
ADVANCING COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PARTICIPATORY URBAN REGENERATION: A CASE STUDY OF MLK WAY, SOUTH CAROLINA

NASSAR, HALA

Clemson University, hnassar@clemson.edu

BILLIE, SARA E.

Clemson University, Seslamz@clemson.edu

ABSTRACT

As criticism of top-down urban development grows, community participation planning becomes a consistent decision-making technique for urban regeneration (Hui et al., 2021). Urban regeneration and participatory planning are key strategies for global community development. However, community participation's role in sustainable development has received little research (Yang et al., 2022). Seneca, a community in Oconee County, South Carolina, is uniquely positioned to contain segments of MLK Way, which honors Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy and the heritage of African Americans and is located within a newly designated Opportunity Zone (OZ). This research examines future development priorities and concerns along MLK Way, utilizing OZ incentives while addressing community needs. It investigates community participation in urban regeneration, connecting historical, social, cultural, economic, and environmental data with community-generated information for empowerment. A community engagement mapping exercise and survey involving 51 and 89 participants, respectively, were conducted in September-December 2021 to understand residents' perspectives on street regeneration. The data were analyzed using a qualitative inductive coding for the mapping exercise and quantitative analysis for the survey responses. According to respondents, residents expressed enthusiasm for change while voicing gentrification apprehensions. Three key themes emerged. First, residents identified objective and subjective concerns about the built environment, such as lack of sidewalks and safety perceptions. Second, preserving social, cultural, and historical assets like landmarks, public art, and gathering spaces was a priority. Third, promoting affordable housing, local businesses, and mixed-use development could spur economic growth. The study suggests that participatory planning can empower communities, foster collaboration, and translate local needs into design considerations. A holistic approach considering economic, social, cultural, and environmental factors is critical for successful community-centered urban regeneration. The research enhances understanding of effective methods for assessing community needs and assets, informing tailored urban planning to foster community regeneration and empowerment.

Keywords

MLK; community participation, regeneration, community engagement, empowerment

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of community, characterized by its geographical space and social networks (Cao & Tang, 2022), is multifaceted and laden with subjective values, often oversimplifying social, economic, and cultural distinctions (Head, 2007). Edwards et al. (2000) elaborate on community as the context where residents encounter and engage with society and culture, giving rise to sub-communities like schools, hospitals, and neighborhoods. Scholars, including Hui et al. (2021), have deconstructed community across social, cultural, political, and environmental dimensions. This study defines community as a diverse group sharing common ideas and identities engaging in structured social ties within specific geographic location.

As a result of population growth, urban drift, and increased urbanization, urban regeneration has emerged as the predominant model for rural and urban development, impacting residents' quality of life (Hui et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022). Considering the promotion of urban diversity and heightened awakening of civic awareness facilitated by socioeconomic prosperity, conventional top-down planning approaches may no longer align with the contemporary dynamics of urban regeneration processes (Li et al., 2019). Citizens' participation in planning is key to effective urban regeneration practice (Hui et al., 2021), increasing trust, credibility, and commitment to implementing policies (Ryu et al., 2018). However, urban planners frequently overlook public participation, and similarly, citizens have demonstrated little interest in urban planning policies (Ryu et al., 2018). Sustainable urban regeneration connects physical, economic, and socio-cultural regeneration to build a healthy community and improve social capital, sustainability, and quality of life (Pourzakarya & Bahramjerdi, 2021). Regeneration involves various actions, including renovating the built environment, buildings, and infrastructure, redeveloping structures that no longer serve their intended purposes, and revitalizing previously abandoned places. The emphasis is on enhancing the city's economic, social, and environmental vitality (Galdini, 2005). Urban regeneration is viewed as a city's effective approach to increasing land values, improving environmental quality, mitigating urban decay, achieving various socioeconomic goals (Yang et al., 2022; Bromley et al., 2005) and citizen empowerment (Natividade-Jesus et al., 2019; Winston, 2009; Tanrikul & Hoşkara, 2019).

The rapid rise of participation in urban policy is projected based on the advantages it offers in terms of increased project efficiency, sustainability, and empowerment of participants (Jones, 2003). Citizen participation- a synonym for citizen power- has a long history in Western countries, with the publication of Arnstein's "A Ladder of Citizen Participation" in 1969 being the most notable study effort (Hui et al., 2021). The redistribution of power allows citizens currently excluded from political and economic processes to be included in the future. In short, it is how they can bring about substantial social reform, allowing them to partake in the benefits of a prosperous society (Arnstein, 1969). Governmental decision-making has traditionally been considered the input of organized elites, but modern methods strive to highlight processes to include diverse populations and disadvantaged people (Head, 2007). Community participation fosters empowerment among rural residents, enabling them to acknowledge and assume responsibility for community mental health (Russell et al., 2023).

Community engagement is an established method for tackling urban environmental problems and has been extensively employed in diverse development projects (Layson & Nankai, 2014). This concept is the consequence of providing significant chances for all members of a defined community to influence a project or process (Aboelata et al., 2011). It denotes relationships between the government and local residents aimed at creating chances for empowerment (Pourzakarya & Bahramjerdi, 2021). Enhanced community engagement within local areas has a direct correlation with improved physical and emotional well-being of the community (Hassen & Kaufman, 2016). It is defined as working cooperatively with groups of individuals associated by geographic proximity, specific interests, or comparable circumstances to address challenges affecting their well-being (Cyril et al., 2015). Participation enlists the perspectives, abilities, and skills of members of one or more communities to voice community needs, concerns, visions, and expectations in ways that lead to better, healthier results and more livable environments for inhabitants (Aboelata et al., 2011). Regarding resolving local problems and establishing local norms, the most significant and long-lasting impact will likely result from local efforts. When community resources are utilized, there is a greater likelihood that initiatives will be based on notions and ideas that are ethnically and culturally suitable for that specific group (Edwards et al., 2000). Community involvement is defined as a deliberate process that establishes a working partnership between communities, their organizations, and

public and private entities to assist them in identifying and acting on community needs and aspirations (Geekiyanage et al., 2020).

