

Leveraging the Lakefront

Spurring Inclusive Growth in Cleveland, Ohio Through Urban Redevelopment

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For Mayor Justin Bibb, redeveloping the Lake Erie waterfront and connecting it to the city's neighborhoods had always been personal. Growing up on the East Side—a historically Black and less affluent part of Cleveland siphoned off by the Cuyahoga River—he knew what it meant to be excluded from opportunities and understood firsthand the city's longstanding struggles with social and economic inequality. “For generations, the river and the lake have been the dividing line between the East Side and the West Side, Black and white, rich, and poor. Lakefront redevelopment is a way to heal our community, literally making parts of the city accessible, bringing people together . . . At a macro level, this ambitious plan will allow us to grow our population, attract new talent, and attract new investment, which gives the city more resources to invest in historically disenfranchised communities.”¹

Revitalizing Cleveland was part of the reason he had run for mayor, and he was poised to make it happen. There were, however, quite a few uncertainties. He picked up a document from a pile on his desk and read it over once more. Releasing this Request for Proposal (RFP) for a lakefront master plan would be a bold move; previous administrations had wavered, tried, and repeatedly failed to develop the lakefront. But Bibb was undeterred by past failures. As recounted by his Chief Operating Officer Bonnie Teeuwen, “Mayor Bibb is ambitious with his thoughts and ideas and very eager for action. He’s enthusiastic, and he hasn’t been tainted by bureaucracy. He doesn’t say ‘We tried that twenty years ago, it can’t happen.’ It’s ‘Why can’t we do it, let’s figure out how to get to yes.’”²

While bullish about the opportunity ahead, Bibb did not want to swing and miss and was keenly aware of the open questions: What would the project cost and how would it be funded? What role would the city's football team, the Browns, whose stadium was on the lake, play in the process? How would residents feel about the plans, and when would the city start seeing a return on investment? More deeply, he wondered what it would take for the project to address systemic inequities, begin to heal the city's racial wounds, and create inclusive growth. Despite these unknowns, he was convinced that Cleveland's economic future, and his legacy, would depend on it.

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A Vision to Reshape Cleveland

In his post-college years, Bibb worked at the intersection of civics, philanthropy, and business. He served as a special assistant advising on education and economic development policies for Cuyahoga County, led the Global Cities Practice at Gallup, and was chief strategy officer at Urbanova, a startup focused on improving cities. Notably, Bibb co-founded Hack Cleveland in 2014 in the aftermath of a white Cleveland police officer killing Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old Black boy. The initiative sought criminal justice reform through innovative technology solutions generated by a group of more than one hundred diverse attendees in a social justice hackathon. He also launched Cleveland Can't Wait, a nonprofit focused on advancing racial equity and economic opportunity in underserved neighborhoods across the city.³

Bibb cared deeply about improving Cleveland's reputation and transforming it into a top-tier, desirable US city. In January 2021, at thirty-four, he entered the mayoral race to "reshape years of Cleveland's inferiority complex,"⁴ and bring new energy and creative ideas to the city. His platform prioritized people and neighborhoods and reimagining city services to make neighborhoods vibrant and healthy again, including reforming public safety and modernizing City Hall to be more responsive to taxpayers.⁵ During his campaign, he went from a largely unknown candidate to being the front runner, defeating longtime City Council President Kevin Kelley in a landslide victory claiming 62 percent of the vote.⁶

Gravestone Priorities

Bibb took office in January 2022 facing a mountain of new and old challenges as the city emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic had exacerbated Cleveland's longstanding struggles to recover from persistent population decline and the 2008 Great Recession's drastic impact on home values, particularly on the East Side. Gun violence also rose sharply during the pandemic, when shooting deaths increased by more than 50 percent.⁷

Like many cities, Cleveland's downtown was struggling to find its footing in this post-COVID reality. Although downtown was the fastest growing neighborhood since 2010 and drove 60 percent of the city's tax revenue, only 60 percent of employees had returned to downtown offices and foot traffic stood at 80 percent of pre-pandemic levels.⁸ Revitalizing that corridor was a strategic priority to improve Cleveland, and Bibb saw connecting and developing the waterfront as a cornerstone of achieving that goal.

The mayor knew he had a tough road ahead and the ever-evolving landscape demanded creative solutions to balance immediate public needs with bold, visionary plans for Cleveland's comeback. Upon taking office, he set out to make good on his promise to change the way things were done in City Hall, starting with appointing a cabinet of energetic and smart visionaries to drive focus and accountability. For Bibb, this meant "reimagin[ing] our organization to build our reimagined city. With leaders focused on the long-range vision, and on the immediate needs, we can achieve more."⁹ With planning underway for Bibb's first year, his Chief of Staff Bradford Davy led an exercise with a small group of senior staff to outline the Bibb administration's three "gravestone priorities." He said, "the mayor knows that if you try to do everything, you'll be known for nothing. He is clear about his three priorities for the first term: reforming public safety, redeveloping the lakefront, and revitalizing the city's

Southeast Side.”¹⁰ The Halloween gravestone prop he used in this session still hung in his office as a daily reminder of those priorities.

