees represented community-based organizations or other nonprofits, public agencies, and consulting groups. Conversations lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were held over Zoom between May and August 2025. Before data collection began, the team developed an interview protocol and submitted the project for review to USC's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Approval of this project ensured ethical research standards and safeguarded participants' rights to confidentiality.

Participants were recruited through two pathways. First, the team used purposive sampling, drawing on a stakeholder list developed in partnership with members of the IJLA Coalition to identify individuals with relevant expertise. Second, using snowball sampling, interviewees were invited to recommend additional practitioners with relevant experience. Each participant received a \$50 virtual gift card as compensation for their participation.

Following transcription, interview data were coded in the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti to identify themes related to project scoring and multi-benefit infrastructure more broadly. The study team developed an initial coding manual, refining it iteratively as new themes emerged throughout the analysis. Coding captured participants' perspectives on approaches to scoring multi-benefits and community engagement, specific criteria that could inform a scoring framework, and challenges in applying metrics across diverse project contexts. All coded data were then synthesized into key findings, which informed the development of the proposed scoring questions and thematic categories.



Key Findings

How practitioners view the role and challenges of scoring multi-benefit and community engagement in infrastructure projects

Across interviews, practitioners emphasize that any scoring system must begin with **community-defined needs**. They describe **community engagement** not as an optional add-on to multi-benefit projects but as the determinant of whether a project can meaningfully deliver social, environmental, and economic value. Practitioners emphasize that engagement must be iterative, intentional, and tailored to the specific contexts and needs of each neighborhood. Many recommend giving higher scores to projects that are identified, led, or co-led by CBOs, Tribes, or other trusted local groups, ensuring that funding aligns with community priorities. Practitioners also highlight the importance of scoring project viability. Beyond strong design, projects must have feasible **operations and maintenance** plans, demonstrate the ability to adapt over time, and reflect thoroughly researched plans to ensure long-term function. **Climate and ecosystem benefits** are also viewed as core pillars of multi-benefit work.

At the same time, many practitioners emphasize the need to exercise caution in relying too heavily on quantitative scoring, pointing to substantial challenges in developing fair and meaningful scoring systems. Because multi-benefit projects are profoundly shaped by the local histories, geographies, and socioeconomic realities of the communities they aim to serve, practitioners question whether any single scoring framework can fully capture the nuances necessary for equitable evaluation. While they recognize the value of scoring as a decision-support tool, many note that rigid or overly standardized systems could inadvertently disadvantage community-led projects or those emerging from historically under-resourced neighborhoods when compared with higher-resourced projects. Overall, practitioners see scoring as helpful but only if it remains flexible and sensitive to context.



Practitioner-informed scorecard for multi-benefits and community engagement

Scoring Multi-Benefits

The scorecard begins with **infrastructure-specific considerations**, with a focus on IJLA Coalition partners' primary areas of interest (water, parks, housing, and transportation). This set of metrics reflects the need to assess benefits within the primary sector of a project. These appear first to help evaluators quickly identify sector-specific benefits before turning to criteria that apply beyond individual infrastructure areas.

The next set of metrics addresses **environmental benefits**, asking whether a project advances climate mitigation and resilience, protection or restoration of ecological systems, and the use of nature-based solutions. Practitioners frame these environmental dimensions as core to defining multi-benefit projects.

A third category addresses **community resilience**, consistent with interviewees' emphasis on evaluating whether projects meaningfully reduce entrenched disparities, incorporate anti-displacement measures, strengthen environmental justice outcomes, and contribute to public health—both in terms of pollution reduction and mental well-being.

Given the centrality of **community engagement** in practitioners' reflections, the scorecard includes an expanded exploration of community engagement metrics that further assess the depth, quality, and timing of engagement throughout a project's life cycle (see *Scoring Community Engagement section for further detail*).

Finally, the scorecard evaluates planning and development quality, a dimension that practitioners identify as essential for project feasibility and long-term success. These criteria assess whether a project integrates effectively with existing infrastructure, avoids duplicative efforts, clearly communicates anticipated benefits, is supported by appropriate and aligned funding sources, and demonstrates an intentional and integrated planning approach.

