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CWRU, CSU and partners enter federal competition to connect workers without cars to sprawling job hubs along highways

Updated Feb 17, 11:21 AM; Posted Feb 17, 9:00 AM



Denise Green worked the third shift at Swagelok in Solon and was being dropped off at her home in Bedford Heights last September at 8 a.m. after a ride in a Paradox Prize van. Dominic Mathew, Fund for Our Economic Future

By **Steven Litt**, [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com)

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Sixty years of sprawl enabled by highways has moved tens of thousands of jobs beyond the reach of low-income job-seekers who can't get to work without a car, but who can't afford a car because they don't have a job.

That conundrum — which is related to redlining, exclusionary zoning, and other legacies of systemic racism in Northeast Ohio — is the focus of a local entry in a new civic research project funded by the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Energy.

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The local entry is part of a national competition in which contestants are seeking a \$1 million, one-year grant to implement solutions to the “spatial mismatch” between jobs and employers created by sprawl.

Today, workers who can't afford a car spend an inordinate amount of time stitching together bus routes that can involve lengthy waits at transfer points. Then, regardless of the weather or time of day, they may have to contend with long walks to complete what city planners call the “last mile” to their destinations.

The objective of the federal competition is to “provide mobility options that resolve what is often described as an affordable housing and job-location mismatch,” according to a Case Western Reserve University news release.

CWRU is partnering in the Northeast Ohio competition entry with Cleveland State University, Cuyahoga County, and the Fund for Our Economic Future, a philanthropic alliance devoted to job creation, access and training.

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Pan Li, associate professor in the Department of Electrical, Computer and Systems Engineering at CWRU's Case School of Engineering will serve as principal investigator in the project.

“It is our privilege to have this great opportunity to collaborate with our civic partners to address the spatial mismatch problem our local communities are facing,” Li said in the news release.

The project team also includes Francisca Richter, research assistant professor at CWRU's Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences; Dominic Mathew, urban and regional planner for mobility innovations at the Fund for Our Economic Future; Hongkai Yu, assistant professor in the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at Cleveland State University; and Catherine Tkachyk, chief innovation and performance officer for Cuyahoga County.

The team will base their project on existing work supported by the Fund for Our Economic Future. Two years ago, the fund launched The [Paradox Prize](#), an earlier competition that generated proposals from 53 firms seeking to provide efficient transport linking urban workers to suburban jobs.

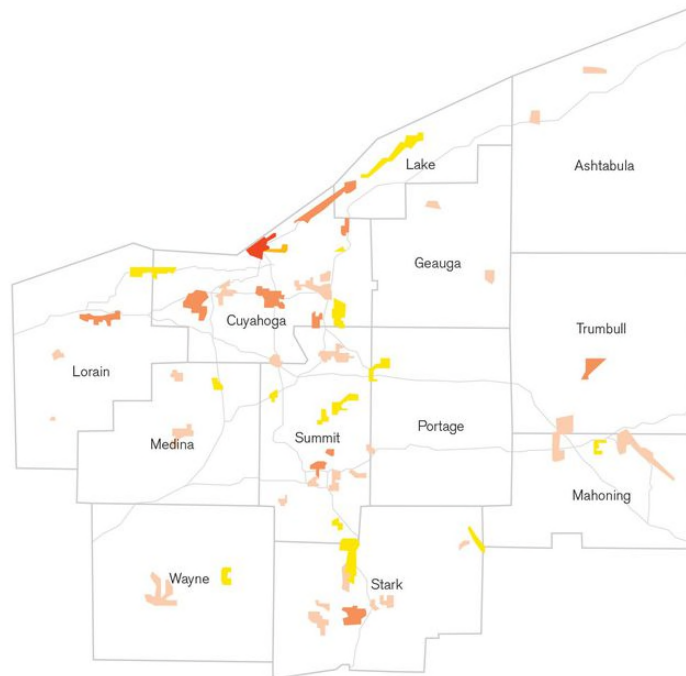
As part of its work, the fund documented the rise of dozens of suburban job hubs that had gained tens of thousands of jobs in 12 Northeast Ohio counties between 2002 and 2015, while urban job hubs shrank.

Traded Sector Job Hubs

Change in Traded-Sector Employment
NEO Region; 2002 – 2015

Partners across the region are working together to finalize this job hubs map.