Revitalizing and connecting Cleveland’s waterfront had the potential to transform it into a vibrant, walkable, and attractive city center, drawing in new residents, visitors, and businesses, bolstering job opportunities, and retaining the city’s valuable talent.¹¹ Though crucial economic and traffic impact studies had yet to be developed, Bibb believed if the project were executed thoughtfully, it would yield short-term construction employment, long-term job growth, increased investment in residential and affordable housing, and expanded commercial prospects, particularly for small businesses. Prioritizing waterfront development would create desirable public spaces but could also diversify Cleveland’s economic foundation and generate sustainable tax revenues to address future structural issues.

Bibb reflected on the gravestone exercise: “. . . if we want Cleveland to grow and expand, we have to make big bets not just for the present, but for the next generation. Everyone since Tom Johnson [Cleveland’s mayor, 1901-1909] has had a lakefront plan, but what happens in this job is that you get distracted by picking up trash, gun violence, managing the city council, and the lakefront plan sits on a shelf, and no one’s focused on it. Finally realizing this waterfront vision for our city is one of my gravestone priorities. I’m putting a lot of political capital to get it done, because to me, it’s worth it.”

Industrial Rise and Decline

At the intersection of Lake Erie and the Cuyahoga River, Cleveland was once a thriving industrial city known for its successful oil, steel, and automotive industries.¹² Beginning in the mid-1950s, the city’s economy suffered from an exodus of manufacturing jobs and the introduction of the interstate highway accelerated city-to-suburb emigration.¹³ Since the 1950s, Cleveland has lost more than 60 percent of its population and tax base, while its suburbs continued to grow. This decline caused the city to fall from being the seventh most populous in the US to the 54th.¹⁴

Cleveland worked to rebuild its reputation and diversify from an industrial economy to one that is knowledge-based and driven by its healthcare, educational services, and financial institutions. Home to the world-renowned Cleveland Clinic, the city has attracted medical and biotech professionals, as well as patients, and is the largest employer in the state, estimated to contribute 133,000 jobs and \$21.6 billion to Ohio’s economy (2019).¹⁵ Cleveland also ranked in the top fifteen US cities for main street entrepreneurship in 2016.¹⁶ Further, the downtown and lakefront area was home to iconic cultural sights and sports teams, including the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, which attracted over 500,000 visitors in 2017;¹⁷ the Cleveland Cavaliers (basketball); the Cleveland Browns (football); and the Cleveland Guardians (baseball). Professional and technical services, administrative support, and food and beverage service were also large industries in the city.¹⁸

Despite this growing job base, opportunities were not widely shared. Black workers were underrepresented in higher paying industries, overrepresented in lower paying industries, and those without a bachelor’s degree made 27 percent less than comparable white workers.¹⁹ Many of metropolitan Cleveland’s neighborhoods were connected by bus and rail and though its urban, predominantly Black neighborhoods had some of the highest accessibility to jobs, they had the lowest employment rates.²⁰ Though the city had several prominent colleges and universities—including Case

Western University, Cleveland State University, and Cuyahoga Community College—primary and secondary education underperformed. Its two school districts received some of the lowest marks in the state, particularly in graduation and early literacy rates.²¹ Upward mobility was also low across most of the city, especially on the East Side.²²

The post-pandemic trend of reshoring manufacturing following supply chain disruptions and geopolitical tensions presented an enticing opportunity. By capitalizing on its existing industrial foundations, Cleveland could lure manufacturing operations and associated R&D and professional roles back home, particularly in electric vehicle batteries and semiconductors.²³ However, significant obstacles, including the need for hundreds of millions in investment for large-scale manufacturing and distribution hubs, had stood in the way.

Mayor Bibb’s economic vision was centered on growing the water economy, diversifying jobs, and improving access to good jobs. He envisioned a “15-Minute City” of healthy, thriving neighborhoods spanning the city where all could access work, school, grocery stores, and recreation within a fifteen-minute walk, bike, or transit ride.²⁴ “Your main streets determine your side streets. If you have thriving commercial corridors, you will see more opportunity and prosperity long-term,” Bibb said.²⁵

Cleveland’s Racial History

As of 2022, the city of Cleveland was 48 percent Black and its suburbs were 71 percent white.²⁶ Through 2019, in the Cleveland metro, the median income for white residents was double that of Black residents (at \$60,000 and \$28,000, respectively), and Black residents were 1.7 times more likely to be living in poverty than their white counterparts.²⁷ Like many US cities, Cleveland had a fraught racial history that had created high barriers to shared prosperity and deep racial divides in access to economic opportunities, property and business ownership, and quality education. It had been repeatedly ranked in the top five most segregated large cities in the country.²⁸ In 2019, Cleveland was ranked 98th out of 100 in racial inclusion among the country’s largest metro areas, driven by substantial racial disparities in poverty, earnings, and employment.²⁹

From the 1930s, Cleveland enacted discriminatory housing policies, such as mortgage redlining. The practice denied people access to credit based on where they lived—often urban, Black-populated neighborhoods—resulting in a lack of investment in housing and business development, and fewer resources for schools.³⁰ Cleveland’s redlined areas experienced higher poverty and poorer health and education outcomes that persisted in 2024.³¹ The introduction of interstate highways through the 1950s and ‘60s also aggravated social and community cohesion by dividing neighborhoods and walling off waterfronts. The Cuyahoga River had consistently demarcated Black-majority neighborhoods (East Side) from white-majority neighborhoods (West Side). Advocates have continued to push for social and economic reforms to remedy decades of segregation and ongoing racial disparities in health, education, and employment access. (See Appendix Figures 4 and 5.)

