

Accelerator Program

Summary of Interviews

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Executive summary: About this report

The Infrastructure Institute at the University of Toronto partnered with the United Way to offer the Groundwork Initiative, which aims to help mission-driven organizations develop social purpose real estate (SPRE) projects. The Infrastructure Institute offers two programs under the Groundwork Initiative: the Organizational Readiness Program and Accelerator Program. These programs are delivered by Institute staff who also conduct regular evaluation activities as part of their program implementation.

In the summer of 2025, the Infrastructure Institute contracted Cathexis Consulting to support additional evaluation of the Groundwork Initiative's Accelerator Program. Cathexis conducted a total of 19 interviews with program participants to gather insights to build understanding of the program impact, identify what contributed to positive outcomes, and collect narratives to share with funders, interest holders and program participants.

This report presents a summary of these interviews and is designed to complement the Infrastructure Institute's existing data, providing a full picture of the program. The report features success stories from five organizations, along with overall participant feedback on program structure, mentorship, program value and impact, and the challenges and supports that shaped their journeys.

Who we heard from:

- 15 grassroots organizations from various regions across Ontario, representing all four cohorts of the Accelerator Program to date (2022 – 25). 10 organizations are based in Toronto or GTA and 5 organizations from other parts of Ontario.
- Four mentors and guest speakers, some of whom supported more than one organization across multiple cohorts.



Source: Seniors on Second Residences



Source: StepStones for Youth

Executive summary: Highlights of findings

Overall, feedback on the Accelerator Program demonstrates that the Program is making an impact: participants value the content, connections, and mentorship provided. Participating grassroots organizations are making informed decisions to move their SPRE projects forward and identifying what success looks like to their unique project. Participants increased their confidence, while organizations gained credibility and strengthened their ability to build affordable housing.



The Accelerator Program is highly valued by participants.

- The program covered all components of SPRE development, including legal, financial, and technical aspects.
- The program's design and delivery were praised for their clarity and practicality. It is seen as accessible and inclusive, offering value regardless of prior knowledge levels and accommodating different learning styles and schedules.
- Peer learning opportunities allow organizations to benchmark progress, share experiences, and learn from peer experience.
- Mentors generally find their roles meaningful, deriving satisfaction from contributing to social purpose real estate projects and witnessing participant and organizational growth.



Access to mentors plays a key role in successful SPRE projects.

- The mentorship model and access to industry experts helped participants turn broad ambitions into concrete, actionable plans.
- Mentor-mentee matches were strong, fostering engagement between both parties and effective working relationships.



It is bridging gaps in real estate development capacity among grassroots organizations.

- The program contributed to strengthen internal capacity, board engagement, and organizational readiness for SPRE projects.
- Organizations with little or no redevelopment experience acquired foundational knowledge, making the development process more accessible and less intimidating.

Participant feedback

"I would say especially helpful was the mentorship connection. I actually still stay in touch with our mentor to today. He's been very helpful as we navigate new and exciting projects."

– Cohort 1 participant

"During the session where we got to collaborate. I love hearing different experiences from everyone. It's amazing how much you can learn from real people. It's different from reading something in the book and magazines. And it's different when you're hearing it from someone."

– Cohort 3 participant

"[That] we're on the pathway to doing this [SPRE project] is the big success to me. As a charitable organization, we don't have a huge amount of money to be able to make big mistakes. A big part of this is being very measured as you move along and to always be aware of risk, especially financial risk."

– Cohort 1 participant

"[Success means] having more knowledge and peace of mind for someone like me who's never done this type of development work before."

– Cohort 4 participant

Background

The Infrastructure Institute was established in 2021 as an evolution of the Creative Mixed-Use (CMU) Initiative at the University of Toronto’s School of Cities. Building on the CMU’s efforts to foster cross-sector partnerships for community-focused developments, the Institute now operates at the intersection of real estate, urban development, land use policy, and transportation planning.

Its mission is to strengthen collaboration across public, private, and non-profit sectors while positioning itself as Canada’s leading hub for infrastructure training and interdisciplinary knowledge.

