

COLUMBUS, OHIO LOCAL GOVERNMENT R&D AGENDA WORKSHOP

**A MetroLab Network Report Out
November 17, 2025**



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Introduction

Cities are often on the front lines of addressing complex, interrelated challenges spanning infrastructure, housing, public health, safety, and service delivery, all while operating within fiscal, political, and administrative constraints. Columbus faces a distinct set of pressures shaped by a growing population and a variety of environmental impacts while being constrained by budgetary and political realities.

To help align academic expertise, community knowledge, and municipal priorities, MetroLab, in partnership with the OSU's Center for Urban and Regional Analysis and the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) convened a Local Government R&D Agenda Workshop. The workshop brought together representatives from city agencies, higher education institutions, and community-based organizations to surface priority research questions that could directly inform policy, operations, and program design in Columbus.

Participants emphasized the importance of applied, locally grounded research that reflects Columbus' specific conditions, constraints, and opportunities, rather than generic best practices. Across discussions, there was strong interest in research that supports housing and affordability, population growth, environmental and community health, infrastructure and mobility systems, and capacity building.

This report summarizes the research needs, collaboration opportunities, and implementation considerations identified during the Columbus workshop that occurred on November 17, 2025.

Columbus' Research Needs

MetroLab convened this workshop with Columbus leaders and stakeholders to surface shared research priorities, explore collaboration models, and strengthen the relationships between institutions as drivers of evidence-based governance.

Participants identified five recurring domains where applied research could directly support policy and operational decision-making:

- Housing & Affordability
- Community Health & Well-Being
- Transportation & Infrastructure
- Energy & Environment
- Service Delivery & Community Engagement

Topic 1: Housing & Affordability

- How could updates to land use policy and streamlining permitting processes help meet the needs of the future, and facilitate housing across urban, suburban, and rural jurisdictions?
- What is the lifecycle cost of growth across jurisdictions (infrastructure, service delivery, schools, stormwater), and how does that change under alternative land-use scenarios?
- Which zoning or regulatory reforms most directly unlock affordable housing production while protecting neighborhood stability?
- What communication and engagement strategies build early community buy-in for new housing so there are “no gotcha moments”?
- How can predictability be injected into the housing system (policy timelines, funding pipelines, consolidated incentives) so municipal governments and developers can plan?

Topic 2: Community Health & Well-Being

- How do residents define “well-being” and what indicators (subjective + objective) best capture those definitions across neighborhoods?
- What services and resources do residents prioritize, and how do they value trade-offs (e.g., increased services vs. tax/investment costs)?
- Why has absenteeism risen since COVID and what targeted interventions reduce chronic absenteeism?
- Which community-level barriers (transportation, language, childcare, stigma) prevent access to mental health and primary care, and where are these barriers concentrated?
- How should health and social indicators be integrated into regional planning decisions (housing, transport, energy)?

Topic 3: Transportation & Infrastructure

- How can the Columbus region better understand how people travel, in order to accommodate the increase in air traffic?
- How can Columbus better understand the economic ROI and social health ROI for active transit and transportation networks? What data is needed to do this?
- How will AI impact transit authorities? How will local operations be impacted, and how will users be impacted?
- What data should be prioritized when creating policy to improve sustainability and efficiency (across all modes of transportation)?

Topic 4: Energy & Environment

- What should be included in a standardized decision process for energy deployment, specifically location and type of energy? What factors should be considered when choosing an approach for deployment?
- How should a regional energy strategy be designed to equitably distribute energy resources, encourage clean transitions, and avoid disproportionate burdens?
- What social factors should be explored when identifying high-risk communities for sensor deployment? How can this be done to inform interventions?
 - Ex: Columbus based research found LGBTQ community members faced higher risks of environmental hazards
- How should environmental hazards in locations where a cluster of hazards are present be prioritized for mitigation?

Topic 5: Service Delivery & Community Engagement

- How can Columbus better train large language models (LLMs) to surface what other communities are up to?
- What should be done to ensure that community engagement processes are regularly streamlined and scaled to ensure relevancy?
- How can local governments, researchers, and organizations better understand community definitions of “well-being”?
 - These might differ from objective/traditional measures, but having ways to define well-being is important.

