

Balancing Black Cultural Preservation with Regional Growth

Community Perspectives on the Revitalization of Crenshaw Boulevard in South Los Angeles and Inglewood



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Introduction

Crenshaw Boulevard (Blvd.) is a cross-section of the Los Angeles region’s past, present, and future. A major north-south corridor, its northern segment connects Central Los Angeles near its Hollywood tourist hub to South Los Angeles’s last remaining Black enclaves. Further south, Crenshaw Blvd. extends through the City of Inglewood, one of the region’s few remaining predominantly Black working class cities. Inglewood is now also a major sports and entertainment destination due to the recent opening of the \$5 billion SoFi Stadium, the new home of the LA Rams football team and future venue for both the 2022 SuperBowl and the 2028 Olympics ceremonies.

New investments abound along Crenshaw Blvd., including, most recently, an 8.5 mile light rail expansion that will connect South LA to Los Angeles International Airport (the “Crenshaw/LAX line”). Also planned for the corridor are economic development projects that focus on community ownership. An example of one such project is Destination Crenshaw, which encompasses both a 1.3 mile open air museum celebrating Black Angeleno culture and an ongoing community campaign to acquire and redevelop the 180,000 square foot Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza shopping center into housing, community spaces, and locally owned businesses. Crenshaw Blvd. is at a critical juncture — a variety of new investments and community campaigns, which sometimes conflict with one another, are raising questions about how best to balance regional growth with community needs. Is large-scale investment without displacement possible on Crenshaw Blvd.? Can community ownership models counteract existing displacement pressures to chart a new path towards equitable development for Crenshaw Blvd. and its surrounding neighborhoods?

Drawing from nine interviews with community leaders, advocates, and city staff, this case study uplifts local perspectives on recent investments in transit, arts, sports, and entertainment along the 6-mile segment of Crenshaw Blvd. that connects parts of South Los Angeles and Inglewood. More broadly, this case study also aims to highlight community perspectives on these investments in order to inform future coordinated anti-displacement and sustainability strategies for Los Angeles County and beyond.