Many scholars have underlined the importance of participatory planning based on requirements and socially acceptable alternatives, as opposed to a top-down approach and expertise-based customized solutions (Layson & Nankai, 2014; Li et al., 2020; Pourzakarya & Bahramjerdi, 2021; Ryu et al., 2018; Sarvari, 2018; Tanrikul, 2023). Empowerment is the essence of participatory planning. At its core, it empowers communities and socially disadvantaged groups to participate in the process of development interventions so that the target community can voluntarily participate in sustainable development (Yang et al., 2022). Tanrikul (2023) explored the significance of community participatory planning in fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment among local residents. Mayo (1997) has emphasized the significance of empowerment through community participation, which fosters self-help and maximizes cost-effectiveness. Community empowerment facilitates the acquisition of skills, self-assurance, and unity necessary for assuming a leadership position in revitalizing the local community (Pourzakarya & Bahramjerdi, 2021).

Although numerous studies have been conducted on urban planning, there is a scarcity of research examining the potential and difficulties associated with community participation's role in fostering communities' sustainable development (Layson & Nankai, 2014; Yang et al., 2022). Community participation has yet to become a "revolution in practice," where variables such as citizens' environment, economic status, race, family, and religion may influence the extent of participation (Li et al., 2020). Overall, Community participation might be complicated. Anyone who has attempted to get a group of individuals together to weigh in on a problem, discuss ideas, or reach a consensus is aware that engagement methods can be time-consuming at best and frustrating at worst. It is essential to analyze what the organization is attempting to achieve and why and how community engagement is required. Each effective endeavor to engage the community involves time, resources, money, dedication, honesty, and expertise (Aboelata et al., 2011).

The problem of public participation in urban regeneration is of great interest to politicians, academics, and the public in general. It is considered not only as the cornerstone of successful community planning (Jones, 2003), but also as a remedy for the inability to regenerate (Li et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the public often lacks a means to engage in urban regeneration initiatives (Li et al., 2020). Despite the constructive impact that community residents may exert on built environment projects, decisions concerning land use and transportation do not always consider the needs and expectations of community members. This oversight, whether purposefully or unwittingly, can result in adverse effects such as gentrification, job displacement, and environmental injustice. It is imperative for policymakers and practitioners to proactively engage with and integrate community input into their initiatives in community design (Aboelata et al., 2011). Numerous efforts, such as the New Deal for Communities in England, Urban Regeneration Program in Denmark, Community Action Program in the United States, and Machitsukuri in Japan in 1983, have been developed to encourage more community participation in urban regeneration. Multisectoral partnerships provide collaborative and supporting roles in community engagement, including the governmental sector, business sector, and third sector (residents and organizations), with residents' participation being the most essential. The active engagement of residents is essential for successfully implementing urban regeneration projects (Li et al., 2020).

1.1 Study area

Nestled in South Carolina upcountry hills, Seneca was founded in 1873 as a railroad junction town along the Blue Ridge Railway. It was named for the Seneca Native American tribe that had inhabited the land. Seneca quickly grew as an entrepreneurial hub capitalizing on the railroad, with 200 residents by 1874 and around a quarter of the population composed of African Americans. Seneca quickly became a booming, prosperous town, boasting depots, banks, churches, schools, and many recreational pastimes. However, three major fires between 1890 and 1906 destroyed much of the downtown business district. Among these early structures were segregated black schools and churches, established as far back as 1876 (Field, 1954). Around 1900, railroads, cotton and a thriving population attracted mill companies to the Upstate. By 1905, one in every six white South Carolinians lived in a textile community (Howard, 2012).

When Seneca transitioned from being a railroad town to a textile manufacturing center focused on cotton, L. W. Jordan established a company and built a mill in 1898, attracting many inhabitants to the vicinity. The mill, named Jordania after Mr. Jordan, was later sold to J. P. Stevens around 1946 and is currently known as Utica & Mohawk Cotton Mill (aka Utica Mill) (Field, 1954). However, the textile industry declined in the 1950s, leading to economic and social struggles (Seneca Cotton Mill, 2022). Following these changes, in 1900, Oak Grove Cemetery was established as the first graveyard for African Americans in Oconee County. Holding graves for many residents of Seneca, the cemetery serves as a historic landmark, showcasing rich heritage of the local community. Oak Grove Cemetery plays a significant part in local African American history and holds many unmarked graves for African Americans (Historic Cemeteries, 2024). Subsequently, the downtown area experienced a decline, with current-day commercial center situated on a significant highway, far removed from the town's cultural core. The historic small town has become depressed, with low-income neighborhoods and many vacant buildings. Despite experiencing a downturn during COVID-19 pandemic and some destruction by a tornado in 2020, Seneca continues to possess enduring features that contribute to its appeal, including Ram Cat Alley and jazz nights (About Seneca, 2024).

Seneca was selected for the purpose of this study for two reasons which constitute a unique overlap between cultural and economic opportunities. Seneca contains South 6th Street, recently named Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Way (hereafter MLK Way) and has received a recent designation as an Opportunity Zone (OZ) covering districts south and east of downtown (Figure 1). In December 2017, the United States Congress passed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which intends to spur local economic growth and job creation in distressed and low-income urban and rural communities by offering location-based (census tract) tax breaks and deferrals to commercial real estate investors. Even though the reform was widely criticized for increasing income inequality and deepening the US budget deficit, a measure with unambiguous potential to stimulate low-income neighborhoods comes at its heart (Sage et al., 2023). The federal government established the eligibility requirements for OZ designation upon the program's inception (Kurban et al., 2022). The zones consist of low-income community census tracts chosen by state governors and local politicians. South Carolina has a total of 135 "Opportunity Zones" that meet the eligibility criteria. (South Carolina Opportunity Zone, 2024; Neiman, 2020; Kurban et al., 2022)



Figure 1. MLK Way and Seneca Downtown within the Opportunity Zone (2024). Map by authors.

