



**FUNDERS FOR
A JUST ECONOMY**



NFG NEIGHBORHOOD
FUNDERS GROUP
Connecting people, place and power

BUILDING POWER IN PLACE

Nashville: Reshaping the City Towards an Economy for All

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WHO WE ARE

Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG) is a network of national and local grantmakers throughout the U.S. We bring together funders to learn, connect, and mobilize resources with an intersectional and place-based focus. We create inspiring organizing spaces for funders to explore shifting power and money in philanthropy towards justice and equity. Our member network includes donors, philanthropic institutions, and their staff interested in supporting racial, economic, gender, and climate justice movements across the US.

Leading the Building Power in Place project, **Funders for a Just Economy (FJE)** is a program of NFG committed to advancing the philanthropic conversation around intersectional economic justice and workplace power. We are committed to placing organized labor, worker centers, worker justice campaigns, policy efforts, and organizing strategies at the center of our efforts. Partner groups address the disparate impact of economic policies on people of color, women, migrants, and low-income individuals and families. Two of our key programs include (1) Meeting the Moment, creating collaborations for a just future of work(ers) that also addresses long-term racial, gender and climate justice and (2) Labor's Evolution, strengthening ties among labor unions, community-based organizations and philanthropy and charting new directions in worker-led organizing.

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Our BPP work in Nashville is only possible thanks to long-term foundational work from and FJE's partnership with NFG's Amplify Fund, including on the 2020 Nashville Virtual Learning Visit. Launched as the first, and only, grantmaking fund at Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG), **Amplify Fund** believes that community power is the key driver of just and equitable development. As a funder collaborative, the Fund supports Black, Indigenous, people of color and low-income communities to build power and to influence decisions about the places they live and work. Amplify centers racial justice and believes in following the wisdom and guidance of local leaders. In addition to guiding our strategies and grantmaking, Amplify is committed to living these values through internal operations, administrative functions, and behavioral norms to the fullest extent possible. We fund in 8 places -- Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, Tennessee and in California (via the Fund for an Inclusive California). Amplify selected these places because of: 1) the prioritization of power building work led by people of color and low-income people, and focused on equitable development; 2) the relative absence of national philanthropy; 3) the potential to mobilize local philanthropic dollars. In each place Amplify follows the guidance of local advisors and the wisdom of those with lived experience to develop context-specific strategies.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROJECT

With public eyes on 2020 voter mobilization to give voice to hundreds of thousands of Black, Latinx, and API voters in Georgia and Arizona; burgeoning union movements in Alabama; and struggles against police violence in Minnesota and Kentucky, it's become clear to many funders that the map of transformative movements extends far beyond hub coastal cities. **Nashville, Tennessee - while it might escape the national headlines - is precisely such a region of change in the equations of power - and in shifting towards economic equity.** While facing rapid gentrification and relentless state-level pushback against inclusion, new upsurges in labor-community organizing are opening high-road job access and helping neighborhoods fight for fair share. With this, a dramatic increase in Black, Latinx and Muslim-migrant voter registration, and other changes are radically redefining a Southern landscape in ways that both reverberate with civil rights histories and set forward innovative models.

Yet the impulse and intention to direct new resources to the South and Midwest and to rural communities can often be met with confusion on where to even begin - or with rapid action wrapped in assumptions on what works where. This can translate into frustration in these underfunded areas as local movements for change are bypassed for more

well-resourced groups with national reach, or are asked to replicate one model that may not fit local geography, history, and power relations.

When it comes to expanding the geographic reach of funding to support lasting change on inequality, in other words, **mobilizing resources must be met with a deeper knowledge of and partnerships with Black, Indigenous, migrant, and people of color-led movements rooted in place.** Local funders, too, must also be considered in this landscape and as potential partners.

Building Power in Place emerges from a recognition that there is no “one size fits all” solution to addressing low-wage worker issues and economic inequality in the US, especially if we want to pay attention to race, gender and climate. In fact, many challenges workers and low-income communities face are place-based or geographic. Think about how local policies like a \$15 minimum wage can be undercut by state pre-emption, or the power that corporate forces like Amazon or agri-business exert in rural and exurban places. This has never been more clear than under COVID-19, where essential worker protections are a complex patchwork, and often include battles among local cities and state governments in intervening in dangerous industries like meatpacking.



We ask: How are low-wage workers and organizations that represent them addressing unequal economic, health conditions, given the complex geography of power in the US? Where are their connections among places in terms of both what low-income Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities face and how they organize? What role are funders playing – and where can they shift - to best respond to the specific place-based conditions related to economic justice?

This project is as much a research process rooted in community voices as it is an **active process to help forge a shared understanding among funders, community, and labor organizations**, and other key stakeholders through listening, learning, and building together.

Primarily funded by the generous support of the Public Welfare Foundation, Building Power in Place (BPP) has **three goals**:

#1 Identify specific urban and rural communities with organizing, policy advocacy, and other efforts regarding low wage worker issues and understand how conditions are shaped by place-based factors such as state preemption. Deepen knowledge of the ways in which organizations respond to geographically-specific conditions and the ways they tangibly shift power and the economic prospects for low wage workers and marginalized BIPOC communities.

#2 Bridge donors, funders, and organizations engaged in related areas - including anti-poverty, community health and racial justice - regarding worker justice issues. Share more information about worker and unemployed-led strategies shifting precarious conditions and creating new visions of the economy in places that have not traditionally received significant funding for power-building.

#3 Build and strengthen relationships with local and regional funders in the identified communities through larger events on issues facing marginalized workers, and facilitate deeper partnerships among local and national funders, community groups, and NFG.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROCESS

OUR METHODOLOGY

The BPP is driven by interviews, public conversations and informal dialogue as qualitative research. The 10 sites were selected in partnership with our member organizations, with community groups where we have partnerships, and with our own NFG programs. Places were narrowed down through a process where we mapped regions (1) outside the more conventional sites of significant foundation funding (i.e. New York, Los

Angeles, San Francisco); (2) where NFG programs had active ties, in order to build on our prior commitments and ensure longevity of work; (3) where there was active worker organizing and/or locally-specific manifestations of anti-worker policy (for example, state preemption.) Sites were then filtered to include a diversity of rural-urban or state/local relationships, and to ensure spread across South, Midwest, and rural regions.

At each site, we interview local community, family, and collaborative grantmakers, as well as state/national funders with a strong and active presence in a location. Interview outreach for foundations is conducted using existing NFG networks and community partner recommendations as a starting point. We then snowball to map out a wider network of funders and to determine which officers and staff would be the appropriate interviewees. Questions include how the interviewee viewed the most pressing economic equity/justice issues; how foundations supported work to change these conditions; what challenges they faced in distributing funding; and what gaps they see in local and regional funding related to economic justice. Interviews last 45 minutes to 1 hour, and were recorded to verify and transcribe quotes, and no names are used in reports.

We also interview and have open info-gathering conversations with leaders of labor and community organizations, an approach designed to

both gather data and foster new connections among these movements and foundations. Given the BPP focus on systemic change, partners for this are selected that (1) are led by BIPOC, including in management, (2) actively work across labor unions and community organizations, and (3) include an emphasis on intersectional organizing and on power-building, versus service-orientations to low-income community needs.

In the case of Nashville, NFG's Amplify Fund was essential to this process, having developed its Nashville strategy using a co-created process with key Black-led local labor/community organizations since 2018. The perspectives and activities of these organizations were gathered throughout the process of developing and executing a [virtual joint Learning Visit](#) in September 2020, including producing a short film sharing their story and informal interviews and conversations. The Learning Visit was recorded to also ensure accuracy in quotes.

Quotes are anonymized to protect confidentiality and foster a more honest dialogue. Qualitative data was supplemented and fact-checked with secondary source academic literature, labor and political/economic statistics (most significantly from the [ERI/PolicyLink National Equity Atlas](#)), newspapers, and other media.



OUR ANALYTICAL APPROACH

How do we begin to get a grasp on the local economy? To start to address this, we turned to a longer tradition of theory that views the economy as underpinned by **land, labor, and capital** (where corporations are subsumed). These three planks are not fixed containers, a long history of political and economic research tells us, but in fact, there is significant tension between the drive to commodify these and the social destruction reaped by free market ideas and practice.¹ **Indigenous, Black radical, decolonial and/or feminist scholars and activists** have driven this point home repeatedly, **showing how we value land, labor and capital is never a given.**² How we conceive of property or work can be transformed to better serve all life and reflect broader visions beyond the destructive, extractive market – as it has been historically in certain indigenous, Black and other cultural traditions, and many strive today to make possible at a community level in many ways. While (racial) capitalist transformation has sought to make land, labor and capital solely profit-driven, there have

¹ This includes the classic book Polanyi, K., & MacIver, R. M. (1944). *The great transformation*. Beacon press, as well as Block, F., & Somers, M. R. (2014). *The power of market fundamentalism*. Harvard University Press.; Bugra, A., & Agartan, K. (2007). *Reading Karl Polanyi for the twenty-first century: market economy as a political project*. Springer.

² For some starting points, see: Kelley, R. D. (2002). *Freedom dreams: The black radical imagination*. Beacon Press and <https://www.aaihs.org/black-feminist-futures-a-reading-list/> and <http://www.the-ciej.org/decolonize4climate-syllabus.html>

been key moments of political transformation that have pushed back to redefine these economic elements more responsive to and rooted in social needs like care. In other words, these *Building Blocks* of the economy **not only shape power but are active sites where power is contested and challenged**. The terms of labor, land and capital (from the local on up) must be up for debate if we are to shift the systemic, historical inequalities that shape worker's lives. To highlight place dynamics tied to people and the environment, we also singled out geography and demographics as building blocks influencing the local economy.