To advance this mission, the Institute delivers research, training, engagement, and advisory services that support innovative infrastructure solutions with community benefit at their core. It has placed particular focus on supporting non-profit and public sector clients, including expanding its social purpose real estate programming through the Groundwork Initiative. This initiative helps mission-driven organizations develop social purpose real estate (SPRE) projects.

In partnership with United Way, the Institute offers two programs under the Groundwork Initiative:

1. **Organizational Readiness Program:** A free, 6-week program for mission-driven organizations to assess their organization’s capacity to develop a SPRE project with a team of mentors.
2. **Accelerator Program:** A free, 6-month program to support and speed up pre-development processes for mission-driven organizations who wish to invest in their own spaces.

The Accelerator Program

The Accelerator Program is designed to support and speed-up processes for mission-driven organizations developing SPRE projects.

The Program specifically targets charities and non-profits that already own land, have long-term leases, or have a confirmed development partnership and are committed to leveraging their property for social impact.

It is a capacity-building initiative supporting organizations to move from vision to actionable project plans by offering a mix of structured learning and personalized support through the following:



Six-month structured curriculum with bi-weekly, two-hour virtual workshops covering various topics



Studio-style learning environment to encourage collaboration and problem-solving



One-on-one mentorship with experienced professionals from development sectors

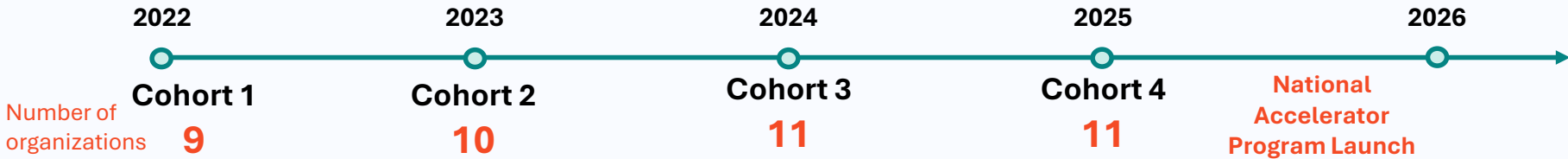


Expert guidance and in-house technical assistance with planning, design, architecture, and financial modeling support



Pitch Night/poster showcase to present SPRE projects to a curated audience of funders, municipal staff, and sector experts

Since its launch in 2022, the SPRE Accelerator Program has supported a total of 41 organizations across four cohorts.



About this report

In the interest of program improvement and understanding impact, the Infrastructure Institute staff conducts regular evaluation activities with all the organizations participating in the Groundwork initiative. This includes post-event surveys, post-program surveys at 6-month and 1-year, mentor surveys, and interviews. An overview of survey findings from past cohorts has been included in [Appendix A](#).

To deepen understanding of participant experiences and outcomes across all four cohorts, the Institute engaged Cathexis Consulting to conduct 20 interviews with a sample of program mentors and past participants across all four cohorts.

The purpose of these interviews was to explore and illustrate what success looks like for participants and mentors from the Groundwork Accelerator Program. This will help to build understanding of the impact of the Program to date, identify what contributes to positive outcomes, and provide narratives to share with funders and stakeholders.

Approach

- Interviewees were recruited from a list of participants and mentors provided by the Program team.
- Interviews followed a semi-structured guide ([See Appendices B and C for details](#)). Facilitators reviewed background documents (i.e., intake survey, program records, etc.) before every interview to get an understanding of the interviewees' SPRE project.
- A total of 19 interviews were conducted between June-August 2025 over webcall. Participants included 15 organizations representing all four cohorts and 4 mentors. Most interviews lasted between 25-30 minutes.

This report is designed to complement the Infrastructure Institute's existing data, providing a full picture of what program success looks like, along with challenges and supports that shaped participants' journeys.