How to Strengthen the Ecosystem for Research Collaboration

Local government decision-makers in Central Ohio are navigating complex, high-stakes questions that go beyond routine operations. Workshop discussions demonstrated that while there is strong interest in partnering with the research community (and an existing partnership and camaraderie between these entities), many jurisdictions face capacity constraints that limit their ability to engage deeply or consistently.

The university community can support these needs by:

- Aligning research with local priorities by using a structured research agenda or policy guidance to identify relevant projects and clarify which municipal office or staff “owns” each area of work.
- Optimizing engagement and outreach by designing interactions that are efficient, minimize burdens on city staff, and provide actionable outputs, such as concise briefs, dashboards, or scenario analyses.
- By structuring collaboration in this way, research can directly inform decision-making, improve impact measurement, and strengthen the capacity of local governments to address community challenges effectively.

Additionally, the recommendations below reflect concrete steps Columbus, and its partners, could take to improve outcomes:

- **Design research outputs for accessibility and action.** Participants emphasized that research outputs should be understandable and easy to digest for community members, while clearly stating immediate and practical next steps for decision makers and policy folks. Outputs that translate findings into plain language, concrete options, and near-term impacts help ensure research is not only relevant, but also usable within local decision-making contexts.
- **Invest in early and continuous communication with communities.** An impactful and continuous partnership requires keeping community partners informed every step of the way throughout the research process. Early alignment on goals, assumptions, and constraints helps build trust and avoids “gotcha” moments when findings or deliverables are shared. Ongoing communication supports shared ownership of both process and outcomes.
- **Prioritize visual and interactive tools to support engagement.** Participants noted that visualizations, dashboards, and interactive formats are especially useful for working with communities, including cherished community groups and institutional stakeholders. These tools help make complex data more approachable, facilitate dialogue, and support collaborative discussions and feedback, rather than just sharing out findings.
- **Rapid exploration and sharing of data are essential.** Tools and materials that allow decision makers and community members to *quickly* explore scenarios, compare outcomes, and understand data driven pros and cons, were determined to be particularly valuable. Time is of the essence and having avenues to present data through these formats consistently and as a near term response, supports timely, informed decision making and helps research outputs remain directly relevant to the Columbus region.

Observational Takeaways from Workshop

- **Policy and funding uncertainty is a significant barrier to action across the region.**
Participants noted that many communities are hesitant to move forward without a more certain understanding of state and federal priorities or long-term financial support, which slows planning and implementation.
- **There is strong interest in using research to reduce uncertainty rather than wait it out.** Attendees discussed the value of research approaches that model multiple policy and funding scenarios to inform decisions under uncertainty and support more proactive regional action.
- **Standardized decision-making frameworks are seen as helpful when facing uncertain futures.** Participants discussed the need for shared and consistent frameworks that can guide decisions across the region while reviewing multiple potential futures, rather than a single assumed outcome.
- **A scarcity or deficit mindset is difficult to overcome in the current environment.** Participants emphasized that ongoing funding and policy uncertainty, combined with existing resource constraints further a scarcity mindset that impacts both institutional and community decision making and action.
- **Maintaining community trust is essential when navigating uncertainty and scarcity.** Community members want to be heard and want to see their realities reflected in research outcomes. Participants noted that people experiencing scarcity in daily life are wary of processes that do not visibly honor those realities.
- **Many communities lack foundational tools for planning and analysis.** Especially in rural areas and places experiencing rapid growth, participants observed gaps in capacity for land-use planning, data analysis, zoning reform, and economic development strategy.
- **Baseline data gaps and limited capacity persist.** Many communities do not have clarity on what data to collect, lack the resources to collect it, or do not have the capacity to standardize and utilize existing data in the policy process.
- **Rapid growth is outpacing local staff capacity.** Communities facing megasite development, accelerated growth, or complex regional projects often lack the needed.

The Central Ohio region faces a period of rapid growth and transformation, with opportunities to improve mobility, housing, sustainability, and community well-being. Key challenges include policy and funding uncertainty, scarcity mindsets and trust barriers, limited local capacity in planning and data analysis, and the need to translate research into actionable insights. These challenges make it difficult for local

governments, community organizations, and regional partners to make coordinated, forward-looking decisions.