In what ways then, do movements practically shift power on this complicated terrain? Significant new work has been done linking movements, funders, and practice in place. Focusing on the possibilities for progressive governance at the US state level, the **University of Southern California Equity Research Institute (USC ERI) *Changing States* framework lays out six key arenas for contesting and wielding governing power.**³ The research shows the electoral, legislative, judicial, administrative, communication, and corporate must each be addressed to make change last. The USC ERI framework offers a critical intervention in

³ See Pastor, M. et al (2016). *Changing States: A Framework for Progressive Governance*. USC ERI. <https://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/changing-states/> and more at <https://dornsife.usc.edu/eri/research-social-movements-governing-power/>

both recognizing the specific ways power plays out at different geographic levels, but also where and how movements develop multi-issue, multi-faceted strategies that can take them from building bases and influencing decision-making towards wielding governing power. These arenas of governance thus form one leg of how *Power in Place* is enacted.

Frameworks like *Changing States* and related movement research⁴ helps address what capacities are necessary, such as a diverse coalitional and leadership development structures, to change arenas of governance. To understand more precisely how the specific economic landscape fits, we brought in a third area of research by scholar Beverly Silver and others on **the ways workers historically have shifted economic power**.⁵ First, workers can build associational power with political or community groups via legally-recognized forms. Second, they can wield their position in the market, such as striking when there are few options to replace them. Finally, they can leverage their position in a key industrial area or production process. Merging these complementary vantage points on progressive movement and worker power under *Movement Ecosystems*,⁶

⁴ Such research includes the key work of Partnership for Working Families on inside-outside strategies, which in part informed SUN’s model in Nashville. <https://www.forworkingfamilies.org/resource-toolkit> and <https://dornsife.usc.edu/perc/1000-leaders-rising/>
⁵ Among others, see: Silver, B. J. (2003). *Forces of labor: workers' movements and globalization since 1870*. Cambridge University Press.
⁶ This term correlates with and expands upon USC ERI’s “Power-Building Ecosystems” concept. See: https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/1411/docs/2020_Power_Building_Ecosystem_Framework_v3.pdf

we paid attention to **both the forms and strategies power-building takes** - and how these respond to and reshape local (and state, national, and global) economic building blocks.

Foundations are, of course, inseparable from movement capacities and strategic orientations to the economy, so we also include them in *Power in Place*. Our findings across these **lead to our roadmap on ways forward for philanthropic partners in change, *Redefining Power***. As all of our research is rooted in local realities, each of these recommendations will look different by place – though we anticipate commonalities that we will also use to inform our own responsibilities as a funder network.

Components	Key Elements	Key Questions
Building Blocks	Geography & Demography	What key contextual elements shape the landscape of economic & political power?
Building Blocks	Capital Labor Land	Where is economic power contained & sustained locally?
Power in Place	Arenas of Governance	Where and how do government and other institutional actors enact power over land, labor, and capital locally?
Power in Place	Movement Ecosystems Where Funders Fit	Where and how do movements organize and strategically wield power in the economic building blocks? Where do/how can funders play a role in this?



THE BUILDING BLOCKS: GEOGRAPHY & DEMOGRAPHICS

#1 Nashville (and Middle Tennessee) is often considered a region of its own, part of a trifurcated state with distinct political, social, and economic realities. On one side is Memphis, which has a more developed philanthropic sector and its own histories of civil rights and labor activism, as well as the violent histories of enslavement-driven cotton production. On the other, East Tennessee is rooted in Knoxville and Chattanooga, which became a center of regional energy production. This is no surprise when one considers the geography of the region – literally the Central Basin of Middle Tennessee, a watershed in the Highland Rim, that separates it out from the Southern delta region and from more mountainous Appalachian lands. It is hilly and has a smaller, but more diverse agricultural range, not supporting large-scale mono-crops.⁷

#2 Middle Tennessee is unceded Native land that, for generations before colonial expropriation, was used as hunting ground and some



Tennessee Map. Credit: Nations Online Project.
(nationsonline.org)

⁷ Kreyling, C (2006). *Nashville Civic Design Center: Nashville Past & Present*. Nashville Civic Design Center.http://www.sitemason.com/files/hYGg6l/PON_History_PastPresent.pdf

settlements for a range of tribes in the area, including Cherokee, Yuchi, Shawnee, Creek, and Chickasaw across Tennessee. Five years after quite literally agreeing to recognize Native land sovereignty over all Tennessee in 1763, colonizers then shifted to take all Native land through a series of forced treaties and violent settler wars over a period of 65 years and centered on the white Watauga settlement in Middle Tennessee.⁸ The state was also violently affected by the Trail of Tears, and other waves of genocidal violence, to the point where official Tribal organizations have been wiped out.

#3 The growing frontier settlement around Fort Nashborough and Davidson County relied upon numerous Black residents who were not enslaved and central to the region's foundation.⁹ Large influxes of white residents, though, changed the dynamic across the 1800s as the region became a real estate hub; many of these depended upon enslavement to create their small plots, and there were nearly 15,000 enslaved Black residents by 1860. Sites like the Nashville Public Square Park marked with

⁸ Estes, R (2013). "Broken Tennessee Treaties." *Native Heritage Project*.
<https://nativeheritageproject.com/2013/04/15/broken-tennessee-treaties/>
Roth, S (2015). Tennessee's Native American History. (Storymaps).
<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/2feccdf99b344a79a54c1c53f82184b3>

For historical and current catalog of Native organizations in TN see
<http://www.moccasinbend.net/cita/TNNAorgs.html>

⁹ Lovett, B. L. (1999). *The African-american History of Nashville, Tn: 1780-1930* (p). University of Arkansas Press.

violent histories of auctions by enslavers.¹⁰ At the same time, even with post-Civil War booms and the expansion of the city during the New Deal era, Black population shares were in the 20-30% range, as compared to Memphis, where the plantation economy and other factors shaped a city that has been majority Black.

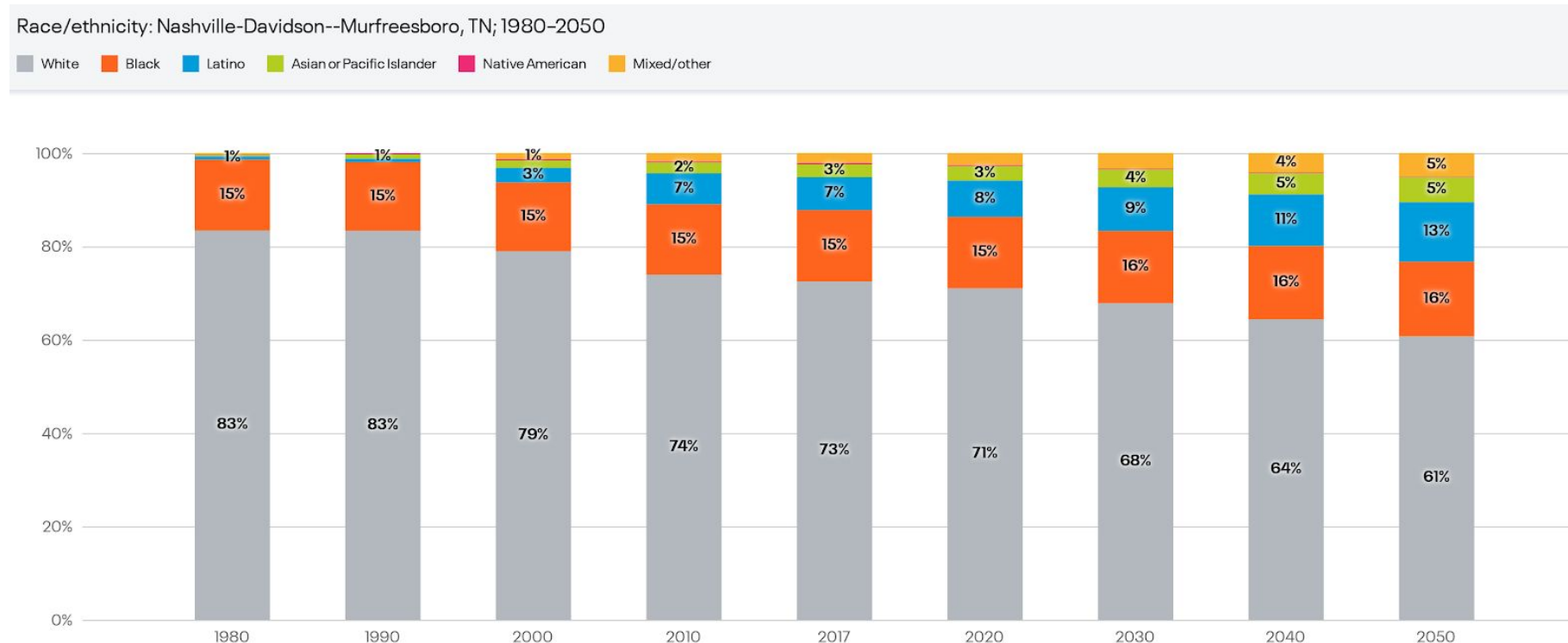
#4 Centuries later, Middle Tennessee itself is best described as holding, in one interviewees' words, "**subrural**" regions with pockets of **density** spread across larger expanses.¹¹ Subrural regions make coordination and regional integration of services complicated, and also make for clear and stark differences among who has access. At the same time, there are a few key metropolitan hubs that very much represent the city of Nashville in the national eye - swarmed with bars, music venues, shops and other businesses (with the city labeled a home to country music).