Additionally, a historic residential street in this area was dedicated to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to honor his legacy and in recognition of Seneca's African American history (Alderman, 2006). Street names serve as symbolic markers to memorialize historical individuals, events, or regimes deemed significant for public remembrance and commemoration (Rose-Redwood, 2008; Tiwari & Ambinakudige, 2020). Naming streets in commemoration serves as a significant means to connect historical events with contemporary settings, integrating history into geographic fabric of everyday life (Alderman, 2002). Despite that, naming MLK streets correlates with areas of economic depression and marginalization, leading to the stigmatization of designation (Tiwari & Ambinakudige 2022). However, streets bearing the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. not only educate the public about the significance of the civil rights movement and black historical

contribution but also serve as a vehicle for achieving economic development and improving the built environment (Alderman, 2012). By 1996, 483 cities across the United States had designated streets bearing King's name, with only 11 states out of 50 having no streets named after him (Alderman, 2002). Studies indicate that MLK streets are predominantly located in areas with higher African American populations (Alderman, 2000), improving a sense of history and togetherness (Agee, 2018).

The newly designated OZ, including MLK Way, runs through residential neighborhoods, prominent landmarks such as Oak Grove cemetery, Blue Ridge Community Center; a school repurposed as a community center, and Utica Mill, which has been vacant since 2001 (Howard, 2012) (Figure 2). Blue Ridge High School was erected in 1955 to provide education for African Americans in Seneca. The school later became Seneca Junior High, then Code Elementary, named after Allen Code, a former principal and coach (Wikipedia contributors, 2023). The property presently functions as the Blue Ridge Community Center, serving as a medium for delivering educational, sports, and developmental programs and activities to residents primarily aimed at the local African American community. This initiative aims to empower community members by equipping them with knowledge and skills to make informed life choices, ultimately fostering their development (Blue Ridge Community Center, 2024). Overall, the convergence of MLK Way as a tribute to African American heritage and its alignment with the Opportunity Zone offers the potential for the street to evolve into a cultural corridor, fostering opportunities for community revitalization. With its heritage, economic prospects, and ambitious community, South 6th Street exhibits substantial potential for regeneration and empowerment.



Figure 2. South 6th Street - MLK Way land use (2022). Map by authors.

1.2 Research objectives

This research aims to investigate the implementation of grass-root community-driven approaches for future development along MLK Way in Seneca, South Carolina, leveraging opportunity zone incentives while addressing community development needs. To achieve this, the study aims to explore the priorities and concerns of the studied community in context of urban regeneration in Seneca to advance community empowerment. Considering the significance and challenges of the studied street, this research examines application of community participation in urban regeneration process to capture residents' perception of their environment along MLK Way. Participatory planning is believed to assist designers, planners, and policymakers in addressing community demands and achieving sustainable development (Layson & Nankai, 2014). Consequently, community engagement initiative on MLK Way implements participatory strategies to examine the community's economic, social, historical, and environmental perspectives.

2 METHODS

The study derived data from two primary methods, community engagement mapping exercise and survey, aiming to understand community residents' perceptions and opinions to examine the challenges and opportunities along MLK Way while addressing community development needs for historical, social, environmental, and economic cohesion.

2.1 Community engagement mapping exercise

Participatory meeting with community residents and social groups was conducted in September 2021. The public was invited to a meeting at the Blue Ridge Community Center. A flyer inviting the community to attend the meeting was posted, communicated, and sent to different churches, venues, and organizations three weeks prior. Masks were strongly encouraged at the time due to the high number of COVID-19 incidences in general and to ensure public safety. The purpose of the community and stakeholders' meeting was to better understand urban regeneration process for future development plans. Participants engaged in a mapping exercise to identify 1) places that benefit the community and should be preserved in the community's future development plans, 2) places that community members identify as problematic for various reasons and are in dire need of improvement, change, and investment and, 3) places where the community identify opportunities for future growth and new land use development (Figure 3). The researchers provided the community with information regarding the study's objectives, the utilization of their data, and the advantages of their participation at each phase of communication.

The researchers collected community's opinions as form of diverse colored dots assigned for three above mentioned categories placed on the aerial map of MLK Way along with notes of conversations between community members and researchers. To analyze the data, a qualitative inductive coding was utilized to generate data-driven themes. The coding process commenced by putting the data from each map onto Miro, an online collaborative whiteboard tool that facilitates the creation of visual representations of data. The data was then divided into three domains: concerns, assets, and opportunities. Consequently, we would have the capability to edit and relocate the data into various categories, resulting in the organization of the data. The methodology employed in this study was based in the use of a grounded-theory approach, wherein categories were systematically developed as they emerged from the collected data (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005). This process continued until all maps and notes were covered. Therefore, the data were refined throughout the review process, and data with similar themes were classified into the same groups until all the data was covered. This method inductively extracted new ideas from the mapping exercise and reduced researchers' bias.



Figure 3. Community participation in mapping exercise (2021). Photo by authors.