Cleveland’s Waterfronts

Cleveland’s water access has played a key role in its economic and social identity. From the 1940s through the 1970s, downtown lakefront development was focused on building out the shoreline for shipping and transportation infrastructure, including the opening of Burke Lakefront Airport to handle

small aircrafts and the St. Lawrence Seaway to allow large cargo ships to travel from the Atlantic Ocean to the Port of Cleveland.³² As of 2024, the Port still anchored a bustling commercial shipping industry and remained the third-largest port in the Great Lakes, reinforcing the lakefront's industrial importance.³³ Cleveland's shores of Lake Erie have also been a long-time attraction for residents and non-residents alike, and efforts to capitalize on the lake—one of the city's largest and most desirable assets—stretch as far back as the early twentieth century.

Since the late 1980s, planners, developers, and civic organizations presented at least nine big plans for developing the downtown lakefront, including proposals to better connect downtown to Lake Erie. Still, the downtown remained separated from the water by the Ohio 2 Shoreway and major rail lines.³⁴ Land bridges over the Shoreway were proposed but faced feasibility questions due to a one hundred-foot ramp over the highway. Removing or amending the Shoreway required approval from the Ohio Department of Transportation. Rising lake levels were another major issue for the future of the interstate and the waterfront redesign.³⁵ “The lakefront is an asset we haven't previously appreciated. Historically, we've turned our back on the lake—it was where we dumped our sewage and put our trains. Neighboring communities have developed their lakefronts, and we've missed out. I'm a believer that if the city invests in ours, the people will come and it will improve the quality of life in Cleveland,” said COO Bonnie Teeuwen.

Failed Development Efforts

In 1985, inspired by the success of Baltimore's Inner Harbor, Cleveland envisioned the lakefront as a corridor for attractions and parks. Despite many development plans, none materialized due to high costs, inadequate community engagement, and ambitious goals without clear execution strategies.³⁶ In 2002, Mayor Jane Campbell initiated the Waterfront District Plan, but after a comprehensive, thirty-two-month planning process with broad community input, the plan stalled when she lost re-election in 2005.³⁷ Six subsequent waterfront redevelopment proposals were presented from 2011 to 2019.

Prior to Mayor Bibb taking office in January 2022, lakefront redevelopment efforts regained momentum. In May 2021, Cleveland Browns owners, Jimmy and Dee Haslam, collaborated with the city to put forth a new proposal (often termed “the Haslam Proposal”) to redevelop the area. With the Browns lakeside stadium lease expiring in 2028, and the team and city standing to gain from development efforts, the plan proposed opening up land for mixed-use development integrated with existing cultural assets—including the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, the Great Lakes Science Center, and First Energy Stadium—and creating a pedestrian land bridge over the railroad and I-90 Shoreway, linking the downtown mall to the waterfront.³⁸ Early estimates put the project's cost at \$229 million, which would make it one of the biggest development efforts attempted by the city.³⁹ In November 2021, the city and the Ohio Department of Transportation initiated an eighteen-month feasibility study for the North Coast Connector, a proposed land bridge connecting downtown to the waterfront.⁴⁰ The effort had again kickstarted discussion about Cleveland's waterfronts.

New Hopes and Cautions

Mayor Bibb had seen other nearby and international cities transform their waterfronts—including Chicago, St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Toronto—and felt that Cleveland was long overdue for a big redevelopment success story.

In Cincinnati, riverfront development revitalized the space connecting the Great American Ballpark (baseball's Cincinnati Reds) and Paycor Stadium (football's Cincinnati Bengals), dubbed "the Banks." Breaking ground in 2008, the new public park—integrating transportation, residential development, dining, recreation, entertainment, hotels, and office space—was financed with public and private funds.⁴¹ The project was estimated to annually yield 2,400 jobs and \$275 million in economic activity for Cincinnati,⁴² though such forecasts were criticized as overly optimistic. A decade in, private investment stood at 20-30 percent of projections and the lead developer had exited.⁴³ Critics of the Banks highlighted another cautionary tale: the 1996 Cincinnati Bengals stadium redevelopment ran \$280 million over budget and was primarily funded by taxpayers from one county. Plagued by poor fiscal management and accountability, servicing that debt contributed to school and sheriff's department budget cuts as well as a rollback of an associated property-tax break.⁴⁴

Closer to home, Bibb saw success in neighboring counties. Twelve miles from Cleveland, the city of Euclid constructed an \$18 million lakefront trail near Sims Park in 2019. In exchange for shoreline erosion protection, private property owners granted public access to the shoreline via the new trail. The effort was partially funded by a tax-increment-financing district that captured tax revenues from the increased value of those properties. The project's success helped inspire a vision of similar projects along Lake Erie and public calls for a network of connected trails.⁴⁵ In Cleveland proper, just west of downtown, Edgewater Park exemplified waterfront possibilities with 147-acres where Clevelanders of all stripes enjoyed the shoreline, so much so that it was often over capacity.