#5 Since 2000, Nashville's metro region population has neared majority-minority, particularly as the share of Latinx residents has grown, and that landscape is riddled with segregation and inequality.

¹⁰ Williams, L. (n.d.) *North Nashville Heritage Project*. Tennessee State University.
<https://www.tnstate.edu/nnhp/>

¹¹ In part, this is due to geography but also the intentional way in which the region developed through privatized subdivision of the land and the selling off of parcels early in its settler colonial development





Data source: U.S. Census Bureau; Woods & Poole Economics, Inc. | National Equity Atlas

Representing about 1% of the population in the 1990s, Latinx communities represented 10% of the demographic balance in 2017, many being global migrants. Regions like Southeast Nashville became dubbed “Little Mexico.” Throughout the same time period, Black residents’ share of the overpopulation increased from 24 to 28%, and Asian Pacific Islanders from just under 1% to 3%. Currently, Asian Pacific Islanders represent about 3.5% of the region, including a large Burmese population

resettled in the wave of Southeast Asian wars in the 1970s, as well as Kurdish, Vietnamese, Chinese and Indian refugees. Yet, many migrants also face specific incidences of racism – including a failed 2009 English only bill and Tennessee’s Senator Marsha Blackburn co-sponsorship of Tom Cotton’s (dropped) racist SECURE Act banning Chinese nationals from studying at US universities.

#6 Some of the poorest parts of the central region are in the northeast of Middle Tennessee, historical Black communities that have experienced disenfranchisement across multiple generations. While the Black

population has remained steady at a regional level, where they live is changing due to the push-out forces of development in the central Nashville city and Davidson County. Key historic neighborhoods in Davidson County saw a drop in Black populations closer to the central core, while pushing Black residents out to further North.¹² For example,

¹² Reicher, M. (2017). “Black share of population plummets in some Nashville neighborhoods.” *The Tennessean*. <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2017/12/28/black-population-plummets-nashville-neighborhoods/936368001/>

census tracts right above Nashville's Haynes Park saw a jump from 67.9% to 79.1% share from 2007-2011 to 2012-2016. During the same time period, closer to the metro areas spanning Germantown and Hope Gardens neighborhoods went from 60.4% Black to 38.4% Black (and with it, from 36.6% to 58.7% white). Several other central tracts saw these drops, while suburban/subrural regions have seen growing Black, API and Latinx populations.

Nashville Nice?

What defines Nashville culturally (besides great music and food, of course)? One particularly relevant aspect is the emphasis on volunteerism and charity as a shared value. While this can sometimes (as noted in the section below on Philanthropic Landscape) slip into an attitude of patronage and stifle systemic change, it also offers a promising set of shared ideas that can be mobilized into action. Care and community exist across Middle Tennessee – but the question is, can that spirit be mobilized towards systemic change?

THE BUILDING BLOCKS: CAPITAL

#1 When the Nashville Chamber of Commerce and business boosters in the 21st Century try to set goals for the city, they look and aspire to Austin, Texas or the Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina research triangle. The former shares an entertainment and music scene; both have attracted larger tech companies and banking; each is relatively liberal politically in a state that swung pro-business and conservative in the last few decades. The goal, in this vision, has been to **attract what is termed the “creative class”** – following the ideas of urbanist Richard Florida of incentivizing knowledge-based industry and the professionals who make up these to fast-track urban development.¹³

These supply-side/trickle-down ideas have been widely discredited by Florida himself, who later saw most cities who employed this strategy are either worse or no better off overall (not to mention how this fueled gentrification in cities like Austin).¹⁴ However, that hasn't stopped business elites from guiding plans for Nashville through this narrow lens.

¹³ Florida, R. (2014). *The rise of the creative class--revisited: Revised and expanded*. Basic Books (AZ).

¹⁴ Saunders, P. (2017) “The Evolution of the Creative Class.” *Forbes*.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/petesaunders1/2017/05/04/the-evolution-of-the-creative-class/#3617a23e12ee>





#2 The attempt to recruit new “creative classes” is a response to the fact that in the 1980s, as Nashville faced global and regional economic shifts, it started to lose its position as the **“Wall Street of the South”, a hub for banks, insurance companies, and other capital**, that it had established in the early 20th Century.¹⁵ Nashville had a smaller mix of industry, such as weapons production for Dupont starting in the civil war,

¹⁵ Thanks to national financial deregulation and tax shifts towards the wealthy and corporations in the 1980s, capital started to move towards an infusion of real estate speculation, including getting amply caught up in the Savings & Loan schemes of the decade. With the globalization of finance, some of the securities institutions moved towards New York, while other banks moved to shifting southern centers of capital like Atlanta and Charlotte. Nashville banks were hard hit by the 1987 stock crash tied to this, and collapse furthered in the 1990s recession. See: Johansson, O. (2007). Ten people can't run this city anymore: neoliberalism and governance change in Nashville, Tennessee. *Southeastern Geographer*, 47(2), 298-319.

but neither this nor agriculture had a large stake. (In fact, as discussed below, land speculation was always a significant part of Nashville's story).¹⁶ Losing major finance, baking and insurance and turning to “creative classes” and tourism led to a reshuffling of power with it (discussed further below).

#3 Today, the cornerstone industries across the 10 counties that make up the middle Tennessee region include **health care management, music and entertainment, tourism and manufacturing**. At the top: Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nissan North America and HCA Healthcare. Health care in the region has been entrepreneurial and sought out new ventures to distinguish itself (like elective surgeries), and is more representative of a new corporate base of power. While some small businesses help maintain the large tourism sector, a large number of chain restaurants like Shoney's, major hotels like the Omni, and music venues dominate- part of what has helped brand the city as “Nash-Vegas.” The retail sector has also faced the expansion of non-union, low-wage chains like Dollar General and Family Dollar targeting low-income neighborhoods (and in 2021, piloting a “suburban” model in Nashville).¹⁷

¹⁶ Kreyling, C (2006). *Nashville Civic Design Center: Nashville Past & Present*. Nashville Civic Design Center. http://www.sitemason.com/files/hYGg6I/PON_History_PastPresent.pdf

¹⁷ Goodwin, J. (2020). “Dollar General to open new stores targeting wealthier shoppers.” CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/08/business/dollar-general-popshelf-retail-store/index.html>

#4 **Food production** (and small manufacturing) is often not discussed in the broader Middle Tennessee region, yet still a powerful force. This includes **meatpacking plants that have been at the center of labor organizing** in 2020 to stop the spread of COVID-19 and deal with longstanding safety issues. Many of the largest global meatpacking conglomerates – including Tyson and JBS – are represented both in the Nashville area and Middle Tennessee more broadly.¹⁸

The difference among union and non-union meatpacking plant responses to COVID-19 in the region was stark, with numerous non-union sites being hardest hit with outbreaks.¹⁹ The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) and the Central Labor Council of Nashville and Middle Tennessee have been successful in linking Black and brown workers in meatpacking in often-unrecognized organizing defying narratives about the right-to-work region. (This model of Black-led organizing has informed how RWDSU is also breaking new ground in other sectors in the South, including in its Amazon logistics warehouse unionization campaign in Bessemer, Alabama.)

¹⁸ These corporations, owned by elites in the US, Brazil and Asia, represent the global consolidation of meat production, which has radically affected the prospects for local farmers (including just over the range in Tennessee). See Sharma, S (2018). “Mighty Giants: Leaders of the Global Meat Complex.” IATP Blog. <https://www.iatp.org/blog/leaders-global-meat-comple>

¹⁹ For more on the struggle to organize meatpacking workers in Nashville, see FJE’s Strike Watch interview with CLC of Nashville & Middle TN President Vonda McDaniel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DgXSmo6F80>

