I. Introduction

KEY FINDING

The 'local hire' target for Colorado's Central-70 highway expansion project was met, and even exceeded ahead of schedule. However, our findings complicate the official story of a win-win-win for the City and County of Denver, the construction industry, and workers and impacted and targeted communities. In doing so, we highlight lessons for future local hiring initiative, genuine community engagement, and addressing past and ongoing environmental justice concerns.

In 2018, Colorado Jobs with Justice approached Dr. Rebecca Galemba at the University of Denver (DU) to help evaluate its Equity and Possibilities in Construction (EPIC) program. Launched in 2017, EPIC aims to advance the training, placement, and mobility pathways of women, nonbinary, and people of color in the construction industry through union building and construction trades and apprenticeship programs in Colorado. Given that the expansion of Colorado's Central-70 highway was about to get underway, and contained stipulations for a 'local hire' arrangement, we saw the highway expansion as a potential test case to examine the impacts for women and people of color in construction trades. The local hire included a commitment that 20% of labor hours should be filled by workers from the targeted development area, largely corresponding to minority communities.

In partnership with Dr. Singumbe Muyeba at the University of Denver, DU graduate students, and CREA Results—a grassroots community-based research organization—we set out to examine the opportunities and challenges around the Central-70 local hire initiative. To understand the project's landscape, Muyeba and student assistants conducted initial survey interviews with 32 firms in the construction trades in Colorado. The team accessed and analyzed ongoing data and reports from the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), and under Galemba's supervision, conducted 30 in-depth qualitative interviews (including one repeat) with a range of stakeholders positioned in relation to the project and the construction industry. Interviewees included union leaders, apprenticeship staff and organizers, workers, local advocates and community organizers, CDOT and other city personnel, academics, community members, and non-profit stakeholders. Most research took place between 2018-2020, was interrupted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and some additional interviews occurred subsequently. Dr. Muyeba developed a survey tool to survey workers about their experiences on the Central-70 project, but we were unable to complete this phase of the study as a result of the pandemic combined with the termination of the construction project.

Given methodological and access limitations, the report cannot fully assess whether

the project led to opportunities and advancement in construction careers for women, nonbinary, and people of color. Yet, our findings point to important challenges that provide a cautionary addendum to official accounts of success and a lesson to future public-private large-scale re-development initiatives that seek to engage targeted communities.

II. Background

From the beginning, the Central-70 expansion project was controversial. CDOT had initially proposed the Central-70 renewal in 2014. Community groups like the GES Coalition were active in organizing opposition to the project, pointing out its risks for further gentrification and displacement, increased community exposure to environmental hazards and toxins, and adverse health impacts.

In 2017, the Federal Highway Administration (FWHA) endorsed CDOT's preferred route. Before such a large project could begin, CDOT was required to complete a long environmental impact study. CDOT conducted 5 years of community outreach, including 300 pre-construction public meetings, and made roughly 150 commitments to the impacted communities over the lifespan of the project (CDOT, 2023).

Following the decision to renew Central-70, Earthjustice (representing the Sierra Club, the Colorado Latino Forum, the Chaffee Park Neighborhood Association, and the Elyria-Swansea Neighborhood Association) filed a lawsuit against CDOT for violating Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The case was settled, stipulating additional commitments and mitigation measures to benefit the impacted communities of Globeville and Elyria-Swansea (GES) (CDOT, 2018). However, the plaintiffs did not succeed in achieving their primary goal—to stop the project.

With a total cost of $1.2 billion, the project was financed by multiple sources including the Bridge Enterprise, the Denver Regional Council of Governments, Senate Bill 09-228, and the City of Denver. Construction began in 2018 and was completed by July of 2023 (CDOT, n.d.-b).

III. Local Hire Component

The Central-70 expansion project was one of nine "local hire" pilots nationwide authorized by the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) under the Obama administration. It was the first time in CDOT's "history that such a goal [local hiring] would be applied on a project," and CDOT claimed that the potential benefits would be "substantial and long-lasting" for Colorado's workforce (CDOT, 2017-b). The local hire target was set at 760,000 hours (about 20% of approximated craft hours) (CDOT, 2023: 14).

To design the local hire target, CDOT commissioned an in-depth study, carried out by the Community College of Denver's (CCD) Workforce Initiatives. The goal was for 20% of the project's workforce to come from one of the targeted 13 zip codes of the neighborhoods impacted by the project without displacing the current workforce (see Figure 1). Funding from the FWHA also supported workforce development and training, including skills for job development and advancement. CDOT convened multi-stakeholder meetings, listening sessions, and conducted community outreach. CDOT also partnered with CCD's Workforce Initiatives to establish a neighborhood training center, known as WORKNOW, which offered training programs and other wrap-around supports for the local workforce (CDOT, 2019-a). FWHA funding and multi-stakeholder partnerships helped ramp up recruitment efforts.

