

Leveraging the Lakefront

Spurring Inclusive Growth in Cleveland, Ohio Through Urban Redevelopment

Practitioner Guide

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Overview

A case study is a story about how a person or group of people faced and dealt with challenges or opportunities. It is based on desk research and interviews with key actors but does not provide analysis or conclusions. Written from the perspective of the protagonist(s), it is designed to raise questions and generate discussion about the issues they faced. Cases are meant to help participants develop analytic reasoning, listening, and judgement skills to strengthen their decision-making ability in other contexts.

A case-based conversation is a way to anchor a conceptual discussion to concrete examples. It can bring a case to life and allow participants to place themselves in the shoes of the case protagonist(s), while also allowing a variety of perspectives to surface. This guide is designed to help you lead a conversation about the case, “Leveraging the Lakefront: Spurring Inclusive Growth in Cleveland, Ohio Through Urban Redevelopment.”

Role of a Facilitator

The facilitator leads a conversation with a clear beginning and end, ensures that everyone is heard, and keeps the group focused. The conversation can be broken into three distinct segments: exploring the case, applying the central questions of the case to your organization’s challenges, and formulating takeaway lessons. Some facilitation tips and tricks to keep in mind are below.

BEFORE the discussion

Make sure everyone takes the time to read the case. Participants have the option to fill out the attached worksheets to prepare themselves for the case discussion. If you choose to use the worksheets, make sure you bring enough printouts for all. When setting up the room, think about situating participants where they can see you and each other. Designate a notetaker as well as a place where you can take notes on a flipchart or white board. Plan for at least sixty to seventy-five minutes to discuss the case and takeaways and have a clock in the room and/or an assigned timekeeper. Mention that you may interrupt participants in the interest of progressing the conversation.

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DURING the discussion

Encourage participants to debate and share opinions. State very clearly that there is no right or wrong “answer” to the case—cases are written so that reasonable people can disagree and debate different ideas and approaches. Be careful not to allow yourself or others to dominate the discussion. If the conversation is getting heated or bogged down on a particular issue, consider allowing participants to talk in pairs for a few minutes before returning to a full group discussion. Do not worry about reaching consensus, just make the most of this opportunity to practice thinking and learning together!

Case Synopsis

Cleveland’s new, young mayor, Justin Bibb, ran on a platform that promised to revitalize the city’s downtown and untapped opportunity corridors while addressing social and economic inequity. After decades of failed attempts to redevelop Cleveland’s North Coast into a vibrant waterfront, Mayor Bibb doubled down on waterfront redevelopment as a strategy for inclusive economic growth.

Bibb’s vision had its skeptics. Cleveland faced financial constraints and pressing concerns: public safety, police shortages, underperforming schools, and an economically struggling East Side. The Browns Stadium—one of the main North Coast attractions—with its lease expiring in 2028, complicated lakefront planning and locked the owners and the city in pivotal negotiations. Alongside these challenges, Bibb was committed to confronting the city’s longstanding racial inequities.

The case chronicles Cleveland’s economic transition from a bustling manufacturing hub to a mid-sized city with its knowledge economy workers largely clustered in nearby suburban counties, as well as how racial disparities have been entrenched along geographic (east-west; urban-suburban) and socio-economic lines. It examines the challenges of developing the lakefront, including its purposefully industrial build, existing infrastructure like the Shoreway that cut downtown off from the lakefront, as well as the financing mechanisms to do so. The case also highlights complementary lakefront development efforts, such as opening up land around the Browns Stadium, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and Great Lakes Science Center to mixed-use development. While emphasizing the need for a strong coalition to advance the project, the case also surfaces the difficulties of actualizing inclusive planning while maintaining political buy-in from regional and state actors.

The [data pack](#) may be shared alongside the case. We recommend assigning the [epilogue](#) following the case discussion.

Conversation Goals

The case invites participants to challenge their mental models regarding inclusive growth and equitable economic development. Discussing the case is an opportunity to reflect on the theories of change informing cities' economic strategies and efforts to tackle structural inequality of economic opportunity.ⁱ Participants will explore the following:

1. Diagnose and consider economic development challenges before pursuing particular policy options and making planning decisions, including using the *Five Lenses Framework* and related resources from [“Inclusive Growth for Cities: A Guide to Diagnose Challenges and Opportunities in Economic Development.”](#)
2. Develop and test a theory of change using empirical data from the data pack.
3. Think strategically on inclusive economic development, considering timing, framing, and stakeholder engagement for the project.