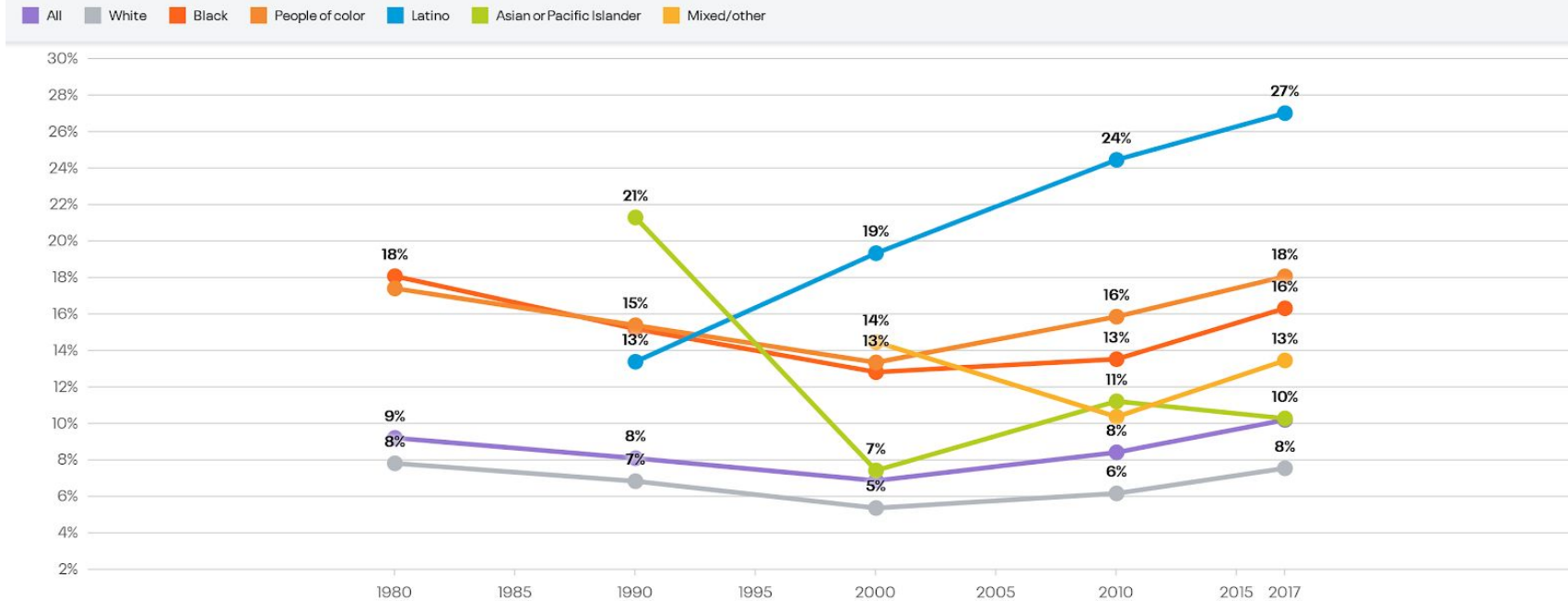
Amazon and Defining Nashville’s Future

In their long-term projections, the Chamber of Commerce has sought to add supply chain management and corporate operations to the mix of business. In part, business leaders have sought to compete with Memphis’ role as a Fedex hub. The supply chain and logistics sector is known for low-road, low-wage labor conditions, and both priorities came together in the city’s bid to attract Amazon’s HQ2.²⁰ The city threw more than \$100 million-plus in subsidies to attract the corporate giant, and similar to when Amazon sought to relocate to New York, was met with massive protests. While the company ultimately split up its ultimate mega-complex planned for New York across multiple locations, it did come to Nashville with a smaller portion of its operations –seizing the city’s promises of tax breaks and direct funding. If Amazon represents the Chamber’s vision, then it leaves significant questions about for whom the city and region is developing.

²⁰ Holder, S (2019.) “In Nashville, Will Amazon Overpromise and Under-Deliver?” CityLab (Bloomberg). www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-15/will-amazon-really-pay-employees-150-000-in-nashville



Percent working poor by race/ethnicity: Nashville-Davidson--Murfreesboro, TN; **Poverty:** Below 200%; **Workers:** All workers; 1980-2017



Data source: IPUMS-USA

THE BUILDING BLOCKS: LABOR

#1 Given the mix of finance capital and more recent growth of hospitality and healthcare, the workforce leans towards a range of **construction, building maintenance, professional, public sector, communications, food/retail services**, and more recently, transport and supply chain.²¹ The Central Labor Council of Middle Tennessee's makeup

²¹ In 2011, the right-wing supermajority assaulted teacher's collective bargaining rights, and in 2014, the new VW plant in Chattanooga was the site of an unprecedented infusion of cash and pressure on

and the growth of worker-based organizations like the Restaurant Opportunity Center in Nashville reflects many of these sectors and the potential for representation and building power across these disparate areas with increased union organizing.

#2 Key Nashville sectors have **significant gaps among each other** in terms of wages locally; with occupational segregation and exclusion, that often also furthers racial wage gaps.²² While office work averages a \$18 median wage, transport and goods movements is \$15 and food preparation under \$10.

Overall, wages have not only stagnated but actively decreased for those with low incomes since 1979: Nashville's lower 10th and 20th percentile of earners have seen a 10% decline in wages, while the highest 90th percentile have seen growth of 16%.

workers to slimly defeat unionization. See Brooks, C (2019). "Why the UAW Lost Again in Chattanooga." *LaborNotes*. <https://labornotes.org/2019/06/why-uaw-lost-again-chattanooga>
 Employment Data: BLS. (2019). Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates Nashville-Davidson--Murfreesboro--Franklin, TN. Avail at: https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_34980.htm

²² BLS. (2019). Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates Nashville-Davidson--Murfreesboro--Franklin, TN. Avail at: https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_34980.htm

#3 The **wage divide is clearly felt along lines of race** – something persistent along the entirety of the last four decades. While white workers earned an average of \$21/hour in 1980, workers of color earned \$16/hour on average; brief gains happened between 1990 and 2000, only to plummet back to the same rates in 2017, with the racial income gap.²³

As one interviewee described, “One of the basic issues cutting across gentrification and all the things we face is getting enough money in everyone’s pocket. Fair, livable wages are a huge piece that make a difference in lots of different ways – it’s shown to have more time to read to your kids, to get reading by 3rd grade, to have quality time with their families. It’s not just about Nashville, but it’s also statewide. Every rural community is facing the same thing.”

#4 Conditions within the major construction sector – which undergirds the entire real estate and corporate booms that have cyclically driven the economy – demonstrate that much **low-wage labor comes with high risks for workers of color**. Many Guatemalan, Honduran, and other Central American and Mexican workers – along with US-born Black workers – are a

²³ Data from Policylink/USC Equity Research Institute (ERI) National Equity Atlas; see <https://nationalequityatlas.org/>

key segment of the construction labor force. Yet these are the same workers who are offered few protections and bear non-union, non-regularized employment to build up the changing city.

#5 Throughout the 2010s, a key pathway to shifting wage disparities – **labor unions - were fundamentally challenged in Tennessee**.²⁴ Only 4.6% of workers were members of unions in 2019 – a drop from 5.5% the year prior.²⁵ The drop was due in part to the shedding of union jobs in a major Goodman plant in Southern Middle Tennessee, with jobs consolidating.²⁶ This is where the Chamber may be even more correct in their Austin comparison: both the Austin and Nashville metro areas are featured among the ten least unionized cities in the US. as part of a concerted “right to work” anti-union effort.²⁷

²⁴ Snarr, C. M. (2017). Elaborating Faith: Labor and Interfaith Resistance to Economic Inequality. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 45(2), 255-277.

²⁵ US BLS (2020). Economic News Release: Union Affiliation of Employed Wage & State. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t05.htm>

²⁶ Flessner, D. (2020). “Union membership drops in Tennessee as legislature considers putting right to work laws in state constitution.” *Chattanooga Free Press*. <https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/politics/state/story/2020/jan/22/union-membership-drops-ten-nessee-legislature-considers-putting-right-work-laws-state-constitution/513713/>

Elk Valley Times (2019). “529 more to be laid off as Goodman closure nears.” *Elk Valley Times* https://www.elkvalleytimes.com/news/local/529-more-to-be-laid-off-as-goodman-closure-nears/article_1e2dd4f0-e3bb-11e9-99e2-23d1e30edf73.html

²⁷ Medina, B (2020). “The Most Unionized Cities in America.” *Construction Coverage*. <https://constructioncoverage.com/research/most-unionized-cities-in-america>

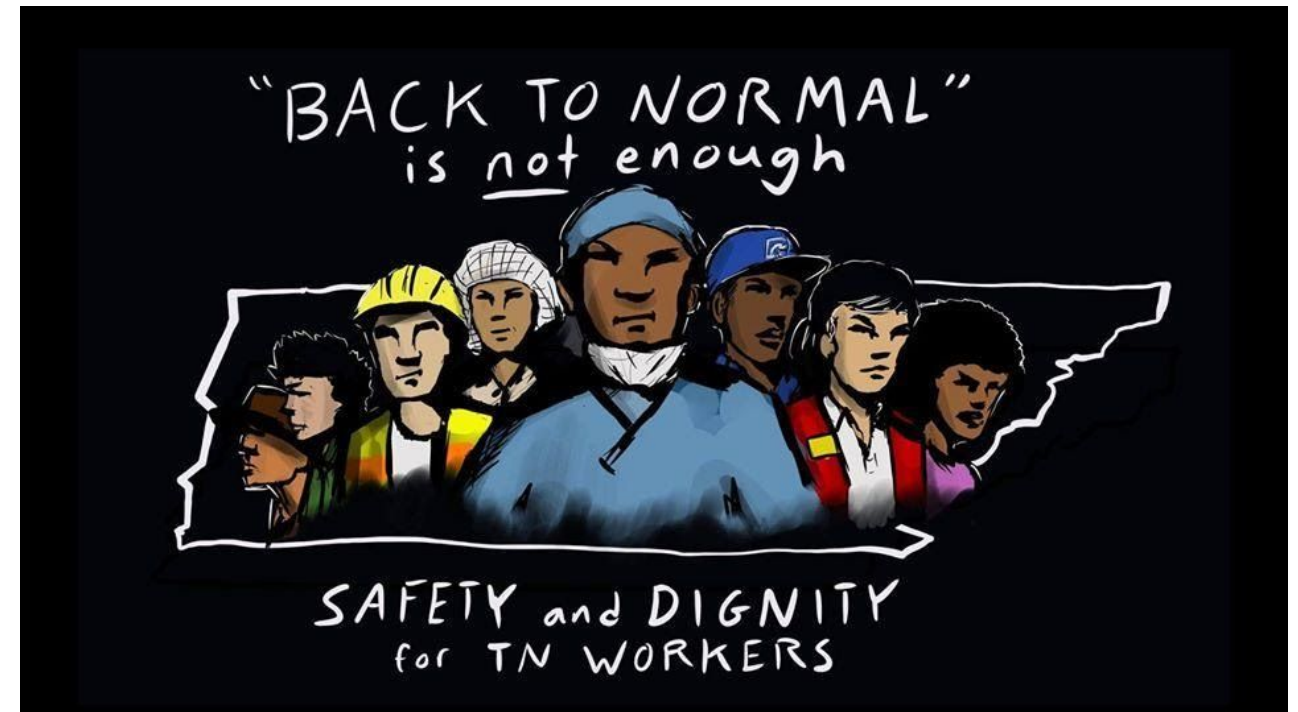


The Pandemic's Punch to Workers

The fragile state of workers was clear following the first waves of shutdown in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a comparative study of 10 major metropolitan regions, Nashville (and Miami) were among the hardest hit with the economic shock.²⁸ New jobs dropped 49% overall, and even in the health care sector, 44%. The latter was due in part to the fact that elective and other in-person, non-emergency services declined initially, and may compose a significant part of the sector in Nashville.

