Story Mapping in Action: Engaging an Immigrant Community in Planning for a New Light Rail

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Introduction

Langley Park, Maryland, is a low-income, predominantly immigrant community in the inner suburbs of Washington, D.C., with many conditions typical of disadvantaged neighborhoods across the country. It is, however, also a vibrant community in which many residents hold strong connections to their neighbors, local small businesses and other community spaces. The Purple Line—the Washington, D.C., region’s first inter-suburban light rail line—is proposed to pass through Langley Park, connecting it west to higher-income neighborhoods and increasing residents’ access to educational, employment and other opportunities. The new line could attract much-needed investments in schools, quality housing and employment in Langley Park. However, it also could result in higher land and property values that could displace current residents, businesses and other community assets.

To increase opportunities within Langley Park, as well as residents’ access to opportunities in other neighborhoods along the line, the University of Maryland’s National Center for Smart Growth (NCSG) and CASA, Maryland’s largest immigrant rights advocacy group, collaborated to create a community story map. The Langley Park Community Asset Map aimed to engage residents in planning for the Purple Line, highlight the neighborhood’s assets, and reframe how planners, policy-makers and others outside the neighborhood perceive its development opportunities. Although many outside the neighborhood see the Purple Line as an opportunity to remake Langley Park by bringing in new investment and residents, many Langley Park residents and community-based organizations see its potential to build upon what already works and improve neighborhood conditions for existing residents.

In 2014, NCSG and CASA convened Langley Park residents in a series of meetings to create a community story map to help transform the narrative about the possibilities of the Purple Line in the neighborhood. The project both involved residents in the story map’s creation and aimed to empower them with an online map that would help them engage in or even lead conversations about the future of the Purple Line in Langley Park.
This case study explores the lessons learned about engaging communities around issues of opportunity. It begins with a background of the Langley Park neighborhood and previous planning efforts around the Purple Line. It describes the ways through which NCSG and CASA engaged residents in the story mapping process. It also details the process undertaken by the project team to create the story map. It concludes with lessons for other communities interested in employing story mapping to improve disadvantaged populations’ access to opportunity within their neighborhoods and across their metropolitan regions.
Background

Langley Park is an inner-ring suburb located along the border between Montgomery and Prince George’s counties, less than 2 miles north of Washington, D.C. The neighborhood is popular among many recently arrived immigrants, with a 65 percent foreign-born population. It also is a hub for Latinos within the state: About 81 percent of Langley Park’s 20,746 residents are Hispanic. Many residents immigrate from El Salvador and Guatemala. While roughly 94 percent of all immigrants in Langley Park are from Latin America, the neighborhood also contains a growing population of African immigrants, who comprise about 4 percent of the foreign-born population. Overall, African Americans make up about 12 percent of the neighborhood’s non-Hispanic population. Langley Park has one of the highest populations of undocumented residents in Prince George’s County (Park and McHugh, 2014).

Langley Park’s housing stock is largely comprised of postwar garden-style apartments like Victoria Crossing. Image: NCSG.

Many Langley Park residents have low incomes, low levels of educational attainment and poor access to steady employment. The median household income is $56,875, about 61 percent of the 2015 Washington, D.C., metropolitan area median household income. About 17 percent of all residents have incomes that fall below the federal poverty level, which is about $24,250 for a family of four. Roughly 63 percent of adults in Langley Park do not hold a high school diploma, and 59 percent lack English proficiency. In addition, the neighborhood’s unemployment rate of 7 percent is higher than the county and state averages. Among adults who work, about 40 percent are employed in construction, which is not a steady source of employment.

Unless otherwise noted, all references to demographics refer to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2011–2015 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates for the Census Designated Place of Langley Park.
Langley Park also has larger household sizes and a younger population than many other parts of Prince George’s County. Langley Park has an average household size of 3.7, compared to only 2.8 for the county. Its median age of 30.3 is more than 5 years younger than that of the county.