2.2 Community survey

The study used a survey to gather information about conditions, amenities, and future development ideas for historical, social, environmental, and economic cohesion along MLK Way. The survey, detailing the study's aim and characteristics, was distributed in person and through local churches and online platforms. It consisted of 23 questions and was divided into four sections. The first section focused on soliciting data regarding participants' backgrounds and knowledge of MLK Way. The second section aimed to collect data about participants' opinions and perspectives regarding existing conditions along MLK Way. The third section primarily centered on identifying the most desirable features and functions along the studied street. The final survey section collected community participants' demographics, including residency location, gender, age, racial and ethnic background, education, and household income. The survey explored in detail various physical aspects related to street infrastructure, pedestrian amenities, recreational facilities, public spaces, and green areas. Furthermore, it elicited participants' perceptions and attitudes toward traffic management and pedestrian safety within the studied area. The survey utilized 5-point Likert Scale,

close-ended, and open-ended questions, enabling respondents to express their level of agreement or preference of specific questions. Next, data were exported from Qualtrics into Microsoft Excel for further quantitative analysis. Data were sorted and selected in various ways and displayed using this software. Microsoft Excel was used to produce two-way tables and graphs comparing all categorical variables. The quantitative analysis aimed to provide additional community's insights into the context and dynamics of MLK Way regeneration, as well as validate the community engagement mapping exercise data.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Community engagement exercise

The study comprises results from two data collection methods employed, first, community engagement mapping exercise and second, community survey. During the community engagement exercise, 51 people from Seneca, Oconee and Utica attended and were received by Blue Ridge Community Center members. The researchers facilitated a mapping exercise to help the community identify areas of concern, community assets, and future development opportunities along MLK Way (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Assets, concerns, and opportunities along MLK Way (2022). Diagram by authors.

Area of Concerns: Participants demonstrated a comprehensive awareness of the studied environment, encompassing natural and built elements. Utica Mill area was among Seneca's most controversial landmarks, giving rise to various concerns (Figure 5). Community participants were explicitly troubled by Utica Mill, viewing it as a hub for criminal activities, drug use, homelessness, and public health issues. The stagnant water pond and landscape around the mill caused an environmental concern for community residents. They advocated for the rehabilitation or demolition of the site. Additionally, they felt that the Utica area lacked sufficient resources and outreach, expressing concerns about community safety. The residents called for an increased presence of authority, rehabilitation services, and youth engagement activities in the area.

Furthermore, their apprehensions centered around South 6th Street infrastructure. The community expressed their concerns regarding poor condition of physical components and facilities, such as holes, ditches, damage to sidewalks and streets, insufficient signage and street design, lack of sheltered bus stops, and absence of streetlights. Accessibility, lack of sidewalks connectivity, traffic patterns and pedestrian safety were also highlighted as additional concerns. Finally, the community expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of park space, inadequate play areas for children and youth, and abandoned, deserted, and burnt structures.

Community Assets: During the mapping exercise, participants emphasized the importance of Oak Grove Cemetery as an active and historic site requiring attention. This significance stems from its role as a resting place for many unmarked graves of African Americans dating back to Seneca's early days, including veterans from World War I. Respondents expressed a desire for beautification efforts aimed at highlighting Oak Grove Cemetery's role in local African American history and its importance in preserving information related to the state's social, religious, artistic, and cultural heritage.

Furthermore, community participants desired increased focus on Blue Ridge Community Center due to its significant role as a community hub offering diverse programs and activities to enhance community well-

being and decision-making skills. Its potential to provide recreational facilities and green spaces further solidifies its value for residents. They emphasized Blue Ridge Community Center as a testament to preserving local history and fostering positive social change within the community.

Some features were identified with conflicting positive and negative attributes. For instance, Utica Mill was acknowledged for its historical significance. Participants discussed a strong connection to Utica area, noting that a high percentage of residents lived in the textile community at the time of its construction and operation. The community expressed a keen interest in conserving the pedestrian trail surrounding the historical mill and exploring avenues for its transformation into a multifunctional complex incorporating affordable housing, studio apartments, and commercial establishments. These changes reflected a broader desire among communities to revitalize and repurpose former industrial sites for new purposes, highlighting the mill as a symbol of resilience and adaptation in urban regeneration. In addition, positively regarded sites such as Oconee Community Theater and Seneca Library were recognized as integral components of the community, enriching its social and cultural fabric.

Future Development Opportunities: Participants identified areas suitable for expanding and regenerating land use, including residential, recreational, and commercial domains. The Blue Ridge field, located adjacent to the Blue Ridge Community Center, emerged as a promising opportunity for enhancing outdoor communal spaces, such as parks, playgrounds, and recreational facilities. Community participants expressed interest in enhancements, including restroom, shelter renovations, and further improvements to the field, trail, and stage areas. Under proper security measures and supervision, the site could be leveraged for activities ranging from picnics and exercise to recreational pursuits, community gardening, and youth-oriented educational endeavors. Furthermore, noteworthy opportunities identified included accessible local grocery stores and corner stores serving as convenient places for residents to purchase necessities without needing to travel far from their homes. Economic development, including housing provision for prospective homeowners as well as training and education opportunities to foster employment opportunities across diverse skill sets, was also considered a driver for future opportunities.

Furthermore, Martin Creek, situated within the study area, emerges as a significant dividing line that separates the city into distinct low and high-income sectors. Recognized as a promising opportunity for trail development, recreation, education, and connectivity, Martin Creek holds great potential for revitalization and community physical activities. Community members expressed that regeneration of neglected areas along Martin Creek would help alleviate the disconnect between the western and southeastern areas. The western areas, primarily consist of single-family residences and the downtown district, while the southeastern areas include Utica, which are characterized by townhouses and neighborhoods with lower socioeconomic conditions. Residents collectively expressed a strong desire to support initiatives that promote art, establish diverse parks and green spaces, provide playgrounds, and develop facilities catering to children's activities. Overall, they perceived the designation of South 6th St. as MLK Way as an opportunity, symbolizing reverence for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and celebrating African American heritage within the community.

3.2 Community Survey

Findings presented in this section stem from analysis of survey responses obtained from 89 community members who participated either virtually or in person. The demographic distribution revealed that most respondents (78%) hailed from Seneca, with only 3% representing Utica. Additionally, 6% of respondents resided outside of Oconee County, while 14% lived within Oconee County but outside of Utica or Seneca. Regarding their familiarity with the area designated as MLK Way, 94% of respondents indicated a positive acknowledgment.