At the same time, workers of color were disproportionately represented at the front lines of the pandemic, compared to non-essential sectors.²⁹ Women of color were 18% of the healthcare workforce and 15% of essential workers, and men of color 18% of essential workers. On the other hand, white men were 40% of non-essential workers and white women 37%.

As COVID-19 has continued, whatever recovery is occurring, one interviewee explained, is K-shaped: in other words, the trajectory is upwards for a small percentage already endowed with wealth, while destroying the income, savings, and security of a larger percentage of the population.



"Back to Normal Is Not Enough" Safety and Dignity for TN Workers Poster (2020). Credit: CLC of Nashville & Middle TN.

²⁸ Langston, A. et al (2020). "Race, Risk, and Workforce Equity in the Coronavirus Economy." PolicyLink. <https://www.policylink.org/our-work/economy/national-equity-atlas/COVID-workforce>

²⁹ Langston, A. et al (2020). "Race, Risk, and Workforce Equity in the Coronavirus Economy." PolicyLink. <https://www.policylink.org/our-work/economy/national-equity-atlas/COVID-workforce>

THE BUILDING BLOCKS: LAND

#1 **Land privatization and real estate speculation have been a defining character in Nashville** from colonial settlements and historical development to today. Given the lack of cash crop cotton or tobacco agriculture, in the 19th century settlers turned into a unique, subdivided landscape for what can be seen as a predecessor of suburban living, marketed to private landowners as a quiet/scenic setting for country living. Real estate was a driving force in the economy (alongside the “Wall Street of the South” emphasis). In the contemporary era, this finance and real estate mix is tied in part to office and corporate development, and the rise of new high-rise structures and multi-unit, mixed-use development.

#2 Nashville’s rapid development has come with significant shifts in the housing market. **Since 2000, the renter population has jumped by 32%.** With continued stagnation in wages, renters are particularly cost burdened, with a 56% increase in households who must spend more than 30% of their income on rent.



#3 Worsening factors has been a series of **climate change-fueled natural disasters**, particularly tornadoes, that devastated parts of the central city’s neighborhoods. North Nashville most recently faced a devastating tornado in March 2020 that saw many worried as land speculators scoured battered homes for opportunities to buy and flip homes.³⁰ This threatened to repeat the patterns from the mid-2000s tornadoes devastating East Nashville, which led to waves of land speculation and push-out of Black residents as rents rose and buyers preyed on desperate homeowners.

³⁰ Faussett, R & S. Cavendish (2020). “A Tornado Decimated North Nashville. The Rebuilding May Destroy Its Soul.” *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/04/us/tennessee-tornado.html>



#4 The displacement adds up to further burdens on BIPOC workers primarily, who find themselves even further from their jobs in the city, and from opportunity. Public transportation options are few and far between, especially across county lines, and most especially for late-shift workers. In a city driven by more round-the-clock work, like entertainment and hospitals, workers are finding a region not built to support them.³¹

#5 The city has long struggled with segregation. Policies like the I-40 highway cutting through Northern Nashville – challenged, unsuccessfully, by a Fisk University-led movement that took the fight all the way to the Supreme Court – furthered processes of segregation and urban inequality.³² This allows wealth to accrue in white neighborhoods due to land values, and when displacement occurs, at the expense of Black (and more recently, Mexican) communities that have resided and kept up these neighborhoods for generations.

³¹ Stacy, C et al. (2020). “The Unequal Commute: Examining inequities in four metro areas’ transportation system.” *The Urban Institute*. <https://www.urban.org/features/unequal-commute>

³² Mohl, R. (2014). “Citizen Activism and Freeway Revolts in Memphis and Nashville: The Road to Litigation.” *Journal of Urban History*.
<https://journals-sagepub-com.libproxy1.usc.edu/doi/full/10.1177/0096144214533296>



First Nashville Metro Council meeting of 2019 showing “the change of guard.” The Nashville Justice League (NJL) had 13 of 15 on their slate elected to office. The very first thing they did as the new governing body was pass a “Equitable Governance” resolution. Credit: SUN.

POWER IN PLACE:

ARENAS OF GOVERNANCE

Fragmentation is as embedded in land as it is into the structure of government, a rare city-county structure in which the city is governed by a Metro Council of 40 members – 35 of which are from single-representative districts, and 5 are at large. The city also has an active Mayor and Vice Mayor. This does not include the 10 or so counties that comprise the regional economy, in addition to another 28 counties (and their governments) that officially make up Middle Tennessee. There are few other cities with comparable structures, like Louisville, KY, and concerning, regions like Saint Louis are looking to Nashville as a potential governance model.

The structures of elite and corporate governance, such as the Chamber of Commerce, and the Watauga Society (discussed below), cut across fragmented governance and as a result hold outsized power. On the flipside, organizations with a regional vision like Central Labor Council of Nashville & Middle Tennessee, Stand Up Nashville, and the Equity Alliance also hold unique potential to cut across fragmentation to build power.

Nashville played a critical role in shaping the direction of the civil rights movement – fundamental to the development of the sit-down strikes and the broader religious and intellectual philosophy that informed the non-violent movement. Yet **Nashville’s white leadership at the time was characterized by moderate liberalism** and ideas like the Nashville Plan of 1956, which would desegregate schools by starting with first-graders only (a delaying tactic later ruled unconstitutional). This orientation among white leadership was characterized by historian Benjamin Houston as a “racial etiquette” that purported continual reinforcement of segregation.³³

While it’s impossible to simplify multiple decades of history, interviews with foundation and movement organizations affirmed the presence of a **political culture that refuses to directly talk about racial and systemic inequality**, under the terms of “racial etiquette.” Scholars also echo this in analysis of three-term mayor Richard Fulton’s legacy, who in part has been seen as advancing civil rights in both his state and local career, while catering to development interests in changing downtown – setting the stage in part for today’s conflicted approach to city growth.

³³ Houston, B. (2012). *The Nashville way: Racial etiquette and the struggle for social justice in a southern city*. University of Georgia Press.



Fulton's legacy, and that of racial liberalism-lite of Nashville, was also tied up in the history of an informal, visible-yet-invisible group called the Watauga Society (named after the original settlement colony). This group included some 15 to 20 business, university, and other CEOs, including the head of the Chamber of Commerce and, reflective of power in the region, were white, mostly Protestant men.³⁴ They held secret meetings from the 1960s to 1980s – so clandestine, in fact, that no notes were taken, no photographs allowed, and few direct references existed. Yet, they played a critical role in both selecting and pushing Fulton to run, and other major decisions, all imagined with a benevolent edge of improving the city. With some relevance for philanthropy, part of what made it effective was the ability to move money for ideas quickly, like a program called Leadership Nashville to train municipal leaders in the 1970s, or to push for more contracting to businesses led by people of color.

The rise of Phil Bredesen – a multi-millionaire connected to health care – represents the political shift engendered in the city in the 1990s, tied to a changing economy. His regime squarely **sought to attract sports teams, tourism, and corporate headquarters, establishing the emphasis on big business incentives and giveaways.** He also launched an educational plan

³⁴ Dobie, B. (2002). "Watauga." *Nashville Scene*.
<https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/article/13007140/watauga>

that exemplified the kind of neoliberal reforms from the Clinton era forward, invested in charter schools, working on a "report card" type model of constantly assessing schools for performance, and being among the first to develop the Common Core idea.³⁵ (At the same time, he did make significant pushes to increase funding for schools and include equity in these budgets.) Bredesen would eventually become Governor of Tennessee in 2003-2008, where he took a strongly centrist approach, even in his attempts to broaden access to medical care through his "TennCare."

With the end of Watauga, while no secret society (supposedly) exists, **the Nashville Metro Chamber has come to play a key role in political life, especially with its ability to see the economy across the 10 main counties** of the region, and to guide power through moving money and unifying certain interests. Their power is clear in the decisions made to prioritize corporate incentives or needs and attract a certain kind of development, and in successive mayoral regimes. Following Bredesen, mayoral regimes included other businesspeople, like current Mayor and former Lehman Brothers finance executive and real estate developer Bill Cooper, have

³⁵ Johansson, O. (2010). From entrepreneurialism to social regulation: Nashville's business elite and local education. *southeastern geographer*, 50(1), 39-57.
Pinkton, W (2019). "How Bad Actors Tried to Destroy Public Education." *Race to the Bottom Project (TN)*.
See more resources & syllabus at: <https://racetothetbottom.us/race.html>

continued to focus on the neoliberal ideal that simply attracting sports, tourism, and other industries will lead to prosperity.