However, Central Ohio has a strong foundation to address regional challenges, built on strong existing partnerships between local governments, community organizations, and OSU's research and technical expertise.

- MORPC serves as an effective convener, connecting counties and municipalities to coordinate mobility, housing, sustainability, and green infrastructure initiatives.
- The region benefits from a wealth of applied research, from CURA's urban analytics and environmental studies to specialized projects on climate resilience, energy transition, and equitable housing.
- Community organizations and advocacy groups bring deep local knowledge, while innovative programs in finance, planning, and professional development provide tools to support implementation.

Together, these assets create a rich ecosystem for data informed decision-making, cross-sector collaboration, and community engagement, positioning the region to proactively shape its growth and sustainability.

Ideas to Move Forward

Build regional data and knowledge infrastructure.

- How can we better standardize data and legislation? Developing templates and knowledge sharing processes for data and RFPs. Creating systems for data requests, grant support requests, and general "how to" across organizations and institutions.
- Create a Regional Knowledge Hub that integrates analytics, data archives, environmental sensors, planning data, and community datasets. Organizations such as Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC), CHRR at OSU, and the Center for Urban and Regional Analysis (CURA) will be key in providing this information.

Align service delivery with regional growth.

- What data is needed to understand costs of growth and service impacts? How can local governments better communicate trade-offs in investment decisions (transit, trails, energy, housing)?
- How can small/local governments with limited capacity and expertise in planning, data, and analysis be supported across the region?

Coordinate technical support for modernizing land use, housing, and infrastructure planning.

- A regional technical assistance program could:
 - Provide local governments with model ordinances, zoning updates, and permitting guides.

- Offer expert support from MORPC, OSU, and partner organizations for specific development projects (megasites, mixed-use, sustainable infrastructure).
- Prioritize communities with limited planning capacity.
- Pulling in data and engaging communities:
 - Creating “decision-making support” dashboards showing growth costs, housing needs, environmental and mobility impacts.
 - Scenario modeling could be an advanced feature.
 - Engage residents and stakeholders early to build trust and alignment.

About FAS and the Local Government R&D Agenda

Cities are often on the front lines of solving difficult and complex social issues such as affordable housing, mental health, and digital equity. Universities can serve as a key partner, producing cutting-edge research, ideas, and technology that could help cities solve some of these complex issues.

And yet, there is a disconnect between research and local government programs and policies. Why? We believe for two primary reasons: 1) research is often pushed, not pulled from local government and 2) research output doesn’t necessarily align with how cities and counties work – and so it’s difficult to adopt.

MetroLab aims to equip cities with science and research. And with philanthropic support, MetroLab is producing a national body of work called the Local Government R&D Agenda: a list of identified priority research areas that can address local governments’ complex issues and needs. MetroLab aims to do this by working with a select number of cities and hosting workshops with nearby universities and colleges to ask the question “if you could get research on [blank], what would you want?”.

By intentionally bringing these key stakeholders together, we can produce actionable research addressing complex challenges. For example:

- What if R&D efforts reduced the cost of affordable housing in half?
- What if city councils received draft policy language to make starting a business as easy as getting a driver's license?
- What if we discovered ways to expedite recovery funds delivery to low- to moderate-income neighborhoods, reducing wait times after a disaster event?

At the conclusion of the city-hosted workshops, MetroLab will work with federal agencies and congressional stakeholders to fund projects that would directly support and address the Local Government R&D Agenda. We hope to bring those projects back to cities, with MetroLab serving as a matchmaker of research and programmatic outcomes back to the local communities we partner with.

Appendix: Notes Captured During the Workshop

Workshop Question Responses

During the workshop, several interactive questions were asked of the participants. Those answers informed the summary above and are listed in full below.

For local government, what is one word you think of when you hear “research”?

- Limited Data
- No system
- Data
- Academic
- Statistics
- Static
- Black Hole (unfocused)
- Community Engagement x2
- Informed
- Predictions
- Scenario Plans
- Modeling
- Recommendations
- Cost
- Long
- Idealistic
- Findings
- Shield
- Irrelevant (not fit to purpose)
- Open Ended
- Ideas
- Time
- Surveys
- Creative opportunities
- Research: justification
- Public Policy: rules
- Data
- Academic
- Root change
- Positive Policy
- Expensive
- Long-term
- \$

For academic partners, what is one word you think of when you hear public policy?