Like many suburban areas located close to large cities, Langley Park developed largely during the early postwar period as a dense but car-oriented neighborhood. Low-rise garden-style apartments, wide streets, commercial strip malls and large parking lots characterize the neighborhood. About three-quarters of the neighborhood’s 5,434 housing units are apartments, and nearly the same proportion of residents are renters. Due to age and lack of maintenance, many complexes have frequent reports of rodent and bedbug infestations (Scott et al., 2014). Many shopping centers also are in need of major upgrades. They are largely occupied by local-serving small businesses that sell everything from pupusas and international phone cards to wire transfer and tax services that cater to the needs of the immigrant residents.

In this car-oriented community, a lack of vehicle ownership makes it difficult for Langley Park residents to access employment and other opportunities across the region. Roughly one in four adults in Langley Park do not own a vehicle. With such low rates of vehicle ownership, about 43 percent of workers commute using carpools and another 19 percent rely on public transportation. Bus ridership rates in the neighborhood are among the highest in the Washington, D.C., region (Rowlands, 2016).

Despite its many challenges, Langley Park maintains a strong sense of community. Although most residents are renters, they have surprisingly long tenures, with more than half of all residents having lived in their housing units for at least 5 years. Though the neighborhood has poor pedestrian amenities, residents can regularly be seen walking to local businesses, many of which feature products from Central America and West Africa. With its proximity to Washington, D.C., and wealth of market-rate affordable housing and commercial spaces, the neighborhood continues to be an attractive destination for diverse residents from around the region and the world.
The Promise and Pitfalls of the Purple Line

The 16-mile Purple Line would be the first inter-suburban rail line in the Washington, D.C., region. If built, it would transect a diverse and divided metropolitan region, characterized by high rates of racial and economic segregation, particularly between communities on the western and eastern portions of the line. The former includes many wealthy and largely white neighborhoods in Montgomery County. The latter includes many lower-income immigrant and minority communities in Prince George’s County, including Langley Park.

![Map of Poverty Rates](image)


Langley Park’s two proposed Purple Line stops would better connect the neighborhood to its wealthier western neighbors, but these stops also have the potential to rapidly transform the community. Nearly all existing commercial and residential units in Langley Park are located within a half-mile of the two stops. Without policies in place to address the line’s potential impacts, new investments could raise rents and land values, displacing many residents and small businesses that currently characterize the community (Lung-Amam et al., 2014).

Purple Line plans have long been in discussion, and so too have attempts to engage Langley Park residents in the process. The Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) began exploration of the new transit line in 2002, and in 2009 it identified the potential path to include Langley Park (MTA, 2017). Residents from higher-income communities on the western portion of the line made up the vast majority of attendees in many early planning meetings (Lung-Amam et al., 2014).
East-side residents faced several barriers to participation. In Langley Park, time was a major factor as many residents worked multiple jobs and long hours, and many individuals have long commutes and large families. Cultural and educational barriers were factors, as residents generally have low English proficiency and education levels and come from countries that lack robust democratic participation (Lung-Amam et al., 2014). Additionally, fear was a major concern, particularly among the neighborhood’s undocumented immigrant population.

Noting this discrepancy, CASA formed the Fair Development Coalition (FDC), a group of about 40 local and regional organizations, with the goal of establishing a stronger voice for Langley Park in the process. The FDC is part of the Purple Line Corridor Coalition (PLCC), a group of local governments, nonprofits, philanthropies, developers, civic and professional organizations, employers, and major businesses along the proposed Purple Line corridor. NCSG leads PLCC, which is committed to seeing equitable development in communities along the line. Together, FDC and PLCC have pushed for a bi-county Community Development Agreement that lays the terms for equitable development along the line.

As part of CASA and NCSG’s efforts to empower Langley Park residents in planning for the Purple Line, the organizations gathered residents together to create a community story map in 2014. The story map aimed to engage residents in crafting their community narrative in a way that would honor the assets of Langley Park and help residents and community-based organizations frame future discussions about neighborhood investments and opportunities.
Engaging Langley Park Residents

Effective community engagement, particularly with vulnerable groups, requires community-based partners that residents know and trust. Thus, the partnership between NCSG and CASA was a critical component of the project’s success. Headquartered in Langley Park, CASA provides many services to Maryland’s immigrant community, including employment placement; workforce development and training; health education; citizenship and legal services; and financial, language and literacy training. The story mapping process leveraged CASA’s well-established relationships with NCSG’s technical and research expertise.

