



Detroit Creates Connections at a Crossing

The approximately 300 students who walk every day to Noble Elementary-Middle School in the Littlefield neighborhood of Detroit, MI, now have a safer, more colorful route to travel. A quick-build project to reduce the turning radius at a school crossing and an adjoining park provided immediate safety benefits in an underserved area where children and teens walk and

bike. The project used flexible posts and the new space was filled with murals. The murals became a meaningful way for community members to express themselves artistically and participate in the beautification of their neighborhood. The project was supported by a National Center for Safe Routes to School quick-build minigrant to the City of Detroit made possible by General Motors (GM).

This case study is largely excerpted from a report by project partners in the City of Detroit Public Works Department, "City of Detroit: Littlefield Community Quick-Build Project Final Report," by Erin McCargar, Adam Jadun, and Idrees Mutahr.



Intersection of Fullerton Avenue and Cherrylawn Street at Noble Elementary-Middle School in the Littlefield neighborhood. Source: City of Detroit.

Historic and persistent challenges to overcome

The City of Detroit recognizes the crucial importance of addressing neighborhoods like Littlefield where road safety concerns have been shaped by historic disinvestment. Intergenerational and concentrated poverty in Detroit was exacerbated by the cumulative impact of more than six decades of population decline, failing infrastructure, and chronic gaps in public service. The Littlefield Community, an Area of Persistent Poverty as defined by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, as well as a Historically Disadvantaged Community as defined by U.S. Department of Transportation, is no exception to this historic disinvestment and population shift.

Detroit has included the Littlefield area in its road safety improvement plans for years. Moreover, in 2022, the city's "Streets for People: Detroit Comprehensive Safety Action Plan" included a key priority action to create a Slow Streets Network made up of residential, low-speed zones in areas with high numbers of vulnerable users such as schools, parks, community centers, and senior and transitional housing. The Littlefield street location was identified as a "Slow Street," signifying an important first step toward implementing Detroit's 300-mile Slow Street network program.

Safe mobility improvements in the neighborhood were not only needed to help move people to destinations, but also to increase access to opportunity and improve quality of life. Improvements to crossings near Noble Elementary-

Middle School were also crucial for improving walking conditions for children, one of the most vulnerable groups of road users in Detroit.¹

Engaging the community

Improvements in the Littlefield neighborhood were not only needed from an equity perspective but were also strongly advocated for by residents. Prior to this quick-build project, the city had already launched community engagement for the Joe Louis Greenway, a multiuse trail linking neighborhoods throughout Detroit and passing through the Littlefield neighborhood. In June 2023, the Littlefield Community requested that the Joe Louis Greenway route provide connection to Noble Elementary-Middle and nearby Littlefield playfield so that students would have a safe connection for walking and biking to school. The greenway alignment was altered to provide safe access to the school and park, a first step in making the Littlefield Community safer for multimodal users by slowing turning vehicles and bringing attention to people crossing at the crosswalk.

The city's project team found the most impactful outreach for this project was attending block club or community association meetings to meet people where they were already present. This meeting style facilitated more in-depth conversations about the traffic calming elements that are less familiar to Detroit residents. Community members also felt comfortable speaking up and providing feedback to people they were already comfortable with, and the project team felt it led to greater insight into the needs of the community.

Empowering students

Another critical element of this project was the involvement of staff and students at Noble Elementary-Middle School in the mural design and installation process. Prior to bringing an artist onto the team, city staff coordinated a meeting with Noble students to brainstorm and sketch out design ideas, including compiling a list of words and phrases to use as motivation in the artist's design. The project team then collaborated with Detroit's City Walls program² to create an open call for artists, where applicants were asked to submit designs that captured the vision presented by the students. The review panel for artist submissions included students and teachers from Noble Elementary-Middle, as well as representatives from the Littlefield Community Association. The community was able to choose a design that best represented their neighborhood and directly incorporated students' ideas.

Littlefield Community members and students were also directly involved in the mural painting process. The hired artist, Trae Isaac, first painted an outline of leaves, flowers, and faces onto the street, and then Noble students completed the painting with supervision by teachers, city staff, and community members. The Joe Louis Greenway Partnership collaborated by bringing music and other activities for the kids, and students received swag and other memorabilia to commemorate the day. The mural paint day was an engaging event for the students, allowing them to take part in the beautification and installation of safety infrastructure in their neighborhood.

At first the addition of the mural was seen as an "extra." However, during the process, project leaders saw how community members were able to express themselves artistically and participate in the beautification of their neighborhood. This created overall acceptance and support for the project as a whole, according to city staff. "Community members really liked the murals," said City Complete Streets Planner Erin McCargar. "People don't always understand the purpose behind flex posts and other changes to the roadway, but they appreciate the artwork."



*Mural painting day with Noble Elementary-Middle School Students.
Source: Elonte Davis.*

Permanent changes and citywide expansion

This project helped inform discussions with the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) as they look to fund permanent changes through a Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) Grant. The Joe Louis Greenway project team presented this project to MDOT to discuss how it would increase safety and be a candidate for future funding to install permanent safety improvements. The city also requested departmental matching funds to install a quick-build traffic circle at the other end of the street.

Along with helping to secure funding for this location, the Littlefield quick-build project generated interest from both residents and leadership in the city's Department of Public Works to create a citywide quick-build program. As of this writing, the city's Complete Streets team is now working on a proposal to include funding in the 2025 budget to partner with other schools to implement quick-build projects that improve safety around schools and parks for young people who bike and walk in their communities.

Additionally, a local news crew attended the mural painting and produced a television segment and article highlighting the mural install day. The project team hopes to use the media attention to highlight how safer connections can be visually appealing to communities as well. School officials from Noble Elementary-Middle expressed interest in

partnering with the City of Detroit on future safety improvements. "As the news spreads through the Detroit Public School system, the hope is that other schools will request these types of projects so that we may expand the program to improve safety along other school routes," said Adam Jadun, Joe Louis Greenway Project Manager.

References

1. City of Detroit. (2022). *Streets for People: Detroit Comprehensive Safety Action Plan*. <https://detroitmi.gov/sites/detroitmi.localhost/files/2022-09/Detroit%20CSAP.pdf>
2. City of Detroit. (2024). City Walls. Retrieved October 18, 2024, from <https://detroitmi.gov/departments/general-services-department/city-walls>

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