Scoring Community Engagement

The community engagement section of the scorecard provides a comprehensive framework for evaluating participatory processes. It begins by assessing **engagement during project design and development**, focusing on whether community input shapes project priorities, how transparently feedback is incorporated, and whether the project responds to documented community needs.

The scorecard also evaluates **engagement across the project life cycle**, recognizing practitioners' emphasis on maintaining communication and participation beyond the design phase. This includes ongoing updates, continued opportunities for input, and mechanisms to collect post-implementation feedback.

Next, it evaluates **community responsiveness**, including evidence of genuine buy-in, opportunities for substantive participation, and efforts to increase community understanding of advocacy processes and infrastructure systems.

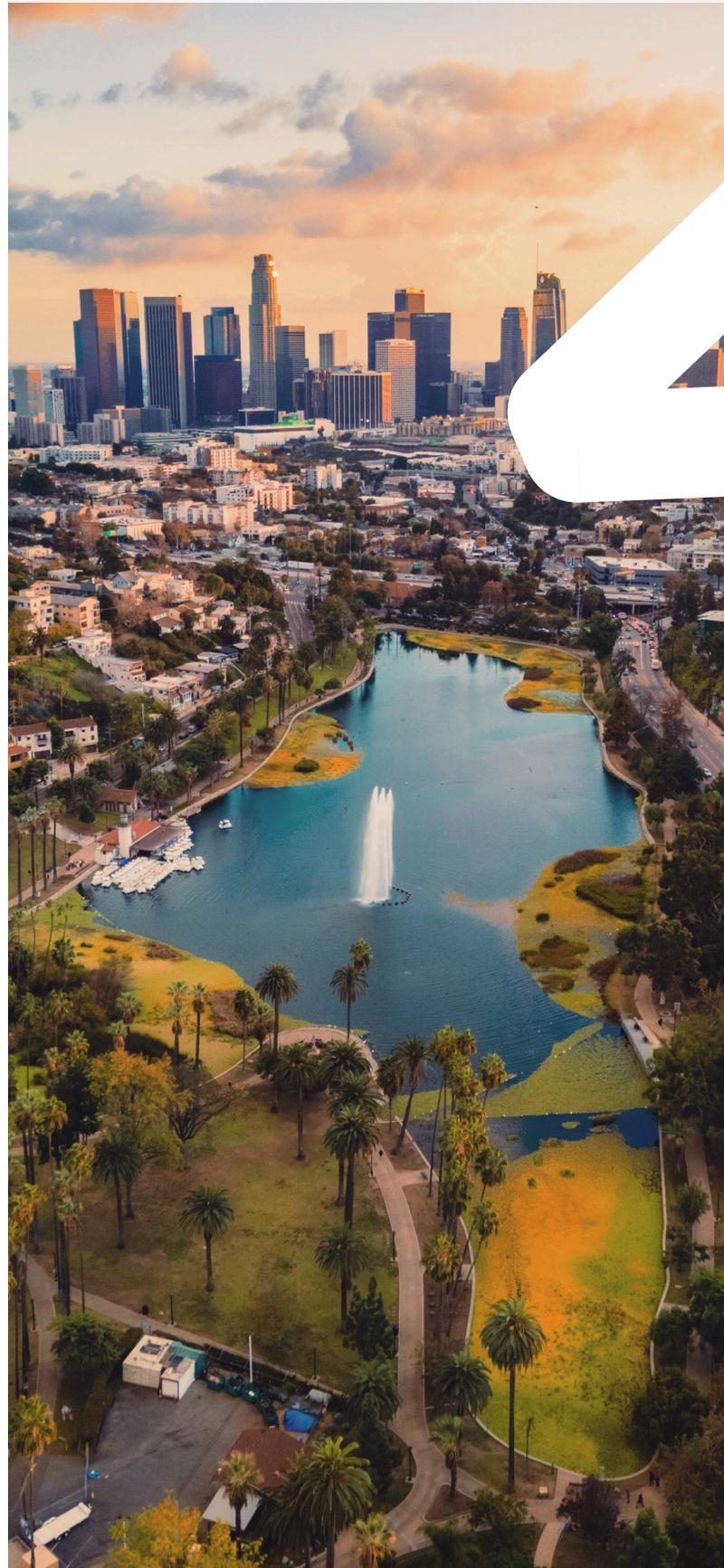


The scorecard then considers **accessibility**, assessing whether engagement opportunities are geographically convenient, linguistically inclusive, and offered in formats to accommodate diverse participation.