A Serendipitous Moment

Mayor Bibb was increasingly convinced that the lakefront—and broader waterfront—redevelopment was paramount to Cleveland's economic future and regional positioning as a two-waterfront great American city. With Cleveland sitting on the Great Lakes—20 percent of the world's fresh water—and a port that generated up to \$4 billion of economic impact for the Great Lakes region, the water economy was a major regional growth driver. He had talked about the burning opportunity in a speech after his election: "We must be creative and truly imaginative in terms of how we can transform our community. We only get one shot I believe to get this moment right—and that time is now."

Tasked with leading the city's economic and community development efforts, Chief of Integrated Development Jeff Epstein explained, "For a generation, we've seen cycles of residents leaving our city because of job loss and lack of citywide growth, compounded by poor education, safety, amenities, and services. There is a need to bring people back to a city that was built for a population three times its current size. We are positing that the quality and accessibility that we can create along our waterfronts will make it more desirable for people to live, work, and visit here . . . we can reverse those growth metrics and drive more money toward those neighborhood issues, enhance quality of life, and make us more attractive for business."⁴⁶

Bibb's cabinet saw a developed waterfront as a key driver for sustained growth. They were keenly attuned to "no longer manage decline" and galvanized by a vision where Cleveland was not "resigned to being a rustbelt city, to continue shrinking."⁴⁷ Epstein underscored the urgency of the post-pandemic moment with downtowns across the country facing vacancy and public safety challenges, and the need to "leverage all of our resources to grow our economy, to attract people and jobs to

Cleveland.” The city’s then CFO Ahmed Abonamah was also on board, highlighting the need to adapt and take risks to invest in the next one-hundred years: “Our job is to create the conditions in which our city and community can thrive, and economic development is a big piece of that.”⁴⁸

Waterfront redevelopment was the biggest bet among a portfolio of inclusive economic and community development efforts. Among them was the Site Readiness for Good Jobs Fund that converted vacant brownfields into quality job sites for advanced manufacturing and reshoring; Southeast Side Promise, a blight reduction, housing stability, and commercial corridor growth initiative in Cleveland’s historically disinvested neighborhoods; and initiatives to bolster and refocus business growth and attraction efforts aligned to R&D and strategic growth sectors.⁴⁹

Federal Investments

The mayor was considering a waterfront redevelopment strategy amid two historic federal funding opportunities that could contribute hundreds of millions in federal investment for pandemic recovery and infrastructure investment. Signed into law in March 2021, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) provided additional financial relief for state and local governments to support economic recovery efforts in the wake of the pandemic.⁵⁰ With an arsenal of \$462 million in ARPA funding, the mayor outlined priority spending categories and established the Center for Economic Recovery, comprising his cabinet members, to help vet ideas and implement his spending plan.⁵¹

That same month, President Biden also unveiled his \$2.3 trillion American Jobs Plan to overhaul the nation’s economy. By August 2021, negotiations and bipartisan agreements were increasingly taking shape and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act—with \$500 billion in new federal investment in America’s roads and bridges, water infrastructure, resilience, internet, and more—seemed likely to pass.⁵² Notably, the legislation included funding for reconnecting communities historically divided by transportation infrastructure. In August 2022, Congress also passed the Inflation Reduction Act, which would unlock additional funding for investments in clean energy infrastructure and manufacturing.

Mayor Bibb was convinced that Cleveland was poised to take advantage of this once-in-a-generation federal infusion of capital and align with the Biden administration’s priorities. Said Davy: “This is an American infrastructure project that will change the face of a great American Midwest city. It will change our shipping channels; it will help us be more competitive on a national level. It will help us with climate resistance and resiliency in a part of the country that is going to need to be climate resilient.” The mayor believed the waterfront project was all about “placemaking in an intentional way” and had great confidence that investments in infrastructure would lead to greater equity.⁵³

Rising Tides

Equity was a centerpiece of the Bibb administration. The mayor was adamant that “the lakefront belongs to all” and that it could increase cohesion, heal racial wounds, promote inclusive growth, and grow the city’s economy.

Evelyn Burnett, co-founder and CEO of ThirdSpace Action Lab—a grassroots research, strategy, and design cooperative dedicated to prototyping place-based solutions to actualize racial equity—was a close partner to the city’s community engagement efforts. She explained, “Being close to the lake

doesn't guarantee access. In Cleveland, there's a big East and West Side divide and a widespread belief that resources, access, and good news disproportionately favors the West Side. Change really has to go a lot deeper. Before we'll be able to create a sense of belonging for communities that have been disconnected from the lakefront, we must first reckon with and heal from the painful history of exclusion in policy, land use, and development decisions."⁵⁴

Beyond creating lakefront access for all, redevelopment was intended to generate incremental resources to reinvest in addressing structural issues. According to Epstein, if done correctly, increased tax dollars could be deployed and invested in future growth, and infrastructure development could yield quality jobs and workforce training, construction opportunities, affordable housing, and high-quality public spaces that improve health outcomes.