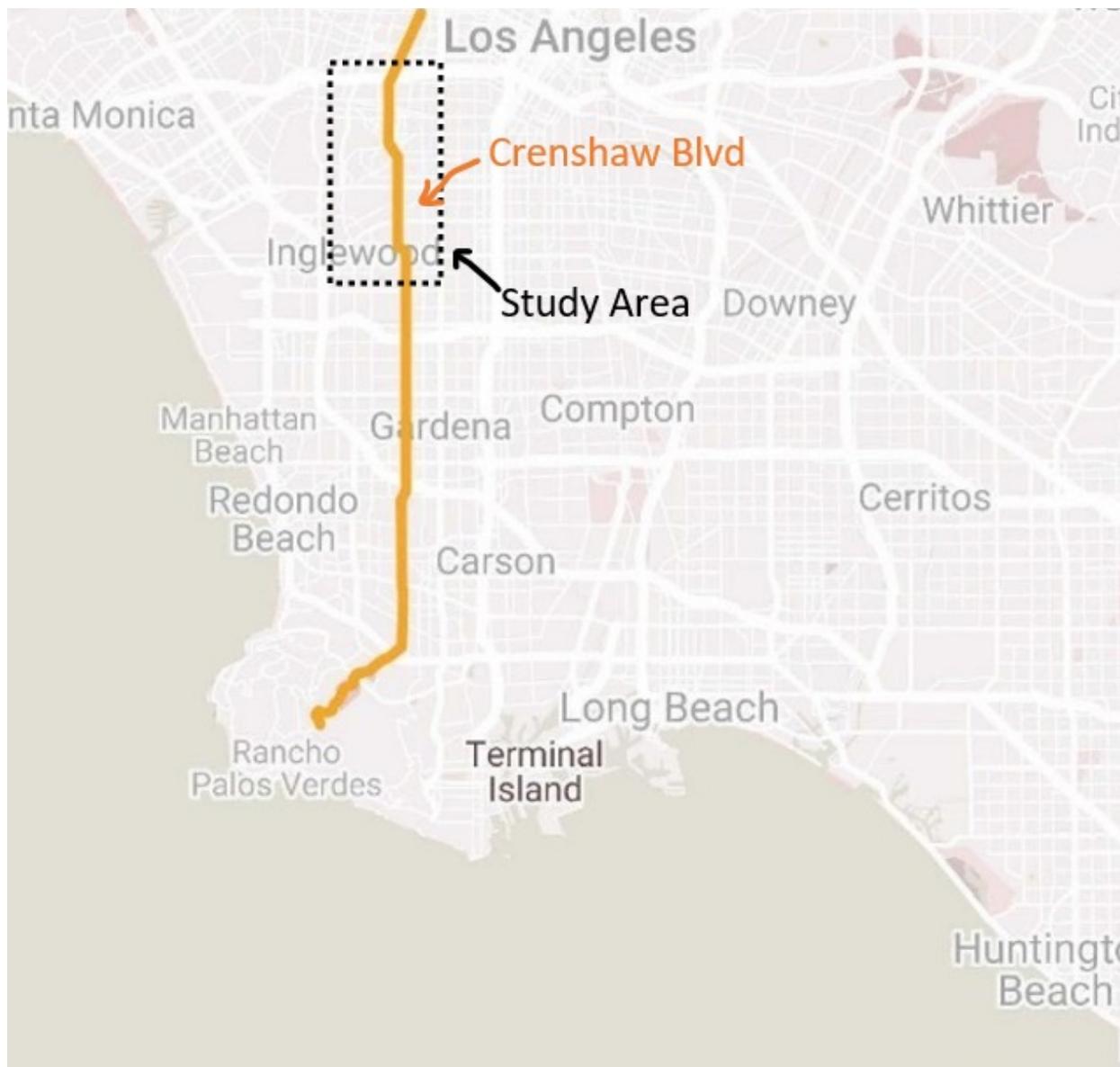


Crenshaw Boulevard (Credit: Anonymous)

I. Crenshaw Blvd and Black Los Angeles

Crenshaw Blvd. is a 23-mile north-south transportation corridor that begins in LA's Wilshire Park, west of Koreatown and several miles south of major Hollywood movie studios. It then transects the South Los Angeles neighborhoods¹ of Crenshaw (also known as Baldwin Hills/Crenshaw), Leimert Park, and Hyde Park, an epicenter of Black Los Angeles. The boulevard continues through the City of Inglewood's Morningside Park neighborhood, a major sports and entertainment district four miles east of the LA International Airport (LAX). Next, it crosses the working class suburbs of Hawthorne (home to the SpaceX headquarters) and Gardena before terminating in the coastal affluent suburbs of Torrance and Rancho Palos Verdes. (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Crenshaw Boulevard extents (in orange) and study area (black dotted line)



While Crenshaw Blvd. has been described as a boulevard that ‘begins and ends in wealth’,² it passes through neighborhoods in South LA and Inglewood that have been in demographic and economic transition for decades. During the 1920s, the neighborhoods of Crenshaw and Leimert Park were developed as planned, tree-lined communities with the Olmsted-designed Leimert Park Plaza as their central public hub.³ Since redlining and restrictive covenants prevented Black and Brown communities from purchasing homes in these areas, they were initially populated by middle and upper class white residents. Following the U.S. Supreme Court’s outlawing of racially restrictive covenants 1948, middle-class Japanese and Black families moved en masse into Crenshaw, Leimert Park, and Inglewood’s Morningside Park in search of wartime and postwar employment.

By the 1950s and 1960s, Crenshaw, Leimert Park, and Hyde Park to the south had become predominantly Black neighborhoods, full of Black-owned restaurants, artist studios, and music venues. At the same time, Inglewood’s Morningside Park neighborhood had become a prominent Black enclave, known as the “Harlem of the West” due to its well-known jazz bars and entertainment venues.⁴ Morningside Park was also known for its proximity to Los Angeles International Airport and major sports entertainment centers. For example, the Hollywood Park Racetrack (the current site of SoFi stadium), which was constructed in 1938, became a national destination for championship horseback racing. With the opening of the The Forum (the home of the LA Lakers basketball team and Kings hockey team) in 1967, Inglewood came to be known as “The City of Champions.”