Perceptions regarding the physical condition of street infrastructure along MLK Way revealed high level of concerns among residents. Approximately 60% of respondents identified street parking as being in very poor condition, while 30% perceived sidewalks to be similarly dilapidated. Furthermore, 27% of community participants assessed street and traffic signages as being in very poor conditions. These findings underscore the need for attention and maintenance, particularly as perceived by African American individuals and those aged 65 and older. However, only 6% of residents consider these infrastructures to be in good condition, including those with education level of high school diplomas or less.

Safety emerged as a primary concern among community members, with approximately 33% feeling unsafe while walking along MLK Way, compared to less than 3% feeling safe. Subgroup analysis revealed that African American individuals and those with incomes under 50k were most likely to report feeling unsafe, in contrast to individuals aged 65 and older. Connectivity issues were also highlighted, with 30% of residents, particularly those from Seneca and Utica, expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of walkability in various parts of the community. Moreover, concerns about safety while crossing streets and traffic were raised by 25% of respondents, while approximately 15% of community participants highlighted concerns regarding condition of street signs and speeding drivers (Figure 5).

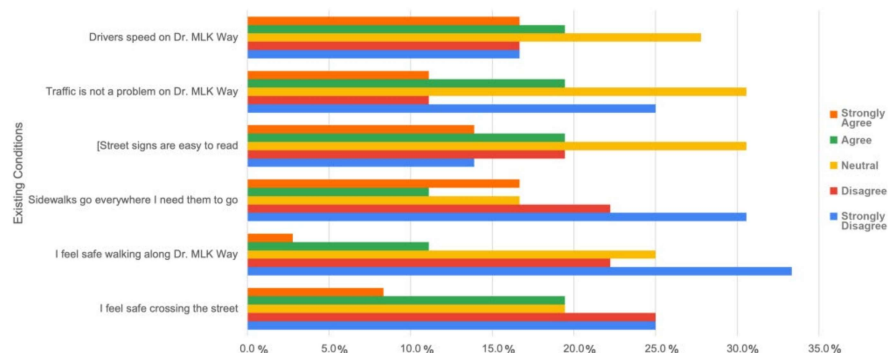


Figure 5. Community Survey Results: Existing Conditions (2024). Graph by authors.

In terms of desired features for regeneration of MLK Way, pedestrian safety and accessibility were ranked highest, with 72% of residents expressing a preference for improvements in this area, particularly among individuals aged 65 and older. Public and recreation spaces were favored by 60% of respondents, particularly among older individuals. Approximately 50% of respondents indicated a desire for landscape and green spaces, bike lanes, and enhanced traffic safety.

When asked about desired amenities in the redevelopment of MLK Way, 61% of respondents identified street lighting as top priority, closely followed by safer crosswalks, wider sidewalks, and sheltered bus stops, receiving 58%, 56%, and 53% respectively. Demographic analysis indicated relatively higher interest from African American individuals and those aged 65 and older compared to other groups. Other amenities, such as bike lanes, educational elements, street furniture, and trees, garnered significant attention by 40% the respondents.

Preferences for residential building types revealed a desire for single-family houses (36%), followed by duplexes and townhomes (33%), with apartments ranking lower at 14%. African American respondents showed a higher preference for single-family houses and apartments, while individuals with incomes under 50k favored duplexes and townhomes. In terms of commercial regeneration, food stores were prioritized by 44% of respondents, followed by community-serving businesses (39%) and restaurants and other retail stores (33%). Preferences varied among demographic groups, with individuals aged 65 and older showing the most interest in food stores, while African American respondents favored restaurants and retail stores.

Finally, preferences for active spaces within the area highlighted walking paths as the most desired feature (53%), followed by play spaces for children (48%) and community gardens (42%). Subgroup analysis revealed varying preferences, with individuals aged 65 and older expressing more significant interest in playgrounds and community gardens. Additionally, the survey revealed that picnic areas and basketball courts captured the attention of approximately 36% of respondents. Furthermore, 22% to 30% of participants expressed interest in amenities such as baseball fields, amphitheaters, performance spaces, soccer fields, and tennis courts. Notably, the highest proportion of respondents who selected these amenities were African Americans.

4 DISCUSSION

This paper investigates urban regeneration as a sustainable development strategy focusing on social, economic, historical, and environmental benefits and concerns through community participation in Seneca,

South Carolina. Participatory urban regeneration in Seneca capitalized on two key opportunities: a street designated as MLK Way to commemorate the African American community of Seneca and the designation of an Opportunity Zone. Participatory meeting and a survey were conducted to examine what environmental features would be of most interest to participants, how they would conceptualize and explain them, and what new ideas would be created regarding the regeneration of MLK Way. Therefore, data analysis identified the following significant themes.

Open Space & Built Environment: The present streetscape along MLK Way serves as backdrop for the community's perceived concerns, opportunities, and assets. The study uncovers a multifaceted understanding of the area's infrastructure and environmental needs. Participants' concerns highlight their foremost demand for creating a safe and walkable community, citing a deficiency in safe, wide, and accessible sidewalks along MLK Way. Additionally, suggestions for streetscape improvements, encompassing enhanced lighting, increased commercial presence such as local stores and new businesses, trees, sheltered bus stops, furniture, and educational elements, underscore the community's vision for a revitalized and pedestrian-friendly streetscape.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the importance of creating and expanding public spaces for gathering and recreational facilities, providing children's play spaces, and green spaces to foster community well-being and cohesion. In addition, findings reveal that diverse demographic groups, including gender, age, education level, household income, and ethnicity, perceive the environment differently, underscoring the importance of considering varied perspectives in urban regeneration. By addressing concerns related to the built environment and promoting an accessible and inviting environment, policymakers and planners can enhance quality of life for residents along MLK Way while fostering a sense of community empowerment and belonging.