Despite the fact that Nashvillians like Bredesen have held power at times, the city is being treated more and more like a target and outlier by a small group in power at the state level – including in its attempts to protect worker health and safety during COVID-19. The ability to make change locally has been particularly hampered by an increasingly emboldened right-wing state administration in the Tea Party/Trump era that has, in recent years, followed the trend to try and pre-empt localities from making change counter to their agenda. Between 2011 and 2017, Tennessee passed a series of laws curtailing the ability of local ordinances to allow for project labor agreements, fair scheduling, LGBTQ rights, or to set a higher prevailing or minimum wage.³⁶ Even ban the box was not spared state pre-emption, nor were inclusionary zoning laws.³⁷ **Where Nashvillians have organized for systemic change, in other words, they have also had to face a state administration emboldened by a conservative strategy to control statehouses and to impose an agenda that worsens existing corporate and finance power.**³⁸ When one considers the labor inequalities

and displacement to expensive properties, such pre-emption laws hit women of color the hardest as the lowest-paid, most undervalued, and most rent-burdened in the metropolitan region.³⁹

Property taxes have also become a rallying point for forces attempting to bring Nashville in line with Tennessee elites' broader anti-social welfare and pro-corporate agenda. Koch family-funded Americans for Prosperity and conservative attorney Jim Roberts have petitioned the courts to roll back a June 2020 property tax increase meant to help shore up funds – and included in the proposed referendum laws restricting public bonds, sale of state property, and in a stranger twist, the return of stadiums and sports arenas “to the people” when not in use for an extended period of time.⁴⁰ While the Metro Council and Mayor argued the referendum was illegal, the Elections Commission (elected) refused to rule on this and sent it up to the Court, where the “People4GoodGovernment” hired a former Tennessee Supreme Court judge to defend their right to turn over the tax.

³⁹ Partnership for Working Families (2019). *For All of Us, By All of Us: Challenging State Interference to Advance Gender and Racial Justice*. PWF. https://www.forworkingfamilies.org/sites/default/files/publications/PWF%20Gender%20Preemption_0.pdf

⁴⁰ Jeong, Y. (2020). “Koch supported group submits petition to roll back Nashville’s property tax increase.” *The Tennessean*. <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/2020/08/26/nashville-property-tax-hike-opposed-koch-supported-group/3443757001/>

³⁶ EPI (n.d.) “Worker rights preemption in the U.S.” EPI. <https://www.epi.org/preemption-map/>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Pastor, M. et al (2016). *Changing States: A Framework for Progressive Governance*. USC ERI. <https://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/changing-states/>



POWER IN PLACE:

MOVEMENT ECOSYSTEMS IN ACTION

While ultimately rebuffed in the court, the 2020 property tax reversal attempt threatened to set further precedent of pre-emption, and the burden, as one interviewee described, “will once again fall to Stand Up Nashville (SUN), The Equity Alliance (TEA), and other groups to fight.” At the same time, SUN, TEA, and a changing Central Labor Council of Middle Tennessee have proven themselves more than capable. They represent the leading edge of movements to reshape the crisis produced across Nashville’s consolidated labor, land, and corporate relationships – and to set a new course where local residents, not merely global corporations, finance and wealth, have a role in shared governance of neighborhoods and workplaces.

Linking Labor, Land, and Capital

Corporate, labor, and land issues are clearly interlinked when it comes to urban development, and under the leadership of Odessa Kelly, **Stand Up Nashville** has connected the dots both in how they organize and how they



win. The members of SUN represent communities affected deeply by the inequality entrenched in the region – including the CLC, multi-racial faith-led Nashville Organized for Action and Hope (NOAH), LiUNA Southeast Laborers, International Union of Painters and Allied Trades’ One Union, and SEIU Local 205. In the years prior to the official formation of SUN, the groups represented had ramped up efforts to organize across labor, faith-based, and community organizations. NOAH was founded in 2014, and currently holds more than 40 faith groups and local unions, and began work on issues of affordable housing, policing, and economic

justice. During that time, a group of new leaders came up through the Amalgamated Transit Union, growing 36% and closing fast on organizing the number of eligible transit workers.⁴¹ SUN's leadership brought together this growing energy and focused it on the critical issues of development linking issues of housing, working conditions, and more.

Among their first major public victories, SUN organizers helped craft and win the **“Do Better Bill”** in 2017 to challenge the trend of corporate giveaways and the use of contractors with dangerous, exploitative labor conditions.⁴² The Bill sought transparency in the distribution of “incentive grants” and payment-in-lieu of taxes (PILOT) breaks.⁴³ The final law requires that companies reveal the type and number of jobs to be created by incoming companies; a workforce plan for recruitment, hiring, wages and temporary and permanent staffing; and wage and safety violations.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Kaspercevic, J. (2018). “Koch supported group submits petition to roll back Nashville's property tax increase.” *Marketplace*.

<https://www.marketplace.org/2018/02/26/union-membership-south-tennessee-thinking-shame/>

⁴² A Better Balance (2018). “Nashville, TN's city council passed the Do Better Bill to encourage more transparency about conditions for workers and businesses” ABB Blog.

<https://www.abetterbalance.org/nashville-tns-city-council-passed-the-do-better-bill-to-encourage-more-transparency-about-conditions-for-workers-and-businesses/>

⁴³ Dovey, R. (2018). “Nashville Gets More Transparent About Corporate Tax Breaks” *Next City*.

<https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/nashville-gets-more-transparent-corporate-tax-breaks>

⁴⁴ Nashville Metro Bill BL2019-1655

<https://www.nashville.gov/Metro-Clerk/Legislative/Ordinances/Details/423541b9-1640-4554-8bef-a0cb31dba641/2015-2019/BL2019-1655.aspx>

An opportunity for SUN and its diverse network to put Do Better into practice came soon thereafter, in the struggle to challenge the Amazon HQ2 subsidies and potential move to Nashville, and to force transparency in the massive giveaways promised to the corporation. It even found unlikely allies in libertarian groups who questioned the free-market rationale of giving large companies money to make moves (research shows) they would likely do anyways.⁴⁵ While a \$17.5 million tax incentive was ultimately approved, the Metro Council did start working on legislation to limit companies from simultaneously using tax incentives from the state and locality (“double-dipping”), and the conversation on corporate giveaways is still active.⁴⁶

Alongside pushing a new level of transparency, SUN's organizers have found ways to renegotiate the very terms of development – encapsulated in its successful effort to secure a **community benefits agreement for the massive Major League Soccer stadium in Nashville**. The Metro Council had offered \$250 million for the building of the stadium to the Nashville SC lead owner – and one of the city's wealthiest residents – John Ingram.

⁴⁵ Rushe, D. (2019). “Amazon faces new headache as Nashville deal enrages locals left and right.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/apr/15/nashville-amazon-deal-sparks-backlash-from-both-left-and-right>

⁴⁶ Jeong, Y. (2019). “Nashville Metro Council approves \$17.5M Amazon incentive.” *The Tennessean*. <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2019/03/19/nashville-metro-council-approves-17-5-m-amazon-incentive/3212031002/>



Nashville Fairgrounds Construction into Soccer Stadium. Credit: Still from NFG - FJE/Amplify Nashville Virtual Visit - Welcome to Nashville (2020)/Shot by Hani Latif



Months of sustained organizing scored a \$15.50 wage floor for workers at the site, a workforce development pipeline for construction jobs to build it, a 20% affordable housing guarantee for surrounding housing, and small business and childcare site guarantees in the larger development.⁴⁷ In 2020, when the city tried to ice Stand Up Nashville out of the continued negotiations (and Ingram tried to back out of major concessions), SUN successfully organized again to get a seat at the table.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Garrison, J. (2019). "Nashville MLS ownership finalizes community benefits agreement ahead of decisive stadium vote." *The Tennessean*.
<https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2018/09/04/nashville-mls-ownership-group-finalizes-community-benefits-agreement-ahead-decisive-stadium-vote/1189105002/>

⁴⁸ Garner, M. (2020). "Key group calls out Cooper, Ingram over MLS stadium deal." *Nashville Business Journal*.

The MLS Soccer Stadium Community Benefits Agreement, Do Better model of transparency, and organizing across the region by the Central Labor Council of Middle TN represent an attempt to set a course for co-created development marked by unionization, regulations on safety, and apprenticeship pipelines that broaden training, oversight, and job access.

As SUN grew, IUPAT also began a concerted new effort to **organize Latinx workers** through a strategy including hiring local organizers, challenging multinational firms in charge and developing the Alianza Labor worker center, that includes ICE raid preparation.⁴⁹ Alianza and other organizations like Worker's Dignity (Dignidad Obrera), which has focused on wage theft claims, proved critical to fighting back when drywall workers for a massive new JW Marriott hotel were fired without being paid for their work. Their organizing exposed a complicated chain of local fly-by-night contractors covering for large multinational construction firm Skanska with a company with a large footprint throughout the South. The links among SUN, CLC and IUPAT have offered a model of pro-active measures reshaping the contract process so Latinx and Black workers don't keep paying the price for fast, cheap development ventures regionally.