As Crenshaw Blvd. gained notoriety and acclaim as an epicenter of Black life and West Coast rap music, economic disparities persisted in its surrounding neighborhoods. A report produced by the Center for Neighborhood Knowledge at UCLA found that in 1960, workers in South LA earned 80 cents for every dollar earned by the average county worker. In 2014, South LA workers earned 60 cents on the dollar.⁵ In 2019, 36% of renter households in South LA spent over half their income on rent (compared to 29% in LA County overall).⁶ In the census tracts spanning South LA neighborhoods of Crenshaw,⁷ Hyde Park, Leimert Park and the Inglewood neighborhood of Morningside Park, the median household income ranges from \$17,273 to \$94,107, well below city and county rates (Table 1).⁸

Table 1: Demographic and Socio-economic Characteristics of Neighborhoods Spanning Crenshaw Blvd in South LA

	Crenshaw (LA)	Hyde Park (LA)	Leimert Park (LA)	City of LA	County of LA
Population (2020)	38,383	38,567	21,627	3,898,747	10,014,009
Dominant racial/ethnic groups (2020)	45.9% Non-Hispanic Black 38.1% Hispanic or Latino	49.3% Non-Hispanic Black 39.2% Hispanic or Latino	47.0% Non-Hispanic Black 39.1% Hispanic or Latino	46.9% Hispanic or Latino 28.9% White 11.7% Asian 8.3% Black	48.0% Hispanic or Latino 25.6% White 14.7% Asian 7.6% Black
Median Household Income - Census Tract Ranges (2019)	\$22,250 - \$64,792	\$17,273 - \$88,854	\$42,500 - \$77,273	\$57,549	\$74,805
Average Rent ⁹ (Oct 2021)	\$2,211	\$1,587	\$1,533	\$2,518	\$2,270

Source: 2020 Decennial Census; American Community Survey 2019 5-year; Rent Cafe, October 2021.

Note: Data on White, Black, and Asian populations are all Non-Hispanic only.

Table 2: Demographic and Socio-economic Characteristics of Morningside Park vs City of Inglewood vs County of LA

	Morningside Park (Inglewood)	City of Inglewood	County of LA
Population	15,367	107,762	10,014,009
Dominant racial/ethnic groups	75.6% Black 14.3% Latino	51.7% Hispanic or Latino 37.9% Black	48.0% Hispanic or Latino 25.6% White 14.7% Asian 7.6% Black
Median Household Income (2019)	\$68,750 - \$94,107	\$57,549	\$74,805
Average Rent (Oct 2021)	--	\$1,986	\$2,270

Source: 2020 Decennial Census; American Community Survey 2019 5-year; Rent Cafe, October 2021.

Note: Data on White, Black, and Asian populations are all Non-Hispanic only.

In recent years, rising housing prices in the LA region have significantly impacted the neighborhoods along Crenshaw Blvd. Between 2010 and 2019, the Crenshaw neighborhood experienced the ninth highest home price increases in the City of Los Angeles; median home prices more than doubled from \$334,452 to \$730,000.¹⁰ According to the Urban Displacement Project, between 2000 and 2018, parts of the Hyde Park neighborhood experienced between a 70% and 250% increase in home values. During this same time period, parts of Morningside Park experienced between a 57 and 120% increase in home values.¹¹ While Crenshaw, Leimert Park, Hyde Park, and Morningside Park are still primarily low-income, regional growth pressures have made residents in these neighborhoods increasingly vulnerable to displacement.¹²