Historical, Cultural, and Social Preservation: Seneca's significance to the African American community underscores the importance of historical and cultural preservation in urban regeneration efforts along MLK Way. Landmarks such as Oak Grove Cemetery and Blue Ridge Community Center serve as tangible reminders of Seneca's rich heritage and cultural legacy. Culture is a powerful resource for governing cities and the basis for making them more appealing; it imparts uniqueness to city's streets and includes its collective memories (Jenks, 2004). The community's aspiration to regenerate Oak Grove Cemetery, the first graveyard for African Americans in Oconee County, and Blue Ridge Community Center highlight their commitment to preserving cultural and historical heritage. However, the study reveals the complexities associated with historical sites like Utica Mill, which evoke conflicting sentiments among community members and present challenges in decision-making regarding the future of such places. The study shows the importance of engaging community stakeholders in historic preservation and adaptive reuse discussions to ensure that development efforts are sensitive to local heritage and values.

Moreover, the role of cultural institutions such as community theaters and educational centers was underscored in enriching social and cultural fabric of Seneca. These institutions serve as community engagement and dialogue hubs, fostering connections across diverse demographic groups. Additionally, respondents' insights, including considerations for street design, public art, improved public spaces, and gathering spaces contribute to enhanced sense of place. These are important community spaces and activities aimed at revitalizing communities, strengthening social capital and networks, and promoting well-being (Semenza, 2003). Existing research in alignment with the literature (Ryberg-Webster & Kinahan, 2014) suggests that preserving historical, cultural, and social aspects along MLK Way enhances Seneca's sense of place and fosters a unique sense of community. Findings underscore the significance of MLK Way as a public space where community members plan, engage in activities, interact, and take action, leading to improved communication, understanding, trust, and reciprocity.

Economic Development Opportunity: The newly designated Opportunity Zone (OZ), including MLK Way, presents opportunities and challenges for economic development and community empowerment in Seneca. Suggestions for affordable housing, education and employment opportunities, and infrastructure improvements reflect the community's vision for sustainable economic growth. However, the research also acknowledges income disparity and gentrification concerns, which have historically accompanied economic development initiatives in underserved communities.

Utica Mill closure in 2001 notably precipitated a series of challenges, including safety and public health concerns. Consequently, property values in the surrounding area experienced a significant decline, directly impacting Seneca and Utica residents. The deteriorating condition of the water pond and landscape surrounding the mill exacerbated the area's segregation, rendering it disconnected and unusable. Residents advocated for converting the mill area into a mixed-use development comprising studio apartments and businesses to regenerate the locality and attract businesses. They believed revitalizing Utica Mill was essential to address social and economic challenges and reinvigorate the community. Moreover, participants desired diverse economic opportunities to enhance the area's vibrancy and livability, including affordable housing development, business establishments, and recreational amenities along MLK Way. Specifically, establishing a local grocery store and corner stores was seen as a crucial step in addressing food desert challenge faced by residents with limited transportation access.

The study highlights the significance of equitable economic development strategies that prioritize the needs and aspirations of existing residents, particularly those from marginalized communities along MLK Way. Residents are often primarily motivated to engage in community regeneration efforts by their economic interests (Li et al., 2020). By fostering partnerships between government, businesses, organizations, and community leaders, policymakers can promote inclusive economic growth that benefits all residents along MLK Way.

5 CONCLUSION

Traditional planning methods are not always consistent with development realities and cannot satisfy public's desires and needs. Community engagement is essential in urban planning as an emerging prerequisite for urban regeneration. In the face of Seneca's current demand for urban revitalization driven by environmental, historical, and social evolution, participatory design has proven instrumental in amplifying community voices and guiding the redevelopment of MLK Way in Seneca, South Carolina. Through active involvement in mapping exercises and a survey, the community has become a driving force for sustainable development, ensuring that their preferences and perspectives are heard and incorporated into the revitalization process. This inclusive approach sets the stage for fostering a more welcoming, safe, and connected community in Seneca, both physically and socially. The process empowered the community with responsibility and a voice, enhanced their capacity, and included them throughout the process of changing the area while providing opportunities for diverse groups and ensuring that development initiatives are responsive to local needs and aspirations. Analysis of community residents' insights regarding concerns, assets, and opportunities assisted in facilitating urban regeneration. Their collective aspiration to stimulate economic growth underscores their commitment to building a prosperous and thriving city. Furthermore, their support for creating a community hub demonstrates their dedication to fostering connectivity and preserving their cultural heritage.

The analysis revealed three themes pertinent to MLK Way's regeneration: Open Space and Built Environment, Historical, Cultural, and Social Preservation, and Economic Development Opportunity. These findings underscore the effectiveness of participatory methods in identifying common goals for MLK Way's future and facilitating the design and implementation of plans through collaborative consultation. The participatory meetings served as a platform for diverse groups with strong social ties to share collective memories of Seneca and engage in collaborative efforts to regenerate the area. Moreover, it is acknowledged that community engagement strategies may vary depending on project specifics such as purpose, duration, and available resources. However, the overarching objective remains consistent: to empower communities to shape the outcomes of future projects. This research emphasizes the importance of adopting a holistic and inclusive approach to urban regeneration, considering economic, social, cultural, and environmental factors while promoting social inclusion and community empowerment. However, a possible limitation of this study is the relative novelty of the Opportunity Zone initiative, which means that the long-term effects of implementing this program in low-income neighborhoods have not yet been fully revealed. The Opportunity Zone initiative holds significant potential benefits for low-income communities, such as stimulating economic development, creating jobs, and improving infrastructure. Future research should explore these enduring impacts, with particular emphasis on engaging the community throughout the urban regeneration process. The findings from this study have significant implications for both theory and practice in urban regeneration, emphasizing the need to foster inclusivity

and participatory decision-making to ensure equity among all stakeholders. The insights gained will guide future projects, ensuring they are responsive to the evolving needs and aspirations of the community.