<https://www.bizjournals.com/nashville/news/2020/02/03/key-group-calls-out-cooper-ingram-over-mls-stadium.html>

⁴⁹ Brooks, C. (2019). "Labor Raises the Floor in Nashville." *The American Prospect*.
<https://prospect.org/labor/labor-raises-floor-nashville/>

Building the Base for Deeper Democracy

Developing an infrastructure of co-governance has also meant attempting to mobilize an active civic base whose Metro Council, State and of course federal representatives have failed to protect or represent, more



The Equity Alliance & Black Women of Tennessee - A Walk for Ida & Frankie (Voter Engagement) Aug 2020. Credit TEA.

interested in attending to the needs of lobbyists, developers and financiers. **The Equity Alliance** represents another central axis of community power-building for workers and those excluded from the economy. Like SUN, it has experienced a meteoric growth in a short time period – exhibiting both the tenacity of its leadership and the significant need it filled. Founded by six Southern Black women, convened by Charlane Oliver and Tequila Johnson, they pooled what small amount of resources they could bring together in 2017. Motivated by the histories of civil rights activism and the continued exclusion Black communities faced that they had seen and lived first-hand, **they rapidly built an organization that registered 91,000 voters of color before the 2018 midterms.**⁵⁰

TEA and other groups' successful work spurred new attempts at voter repression as part of a 2019 bill that sought to drastically reduce the avenues for voter registration drives, imposing civil and criminal penalties. While it passed, it was later ruled invalid and suppressive by the federal courts, and repealed by lawmakers in 2020.⁵¹ **TEA's work did not**

⁵⁰ Plazas, D. (2020). "Tennessee Voices, Episode 66: Charlane Oliver and Tequila Johnson of The Equity Alliance." *The Tennessean*. <https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/columnists/david-plazas/2020/07/17/tennessee-voices-the-equity-alliance-charlane-oliver-tequila-johnson/5450872002/>

⁵¹ Gardner, A. (2019). "Judge blocks Tennessee law restricting voter registration drives." *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/judge-blocks-tennessee-law-restricting-voter-registration-drives/2019/09/12/74d33bbe-d589-11e9-86ac-0f250cc91758_story.html



waver, and by summer 2020 they had registered more than 250,000 people.

At the statewide level, Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC) has mobilized and helped immigrants complete naturalization paperwork, register, and get active in issues of immigrant rights (including both defense against ICE raids), including in Muslim and Arab communities in Middle TN's Murfreesboro.⁵²

Relatedly, also at the state scale, the historic Highlander Research and Education Center, formerly known as the Highlander Folk School, has also continued to play a key role as a training and education center on social justice and community organizing, including advancing new visions of transformative justice and a solidarity economy.

Setting a New Vision for Development

When the region was struck by a devastating tornado in March 2020, particularly hitting North neighborhoods, SUN and TEA brought their efforts together to challenge the wholesale razing of the city's Black

⁵² Guzman, DT. (2020). "First time immigrant voters take pride in making their voices heard." *The Tennessee Lookout*.
<https://tennesseelookout.com/2020/10/28/first-time-immigrant-voters-take-pride-in-making-their-voices-heard/>



The Equity Alliance Voter Registration (Fall 2020). Credit: TEA.

neighborhoods. Learning from the prior gentrification process in East Nashville exacerbated by a 1998 tornado, residents led by SUN and TEA challenged the widespread speculation that follows disaster. Even prior to the 2020 tornado, parts of North Nashville began to see what are termed “tall and skinnies.” The quickly-built up apartments take small single-home lots and turn them into profit-oriented, awkwardly-placed buildings shifting local character and feel in the interests of real estate madness and mass profit. As part of this effort, they launched **the “Don’t Sell Out the Norf” campaign** in order to educate homeowners and renters on their civil rights and avoid predatory lending and rapid gentrification.

The tornado came days before the widespread explosion of the COVID-19 epidemic, hitting Black and Latinx communities and essential workers in Nashville the hardest. When federal CARES Act funding was scheduled to be released, TEA developed a rapid research project (financially backed by the Mayor’s office), **Our Fair Share Nashville Needs Assessment**. TEA wanted to assure that the hardest-hit Black, Latinx, unhoused, and minority small business owners were heard in the distribution of these much needed relief funds.⁵³ In an unprecedented 65 days, they reached

8,505 survey responses (272% of their goal), engaging with 107 community partners and including 1,756 door-to-door field survey responses. The survey showed the disproportionate impact of the pandemic, with 54% of Latinx and 45% of Black workers still needing to report to work, and the highest need for financial, rent and food assistance in the 12 most diverse, less-resourced neighborhoods. The survey spurred new rounds of organizing and significantly shaped the release of funds towards the needs most expressed: \$10 million for mortgage/rent/utility assistance, \$2 million to address food insecurity, and \$5.7 million for small business relief (30% of which earmarked specifically for minority business owners). The strategy and win also embodied the nuanced inside-outside strategy that SUN and TEA has led, building a solid base of community support that protests and applies pressure when needed, while also developing partnerships with administrators and officials in office and providing them much-needed insight from the community.

Today, political voting patterns show a population that leans more “blue,” especially considered relative to the rest of the state. But as noted above, blue can often mean a much more corporate, liberal agenda versus equity or racial justice – and the voices of a wide range of Black, migrant and other non-white residents have been left out. It has not always translated

⁵³ The Equity Alliance (2020). *Covid-19 Nashville/Davidson County Community Needs Assessment 2020 Report*. TEA.
<https://theequityalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/The-Equity-Alliance-Our-Fair-Share-Report-Sept-2020.pdf>



(at all) into a unified agenda of policy serving marginalized communities. TEA, SUN, the CLC, and other affiliated groups have redefined this agenda – from helping push **an agenda of transparency and responsiveness in development, to advancing a platform of good jobs and ensuring that an analysis of racial equity** shapes the distribution of services.



Leaders from SUN & TEA, as well as local leaders running for office, at A Walk for Ida & Frankie (2020). Credit: TEA

Moving Toward Shared Governance

Underlying this policy is a widening and active base of democratic power that has raised uncomfortable topics and mixed tactics and strategies that include research, education, protest, and media. SUN and TEA – and their partner members such as the CLC or IUPAT – are key arms of co-governance in their ability to advance policy through “outside” mobilization and moving “inside” action in ways driven by real, local knowledge.⁵⁴ In 2019, the potential for co-governance was furthered with the establishment of the **Nashville Justice League PAC** – created by the 501c4 affiliates of CLC, TEA and TIRRC – who are actively running leaders for office from marginalized neighborhoods who actually represent those deeply affected by inequality.

The results were one of the most diverse Metro Councils in Nashville history, expanding Latinx, LGBTQ, and Muslim representation.⁵⁵ Perhaps most significantly, this group has also taken strong stances on issues including housing affordability, education funding, immigrant rights and

⁵⁴ For much more on this model, including other Partnership for Working Families sites & cities where this is happening, see: Chlala, R et al (2019). *1000 Leaders (and More) Rising: Developing a New Generation for Progressive Governance*. USC ERI. <https://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/1000-leaders-rising/>

⁵⁵ McDaniel, V. et al. (2019). Progressive wave hits Nashville Council, it's now time to govern that way." *The Tennessean*. www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/2019/09/24/nashville-progressive-metro-council/2419245001/

more. New Councilwomen like Kyonzte Toombs (a founding board member of TEA who won by unseating the incumbent and is now Metro Budget Chair) and Delishia Porterfield (who won more than 75% of her runoff and also co-chaired for the Sanders campaign⁵⁶) have actively sought to bring community into the budget process through a **virtual Budget 101 process**,



Statewide Progressive Governance Academy convening for elected officials across the state of Tennessee in 2020. Credit: SUN.

⁵⁶ Councilperson Delishia Danielle Porterfield (on Twitter): <https://twitter.com/delishia4d29>

while serving as a key voice for protecting the rights of workers and communities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

It’s important to note that the effort for co-governance extends beyond the most visible seats; it is also seen in active wins by community leaders tied to TEA, SUN and the CLC sitting on the Industrial Development Board, in school boards, and more. At the same time, new SUN-led **Board and Commissions Leadership Institute (BLCI)** and TEA’s new **Political Organizing training** (which received a seed grant from Gilead Sciences) promise to coalesce a critical pipeline to prepare underrepresented leaders to assume more of these elected and appointed roles.⁵⁷

Alongside the organizing-driven urban policy advocacy of SUN and TEA’s work amplifying the voice of Black and brown voters, this expanding infrastructure and multiplicity of strategies represents a new model of inside-outside governance for Nashville that can finally fulfill the promise of civil and economic rights and a city for all.

⁵⁷ SUN (2020). “SUN is launching Boards & Commission Leadership Institute.” *Stand Up Nashville* blog. <https://standupnashville.org/sun-is-launching-boards-commissions-leadership-institute/>
TEA (2020).
Burnett, M (2020). “Equity Alliance receives national grant to launch civic leadership program.” *Nashville Business News*. <https://www.bizjournals.com/nashville/news/2020/12/11/equity-alliance-national-grant-civic-leadership.html>

POWER IN PLACE: WHERE FUNDERS FIT

Understanding the foundation landscape in Nashville actually gives significant insight into a changing economy – and its longer historical trends. There are **several key family foundations in the area that represent generational wealth and leadership** in Nashville. The Frist Foundation, for example, is one of the larger family foundations, but also makes significant impact on systemic change work as part of its vision of advancing the quality of life for all Nashville residents. In a typical year, the fund provides \$6 million in grant funds. It has multiple key programs – not the least of which is being one of the few large art philanthropists in Nashville, along with sustaining the Nashville zoo and other standing projects. Frist sets an important example in its ability to offer large-scale capacity funds and general, flexible operating support.

Newer to the foundation scene is the Maddox Fund, created following the death of a wealthy benevolent philanthropic couple who willed their fortune to a community-run foundation. The Attorney General helped establish the Fund in about 2008 with clear bylaws and a charter centering the foundation’s mission on marginalized youth and education. While

Maddox family members still sit on the board, it’s also rotating and has a community presence that leads to a more diverse pool of grantees.