A question that remains for residents, advocates, and city staff as they consider the future of Crenshaw Blvd. is how new investment might best serve and help retain South LA and Inglewood's steadily declining Black community.¹³ In 1970, South LA was majority Black (80%) while in 2017, the area was majority Latinx (61%).¹⁴ Between 1970 and 2017, South LA's Black population decreased almost threefold from 80% to 28%. While much of the Black population that has been displaced from LA has moved to nearby cities such as Inglewood, these areas have also experienced significant demographic shifts. The Black population in Inglewood decreased from 47% in 2010 to 39% in 2020. Today, Latinx is now the majority racial/ethnic group in the city, comprising over half of the population.¹⁵ [Table 1 and 2]

Recent large-scale investments in transit, housing, and economic development along and adjacent to Crenshaw Blvd. have raised concerns about displacement. At the same time, community-driven placemaking initiatives have taken off within the last five years, both as an extension of the area's long history of Black activism and in response to the massive physical changes and economic shifts in the region.¹⁶

II. The Crenshaw/LAX Line and Regional Growth

The Crenshaw/LAX line is one of many large-scale investments that have shaped the neighborhoods around Crenshaw Blvd. in recent years and prompted a wave of community-driven activism.

As part of an effort to expand light rail in LA County, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority (Metro) is constructing the Crenshaw/LAX Line between the intersection of Crenshaw and Exposition Boulevard and the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) to the south.¹⁷ Funded by a half-cent sales tax implemented in 2008, the \$2.1 billion, 8.5-mile rail line will connect to the E Line (formerly the Expo Line) at its northern end and the C Line (formerly the Green Line) at its southern end.

Along Crenshaw Blvd. in LA, Metro will construct four new light rail stations: the Expo/Crenshaw station at the northernmost end of the boulevard; the Martin Luther King Jr station at the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza; the Leimert Park station at the northern end of the proposed Destination Crenshaw outdoor museum; and the Hyde Park station at the southern end of the museum. The Hyde Park station will be located near Marathon Clothing store, which

was established by the late rapper and influential Hyde Park resident Nipsey Hussle. One of the new stations, in Downtown Inglewood, will be located just east of SoFi stadium and the city's major sports/entertainment hub. There will also be two stations adjacent to LAX.

In 2011, Metro formed the Crenshaw/LAX Community Leadership Council (CLC), an advisory body composed of community leaders and business owners spanning Los Angeles, Inglewood, and El Segundo, to steward the community engagement process for the project. The CLC played an important role in elevating community concerns, which led to a series of modifications to the original plans. For example, after the CLC and community activists cited pedestrian safety issues and potential disruptions to local business activity, Metro agreed to move the line underground between the Expo/Crenshaw and Martin Luther King stations. Pressure from the CLC and Crenshaw Subway Coalition also resulted in the addition of a station in Leimert Park — considered by many as the cultural center for the Black community in Los Angeles.^{18 19}

The work of the CLC intersected with ongoing efforts to bolster resident participation in public planning processes generally. Between 2013 and 2014, the West Angeles Community Development Corporation, a faith-based community developer serving South Los Angeles, helped lead a series of workshops known as “TOD University,” a popular education curriculum developed in partnership with Move LA, Reconnecting America, and Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE) with funding from the Southern California Office of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The goal of TOD University was to educate residents on public processes to prepare them to participate in planning meetings related to Crenshaw/LAX line and other large investments impacting their neighborhoods.²⁰

Construction of the Crenshaw/LAX line began in 2014 and has experienced numerous delays, many due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As of the writing of this case study, the line is slated to open for full operations in late 2022.²¹

Neighborhood change was already underway prior to the construction of the Crenshaw/LAX line, but advocates agree that the most dramatic shifts have occurred in recent years. Elva Yañez, Director of Health Equity at the Prevention Institute, who works in Leimert Park, noted fast turnover of homes in the neighborhood in part due to the ongoing Crenshaw/LAX line project:

“Four years ago, it started happening slowly. A house here or a house there coming up for sale and then it just started happening super fast. Two or three houses a week. [Now] the color of the neighborhood is changing. The old owners are selling or the renters are being pushed out.”²²