The project claimed to offer a win-win-win for the construction industry, city development and workers and their communities. However, our findings provide caution to the official narrative.

Figure 4: C-70 project local hire neighborhoods

Source: CDOT (2019-b).

IV. Toxic Grounds

"The people in the neighborhoods do not trust anybody, any kind of government agency…They feel like they've been betrayed over and over again."(interview 8/2019)

The first theme was a lack of trust between the project's proponents and targeted communities, which had long borne the negative impacts of city development initiatives. Many of the targeted communities, specifically the neighborhoods of Globeville and Elyria-Swansea (or GES), were already considered to be "environmental justice communities"—meaning they suffer disproportionately from environmental hazards and their adverse health, social, and economic impacts. The GES neighborhoods (which collectively form a significant portion of the 80216 zip code) are the most polluted residential neighborhoods in the U.S. (Horvath, 2023). Owing to the legacy of smelting, an area of over four miles is designated a Superfund site. GES's history as smelting towns that attracted European immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries inform the residential urban and industrial mix that persists today. GES are historically working-class neighborhoods with a relatively high percentage of foreign born; now largely Hispanic and/or Latino. GES residents are already disproportionately impacted by gentrification and vulnerable to displacement. For some residents, the fight against this recent wave of highway expansion was a generational struggle. Some of today's activists recalled their grandparents resisting earlier highway expansions that cut right through the neighborhoods in the 1960s and altered the composition of the neighborhood (Doeppers, 1967; Interview with Candi CdeBaca 3/2022).

Although the Central-70 project promised community investment, a community health study, job opportunities, and improved connectivity, a legacy of lack of community consultation, displacement for city development and industrial priorities, and exposure to adverse environmental and health risks bred distrust from the get-go.

V. Local Hire: Job Promises and Advancement

Although local hire was a way to mitigate some of the project's impacts, proponents were optimistic it could also create economic opportunities for the local workforce and keep money in the communities. However, interviews with union leaders, workers, organizers, and apprenticeship program revealed challenges with recruiting, retaining, and advancing women, non-binary, and people of color in construction trades. These included:

- Workers not meeting skills/qualifications needed
- Stigma around construction work as "dirty work"

- Concerns of “industry” culture: harassment, lack of accountability, perception of industry not being friendly to women and people of color
- Youth not seeing construction as a career pathway
- Lack of trust in construction industry, high rates of labor violations
- Lack of affordable and reliable child-care
- Inflexible, long hours
- Transportation, language barriers
- Apprenticeship program requirements: E.g., driver’s license, math requirements, GED
- Lack of work authorization, institutional racism barriers (e.g. disproportionate incarceration rates for people of color can make fulfilling some requirements difficult like a commercial driver’s license)

Recruitment efforts, as well as WORKNOW, attempted to address some of the barriers. For example, WORKNOW provided training and “wrap-around services” such as access to bus passes, boots, and assistance with other resources that could interfere with the ability to work. The lead contractor, Kiewit, also partnered with unions and community and industry partners for referrals for apprenticeships and training programs, offered cultural awareness and language classes for supervisory staff and workers to improve industry awareness and culture, and supported worker retention through mentorship from established craft workers (CDOT 2023, 9).

These efforts improved trust and access, but other challenges persisted; some due to tensions between the “local hire” target, how unions and apprenticeship programs operate, and weak union density in Colorado:

- Difficulties ensuring workers had opportunities beyond the Cental-70 project
- How to keep contractors accountable
- Whether targets would be manipulated by including specialists like architects in Rhino
- Unions operate from their benches, which does not take zip code into account
- How unions would balance the large amount of work for Central-70 without lowering qualification standards and requirements
- Apprenticeship programs can have extensive wait lists and going through one doesn’t guarantee a job on a particular project

At the time, a skilled labor shortage and weak union density motivated unions to be invested in bringing in more workers. Still, advocates wanted to ensure that local hire was not a goal in and of itself, but that it would provide a bridge to bring more people into construction careers and opportunities for advancement.

Despite initial hurdles, **the local hire target was not only met, but exceeded early**. By June of 2022, local hire hours were over one million (CDOT, 2021; CDOT, 2023). To address earlier concerns that the hours might not be in craft occupations, the final report documented 789,000 craft hours as of June 2022 (CDOT, 2023: 13). The zip code including GES neighborhoods, 80216, accounted for 66 of 515 craft hours as of December 2020, with 169 WORKNOW members working on the project and 69 had been employed by Central-70 contractors for subsequent projects (CDOT, 2020).