CASA is an important community institution in Langley Park and Maryland’s largest immigrant rights organization. Image: NCSG.

NCSG and CASA staff and researchers comprised the project team that planned and conducted the engagement events. CASA coordinated and conducted the outreach, including deciding who to invite and where to host the community meetings. They also served as the primary conveners and facilitated the meetings. NCSG designed the exercises, analyzed the results and worked with CASA to create the online story map.

Langley Park community members were not part of the project team that coordinated the engagement events, largely due to time and budget constraints. With the Purple Line groundbreaking approaching, NCSG and CASA aimed to complete the map in a couple of months, ahead of proposed larger stakeholder discussions. The short time frame did not allow for sufficient engagement of residents in the planning phase. Likewise, the minimal project budget did not include funds to compensate residents for their participation in meeting planning. Instead, NCSG and CASA considered how they could leverage existing resources to create the story maps effectively and efficiently.
Selecting an Engagement Approach

As described in Engaging Communities Around Opportunity Through Story Mapping, the first step in planning an effective engagement strategy is to consider a project’s goals and timeline, desired levels of community engagement, and organizational and community capacity. In Langley Park, the project team considered the following:

**Table 1. Langley Park Story Mapping project team considerations.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Considerations</th>
<th>Project Goals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>50+ participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of engagement</td>
<td>Involve residents in creating the map, but develop a platform that would empower them to engage in and lead future planning efforts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project timeline and lifetime</td>
<td>A few months to engage the community, analyze data and create a map that will live permanently online with little need for updates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational capacity</td>
<td>High technical capacity for data collection, analysis and map creation but a lack of time and funding for long-term engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community capacity</td>
<td>Low spatial and technological literacy, low English proficiency, and a lack of time and resources for long-term engagement.</td>
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Given these considerations, the project team selected an approach that combined base map surveys with cognitive maps (hand-drawn maps that represent how people understand their environments). Both methods have the potential to reach a fair number of people with limited education levels and technological skills. Each also has the capacity for long-term engagement.

Reaching a Diverse Community

Given barriers to participation that Langley Park residents may face, CASA targeted community groups that it already met with on a regular basis. These constituents represented a diverse cross-section of the neighborhood and stakeholders in the Purple Line expansion corridor. This included groups of tenants who faced potential displacement from rising rents; parents who not only held their own concerns about the Purple Line, but also represented the concerns of Langley Park youth; and day-laborers, who constitute the largest segment of workers in the Langley Park community. Meetings were held at CASA’s headquarters in Langley Park and its nearby worker center during regularly scheduled group meeting times. A total of 51 residents participated in three 1-hour meetings led by CASA staff. The tenants’ and parents’ groups included mostly Latino immigrants, while West African immigrants were the primary attendees at the day-labor meeting. Working with a trusted community partner in a familiar community setting created a safe space for residents to share their stories.
Facilitating the Community Meetings

To create the Langley Park story map, the project team engaged residents in two exercises that drew on cognitive mapping and base map survey approaches. One asked residents to draw the boundaries of their neighborhood on preprinted maps. The other asked them to label the important places in their neighborhood and talk about why these places are valued. Before engaging residents, NCSG and CASA gave considerable time and attention to issues of meeting design and facilitation.

Preparing for the Engagement

Having clear roles was key to the success of the NCSG-CASA partnership. CASA staff served as meeting facilitators. Their primary roles were to welcome residents, explain the purpose of the meeting and exercises, and provide translation services, because the meetings were held primarily in Spanish and French. NCSG acted in a support role for CASA staff, prepared meeting materials and took notes.

Meeting materials were designed to quickly engage residents. NCSG team members created maps that oriented residents to the area with familiar roads and other landmarks, including the proposed Purple Line stops. Maps were printed in both English and Spanish. For French-speaking participants, CASA staff provided translations of map instructions.