Conversation Plan

Part 1: Exploring the Case (20 minutes)

The goal of this part of the conversation is to review the case from the point of view of the people involved. Ask participants to briefly introduce the case protagonist at a high-level, their priority issues coming into office, and the options available to them. For example:

- Mayor Bibb came into office with an ambitious plan for Cleveland's future centered around a revitalization of the city's lakefront. Yet many mayors before him had attempted the same redevelopment and failed. *What lessons should Mayor Bibb have taken away from them? What made their situations similar? Different?*
- *What were Mayor Bibb's priorities for his term coming into office, and how might he have incorporated them into his lakefront redevelopment project? Did any of his priorities go unaddressed by the project, and if so, which should he have prioritized?*
- *Do you think lakefront redevelopment was a good strategy for Cleveland? What were the reasons for and against pursuing it?*

Enrich discussion with the following questions. Alternatively, share Worksheet 1 before the class.

1. *What was the core problem Mayor Bibb was trying to solve with the lakefront redevelopment? What was his theory of change? What data supported its plausibility?*
2. *If you were Mayor Bibb, would you have prioritized waterfront redevelopment as an inclusive growth strategy? If yes, why? If not, what alternative strategies would you have focused on?*
3. *How would you have ensured the gains from redevelopment would benefit Clevelanders equitably? How would you have measured success?*

Next, frame the key objectives of the session: diagnosing an economic development challenge, choosing the right policy tools to address the challenge, and ensuring an equity-focused strategy.

ⁱ For more on structural inequality and reparative justice see Linda J. Bilmes and Cornell William Brooks, “Normalizing Reparations: U.S. Precedent, Norms, and Models for Compensating Harms and Implications for Reparations to Black Americans,” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* (New York, NY: RSF Publishing, June 2024), available at <https://www.rsfsjournal.org/content/10/2/30>.

Part 2: Diagnosis (35 minutes)

When taking on a major project like waterfront redevelopment, there are a wide variety of issues to consider before settling on a course of action. Pose questions about two or three of the themes listed below, encouraging the group to share answers aloud, allowing room for disagreements and debates.

Readiness

- *Were the conditions right for lakefront development?* Consider the perspectives of different stakeholders, other needs, limits on federal funding, and potential mayoral change in 2025.
- *How important was the Brown's stadium negotiation in the decision to redevelop the lakefront? Should the administration have waited until it was resolved before moving forward?*

Population and jobs

- Cleveland and its surrounding counties have faced declining populations and historically low upwards economic mobility in recent decades. *How would waterfront redevelopment have attracted more residents? Could it have increased the economic mobility of existing residents?*
- *Would the jobs that waterfront development generated benefit Cleveland's urban residents?*
Note: Black unemployment in Greater Cleveland has consistently been at least 3 percentage points higher than white unemployment, as seen in 2020 and 2022, with a peak difference of 8 percentage points in 2010-11. Additionally, Black workers have historically been underrepresented in lower-paying industries.
- *How might lakefront redevelopment have supported dynamism in Cleveland's economy, given the industry composition at the time?*

Equity

- *In what ways could the lakefront have promoted racial healing in Cleveland? Was it a good vehicle to do this? Why or why not?*
- Less than 25 percent of metropolitan Cleveland's housing units were owner-occupied and the lasting impacts of 1930s redlining in downtown Cleveland meant decades of denying credit in historically Black neighborhoods. *Would increased property values have benefited or hurt Cleveland's metropolitan residents?*

Approach

- *Considering the funding sources and governance of the waterfront developments highlighted in the data pack, what was the right financing and governance approach for Cleveland?*
- *What could failure to deliver have meant for future redevelopment efforts and the city overall?*

Part 3: Application (15 minutes)

As Mayor Bibb and his team chose a policy path, it was important that they first defined what an “inclusive and resilient economy” meant to them. Walk the participants through the Five Lenses Framework of an inclusive and resilient economy and use Worksheet 2 to apply it to this case.