However, many of our interviewees questioned the success story. Candi CdeBaca asked, “A better question is retention” (interview 3/2022). She and others had heard stories from a number of community members who had gone through the training, but never worked on the project. Others only did so briefly, and others were not interested in the jobs offered. CdeBaca explained that many community members did not want more construction jobs, they’ve “already got that market cornered. That’s what [they] do already.” Others were skeptical about how much money or well-paying jobs would flow into the communities. One non-profit advocate also noted that “large contractors are pretty used to hiring their own…My guess is that all the skilled high paying jobs are already spoken for…” (interview 8/19).

Concerns from community members and some community and non-profit advocates included:

- Whether the community saw value in the project and job opportunities
- Mistrust in CDOT that goals and targets could be “empty promises”
- Skepticism that job promises were a distraction from displacement and environmental impacts
- Not desiring more construction jobs
- Distrust about if these were attempts to “buy off the community” and pitting segments vs. one another around the jobs promised vs. opposing the project

Jobs delivered through local hire arrangements can be promising if they provide adequate protections, benefits, and a pathway to higher wages and careers. If not, however, they can risk reproducing the reliance on communities of color to provide a source of cheap labor for the benefits of industry and city development prerogatives. However, given historical experience of mistrust of city initiatives, and wariness around how the project would contribute to further gentrification and displacement, exposure to pollution and environmental hazards, and potential health, social, and economic impacts, some community members did not see “local hire” as an effective mitigation, but instead as an attempt to make the project “easier to accept” (interview 10/19).

VI.Displacement and Gentrification

In neighborhoods already disproportionately impacted by gentrification and displacement, the project raised significant concerns. For construction alone, 56 homes were demolished. Many families had experienced multiple displacements because of consecutive construction projects over the years, fragmenting families, school communities, and social networks, impacting the ability of local businesses to survive, and altering the nature of the neighborhoods. For many, the compensation for relocation was also seen as insufficient and unfair. Moreover, we heard that when some families resisted relocation, that city stakeholders would make staying more difficult. One explained that CDOT would buy property, “put a huge hurricane fence around it and abandon it. Gardens will turn into weeds and there will be rats. They were deliberately blading the neighborhood to drive down prices so people will move away” (interview 8/2019). They would have no choice but to leave.

VII.Adverse Environmental Exposure and Health

Despite millions promised for investment in GES as part of the mitigation, residents were skeptical. CDOT was well-aware of the implications of having a “billion dollar project in your backyard,” but to community members, the project risked exacerbating generational forms of dispossession, displacement, and disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards and adverse health impacts. GES already has a high prevalence of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and asthma (Kenyon et al. 2024).

Although some community members wanted the jobs, some were wary of disturbing potentially contaminated soil in a Superfund area. They had reason to be concerned. CdeBaca mentioned that during earlier construction phases that employed local

community members, they often worked on Superfund sites; “they were paid to dig their own graves and there was no legal recourse for them because when you hire locally in an environment like this, if somebody gets cancer down the road, there’s no way to prove that their exposure was on the job versus because they lived in the community” (interview 2/2020). She likened this to the conundrum of how to “describe water to a fish” (interview 3/2022). Without a baseline, lack of data, historical neglect, and compounding forms of adverse exposure over time, even with funds for a community health study, many worried it would be difficult to attribute any particular consequences to the highway expansion alone. Others were skeptical about effective EPA monitoring, environmental concerns around the park—also known as the “cap” being built over the highway to mitigate highway noise and pollution (see Brasch, 2023)—, and the mitigations and investments into Swansea elementary school, which some described as a bit like putting a muffler on a toxic pipe. CDOT invested $2 million into the school, including for windows, sound-proofing, and an HVAC system, but none of this addressed what would happen when children went outside. As one advocate ironically asked, “Are you gonna give our children self-breathing apparatuses when they go out to play?” (interview 8/19).

VIII.Lack of Meaningful Benefits & Consultation

Three overarching themes underscore the tension between official success narratives and the disillusionment of many impacted and targeted community members and advocates: **1) Lack of meaningful benefits, 2) Lack of adequate consultation, and 3) Failure to fully consider community concerns, agency, and autonomy**

1) Lack of meaningful benefits: To many community members and local advocates, it was clear who the intended beneficiaries were. One advocate saw minimal community benefits; mostly “minimal concessions” [from the lawsuits]…The only community that would benefit from the extension of I-70 will be all the white people who come to ski.” (interview 10/2019). An organizer commented, “the community is being redeveloped [but] it is not being redeveloped for them” (interview 10/2019).