Establishing Community Context

The first exercise asked residents to draw the boundaries that defined Langley Park on preprinted maps of the area. Understanding how residents defined Langley Park was important, because the neighborhood sits in an unincorporated area on the border between two counties, each with its own policy-making tools and priorities. While the U.S. Census Designated Place of Langley Park and its planning area are in Prince George’s County, the demographics
of residents and spatial character of areas just across the line in Montgomery County are similar. Residents thought about the community as existing on both sides of the county line, suggesting that addressing the concerns of Langley Park residents would require interjurisdictional collaboration.

**Identifying Community Assets**

In the second exercise, residents labeled and ranked the 10 most important places to them in their community. This exercise highlighted critical assets in the community that the Purple Line might threaten, or alternatively, that the planning process could leverage. Place rankings also helped residents think about the places they value most and why.

The exercise offered residents the opportunity to reflect and engage with others about important places in the community. Though they began the project working alone or directly with a CASA staff member, the exercise often became collaborative as neighbors discussed their choices and prompted others to think about how they valued similar or different places and why.

CASA staff also facilitated community discussions about the maps. After completing the exercise, each resident described their maps to the group, explaining their top choices and why they chose them. In addition, the project team and other community members asked residents questions about the value that they attached to these places. Residents’ explanations often prompted robust group discussions about places of shared value and meaning.

Maps used for community engagement workshops with red dots showing locations Langley Park residents selected. Image: NCSG.
Creating the Story Map

From the community meeting notes and maps, NCSG worked with CASA to create the Langley Park Community Asset Map. To do so, the project team identified the story mapping platform appropriate to the project’s goals and organized residents’ stories about their valued places into key themes. The project team also conducted additional research about places selected by residents, particularly key facts that could contextualize residents’ statements about their perceived value.

Choosing the Platform

As Engaging Communities Around Opportunity Through Story Mapping discusses, communities need to consider several different issues before choosing a story map platform. In Langley Park, the project team considered the following questions:

Table 2. Considerations for Selecting a Story Map Platform in Langley Park.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the desired level of customization?</td>
<td>• A professional look to give the community’s narrative legitimacy to policy makers and planners outside the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• High-level of customization, as UMD had high technical capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who will own/maintain the story map?</td>
<td>• UMD would own and maintain the map, because it held an ESRI institutional license</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the lifetime of the project?</td>
<td>• One-time project that would help community members engage with outside stakeholders about the future of the Purple Line</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Low community and organization capacity for regular updating and editing of the maps because of time and resource constraints</td>
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Based on these considerations, the project team selected the ArcGIS Online Story Mapping platform to host the map. ArcGIS offers professional design templates with a high level of customization, which would give Langley Park residents an easy-to-use map that would not require much updating and would present a visually compelling narrative to planners and policy makers. Though ArcGIS is expensive and requires technical proficiency, NCSG had an institutional license, as well as students and staff available to create the maps. However, neither NCSG, CASA nor the community had the resources needed to update the maps over time. The maps thus reflected the views of only a small number of residents and were constructed by project team members. If NCSG and CASA had more time and resources for long-term engagement, a bottom-up GIS or crowdsource mapping approach would have allowed for greater resident engagement in creating the maps and a more dynamic platform where residents could continuously update the map as the neighborhood changed.
Finding the Story

To develop the story map narrative, the project team combined data from the Langley Park community engagement sessions with the additional data they collected about the places that residents selected.

The cognitive maps confirmed that residents see and experience Langley Park as a community that exists on both sides of the county divide. Nearly all community meeting participants included portions of both Prince George’s and neighboring Montgomery County in their maps. This information was valuable in showing planners and policy makers that working with the community and building upon existing neighborhood assets would require collaboration across jurisdictional lines and planning areas.

The assets selected by residents also told a different narrative about Langley Park than often is recognized by many both inside and outside the community. Various community institutions, local businesses and social gathering places were among residents’ most valued places. Stories about why these places matter revealed both the vulnerabilities and the strengths of the Langley Park community.

Community Institutions

Residents frequently identified CASA as a valued community institution; it offers vital services related to workforce development, job placement, education resources, health care referrals, tenant advocacy, and legal counseling at low or no cost. Residents noted that CASA provided a one-stop shop for services focused on the needs of recent immigrants.