A fifth dimension examines **involvement**, emphasizing the importance of meaningful participation from Tribal communities, diverse demographic groups, and trusted CBOs.

Finally, the scorecard examines **logistics**, including whether trusted facilitators are involved, the adequacy of the number and reach of engagement opportunities, and whether the **budget** supports community participation through compensation, food, childcare, or transportation.

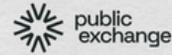
Together, these criteria form a practitioner-informed, context-responsive framework that supports more systematic and equitable assessment of multi-benefit, community-engaged infrastructure projects.





Community-Informed Infrastructure Scorecard

USCPrice



Multi-Benefits			
Category	Question	Yes or No?	Notes
Infrastructure-Specific Considerations	Green Space	Does the project increase access to green space or create new green space?	
		Does the green space component provide stormwater capture benefits?	
	Water	Does the project provide water-related benefits (e.g. improving water quality, enhancing water supply or capturing stormwater)?	
	Transportation	Does the project include infrastructure that supports active transportation?	
		Does the project address transportation safety risks?	
		Does the project increase mobility for community members?	
	Housing	Does the housing development include affordable housing?	
Environmental Considerations	Climate Mitigation & Resilience	Does the project help mitigate current and future climate change impacts (e.g. by adding trees that sequester carbon)?	
		Is the project designed to be resilient to climate-induced events and stressors (e.g. wildfire events or flood risk)?	
	Ecological Benefits	Does the project provide environmental or ecosystem benefits?	
		Does the project conserve or protect natural habitat?	
		Does the project incorporate nature-based solutions?	



Category		Question	Yes or No?	Notes
Community Resilience Considerations	Community Equity	Does the project help address equity disparities in the neighborhood, particularly for underserved communities?		
		Does the project include anti-displacement measures to mitigate gentrification risk?		
		Does the project provide opportunities for workforce development or job creation to support project implementation and long-term maintenance?		
	Community Health & Environmental Justice	Does the project provide mental health benefits to the community (e.g. by increasing opportunities for social connection or access to green space)?		
		Does this project address environmental pollution (e.g. poor air quality)?		
	Community Engagement	See community engagement-specific metrics.		
Project Planning & Development Considerations	Project Viability	Is there a realistic plan for who will manage operations and maintenance?		
		Is the project adaptable in the face of political changes or other contextual changes over time?		
		Was the project based on substantial research?		
	Physical Relationship to Existing Area / Infrastructure	Does the project integrate with existing infrastructure (e.g. public transportation)?		
		Does the project avoid duplication of existing infrastructure?		
	Expectations	Does the project provide opportunities for community members and/or relevant groups to receive progress updates throughout its development?		
		Does the project clearly define the benefits that the community and/or relevant groups will receive at key points in time (e.g. completion and post-implementation)?		
		Does the project identify how it will meet the goals and expectations communicated to the community?		
	Funding	Is the project fundable?		
		Is the project funded by sources that align with community goals? Who is funding the project?		
	Intentional, Integrated Planning	Is the project space being utilized to the fullest benefit of the area?		
		Does the project apply a holistic, systems thinking approach?		