REFERENCES

- Aboelata, M. J., Ersoylu, L., & Cohen, L. (2011). Community engagement in design and planning. *Making healthy places: Designing and building for health, well-being, and sustainability*, 287-302.
- About Seneca. (2024). City of Seneca. Retrieved February 14, 2024 from: <https://seneca.sc.us/visitor/welcome/about-seneca>
- Agee, D. D. (2018). *Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Street Revitalization Assessment* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin--Stout).
- Alderman, D. H. (2000). A street fit for a King: Naming places and commemoration in the American South. *The Professional Geographer*, 52(4), 672-684.
- Alderman, D. H. (2006). Naming streets for Martin Luther King jr.: no easy road. In *Landscape and race in the United States* (pp. 213-236). Routledge.
- Alderman, D. H. (2012). Naming streets for Martin Luther King jr.: no easy road. In *Landscape and race in the United States* (pp. 213-236). Routledge.
- Alderman, D. H. (2002). Street names as memorial arenas: The reputational politics of commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. in a Georgia county. *Historical Geography*, 30(1), 99-120.
- Alparone, F. R., & Rissotto, A. (2001). Children's citizenship and participation models: Participation in planning urban spaces and children's councils. *Journal of community & applied social psychology*, 11(6), 421-434.
- Amsden, J., & VanWynsberghe, R. (2005). Community mapping as a research tool with youth. *Action Research*, 3(4), 357-381.
- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). Citizen Participation is citizen power.
- Baek, J. S., & Lee, K. P. (2008). A participatory design approach to information architecture design for children. *Co-Design*, 4(3), 173-191.
- Blue Ridge Community center. (2024). Retrieved February 12, 2024 from: <https://www.brccseneca.org/>
- Bromley, R. D., Tallon, A. R., & Thomas, C. J. (2005). City centre regeneration through residential development: Contributing to sustainability. *Urban studies*, 42(13), 2407-2429.
- Can, E., & Inalhan, G. (2017). Having a voice, having a choice: Children's Participation in Educational Space Design. *The Design Journal*, 20(sup1), S3238-S3251.
- Cao, Y., & Tang, X. (2022). Evaluating the Effectiveness of Community Public Open Space Renewal: A Case Study of the Ruijin Community, Shanghai. *Land*, 11(4), 476.
- Coenraad, M., Palmer, J., Franklin, D., & Weintrop, D. (2019, June). Enacting identities: Participatory design as a context for youth to reflect, project, and apply their emerging identities. In *Proceedings of the 18th ACM International Conference on Interaction Design and Children* (pp. 185-196).
- Coulson, N. E., & Leichenko, R. M. (2004). Historic preservation and neighbourhood change. *Urban Studies*, 41(8), 1587-1600.
- Cyril, S., Smith, B. J., Possamai-Inesedy, A., & Renzaho, A. M. (2015). Exploring the role of community engagement in improving the health of disadvantaged populations: a systematic review. *Global health action*, 8(1), 29842.
- De Vries, S., Van Dillen, S. M., Groenewegen, P. P., & Spreeuwenberg, P. (2013). Streetscape greenery and health: Stress, social cohesion and physical activity as mediators. *Social science & medicine*, 94, 26-33.
- Edwards, R. W., Jumper - Thurman, P., Plested, B. A., Oetting, E. R., & Swanson, L. (2000). Community readiness: Research to practice. *Journal of community psychology*, 28(3), 291-307.
- Field, N. D. N. (1954). Seneca echoes, Oconee county, South Carolina [by Nora Nimmons Field]. HathiTrust. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uva.x001240420?urlappend=%3Bseq=11>
- Galdini, R. (2005). Urban Regeneration Process-The Case of Genoa, an Example of Integrated Urban Development Approach.
- Geekiyanaage, D., Fernando, T., & Keraminiyage, K. (2020). Assessing the state of the art in community engagement for participatory decision-making in disaster risk-sensitive urban development. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 51, 101847. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2020.101847>