Figure 2: Proposed Crenshaw/LAX line²³



III. Sports Stadiums and the Rise of Equitable Development Activism in Inglewood

Alongside the massive planned changes along Crenshaw Blvd.'s South LA segment, the Blvd.'s Inglewood segment continues to grow as a regional sports and entertainment hub. Between 2015 and 2016, as the Crenshaw/LAX line was under construction, the Rams and Chargers football teams (formerly based in St. Louis and San Diego, respectively) both agreed to move to LA and share a new stadium in the City of Inglewood. Construction of the stadium began in late 2016, and naming rights were acquired by personal finance company SoFi in 2019. SoFi stadium opened its doors to the public in September 2020.

Located 3 miles east of LAX Airport in the region's longtime sports and entertainment hub, SoFi Stadium sits on the former site of the Hollywood Park Racetrack and is directly adjacent to The Forum, formerly home to the LA Lakers basketball team. The estimated \$5 billion stadium is the centerpiece of the revitalized Hollywood Park, a 298-acre mixed-use complex that will include retail, offices, hotels, restaurants, parks, a 5-acre artificial lake, and 2,500 housing units (see page 11).^{24 25 26} As of June 2021, half of the mixed-use development was completed.²⁷

Directly across the street from SoFi stadium, plans for the Inglewood Basketball and Entertainment Center (IBEC) are underway, further reinforcing Inglewood's identity as "the Mecca of sports and entertainment" in the region.²⁸ Announced in 2017, the \$1.8 billion, 18,000 seat arena will be the new home of the LA Clippers basketball team. Unlike the SoFi stadium property, which was privately owned by Hollywood Park, IBEC will sit upon 22 acres of publicly and privately owned land acquired through eminent domain.²⁹ IBEC broke ground in the summer of 2021 and is expected to open to the public in 2024.

Both the SoFi stadium and IBEC projects spurred a series of community-based campaigns to mitigate displacement and stabilize rents to support long-term housing stability for Inglewood residents. In 2015, the announcement of the SoFi stadium project led to the creation of Uplift Inglewood, a coalition of residents, businesses, faith groups, and community organizations that "organizes for sustainable community investment while standing against mass evictions, displacement, and all of the negative effects associated with gentrification."³⁰

Founded by D'Artagnan Scorza (former Founder/Executive Director of the Social Justice Learning Institute and current Executive Director of Racial Equity for Los Angeles County), Uplift Inglewood coordinated community engagement processes throughout the planning phases of the SoFi Stadium. As noted by Scorza, while "there was a commitment to responsible economic development" during the early stages of the project, concessions were made during later phases of the project - a point of frustration for advocates and residents. Stadium developers originally committed to building 3,000 housing units adjacent to SoFi stadium, including 600 affordable units, but the final plan reduced the number of total units to 2,500, decreasing the number of affordable units as well.³¹

In response to the SoFi stadium development, Uplift Inglewood also created a campaign called

“Homes Before Arenas” to push even harder for community benefits from the IBEC project. In order to halt the transfer of public land to build the IBEC project, Uplift Inglewood sued the City of Inglewood for violating the California Surplus Land Act, which states that cities planning to sell or give away public land must give first priority to affordable housing development proposals.³² While the suit was unsuccessful in court, Uplift Inglewood’s organizing around the project resulted in a commitment from the developer to provide \$100 million in community benefits for Inglewood, one of the largest commitments of its kind in history.^{33 34}

As part of its advocacy efforts around affordable housing in Inglewood, Uplift Inglewood also organized a rent stabilization ballot initiative, which resulted in the passage of a 5% rent cap for rental units in 2019.³⁵ In South LA and Inglewood, efforts to mitigate displacement amid massive regional changes have sparked community-driven economic development initiatives that aim to preserve Black history and culture.