When it comes to **corporate foundations, healthcare dominates** (as it has been a force in politics and government). The HCA (formerly Hospital Corporation of America) Healthcare Foundation represents a significant funder of work including public health and poverty alleviation. Many point to HCA as an institution that has shifted in leadership and where interest in funding more systemic change is possible. This would be in line with many other healthcare funders who are realizing that the “downstream” health effects are fundamentally tied to “upstream” health disparities, like diabetes, heart disease, and other issues disproportionately affecting Black and low-income communities.

Those tied to grassroots organizations point to some contradiction when it comes to the treatment of non-Black migrants and Black populations by foundations – and **how funding may follow the “racial etiquette” that does not confront anti-Black racism, segregation, and inequality directly.** The city has signed up to accept a large percentage of refugees, and philanthropy has responded by funding infrastructure to help receive migrants, including educational access and other programming. Such is not necessarily true of organizing and activism, in part due to replicating

the idea that Nashville may have done better - or rather, just enough - compared to its Southern neighbors in civil rights policy.

One funder strongly cautioned the need to avoid the impulse to rest on the idea that Nashville is doing better on racial equity than its Southern neighbors and instead to listen and put at the center Black and migrant organizations and leadership. “Foundations can’t do the same as Watauga or any of those other groups and say: We are the elites – we are going to help guide the community – that’s not the same as making systemic change.” This is not helped by the lack of diversity that many admit is a reality in foundation staff and leadership, meaning that at the very head, an older, white male leadership continues to guide the philanthropic conversation.

With this patronage history comes also a focus on charity and volunteerism that can avoid systemic change. **“Charity and justice are not the same thing,”** one funder interviewee noted, and some local philanthropy tends to conflate these, without recognizing that philanthropic work is not simply a benevolent act from “those who have [giving] to those who don’t have.”

A different mix of local economy and histories of wealth (including the rise of new forms of business and corporate wealth) has meant **Nashville has a**

less resourced community foundation infrastructure, in comparison to cities like Memphis, according to interviewees. With one Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee, there is much ground to cover, and they have tended to, as one expert explained, “focus more on direct service.” At the same time, as noted above, there is plenty of new corporate wealth and higher-income individuals moving to Nashville and who have shifted the political and social landscape. The shifts at the **Middle Tennessee Donor Forum** indicate a changing landscape: roughly 90% of funds were from foundations and about 10% from the corporate sector. Now, there is an estimated 50/50 split. The Forum birthed its first pooled fund on the Census and a participatory grant mechanism to move those funds, marking an important shift towards democratizing grantmaking.

Other potential wealthy donors in Nashville include local sports and cultural figures, including from the NBA, the latter of which have been more vocal on issues of racial equity. The music industry represents another relatively untapped sector, with a small number of music executives offering donations to social justice causes. While the local music industry itself has appealed to a more conservative base at times, that is not uniformly true and does not mean donors cannot be organized to contribute to the broader vision of Nashville that SUN and TEA represent and that will at times involve challenging power.



Organizations, both philanthropic and community, are working on deepening the philosophy that, **“For those to whom much is given, much is expected.”** They are helping instill the idea that there is a responsibility among philanthropy to take action, given the accumulation of wealth in certain institutions, companies, and families – including through a robust effort to bring in corporations both long-term and new to Nashville in giving. This also means halting the constant othering of Black, migrant, disabled and other communities in dealing with inequality in Nashville and actively including them in the process of distributing giving, with the idea of “nothing about us, without us.”

Different organizations have the power to advance and shape this – Philanthropic Serving Organizations (PSOs) have a unique ability to have the conversations across an organization, and build a local culture different than that which has persisted (and PSOs like the Donor Forum are aiming toward this). At the same time, there are challenges within institutions in moving change – whether it’s the limited structures or size in a family foundation, or the ways in which corporate giving is often separate from a company’s broader operations (and at times, in contradiction to its agenda or effects on development).

Large gifts to major, visible organizations like NAACP, one interviewee noted, can “become **a very expensive community relations exercise** that neither changes the systemic issues nor actually does much for moving the PR dial, as it doesn’t improve image in certain areas, given how transparent it is.” Deeper action, including in the choices companies make in hiring, supporting unions and challenging displacement, and in how they link to genuine local movements and systemic change is key. “Money can’t replace intention – and more focus on intention can lead to bigger changes, including in hiring, organization culture, and practice in communities,” another noted.

Yet as Nashville continues to grow – and money pours into the broader region – there is the opportunity to redefine how power works. Stand Up Nashville, The Equity Alliance, the Central Labor Council, and others are building cross-cutting ways to finally broaden the table and have communities co-govern with those who hold on to the resources, yet who depend on the labor, innovation and spirit provided by workers and local culture. If Nashville is to prevent, for everyone’s sake, yet another boom and bust cycle and to sustain its growth, **foundations too have to recognize their potential to broaden the table of power** and make the city a model of racial and economic justice it has always wanted to be.

May 30th 2020 protest for George Floyd & Black Lives at Nashville's Legislative Plaza, led in part by TEA, SUN. Photo: Odessa Kelly



REDEFINING POWER: 10 PATHWAYS FOR FUNDERS

To close out, we offer 10 recommendations spurred by the interviews, learning, and dialogue in Nashville, with the hopes that these can better support the critical – yet radically under-resourced work – redefining Nashville's economy to work for all its participants.



FUNDERS FOR A JUST ECONOMY

#1 For national and local funders alike, don't just give money to the "loudest voices in the room." Look closely at the actual landscape of organizing, and **center the voices of (often underfunded) Black women leadership at the forefront of change** in conversations on questions like inequality, housing, poverty, and other issues hitting communities hard. Recognize that the most established groups with the highest budgets may have time to respond to detailed grant proposals or letters of inquiry, but they may not be doing the actual work on the ground that is shifting conditions for Nashville residents.

#2 Expand funder education on the importance of **centering race and inequality and structural change and local, base-building organizing to make lasting change on issues like poverty**. As part of this education, create more local **spaces of dialogue** where foundations and BIPOC organizing leaders can be seen as equals – allow people to break bread together and share their vision for Nashville.

#3 Recognize the importance of **breaking out of silos and providing multi-year, general operating support**. A particular roadblock is the impulse to consider migrant and Black community needs separately, rather than interconnected and solved through mutual collaboration. Fund groups creating those connections on the ground in tangible ways,

and fund them with unrestricted funds *and* with multi-year funding to allow more time for organizations to organize versus seek out funding. Put simply: **long term structural change, is going to take long term funding.** Or, in one interviewee's words, "You can't move mountains with garden tools."

#4 Consider **revamping and simplifying the funding application process**, especially in times of crisis like the pandemic. Local Black women-led startup organizations like [Stand Up Nashville \(SUN\)](#) and [The Equity Alliance \(TEA\)](#) with smaller budgets may not be able to provide all application requirements (such as audited financial statements) or multi-page reports like a larger multi-million dollar nonprofit, but are worthy of funding nonetheless. Some foundations have moved to short interviews for applications and reports, and other streamlining of bureaucratic application processes. Prioritize moving resources out the door quickly and efficiently.

#5 **Support regional grassroots work and shared infrastructures** like Stand Up Nashville and the [Central Labor Council of Nashville & Middle Tennessee](#) that connect the dots on economic and social issues and that bridge the complex regional geography of the Metro area. Support the efforts to **link such networks across the state**, including by groups like TEA working on statewide voter mobilization, and thus give Nashville a broader voice (counter to the pre-emption bias).

#6 Expand the potential for **more democratic co-governance** and transforming Nashville's history of secretive power through the SUN [Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute](#), TEA's [Political Organizing and leadership training](#) and newer (c)(4) efforts like [the Justice League PAC](#), thus creating better representation of Black, Latinx, unhoused, LGBTQ and other marginalized residents. Read more about the co-governance model [here](#).

#7 Increase knowledge of the importance of **funding government services locally** and **expanding fair share taxes**, supporting structural change versus charity models with less stable and unreliable budgets. Consider the importance of the public sector as a source of reliable, unionized employment and wealth-creation, especially in Nashville and for Black residents.

#8 Develop knowledge of actual community needs and support **local, community-grounded research efforts** on labor, economic, and social issues like the [Our Fair Share research](#) advanced by The Equity Alliance.

#9 As funders, engage with and **bring corporate donors into the conversation** on structural racism, who are an increasingly larger part of the Nashville landscape. Also involve **local cultural and sports figures as donors**. NBA and athletes offer a strong potential set of donors, and have already contributed to issues like voter engagement. To be aware of,

historically in the country music scene few musicians are willing to risk their careers to speak out on racial inequality, fearing that their market/demographic will disagree with their political stance. But that does not mean music executives cannot be brought to the table to help contribute to the vision of social justice, especially through pooled funds and small donor mechanisms.

#10 Further learning with local funders and **donors** on how to create more democratic, joint mechanisms for funding. **Learn more about participatory grantmaking and how to reduce the burden on funders and communities by giving power to communities over the distribution of funding.** Implement such mechanisms within foundations locally.

For more resources on this connect with funder learning communities and collaborative funding spaces like NFG and the [Amplify Fund](#), which makes general operating grants to Black, Indigenous, and people of color led organizations to build power in their communities and make decisions about the place where they live. Amplify's Nashville strategy is driven by a locally led grantmaking strategy. Learn more about this co-created process and the driving theory of change [here](#).

A Special and Sincere Thanks to All Our Nashville Interviewees and Learning Visit Participants for Sharing their Time, Insights and Vision!



FUNDERS FOR A JUST ECONOMY



Youth at TEA voter mobilization action (Fall 2020). Credit: TEA