THE FIVE LENSES FRAMEWORK



Source: “Inclusive Growth for Cities,” Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, December 2024, <https://cityleadership.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/bhcli-inclusive-growth-for-cities-guide.pdf>.

As each lens is discussed, you can ask, solely based on the information provided in the case:

- *How did Cleveland perform through each lens? How would the waterfront project affect outcomes? What other information would you have needed to know? What other actions could have improved outcomes?*

Have participants write their answers in the chart individually, in pairs, or in the large group. Remind them that there is room for disagreement and there is no perfect answer.

The key premise of the framework is that an inclusive and resilient economy is:

- Shared:** The economy represents demographic diversity in economic opportunity, activity, ownership, and wealth.
- Accessible:** All have access to the information, services, capital, real estate, and infrastructure to pursue economic opportunity.
- Skilled:** The level and distribution of educational attainment is adequate, and professional skill required for employment in high-quality jobs is present in the local workforce.
- Dynamic:** There are high levels of labor market participation and entrepreneurship across all demographics and existing industries generate and attract new businesses.
- Connected:** Cross-sectoral coordination and collaboration between government, businesses, non-profits, and anchor institutions enable joint problem-solving and synergy in pursuing inclusive growth opportunities.

If time allows, ask participants to relate the concepts and frameworks to their own organizations' challenges or to their previous professional experiences. In small groups or individually, they may apply the Five Lenses Framework to economic development efforts in their own cities (See Worksheet 3).

Follow up by asking:

- *How broad or narrow is your city's approach to economic development?*
- *Does your city have an explicit theory of change regarding how your economic development efforts will lead to the desired social and economic outcomes?*
- *What data is your city using to test your theory of change and to identify potential actions to mitigate the risks of failure and increase the potential for success?*

Part 4: Wrap-up and Takeaways (10 minutes)

This part of the conversation focuses on the lessons of the case discussion that participants may continue to reflect on and apply to challenges in their work. Summarize the process and learning objectives and discuss insights most relevant to challenges of the participants' organizations.

High-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion might include:

- *What were the main levers through which Bibb's plan could have solved racial inequity challenges and spurred economic development?*
- *What needed to be considered for the approach to have reparative outcomes?*
- *What might alternative strategies for inclusive growth have looked like and how do they compare to the waterfront redevelopment strategy?* Consider alternate uses of ARPA and IIJA funds, attracting companies to move to Cleveland, workforce development, incentivizing entrepreneurship, federal re-shoring opportunities like the CHIPS Act, and other infrastructure development and urban planning projects.
- *What would successful waterfront development have looked like? What did we know about waterfront development projects elsewhere? What metrics would you have used to measure success/progress?*
- *If Bibb pursued his waterfront redevelopment strategy, what else needed to be true (e.g., what type of complementary investments, policy measures, etc.) to realize the theory of change?*
- *Nine waterfront development plans had been proposed since the 1980s and none came to fruition. Why do you think that was? Why would it have been different this time?*

Appendices

Worksheet 1: Key Questions

1. *What was the core problem Mayor Bibb was trying to solve with the lakefront redevelopment? What was his theory of change? What data supported its plausibility?*
2. *If you were Mayor Bibb, would you have prioritized waterfront redevelopment as an inclusive growth strategy? If yes, why? If not, what alternative strategies would you have focused on?*
3. *How would you have ensured that the gains from redeveloping the waterfront benefited Clevelanders equitably? How would you have measured success?*

Worksheet 2: Five Lenses Framework

Use the data from the Growth Lab analysis in the data pack and apply the Five Lenses Framework for equitable development to the case, completing the following table:

Analytic Lens from “ Inclusive Growth for Cities ”	How did Cleveland perform through each lens?	How would the waterfront project have affected outcomes?	What other information would you have needed to know?	What other actions could have improved outcomes?
Shared?				
Accessible?				
Skilled?				
Dynamic?				
Connected?				

Worksheet 3: Five Lenses Framework – Participant Application

Apply the Five Lenses Framework for equitable development to economic development efforts in your own city, completing the following table:

Analytic Lens from “ Inclusive Growth for Cities ”	How does _____ perform through each lens?	How would the _____ affect outcomes?	What other information would you need to know?	What other actions could improve outcomes?
Shared?				
Accessible?				
Skilled?				
Dynamic?				
Connected?				