2) Lack of adequate consultation: Although CDOT held numerous listening sessions and community outreach and consultation sessions, what stood out was the perception of being spoken for, rather than listened to. Specifically, consultations did not allow community members to say no. Much of the consultation occurred after it was clear decisions had already been made. Many knew little; one community member described, “Without even knowing, anything about the community, one day [they] just come and bring the tractors and start crossing the streets, tearing down houses to

make space for I-70" (interview 10/2019). The following quote from a non-profit advocate further illustrated this problem:

> *"You know, they talk about all the hundreds of hours of community outreach they've done and what not…What they would do going down into those neighborhoods starting around 2006 was to say, 'Hi, we're here and we're gonna double the size of the freeway and poison your air. Are you ok with that?'…That is not exactly what they said of course! But that was pretty much it." (interview 7/2019)*

One organizer noted how planners often chose to consult non-profits rather than attempting to understand and listen to the community. She cautioned, "I just think it's bad when you're just asking people and then do what you want" (interview 10/19). Although they may have heard the community, they had not listened.

3) Failure to fully consider community concerns, agency, and autonomy: The project's proponents admitted that there would be short-term disruption and costs, but they believed these would be overcome by the eventual widely shared benefits. However, this sacrifice was determined for impacted communities without fully addressing and listening to their concerns. Nor was there sufficient respect for the autonomy and expertise of targeted communities to assess their needs and make their own free and informed decisions. Despite early community suggestions of alternative highway routes, many felt that they were never fully considered. Similarly, as depicted above, jobs were promised without consulting community members about what kinds of jobs they needed or wanted:

> *"It was kind of like this thing that we were told we wanted…and at the time the unemployment rate was like 2% and it was even lower for Latinos because of all the development and construction jobs. So it was kind of like, this isn't really a bargaining chip that we want right now, that we need, like why is it being told to us that we need this?" (interview with Candi CdeBaca 3/2022).*

The legacy of mistrust is critical. One non-profit advocate explained, “They feel like they’ve been betrayed over and over again” (interview 8/19). Others picked up the fact that the GES neighborhoods have long been treated as a “laboratory” for city planners, projects, as well as research initiatives to experiment on, rather than as agents over their own decisions and priorities (interview 8/19).

Yet, there some unanticipated benefits, specifically learned through the work of organizing against the project and winning particular concessions and mitigations. One local organizer mentioned how this process was creating new leaders and cultivating community consciousness:

“The real value could be really helping people understand the power of their voice and getting them engaged in channels where they could make a difference. Having them believe their voice matters”(interview 10/2019).

IX. Conclusion

Our report cannot fully assess whether and to what extent the local hire component led to meaningful job opportunities and pathways to advancement in construction careers for targeted communities, with a specific focus on women, non-binary, and people of color. However, our findings offer a space to make visible some of the alternative and complicating narratives to the official win-win-win story. This consideration is important to the success of future projects, city-community-industry relationships, and building foundations of trust.

Our findings also offer important lessons on engaging with communities on large-scale infrastructure projects, lest the same errors continue to breed mistrust in future undertakings. For example, community resistance was key to frustrating former Denver Mayor Hancock’s plans for the National Western Center’s arena and marketplace, which the GES coalition argued “failed to meaningfully include the community” despite the fact that funds would have filtering into the communities (Beaty 6/20/24; GES Coalition, 2024). Nola Miguel, director of the GES Coalition, signaled the importance of building true partnership, community power, and putting projects directly into the hands of the coalition; especially through its land trust:

We don't just want community engagement of some sort. We want a true, equal partnership, where the equity is actually equitable, where the land is owned. So then we have that control so that throughout the whole process, there's community checks of not only how it's happening but what's happening throughout the process." (Nola Miguel, quoted from Beaty 3/3/2024).

Despite their criticisms, it is important to stress that most interviewees still favored the idea of local hire initiatives for future projects. It is not that impacted communities don't want development, jobs, or even a local hire initiative; but rather not on the terms defined by others and at the expense of their land, livelihoods, health, communities, environment, and autonomy (e.g., see Kirsch , 2007).

X. Recommendations

Local hire arrangements should be considered and implemented in future initiatives, but with the following lessons and considerations:

Genuine community consultation, trust, and buy-in take time:

- Start prior to any project; not after decisions have already been made
- Engage with communities in all their facets (vs. relying on select non-profits, or spokes-people) and avoid pitting segments vs. one another or aggravating existing cleavages
- Public officials, developers, planners,industry leaders also need to demonstrate accountability

Regularly assess health and environmental indicators and impact in a way that tracks specific project impacts over short, medium, & long-term:

- Train community members in participatory-action research techniques to assess, advocate for, and take action on issues impacting their neighborhoods (The law suit's settlement funds for the comprehensive community health assessment conducted by the community is a good example)
- Seriously engage with and address local concerns, including past and ongoing environmental and health disparities and hazardous exposures

Take an asset vs. deficit approach to communities to understand what they already have, need, and desire vs. offering them what they may not:

- Invest in initiatives run by and for the community (e.g., GES Coalition and Tierra Colectiva community land trust). Place more initiatives under community control and ownership vs. assuming planners know best
- Address local desires for affordable and accessible housing and dignified jobs