- Hall, L., Hume, C., & Tazzyman, S. (2016). Five Degrees of Happiness: Effective Smiley Face Likert Scales for Evaluating with Children. *Proceedings of the The 15th International Conference on Interaction Design and Children*, 311–321. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2930674.2930719>
- Hartley, R. (2013). Managing high street change through silliness. 6.
- Hassen, N., & Kaufman, P. (2016). Examining the role of urban street design in enhancing community engagement: A literature review. *Health & Place*, 41, 119–132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2016.08.005>
- Head, B. W. (2007). Community engagement: participation on whose terms?. *Australian journal of political science*, 42(3), 441-454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361140701513570>
- Historic Cemeteries. (2024). City of Seneca. Retrieved February 14, 2024 from: <https://seneca.sc.us/arts-history-and-culture-home/historic-cemeteries>
- Howard, J. C. (2012, April 14). Shuttered mills hold years of history. Retrieved January 29, 2024 from: <https://archive.independentmail.com/news/local/shuttered-mills-hold-years-of-history-ep-408318806-348525541.html>
- Hui, E. C. M., Chen, T., Lang, W., & Ou, Y. (2021). Urban community regeneration and community vitality revitalization through participatory planning in China. *Cities*, 110, 103072. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2020.103072>
- Hussain, S. (2010). Empowering marginalised children in developing countries through participatory design processes. *CoDesign*, 6(2), 99-117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2010.499467>
- Jenks, C. (Ed.). (2004). *Urban culture: critical concepts in literary and cultural studies* (Vol. 1). Taylor & Francis.
- Jones, P. S. (2003). Urban regeneration's poisoned chalice: is there an impasse in (community) participation-based policy?. *Urban studies*, 40(3), 581-601. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0042098032000053932>
- Joshi, A., Kale, S., Chandel, S., & Pal, D. K. (2015). Likert scale: Explored and explained. *British journal of applied science & technology*, 7(4), 396-403. <https://doi.org/10.9734/BJAST/2015/14975>
- Kurban, H., Otabor, C., Cole-Smith, B., & Gautam, G. S. (2022). Gentrification and Opportunity Zones. *Cityscape*, 24(1), 149-186.
- Layson, D. J. P., & Nankai, X. (2014). Integrating Community Participation in Urban Redevelopment Projects: The Case of Makongo in Dar es Salaam Tanzania. *Civil and Environmental Research*.
- Li, X., Hui, E. C., Chen, T., Lang, W., & Guo, Y. (2019). From Habitat III to the new urbanization agenda in China: Seeing through the practices of the “three old renewals” in Guangzhou. *Land Use Policy*, 81, 513-522. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2018.11.021>
- Li, X., & Liu, H. (2021). The influence of subjective and objective characteristics of urban human settlements on residents' life satisfaction in China. *Land*, 10(12), 1400. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land10121400>
- Li, X., Zhang, F., Hui, E. C. M., & Lang, W. (2020). Collaborative workshop and community participation: A new approach to urban regeneration in China. *Cities*, 102, 102743. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2020.102743>
- Mayo, M. (1997). Partnerships for regeneration and community development: some opportunities, challenges and constraints. *Critical Social Policy*, 17(52), 3-26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026101839701705201>
- Mellor, D., & Moore, K. A. (2014). The use of Likert scales with children. *Journal of pediatric psychology*, 39(3), 369-379.
- Natividade-Jesus, E., Almeida, A., Sousa, N., & Coutinho-Rodrigues, J. (2019). A case study driven integrated methodology to support sustainable urban regeneration planning and management. *Sustainability*, 11(15), 4129.
- Neiman, M. (2020). Qualified Opportunity Zones-How Active Participation and Complementary Legislation Can Help States Develop Their Distressed Communities. *Cap. UL Rev.*, 48, 457.
- Percy-Smith, B., & Thomas, N. P. (Eds.). (2009). *A handbook of children and young people's participation: Perspectives from theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Pourzakarya, M., & Bahramjerdi, S. F. N. (2021). Community-led regeneration practice in Ghalam Gudeh district, Bandar Anzali, Iran: A participatory action research (PAR) Project. *Land Use Policy*, 105, 105416. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2021.105416>

- Rogers, S. H., Gardner, K. H., & Carlson, C. H. (2013). Social capital and walkability as social aspects of sustainability. *Sustainability*, 5(8), 3473-3483. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su5083473>
- Rong, T., Ristevski, E., & Carroll, M. (2023). Exploring community engagement in place-based approaches in areas of poor health and disadvantage: A scoping review. *Health & Place*, 81, 103026. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2023.103026>
- Russell, K., Rosenbaum, S., Varela, S., Stanton, R., & Barnett, F. (2023). Fostering community engagement, participation and empowerment for mental health of adults living in rural communities: a systematic review. *Rural and remote health*, 23(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.22605/RRH7438>
- Ryberg-Webster, S., & Kinahan, K. L. (2014). Historic preservation and urban revitalization in the twenty-first century. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 29(2), 119-139.
- Ryu, H., Lee, J. S., & Lee, S. Y. (2018). Participatory neighborhood revitalization effects on social capital: Evidence from community building projects in Seoul. *Journal of Urban Planning and Development*, 144(1), 04017025.
- Sage, A., Langen, M., & Van de Minne, A. (2023). Where is the opportunity in opportunity zones?. *Real Estate Economics*, 51(2), 338-371. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6229.12429>
- Sanders, E. B. N. (2002). From user-centered to participatory design approaches. In *Design and the social sciences* (pp. 18-25). CRC Press. <https://doi.org/10.1201/9780203301302.ch1>
- Sarvari, H. (2018). Participatory Planning; Providing Conceptual Model of Factors Affecting Children's Participation in Urban Planning. 1(1).
- Savini, F. (2011). The endowment of community participation: Institutional settings in two urban regeneration projects. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35(5), 949-968. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2010.00997.x>
- Semenza, J. C. (2003). The intersection of urban planning, art, and public health: the Sunnyside Piazza. *American journal of public health*, 93(9), 1439-1441. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.93.9.1439>
- Semenza, J. C., & March, T. L. (2009). An urban community-based intervention to advance social interactions. *Environment and Behavior*, 41(1), 22-42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916507311136>
- Seneca Cotton Mill. (2022). South Carolina Historic Properties Record. Retrieved February 14, 2024 from: <https://schpr.sc.gov/index.php/Detail/properties/74017>
- South Carolina Opportunity Zone. (2024). Retrieved August 18, 2024 from: <https://scoopportunityzone.com/>
- Tanrikul, A., & Hoşkara, Ş. (2019). A new framework for the regeneration process of Mediterranean historic city centres. *Sustainability*, 11(16), 4483. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11164483>
- Tiwari, S., & Ambinakudige, S. (2020). Streetscapes and stereotyping: Streets named after Martin Luther King, Jr., and the geographies of racial identity. *GeoJournal*, 1-14.
- Wikipedia contributors. (2023, November 13). Seneca Institute – Seneca Junior College. Wikipedia. Retrieved February 14, 2024 from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seneca_Institute_%E2%80%93_Seneca_Junior_College#:~:text=Blue%20Ridge%20High%20School%20was,and%20later%20Code%20Elementary%20School
- Winston, N. (2009). Urban regeneration for sustainable development: the role of sustainable housing?. *European Planning Studies*, 17(12), 1781-1796.
- Yang, J., Yang, L., & Ma, H. (2022). Community participation strategy for sustainable urban regeneration in Xiamen, China. *Land*, 11(5), 600. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land11050600>
- Ziersch, A. M., Baum, F. E., MacDougall, C., & Putland, C. (2005). Neighbourhood life and social capital: the implications for health. *Social science & medicine*, 60(1), 71-86. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2004.04.027>