Most residents in Langley Park send their children to local schools, which residents value, though they are not high performing relative to other schools in the region. Schools provide Langley Park youth
with various educational opportunities that many of their parents lacked in their countries of origin. Furthermore, many residents felt that the schools cater to the needs of immigrant children, offering culturally sensitive education and opportunities for parents to interact with both the administrators and other parents in their native language.

Saint Camillus Catholic Church is a particularly well-loved community institution. In addition to the regular religious services it hosts in multiple languages, residents noted that the church acts as an important place of social gathering and connection to community and social services: The church operates a food pantry and offers social service referrals and adult English classes. Its leadership has advocated on behalf of the community in various Purple Line planning meetings.

Local Businesses

Local businesses were highly valued by residents, especially those serving products from residents’ home countries and otherwise catering to the community’s needs. The latter included health care facilities, such as the CVS Pharmacy’s “Minute Clinic,” which serves uninsured and undocumented residents and employs bilingual staff. Similarly, Bank of America’s bilingual services and free and low-cost banking services were commonly cited assets. A range of small retail outlets serving everyday items from residents’ home countries also were commonly selected by residents, particularly local grocery stores that offer delivery services for residents who do not own cars.

Informal Gathering Spaces

Social gathering spaces are important to any community, but particularly in Langley Park, where residents often rely on their neighbors for information and assistance. Given the lack of public space in Langley Park, private businesses often serve as informal public gathering spaces. Community meeting participants noted local laundromats, McDonald’s and 7-Eleven as important gathering spaces. The latter is a place that many day-laborers use to access job opportunities. The “Splash Park,” the only public park in the neighborhood, was also highly rated, especially by parents.
Perhaps not surprisingly, community meeting participants valued their places of residence. Many have lived in their homes and the neighborhood for many years and stay in Langley Park because of their strong connections with friends and neighbors. Despite the poor condition of many apartment buildings, residents viewed their homes as important places to connect to a larger sense of community.

The Langley Park story map helped establish community assets of collective value that residents and policy makers often overlook. Residents’ stories added rich layers of meaning about their valued places that underscore that it often is not the place itself but how residents use and experience it that matters most. For Langley Park residents and community-based organizations, it highlighted places of shared meaning and value that can serve as a means of community education, activism or other opportunities.

Given that the Purple Line may threaten many of the residents’ valued places, the story map provides a tool that can focus community-based actions for preservation and equitable development. For planners and policy makers, the map offers evidence of how the Purple Line can help to enhance what already works in Langley Park while filling important gaps about the community’s needs that the new line can help address.
Influence and Impact

It is too early to tell the impact that the Langley Park Community Asset Map will have on the future of the community. NCSG and CASA completed the story map in 2015, shortly before litigation and questions about Purple Line funding stalled planning efforts. With uncertainty about the line, activism and engagement also waned. At the time of this report, Purple Line planning is beginning to re-emerge, and with it new efforts by FDC, PLCC and others to engage communities and highlight their voices in the planning process.

The Langley Park community map provides a tool that community-based organizations, residents, planners and policy makers can use to assess the strengths and challenges for a community in need of the opportunities that a new light rail can bring and leverage its existing assets to improve the community as the Purple Line comes online. For instance, PLCC has integrated Langley Park’s story map within its dashboard, an online tool meant to monitor and map progress toward the goals of the Purple Line Community Development Agreement. The story map’s insights suggest one measure of whether the line is meeting the needs of the Langley Park community and strengthening its assets. Additionally, the PLCC has created a crowdsourcing story map to allow communities along the line to express their hopes and concerns about the line as it moves forward.

In Langley Park and elsewhere along the Purple Line, story mapping has proven to be a powerful tool to allow residents to construct their community narratives, engage in conversations about neighborhood change and have a greater voice in their future. It also offers many lessons for communities trying to engage with efforts to improve access to opportunity and opportunity in communities to do so as well.
Meet communities where they are. Meet communities where they are. Not every engagement tool is appropriate for every community. The key to successful engagement is finding the right balance between a project’s goals and a community’s capacities. In Langley Park, conditions that often prevent disadvantaged communities from participating in the process also challenge engagement around the Purple Line. However, by meeting with residents in settings in which they regularly gathered, carefully thinking though the project’s goals, and creating tools and an approach that took into account the community’s capacity, NCSG and CASA meaningfully engaged a large number of residents in a short amount of time to create the community’s story map.