IV. Destination Crenshaw and Push for Community-Driven Investment

In response to the proposed Crenshaw/LAX line, residents, advocates, and city staff came together to envision Destination Crenshaw, a proposed 1.3-mile outdoor museum along Crenshaw Blvd. between 48th and 60th streets. The proposed project includes an amphitheater, pedestrian bridge, pocket parks, and public art celebrating Black history and culture. Destination Crenshaw would be the largest Black art project in the U.S. and thereby “place a cultural stamp of Blackness on Crenshaw Blvd. — akin to those in Chinatown, Mariachi Plaza, Koreatown and other ethnic enclaves.”³⁶

Joanne Kim, Senior Advisor to Councilmember Harris Dawson, called the project an experiment in how a “cultural placekeeping project [can] create a cultural commerce corridor and make sure the investment is positively impacting the residents in the Crenshaw community.”³⁷ According to Jason Foster, President and Chief Operating Officer of Destination Crenshaw, the end goal of the project is to “curate this cultural commerce corridor to make sure the investment is coming and [that] it’s the right investment.”³⁸

The late rapper Nipsey Hussle served as a founding creator and shaped the vision for the project³⁹ in its early stages. District 8 LA Councilmember Marqueece Harris Dawson and his staff have led the planning and implementation of Destination Crenshaw in collaboration with city staff, local residents, and the architecture firm Perkins & Will. Construction began in early 2021 and is expected to be completed in mid-2022.

Despite overall enthusiasm and support for the project among residents, advocates, and city staff, Damien Goodmon of the Crenshaw Subway Coalition notes that Destination Crenshaw is just one piece of the puzzle in preserving Black Angeleno life. He points out that larger systemic changes are still needed to sustain South LA’s Black community long-term:

“When you think specifically about Destination Crenshaw, the concept and idea of

creating a memorial [recognizing] Black people...is of course powerful. It always will be. But...in the absence of additional public policy and support, it becomes a point of additional frustration...You can understand given how flashy it is [and] why one would consider it a legacy project...But it's far short [of] what the community needs to keep Crenshaw Black."⁴⁰

Thus, he notes the importance of other parallel projects such as the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza in bolstering the impacts of Destination Crenshaw and counteracting the displacement pressures brought on by larger scale investments.



Crenshaw Boulevard restoration (Credit: Metro - Los Angeles)

V. Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza and the Fight for Community Ownership

Located adjacent to the Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard station on the future Crenshaw/LAX Line, the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza Mall is a shopping mall with deep roots in the community. Known originally as The Crenshaw Center, the mall opened in 1947 as the first open-air, outdoor shopping complex in the state of California. The 555,000 square foot shopping center was anchored by multiple large department stores and a Vons supermarket.

By the 1960s, the mall had become a vibrant shopping destination for Black Angelenos, and was known as “the most iconic African-American retail space west of the Mississippi River.”⁴¹ In 1988, the shopping center was renovated into a 870,000 square foot indoor mall and was renamed Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza. Over the course of the next decade, the mall became home to an additional 115 stores, including the first Magic Johnson Theater.

Since 2018, multiple bids to purchase and redevelop the mall have failed. Initially, developer

CIM Group had plans to purchase the shopping center and convert it into offices.⁴² The resident-based coalition Downtown Crenshaw Rising — with leadership from Crenshaw Subway Coalition leader, Damien Goodmon — convinced CIM Group to back out of the deal.⁴³ In 2020, another attempt by New York-based developers to purchase the mall fell through.⁴⁴

In May 2020, Downtown Crenshaw Rising proposed to purchase the mall through a community land trust-like model, taking inspiration from the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Massachusetts and Market Creek Plaza in San Diego. The mall would incorporate 80% affordable housing and 20% market-rate housing to closely resemble the area's current economic demographics, a health clinic, a child care center, job training programs, worker-owned cooperatives, and community art spaces.⁴⁵ Part of the financing for the mall purchase would include an initial public offering in which residents could purchase stakes in the mall's redevelopment for as little as a few hundred dollars.⁴⁶

For Goodmon, a central tenet of Downtown Crenshaw Rising is the idea that community ownership is the key to equitable development along Crenshaw Blvd.:

“It’s not about developing the site. It’s about establishing a new form of equitable development at the most iconic commercial space in Black Los Angeles that would be the largest project in L.A. It’s showing that you can have a project that uplifts and that doesn’t uproot the community by just having a little bit of good capital aligned, authentic community engagement and leadership who understand these issues.”