- Change
- Evidence
- Representation (or lack thereof)
- Action
- Enabler
- Better partners in same space
- Opportunity
- Time consuming
- Fast moving
- Under- informed
- Data- informed
- Negotiated Priorities
- Experimental
- Reactive
- Impact
- Complex
- Responsive
- Vision
- Change-maker not box checker

In five words or less, how do you know who to work with from the other institution?

For local government:

- Talk to someone you know
- Google/LinkedIn
- Network Connections
- Existing Partnerships
- Recommendations from peers
- Network Connections
- We don't
- Luck
- Google x2
- Depends on the department
- Ask MORPC or AHACO
- Former Students/Partners

- Honestly unsure
- Existing relationships
- No formal method
- Staff Experts
- RFQs
- One primary point of contact

- Networking
- Colleagues
- Word of mouth
- By developing long term relationships
- Find the decision Maker

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What myth do you want to bust to the other side?

For local government:

- Evidence must be perfect to be informative
- That we have regulatory authority (as a Planning Commission)
- We're not curious about research
- We don't use data to inform decisions
- That we have the time and budget to tackle many new initiatives at once
- Higher tolerance for risk than might be thought of a public entity
- MORPC has no direct influence over land use planning. Only transportation.
- We are fully dependent on government funding
- That we have time or staff or capacity to monitor/read/apply general research findings outside of specific projects
- Everyone at the city doesn't care
- We are all corrupt
- We are lazy
- That we are adequately resourced (local gov)
- That local gov's can't be forward thinking, innovative and nimble.
- We only serve very low-income residents
- Government is not slow, it is thoughtful and intentional

For local government, if you could get research on [blank], what would you want?

- Disaggregated data on rental housing: age, location, affordability
- Cost-benefit approaches to simplify the approval process and reduce state and federal regulations

- How to maximize affordable housing financial incentives to tip the most projects from “maybe” to “yes”
- How to evaluate tradeoffs and balance them in a transparent, inclusive, democratic way
- How to distill research into compelling stories that policymakers and the public believe
- To identify evidence-based strategies for building public support for housing expansion in face of active opposition
- Community development: connecting research to community needs and outcomes
- Actual impact of increased housing prices on economic development and economic mobility
- How to create fiscally sustainable communities
- Making argument for renewable energy
- Leverage public investments in parks and economic development to build public support
- Economic impact to local communities
- Increased costs + migrating working class + deterioration of existing housing
- Social isolation + “third spaces” + mobility options (transit expansion)
- Capacity + capability + training to understand and manage the community
- Public education = economic development
- Inventory of rental properties, rent costs, landlord profits
- Best practices: Transit-Oriented Development
- Quantitative predictive safety benefits of infrastructure projects
- Renewable energy in multi-family communities
- American metrics that score cities from transit-first to auto-first to best-in-class for safety
- We need to stop overcomplicating housing production / local community
- Regional energy strategy
- Natural solutions to stormwater management
- Impact of data centers on the environment
- Post-construction infrastructure project performance
- Research on how transportation investments affect regional growth
- Research on how to overcome opposition and support density
- Research questions on how to integrate housing + transportation + energy systems
- Fiscal impact: development has one subsidy, how new development contributes to budgets
- Incentives for data-driven decision making in a political environment
- Best practices & policy to reduce water reuse
- Do green space & health outcomes correlate?
- What is the fiscal cost of heavy single-family zoning to infrastructure?
- How do local governments use data to make decisions under uncertainty?

For academic partners, what research do you think local governments need?

- Equity centered research and research on marginalized groups
- How to deploy limited \$\$ for maximum impact