Even with this compelling vision, Burnett acknowledged that the lakefront was not the community's highest priority with many neighbors' more proximate, day-to-day concerns about jobs, the rise in gun violence, and their children's future. With low homeownership among Cleveland's residents, many long-term renters could face the prospect of being priced out. Still, both Burnett and Joyce Huang, the city's director for planning, resisted "either/or" framing around the lakefront and shared the mayor's rejection of the "idea that people who come from neighborhoods that are historically marginalized don't want to see nice things in their city." Huang rejoined, "I don't think everything needs to be shiny, because I believe that you have to love every part of your city in order to really love it. But I also think that all Clevelanders deserve nice things. Our reputation is grit, blue collar, hardworking, and industrial. But we can also have beauty and wellness and resiliency and social cohesion."⁵⁵

Pressures and Priorities

Mayor Bibb knew from past redevelopment efforts that without the right coalition, public input, and buy-in, the process would not work. For him, people-centered design and community engagement were the cornerstone of the effort and redevelopment had to be city-led. For many stakeholders, especially the city's flagship lakefront tenants, years without strong city leadership on this issue had led to disparate expansion efforts and strategies. Now, they would have to decide how to move forward, including how to integrate these efforts with the city's overarching redevelopment plan.

One looming question was what would happen with the Browns stadium lease and its potential impact on redevelopment plans. Having already invested significant personal capital in lakefront planning efforts, the owners intended to keep the Browns in northeastern Ohio and preferred to stay on the lakefront, but also indicated that their decisions would hinge on how lakefront development played out.⁵⁶ Bibb understood what the Browns meant to Cleveland, especially for a city still fresh with the heartbreak of their 1995 attempted move to Baltimore.⁵⁷

Then there were regional leaders, including county officials and mayors of neighboring municipalities, who had their own agendas and interests. Huang said, "The thing that keeps me up at night is worrying if someone is going to pull the rug out from under us to say we're actually going to prioritize something else or compete with you. Political will is so fragile. I believe in the mayor's political will, but I wonder when it comes to regional leaders, can we actually work together?"

Finally, Bibb had to carefully balance the long-term priority of investing in economic growth with the issues that required immediate attention. Epstein explained the predicament: “There’s a heck of a lot of pressure right now to say, ‘We’ve got huge, immediate needs. We’ve got downtown office buildings that are heading towards receivership; we’ve got crime issues; we’ve got neighborhood issues. Why are you focusing on this development that is five to ten years off right now?’ But we can’t just be reacting to the immediate crises of the day. And ultimately, if we are successful at developing a lakefront, it will help mitigate some of those challenges. We need to be setting the stage for where we’re going to be ten and twenty years from now.”⁵⁸

Who Will Pay for It?

The city had not yet triangulated the cost of the ambitious lakefront vision, but Bibb knew it would be expensive and years in the making. His team embarked on the planning process, agreeing that access to the water was essential. Part of the mayor’s strategy was to simultaneously move development plans forward while building momentum. This meant that as they embarked on community input and design for master planning, they had yet to complete feasibility or economic impact studies that would estimate the cost, financing vehicles, and return on investment. Similar projects across the US have cost up to \$750 million for construction and taken up to four decades.⁵⁹

The mayor also knew that the city could not fund the effort alone; it would require county, state, and federal co-investment, as well as cooperation with local businesses and developers. The city would need to devote \$500,000 for the master planning effort. Despite his confidence that the city could capture federal infrastructure dollars, even if he kickstarted a new master planning process this early in his tenure, the city would not have renderings and numbers to seek major federal funding until 2024. In resource-constrained Cleveland—staring down time-limited ARPA dollars and struggling to emerge from the pandemic—funding planning and redevelopment had big implications for the city’s coffers.

Despite the groundwork being laid for grand federal asks and the creative financing designs envisioned, some were not fully convinced that lakefront redevelopment was a good use of funds and would yield the desired benefits. According to Brian Zimmerman, CEO of Cleveland Metroparks, “I think the lakefront should be redeveloped to a certain degree, but there needs to be a strategic cost-benefit analysis to ensure that it provides a viable long-term benefit for residents and tourists alike.” From his perspective, “downtown doesn’t have the density to fully activate a lakefront. . . the number one priority of a redevelopment strategy has to be relocating companies to Cleveland and rebuilding the city’s human capacity.” Further, he added, “I would go to every market and pitch our water economy. I’d be going after anybody and everybody to come to Cleveland.”⁶⁰

Who Will Benefit?