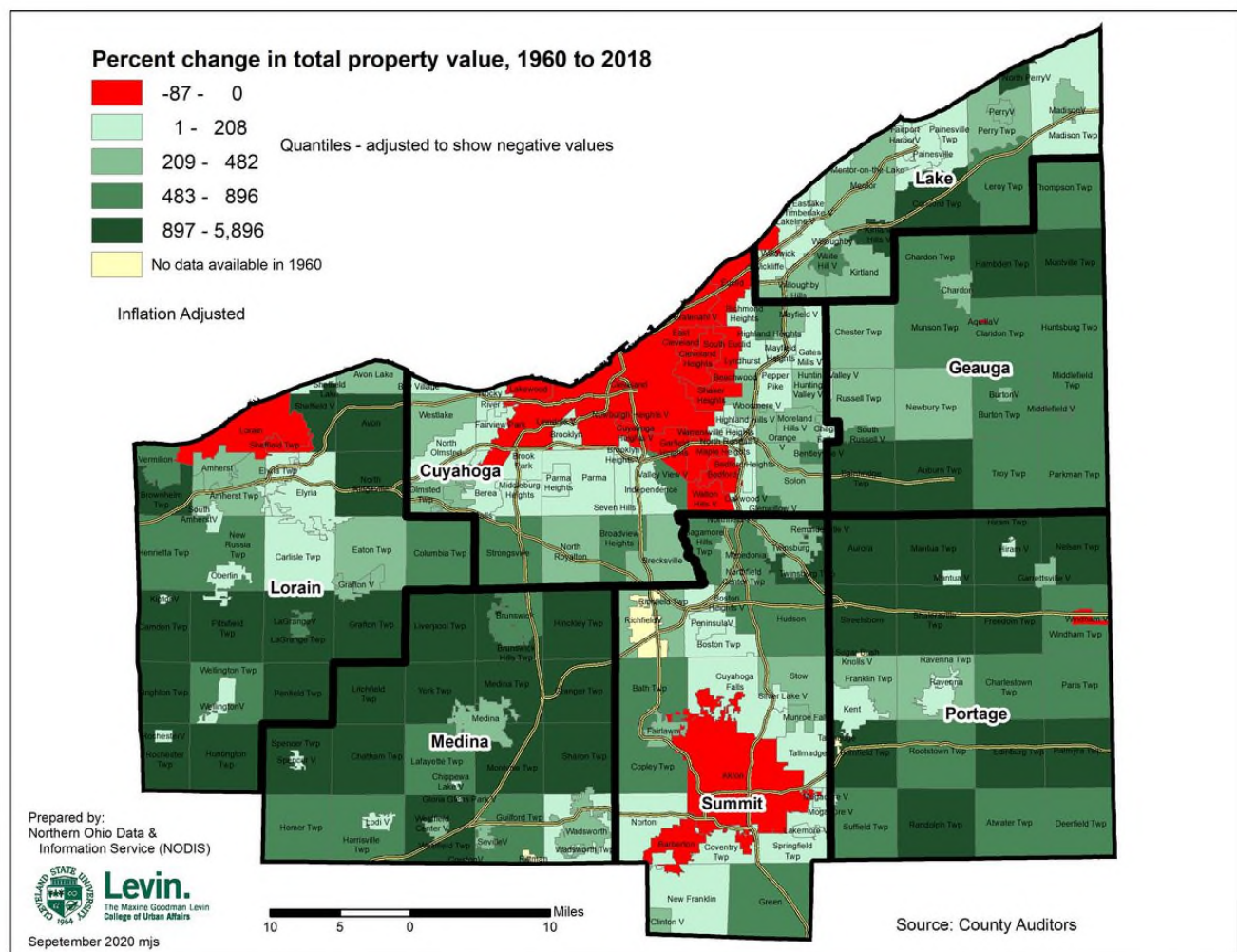
- Loss of more than 20k jobs
- Loss of 2k to 20k jobs
- Loss of 2k to gain of 1k jobs
- Gain of 1k to gain of 8k jobs
- Gain of more than 8k jobs



A map prepared by the Fund for Our Economic Future documents the rise of sprawling job hubs along interstate highways in Northeast Ohio. Distant job centers are growing, while urban core hubs are shrinking. Fund for Our Economic Future

That pattern echoed data provided to [cleveland.com](#) and The Plain Dealer by researchers at CSU last year showing how highways contributed to sorting Northeast Ohio communities into [tax base winners and losers](#) between 1960 and 2018.

Since 2019, the fund has awarded nearly \$800,000 to nine pilot projects in seven counties chosen as winners of the Paradox Prize. Those pilot projects are connecting 336 workers to 61 job sites in Cuyahoga, Lake, Lorain, and Portage, Summit, Stark and Wayne counties, Mathew said Tuesday.



A map based on inflation-adjusted, assessed property tax values for 226 communities in seven Northeast Ohio counties shows gains and losses channeled by highway-induced suburban development between 1960 and 2018. County auditor information was gleaned by Cleveland State University researchers through the Ohio Department of Taxation. Northern Ohio Data & Information Service, Cleveland State University

Data about the Paradox Prize pilots show that two of the most promising projects are making a difference. According to data provided by Mathew:

- Thirty riders in Cuyahoga County using the Get to Work Now pilot saw their commute times drop on average from 90-plus minutes to 22 minutes.
- Fifty-seven riders in rural Wayne County, which lacks transit, are working at 11 employers through the Rural Mobility Solutions pilot, to access jobs that were not accessible to them previously. The pilot's success led to \$1.4 million in ODOT grants in 2020 to fund the expansion of public transit in the county.

The team working on the new federal competition will base their entry on two of the nine Paradox Prize pilots. The team will gather data about mileage, fuel consumption, schedules, and other factors, and conduct interviews with participants.



Deacons Al Shivers, left, and Paul Perry from the Cleveland Clergy Coalition stand in front of a church van after finishing their early morning pick up and drop-offs for the Paradox Prize workforce mobility project that started at 4.30 am September 25, 2020. Dominic Mathew, Fund for Our Economic Future

"We're going to take lessons learned, do a lot more planning and listening to the community, and see if we can create a plan to develop a broader solution," Tkachyk said.

Partners include Manufacturing Works, the Cleveland Clergy Coalition, The American Association of Clergy and Employers, The Centers, and the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority. The National Renewable Energy Laboratory will also collaborate with the project team.

The deadline in the federal competition, called the Civic Innovation Challenge, is May, Li said. The \$1 million prize could be awarded in about five months, he said.

"We know where the residents are and where they want to go," Li said. "We need to come up with a solution so we can provide effective and efficient transportation solutions for those low-income residents."

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