- What stories, messages, and channels have had the most impact on specific and diverse communities
- Neighborhood-level quality of life and concerns
- More valid, community level data and insights to ensure decisions are not being made on anecdotal evidence
- Robust and equitable infrastructure planning under uncertainty
- What would the future look like if we had more mobility choices
- What policies and interventions have worked elsewhere and why?
- What does “worked well” mean and how was it resolved
- Real world applied integration of Data Science and AI
- Outcomes of new policies and initiatives
- Policy analysis on income, health, education, and well-being interventions
- Education needs of the community
- Transportation needs of communities
- Importance of community space for art, gatherings, etc.
- Sophisticated understanding of beneficial pathways and their associated tradeoffs
- Environmental health
- Affordable and accessible housing
- More data needed on accessible/safe housing characteristics
- The long-term implications of policy & infrastructure change and feedback between natural built and social systems
- What does a healthy and equitable community look like?
- Barriers that residents face in accessing services
- Systems-level research on transport and energy
- Well-being of constituents
- Research on future needs of communities
- Translation of research to pilot deployments of advanced technologies
- How to create a culture of something and how to measure that
- Accessibility issues that residents face
- How to utilize existing data to inform policy strategy
- How will short end long term climate impacts influence who has access to safe affordable housing?
- Data dashboards integrated for personal and aggregated decision-making
- Community resilience against climate related hazards
- Identify specific communities/neighborhoods and their assets/needs
- How to collect synthesize and use community input at scale in ways that are convenient for all residents

For local government, how can academic partners support policy development and programmatic needs?

- Create an OHIO local government policy lab
- Make research digestible and accessible
- Bridge deep research to communities, especially lower-income communities
- Better align research
- By focusing on community research priorities developed collaboratively with locals

- Center + respond to RFGs + RFPs
- Hearing from local govts on their needs first
- Less administrative burden for grant-funded projects / partnerships
- Serve as creative thought leaders
- Grant writing + applications
- Internship partnerships
- Engage in regional roundtables via MORPC
- Ongoing communication & engagement between the two
- Speak/present at local + state conferences (e.g., American Planning Association, OEDA, etc.)
- More outreach to community (there is so much knowledge in this room)
- “Adopt” a community
- Meet more regularly to plan, strategize, and share best practices on engaging ops + program implementation
- Provide case studies on proposed policies if applicable
- Providing expertise, resources, + support
- Share applicable + relevant findings directly and in easy-to-understand formats
- Build education that generates public servants with strong data, policy, and evaluation (storytelling) skills
- Develop and share ready-to-use tools
- By educating and aligning policymakers and elected officials directly, not as a consultative force
- University providing people to help implement policy
- There needs to be the will of local government to want to partner this can be difficult due to capacity
- Create living learning labs as the genesis of a project
- University helps diagnose unintended consequences of implementing a particular policy
- Talk to academics early in the research to understand findings
- Regular meetings to discuss research, clean studies, data, and how government can support faculty and student research at universities
- Build communities and develop pipelines to desired outcomes and communities we serve
- Help gov’t identify and access relevant academic literature
- Share your data and your code!
- From partnerships between practitioners + researchers: better performance, design improvements, funding, etc.
- Connections for workforce dev through student placements + future staff

For academic partners, how can local government support university innovation and economic growth?

- Give us ideas for projects that are suitable for class projects
- Make time to talk to us
- Collaborate with university partners to address shared problems
- Letters of support help a lot (sorry if we ask too much – it’s not you)

- Time + capacity for regular or semi-regular engagement through partnerships
- Get a semi-regular meeting on the calendar with local communities
- Get involved – bring your real issues/needs to intersect with our research
- Partner with us on research, education, engagement, etc.
- Through maintaining consistent communication and connection
- Support public schools
- Be patient + persistent
- Help us help you
- Work through existing centers/institutes to scale efforts
- Provide data and questions you think are important to address
- Knowledge is the currency of universities, and it is hard to do research if partners do not allow publication
- Reach out w/questions but know that some community questions need funding to hold answers
- Provide seed grants for research into community issues
- Staff/resources to facilitate or co-develop experiential learning opportunities (community capstone projects, etc.)
- Be willing to write/sign letters of support for grants
- Provide need-based scholarships
- Serve on research project advisory boards
- Give us wicked, complex problems that have lots of funding to motivate grant proposals

**Thank you to the Center
for Urban and Regional
Analysis at Ohio State
University, the Mid-Ohio
Regional Planning
Commission and partners
for their participation in
this effort.**

Acknowledgements

Dave Dixon, Director of Data Analytics & Strategy,
Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission

Dr. Harvey Miller, Director, Center for Urban and Regional
Analysis (CURA) at Ohio State University

Jessica Kuenzli, Chief Regional Planning Officer, Mid-Ohio
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