Addressing historic injustice and correcting intentional segregation along racial lines in Cleveland was one of Mayor Bibb’s strongest motivators for the project. Designing inclusively so all residents would feel connected and welcome to enjoy the waterfront was a guiding principle. Moreover, the idea was that Clevelanders would benefit equitably from the process of building it (through employment in the construction workforce) and the economic return on investment (through community benefits). Still, as Epstein shared, “We have all the intentionality around the equitable impact of the project. Are we going to be able to deliver on that? At the end of the day, we are going to design this in the best way

that we can so that it is welcoming, it is inclusive, it is beneficial, but we have to do that within the limits of the available capital to complete the project.”⁶¹

Burnett cautioned on the ability of waterfront development to be a truly shared city asset: “So many mayors run on a platform of equitable economic development and inclusive growth. And even though the intentions may be genuine, it’s typically the case that developers come in, special interest groups come in, funders come in, and before you know it, it becomes yet another amenity for rich white people. I think the city and the Bibb administration will have to make tough and even unpopular choices to ensure inclusive and equitable growth.”

A Risk Worth Taking?

Mayor Bibb was not afraid to take risks. If he released the RFP, there would be no way back: he and his administration would be responsible for delivering on a potentially transformational but uncertain project. It wasn’t entirely clear how much it would cost and who would fund it. Much depended on the willingness of stakeholders over whom the mayor had limited control, including other jurisdictions and the Browns. And while there was a strong case for leveraging Cleveland’s natural assets to benefit residents equitably, projections regarding the impact on tax revenues, employment, and tourism were not yet developed.

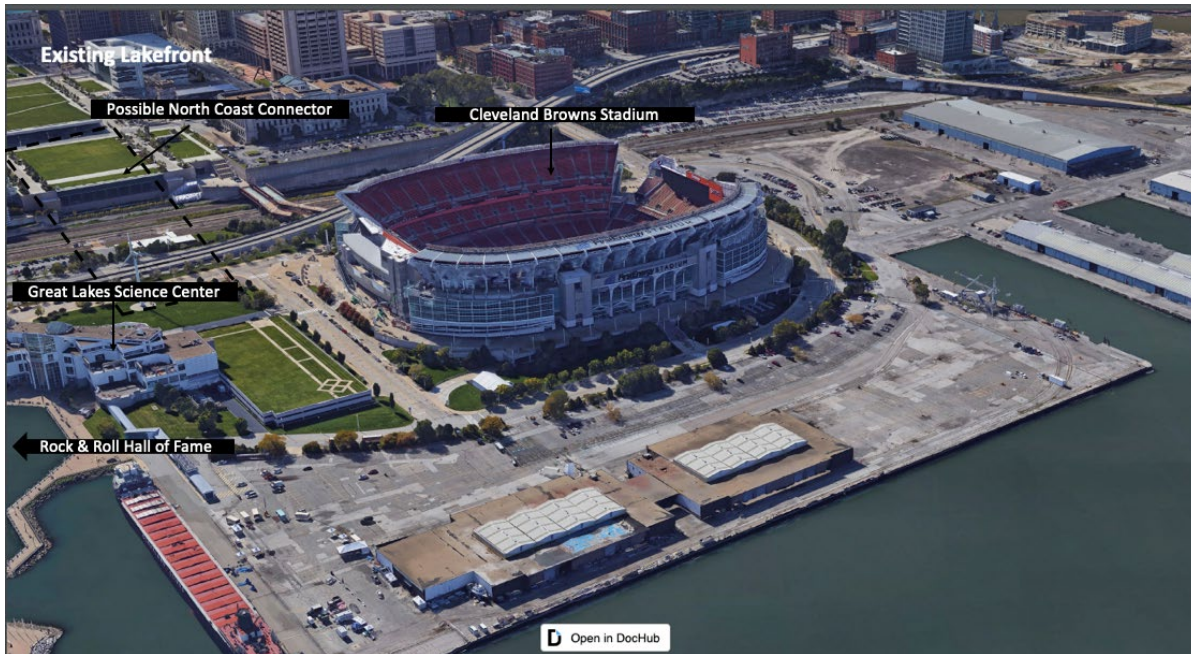
But Chief of Staff Davy had no doubt: “200 years of city planners and urbanists have said that this is important. We are a major American city on multiple waterways, and it has been such an important and integral part of our economic, social, and cultural history, that it would really be an injustice not to develop the lakefront and the riverfront. At a time when the whole country is in a fight for talent and people can work and live anywhere, it feels like an economic imperative to develop the lakefront.”⁶²

At the same time, present-day concerns of rising crime, a sluggish downtown, depressed neighborhoods, and underperforming schools loomed large, and residents would hold Mayor Bibb accountable for progress on these issues long before a lakefront project would pay dividends. Given the many dependencies, the question remained if it would work at all and, if so, if it would indeed spur inclusive growth.

For Mayor Bibb, however, the question was not *if*, but *how* the project could produce value for Clevelanders, and especially those from the East Side. With all eyes on him and some residents just starting to believe again, he felt the delicacy and pressure of the moment. He put the RFP back on the pile on his desk, picked up the phone and called Davy to discuss next steps.