Community Engagement

Category	Question	Yes or No?	Notes
Project Design / Development	Does the project's design and development integrate community input and concerns?		
	Does the project inform community members about how their input is integrated?		
	Does the idea for the project originate from the community?		
	Does the project address a documented community need?		
Project Life Cycle	Does the project provide the community updates at key milestones throughout development?		
	Does the project offer ongoing community engagement opportunities throughout development and after implementation?		
	Does the project provide ways to gather community feedback on whether community members enjoy using or interacting with the project?		
Community Responsiveness	Does the project have community buy-in?		
	Does community engagement provide opportunities for real, meaningful conversations?		
	Does the project provide educational opportunities to help the community better understand advocacy processes and infrastructure development?		
Accessibility	Does the project provide community engagement opportunities that are accessible in terms of time and place, as appropriate for the community?		
	Does the project provide community engagement opportunities that are language accessible in the community's preferred language(s)?		
	Does the project offer multiple types of engagement opportunities (i.e. different workshops or event formats)?		
Involvement	Does the project engage the Tribal community/communities in the project area?		
	Does the project engage diverse populations within the community?		
	Does the project have meaningful partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) or other local groups?		
Logistics	Is the engagement process facilitated or managed by a practitioner trusted by the community?		
	Does the project hold a sufficient number of opportunities for community members to engage?		
	Does the project engage a meaningful number of community members? How many people were engaged?		
Budget	Does the project provide compensation and incentives for community members during engagement (e.g. food, child care, transportation reimbursement)?		
	Does the project allocate a sufficient portion of the overall budget to community engagement?		



Takeaways

The findings of this study illustrate how practitioners believe multi-benefit infrastructure projects should be evaluated, with particular emphasis on the quality and role of community engagement. Interviewees view scoring systems as potentially powerful tools for steering investments toward projects that are integrated, community-centered, and responsive to local needs. At the same time, they raise valid concerns about whether metrics can adequately capture relational dimensions of community engagement or account for the context-specific and long-term realities that shape project success. Rather than weakening the utility of scoring, acknowledging these limitations highlights opportunities to strengthen the framework by addressing where metrics alone fall short.

Study Implications

The metrics developed in this study can help planners and policymakers articulate what matters most when selecting and designing multi-benefit, community-engaged infrastructure. Practitioners consistently emphasize that effective evaluations must center community-defined needs, assess contributions to climate resilience, and examine the feasibility of long-term operations and maintenance. Scoring should also account for the diversity of infrastructure types and neighborhood contexts to avoid privileging large, well-resourced projects over smaller, community-led initiatives. Equally

important is assessing the reflection of community priorities, the involvement of trusted community groups, and whether engagement practices are accessible and transparent. When these considerations guide evaluation, scoring can help clarify which projects are most likely to deliver a lasting and equitable impact.

Limitations

Several limitations affect the application of these findings. Interviewees represent practitioners working in LA County, a region with uniquely fragmented governance structures and a long history of inequitable infrastructure investment. Insights generated here may not translate directly to other geographies without careful consideration of the local political, social, and environmental contexts. Additionally, purposive and snowball sampling likely captured participants connected to the IJLA Coalition, leaving out harder-to-reach practitioners who may hold different perspectives. Finally, this phase of research focused on developing a scoring framework grounded in practitioner expertise; testing of the scorecard in practice is recommended before using these findings for broader implementation.²

² Due to the scope of this project covering different infrastructure sectors and the reality that infrastructure sectors are often overlapping, the findings and recommendations provided are relevant for multi-benefit projects broadly and do not serve as specific deep dives into siloed infrastructure areas.



Future Research Directions

Several avenues for future work would deepen the study's contributions. Piloting the scorecard with real project applications across multiple infrastructure sectors in LA County would reveal how well the metrics function in practice and whether refinements, like differentiating scoring pathways for large capital projects and smaller-scale, community-based efforts, are warranted.

Longer-term research could examine whether projects that score highly ultimately deliver sustained multi-benefit outcomes, meaningful engagement throughout their life cycle, and durable community value over time. This type of exploration could help test the predictive validity of the proposed scorecard.

Additional qualitative research could also explore practitioners' insights on the broader process of designing and implementing multi-benefit, community-engaged infrastructure beyond scoring alone.

Overall, this study demonstrates that practitioners view scoring as a useful tool for guiding infrastructure decision-making, provided it captures the relational, contextual, and temporal dimensions that define successful multi-benefit, community-engaged projects. Scoring can strengthen accountability by anchoring project selection in community needs, climate and ecosystem benefits, and engagement practices that are transparent and meaningful. Yet practitioners caution against rigid systems that risk overlooking community-led solutions if evaluators lack contextual knowledge. Together, the insights presented here underscore the potential for scoring frameworks to advance equity-oriented and grounded infrastructure planning when they are designed with nuance, adaptability, and practitioner expertise at their core.