As of the writing of this case study, Downtown Crenshaw Rising has raised \$34 million in philanthropy, an additional \$25 million from social impact investors, and the remaining part of the \$115 million bid from a mission-aligned equity partner. The coalition has submitted another offer to purchase the mall but it has yet to be accepted.⁴⁷ Tunua Thrash-Ntuk, Executive Director of Local Initiatives Support Corporation-LA (LISC-LA), notes that despite progress expanding cooperative ownership models among Crenshaw businesses, community purchase of property - like the most recent proposal for Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza - requires more “soft money” from philanthropy and government to come to fruition:

“Historically, we haven’t had enough public or private resources stepping up to help the community to be able to make these purchases. Often you have undercapitalized nonprofit organizations and developers doing the best they can to purchase [property] and to make sure key assets remain in the community. But there haven’t been a lot of resources to go around.”⁴⁸

Downtown Crenshaw Rising’s plan for the mall is a direct response to ongoing displacement pressures that advocates believe have been exacerbated by large-scale investments like the Crenshaw/LAX line, the SoFi stadium, and IBEC. Despite the mixed outcomes of community negotiations for these projects, the coalition building that has emerged has helped chart a new, community-driven economic development path for Crenshaw Blvd.

VI. Looking Forward

As the cities of LA and Inglewood grapple with the health and economic impacts of the current global pandemic, interviewees look to Crenshaw Blvd.'s future with cautious optimism. Community coalitions played a key role in negotiating the terms of the Crenshaw/LAX project and SoFi stadium project to prioritize resident concerns. The success of these negotiations set the stage for Destination Crenshaw and the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza, in which community coalitions assumed leading roles in defining Crenshaw Blvd.'s new path towards equitable development.

Interviewees expressed hope about the future success of these community ownership models. However, in order to secure a truly equitable future for Crenshaw Blvd, interviewees stressed the importance of directly addressing past and current systems that have contributed to racial inequities. Community ownership models must be backed by city- and county-wide redistributive policies that prioritize low-income BIPOC residents. This includes but is not limited to expanding targeted local hiring strategies for large-scale investments,⁴⁹ creating more opportunities for community control of land,⁵⁰ and prioritizing BIPOC small business in pandemic recovery efforts.

Progress is being made on this front. Community negotiations led to 30% minority-owned business and 50% local hiring requirements for the IBEC project in Inglewood.⁵¹ In 2021, Los Angeles County established a \$14 million pilot program to help more community-based organizations establish Community Land Trusts (CLTs) to acquire property for affordable housing and economic development.⁵² LISC-LA is connecting BIPOC-owned small businesses with capital to recover from pandemic-related financial losses⁵³ and is also raising awareness of programs such as California Rebuilding Fund, which prioritizes loans to small businesses in historically underbanked areas.⁵⁴

The future of Crenshaw Blvd. is uncertain. Major projects such as the Crenshaw/LAX line, SoFi stadium, Destination Crenshaw, and the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza have yet to be completed, and their potential impacts are still unknown. However, strong local coalitions have emerged as a powerful force in the area and will continue to advocate for development that directly benefits all residents.

Endnotes

- 1 According to the Los Angeles Times “Mapping LA survey”, the South Los Angeles region (formerly known as South Central Los Angeles) includes 25 neighborhoods. The Crenshaw, Hyde Park, and Leimert Park neighborhoods are along the western most boundary of South Angeles.
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- 6 ACS 2019 5-year
- 7 “Crenshaw” is also known as Baldwin Hills-Crenshaw.
- 8 Given that Median Household Income data is available by census tract only, ranges of tracts comprising the Crenshaw, Hyde Park, and Leimert Park neighborhoods are provided.
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