Appendix

Figure 1: Cleveland’s Waterfront



Source: Cleveland North Coast Master Plan Update: 60% Draft, Cleveland North Coast Website, October 20, 2023, https://clevelandnorthcoast.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CLMP_Comm-Eng-3_Presentation_1020.pdf. Used with permission. Black boxes and lines are authors’ overlay. Note: The City of Cleveland owns the stadium and land. The Cleveland Browns’ thirty-year lease on the downtown stadium expires at the end of the 2028 football season.

Figure 2: Cleveland’s North Coast Lakefront



Source: Cleveland North Coast Master Plan Update: Community Conversation, Cleveland North Coast Website, July, 27, 2023, <https://clevelandnorthcoast.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Community-Conversation-Slides-230727.pdf>. Used with permission.

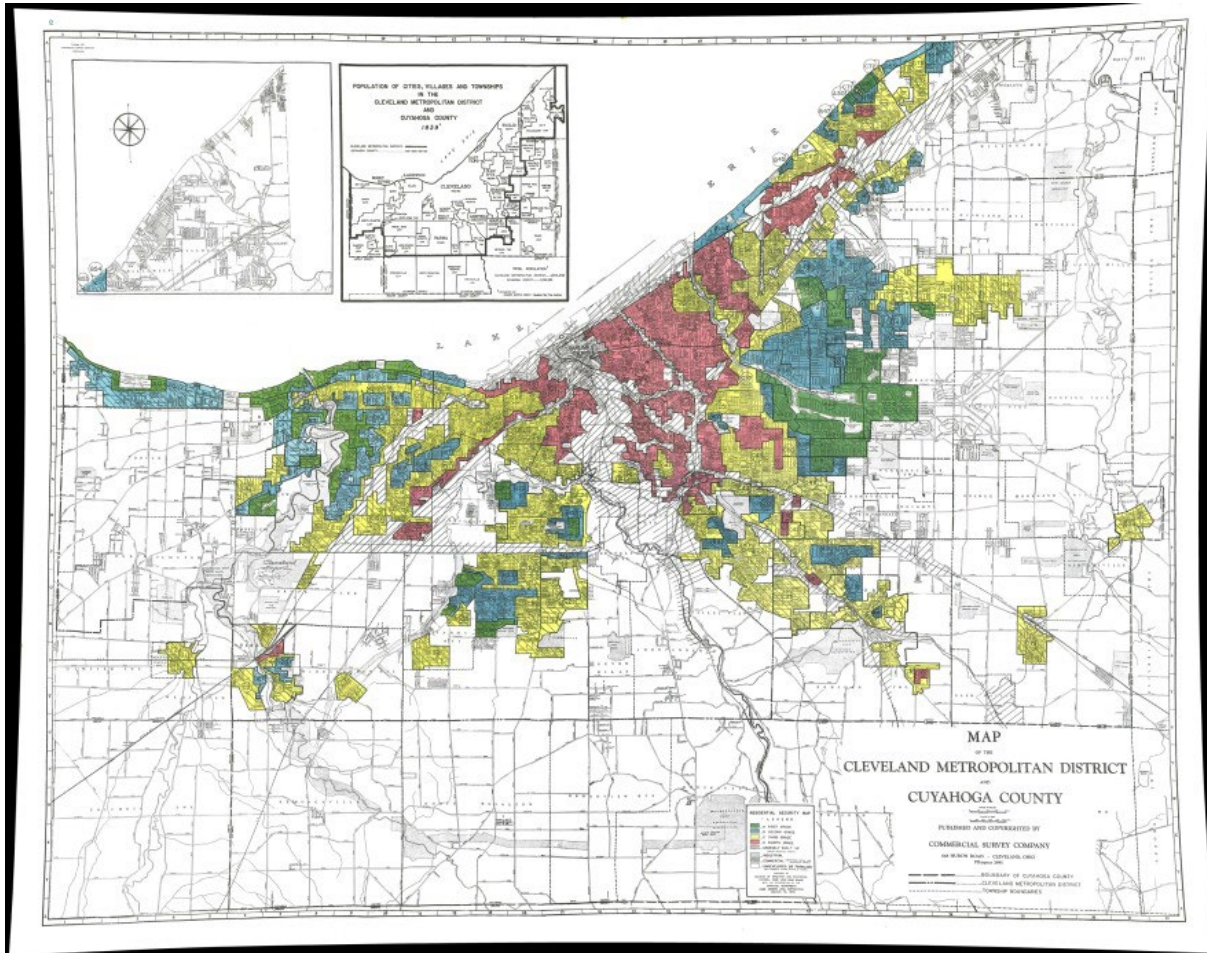
Figure 3: Cleveland’s Master Plan Site



Source: Cleveland North Coast Master Plan Update: Community Conversation, Cleveland North Coast Website, July, 27, 2023, <https://clevelandnorthcoast.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Community-Conversation-Slides-230727.pdf>. Used with permission.