Match trusted community partners with technical expertise. A strong partnership between CASA and NCSG was key to the success of the story mapping process. CASA leveraged the trust they had established with the community to reach out to residents and create safe spaces for engagement. NCSG brought data, mapping technologies and technical expertise to create the meeting materials and the story map. Pairing researchers and community partners brought robust data and analysis together with deep engagement.

Educate and empower residents through the process. The Langley Park Community Asset Map was an important product, but the process that created it was equally important to informing and empowering residents around the possibilities and problems associated with the Purple Line. Processes of engagement are more than just a means to an end; they are important ends in their own right. While creating their community story map, Langley Park residents learned about places of common value and meaning, Purple Line plans and ways to get involved in the process. While sharing their stories, they also shared their hopes and fears about neighborhood change and found common ground across their differences.

Stories reveal hidden place meanings and values. One of the easiest ways to engage residents about their place meanings and values is to ask them to tell their stories. Stories convey attachments to places, experiences and qualities hidden within landscapes. In Langley Park, residents valued many places for reasons beyond their primary functions. Stories revealed the multiple functions that many businesses, homes and community spaces served for residents. They also often revealed the needs and desires of communities. In Langley Park, for instance, stories underscored the lack of public and private investment in the neighborhood, particularly in community spaces, as well as how residents used their environment to support their need for gathering spaces.

Craft rich community narratives. Story mapping platforms allow for the creation of rich community narratives using a variety of social and spatial data. Communities can pair text, video, audio, website links and other multimedia with data from ArcGIS, Open Street Map, the U.S. Census and other sources.
Combining sophisticated storytelling platforms with an ever-increasing array of digital data allows for graphic displays that can powerfully convey the common themes, ideas and values that help to define a community. At the same time, these displays also provide a platform for individual stories that can show the “stories behind the story” and give voice to a community’s diversity and the complexity of their place meanings.

**Story maps lend legitimacy to community narratives.** Maps both reflect and help to construct the way that people see the world. Giving residents the power to map their own communities lends credence to their ways of seeing and experiencing places. This can help residents to see themselves as belonging to communities with shared ideas and values and convince outside stakeholders of the need for investments within them. Mobilizing residents and garnering outside investment often also requires reshaping the narrative that is told about disadvantaged communities. Community maps, especially those that employ high-design customizable platforms, lend legitimacy to a community’s narratives as seen from the inside out, rather than from the outside in.

**Give the tools back to the community.** A community’s story is changing constantly. When possible, residents should have the tools to create, maintain and update their story maps. Robust community participation in map construction avoids biases of interpretation by researchers, planners and other intermediaries and can be an important means of encouraging residents to take ownership of the maps. Given constraints on time, funding and community capacity, CASA and NCSG did not fully engage in a bottom-up process of creating the Langley Park story map. However, once created, the map provides a platform by which FDC, PLCC and other community advocates can continue to engage residents around their common issues and concerns. Over time, such engagement can shift a sense of ownership of the story map to Langley Park residents.

**Move from maps to plans and policies.** While story maps are useful in representing the needs, desires and experiences of communities, they are not agents of change. To be helpful in changing the opportunities available in communities, story maps must be utilized by residents, community-based organizations, planners, policy makers and others. For residents and community-based organizations, story maps can become the basis of community-driven plans, small-scale community development activities and community organizing. For foundations, planners, policy makers and other outside stakeholders, these maps provide a unique view into what matters to community members. They can become the basis of preservation efforts, social and community services, or development plans that seek to leverage the best qualities of communities.

The leap from a story map to a plan is not an easy one. In Langley Park, advocacy groups like FDC and PLCC continue to struggle to make use these maps and residents’ stories as a valuable part of the Purple Line planning process. However, as diverse communities come together to use the power of mapping technologies to create data-driven community development solutions that are developed alongside communities rather than for them, Langley Park offers a hopeful tale. When residents have the tools to tell their stories, they have the potential to shift the way that others think about them and open new pathways to opportunity and possibilities for the future.


