**Fresno DRIVE: A Template for Inclusive and Equitable Regional Economic Development**

by Ismael (Ish) Herrera

“That was impressive.” These were the first words out of California Governor Gavin Newsom’s mouth as the [Fresno DRIVE](https://www.fresnodrive.org/) executive committee completed its [Community Investment Plan](https://www.fresnodrive.org/the-plan) presentation to him and his senior staff at the state capitol on October 31, 2019. As I witnessed the coalition of diverse stakeholders and faces speaking one after another with a unified message, I couldn’t help but feel pride in knowing just how impressive of a feat my community had pulled off in a matter of months.

A common voice is not where the Fresno DRIVE journey began. Led by the table-setting leadership of the [Central Valley Community Foundation](https://www.centralvalleycf.org/), the expeditious work of commissioned consultants, and the support of generous philanthropy, a group of forward-thinking leaders from across the sociopolitical spectrum in Fresno spent the summer and fall of 2019 immersed in a process that was in many ways, for many of those involved, an experience that evoked discomfort, shame, anger, and skepticism. I certainly felt these and other emotions during my participation as a member of the initiative’s executive committee. Embedded in these emotions were individuals’ past and present interactions with data, community identity, allocation of scarce resources, and most importantly, each other.

While we painfully acknowledged unhealed wounds, their sources—among them redlining, income and wealth inequality, and health disparities—and their negative disproportionate effects on communities of color, the strength of this group emerged when collective agreement on innovative solutions, bold fundraising goals, strong accountability, and a commitment to genuine community input surfaced. The message was now clear: racial equity would no longer be considered a barrier to economic development but instead an integral part of achieving prosperity for all in Fresno. A commitment to this approach has become all the more important now as the current COVID-19 crisis has magnified existing inequalities.

The achievements of Fresno DRIVE were celebrated at the [2019 California Economic Summit](https://summit.caeconomy.org/). For two days in November, Fresno was the center of the universe in California with Fresno DRIVE front and center. This was the first time many outside of Fresno learned about the initiative, and it didn’t disappoint. Through candid, on-stage testimony of several executive committee members, those in attendance were able to gather the transformative potential of Fresno DRIVE.

Soon after the event was over, I began to learn about the growing interest from other regions in California for replicating, to some degree, what was accomplished in Fresno. When Governor

Gavin Newsom released his proposed [2020-21 State Budget](http://www.ebudget.ca.gov/) in January that contained over $65 million in investments for components of the Fresno DRIVE Community Investment Plan, it had become clear that Fresno had developed a new model for inclusive economic prosperity strategy in California.

Now as the Director of Regional Stewardship for [California Forward](https://www.cafwd.org/), I’ve been supporting an effort by our team to codify a process for inclusive economic prosperity planning through [California Assembly Bill 3205](https://legiscan.com/CA/bill/AB3205/2019) which seeks to establish the Regions Rise Grant Program. While leveraging the momentum of the State’s recent [Regions Rise Together](https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=d056b93e3116413cbd1ad25cc4245221) initiative and the knowledge of the [California Stewardship Network](http://castewardship.org/), the Fresno DRIVE process contributed to our thinking about how other regions can build inclusive regional economic development strategies.

Don’t get me wrong. There is still a lot of work to be done on implementing the various components of the Fresno DRIVE Community Investment Plan. We need to ensure that the portfolio of proposals and investments are accountable for positively impacting the disenfranchised communities of color they are meant to benefit most. While the current health and economic crisis has rightfully shifted our attention and collective efforts to resolving immediate challenges, we must not lose sight of our long-term commitment to inclusive planning that provides economic equity for all. Doing so will make us more resilient and better prepared to confront the next crisis.

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