Figure 4: Home Owners' Loan Corporation's Redlining of Cleveland, 1930

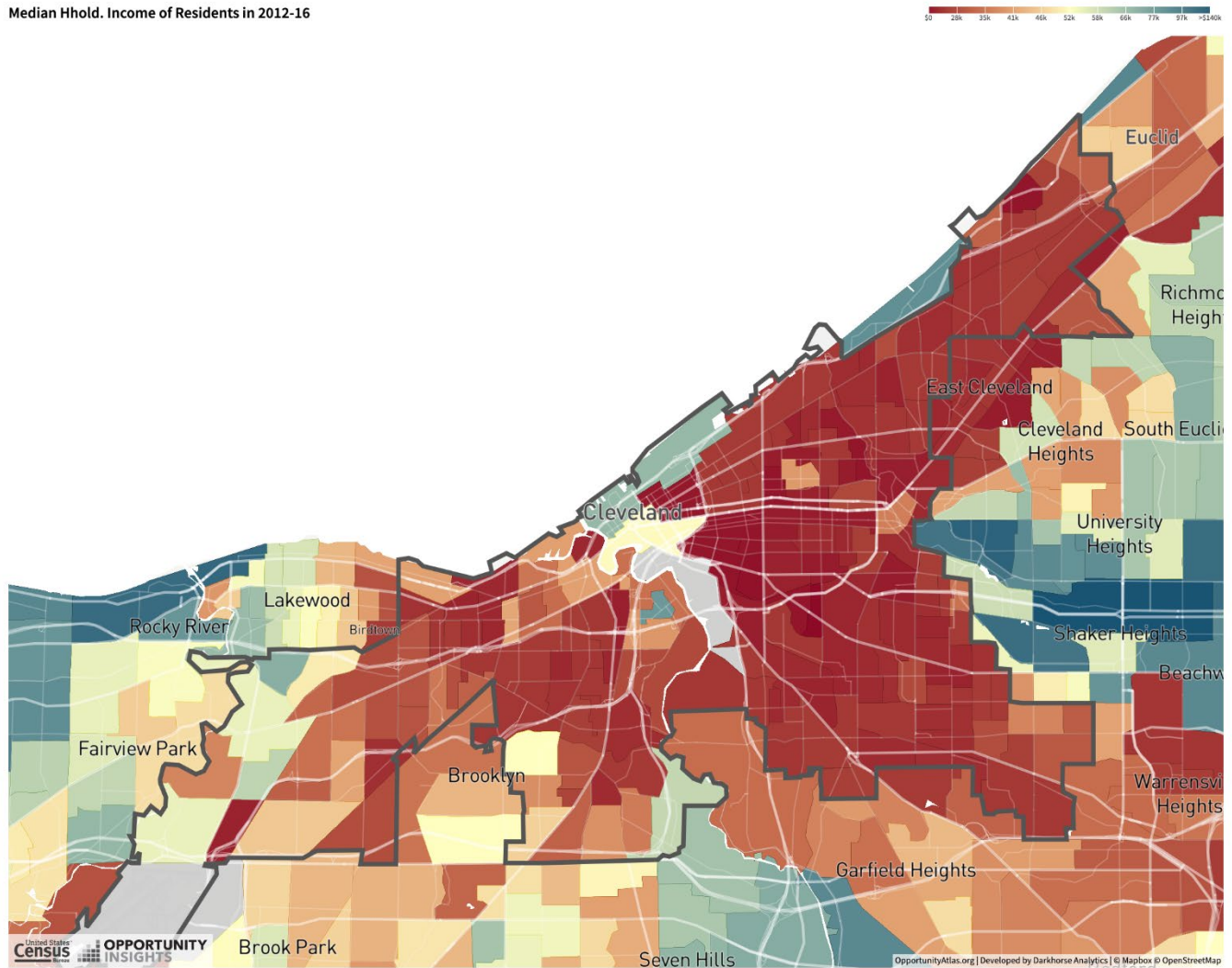
In the 1930s, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation drew color-coded maps of neighborhoods across the country with "grades," ranging from "best" (green) to "hazardous" (red) that often aligned with race, class, and citizenship. These grades represented the practice of "redlining," now understood as a set of housing policies that targeted predominantly Black, immigrant, and poor neighborhoods by restricting credit and discouraging investment. This map shows the grades assigned to Cleveland neighborhoods.



Source: Taylor Wizer, "Racism was the primary reason Ohio neighborhoods were redlined, new study shows," February 2, 2023, *Ideastream Public Media*, <https://www.ideastream.org/health/2023-02-02/racism-was-the-primary-reason-ohio-neighborhoods-were-redlined-new-study-shows>.
 Map Source: [Mapping Inequality](https://www.mappinginequality.com/). Used with permission.

Figure 5: Median Household Income 2012-2016

This map of Cleveland and its surrounding area illustrates individuals’ median income levels during the 2012–2016 period. The data reveal that most areas within Cleveland had low median income levels, with higher income concentrated in the downtown neighborhood.



Source: [Opportunity Atlas](https://www.opportunityatlas.com/) and the US Census Bureau. Used with permission.

Endnotes

- ¹ Mayor Justin Bibb, interview by authors, October 26, 2023. All further quotes by this individual from this interview unless otherwise noted.
- ² Chief Operating Officer Bonnie Teeuwen, interview by author, September 28, 2023. All further quotes by this individual from this interview unless otherwise noted.
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