Limitations

While the interviews provided valuable insights, the following limitations should be kept in mind when considering the findings:

- Participants who opted-in to the interview may hold more favorable views of the Program, leading to an overrepresentation of positive feedback.
- The absence of voices from individuals who declined, were unavailable, or are no longer with the organization may leave certain experiences and critiques undocumented.
- Conducting interviews during summer vacation periods may have reduced participation.
- A few years have passed since some participants were in the Program. Depending on timing, participant recollection on experience or outcomes may vary. Some program feedback from earlier cohorts had already been received and addressed by the Infrastructure Institute staff.

Success stories

This section highlights five organization experiences with Accelerator and the role the Program played in shaping their SPRE journey

Meeting the urgent demand for seniors affordable housing

Seniors on Second Residences

A non-profit organization dedicated to providing affordable and accessible housing for seniors in Cornwall, Ontario. The organization joined Accelerator in 2025, advancing their SPRE project from design stage to completion of pre-construction phase. They have now confidently taken on an additional SPRE project using the knowledge and experience gained through the Program.

BEFORE ACCELERATOR

- The organization recently paid off the mortgage on its 50-unit seniors housing facility and was beginning to explore options for expansion.
- With 55 people on the waitlist, they identified a clear community need for additional affordable and accessible housing.

AFTER ACCELERATOR

- **Formed a dedicated board** for the construction phase to manage risk, with plans to later merge it with the operational board.
- **Developed a full business plan**, including mission and vision statements for their SPRE project.
- **Negotiated parking requirements with the city**, leveraging insights from the program and peer experiences.
- **Secured funding and a pro-bono architect** who produced drawings, moving the project to a ready-to-go stage.
- **Initiated a second project** with a well-funded partner, applying knowledge from the Accelerator Program to engage effectively in partnership discussions.

“Because we took the Accelerator Program, we know what questions to ask and what answers to give them [partners, city, funders, etc.] so that we're all on the same path moving forward.”

“The pitch night was phenomenal...The speakers were very good, I learned a lot from them. The people [at pitch night] that came up, talked to us, asked us questions, and offered support. It was an exceptional Program.”



Source: Seniors on Second Residences

Creating a permanent hub for youth housing and supports

StepStones for Youth

A Toronto-based non-profit organization supporting youth ages 10–25 with education, housing, mental health, and support networks. They joined the Accelerator Program in 2025, gaining skills and confidence to advance their SPRE project to the construction phase.

BEFORE ACCELERATOR

- Led by their CEO, the organization was seeking funding for a SPRE project to redevelop a building into permanent hub providing housing and youth support services and programs.
- They joined the Accelerator Program to build organizational capacity in property development skills.

AFTER ACCELERATOR

- **Gained valuable knowledge and resources** about property development through engaging guest speakers and learning sessions, especially on budgeting and pro forma work.
- **Strategically hired a management company** for the pre-development phase of the SPRE project.
- **Secured additional funds** to acquire a property debt-free, advancing the SPRE project into the pre-development phase.
- **Secured partnerships** for the construction phase and **successfully began redevelopment of the property.**

“It's great that there are resources and programs like this set up to educate people in the non-profit sector.....if we want people who are in a position to expand their services that are working well, develop properties, and create these meaningful spaces, we need to educate the people who are running these organizations on how to do that.”

“The guest speakers were very engaging...that section where they would present was definitely the most beneficial in being able to use that information to inform some of the decisions we were making and strategy we were developing, particularly around budgeting and the pro forma.”



Source: StepStones for Youth

Doorways to Dreams: Building Futures Together

The Cross Cultural Learner Centre (CCLC)

The Cross Cultural Learner Centre is a charity supporting newcomers in London, Ontario. They joined the Accelerator Program in 2024, gaining clarity and confidence in navigating all critical aspects of their first major development project.

BEFORE ACCELERATOR

- The organization was planning a SPRE project to provide newcomers with affordable housing, alongside space for community programs, commercial use, and a health and wellness centre.
- They joined the Accelerator program to build knowledge and skills for navigating the pre-development process.

AFTER ACCELERATOR

- **Access to experts and resources** to navigate the pre-development phase of their SPRE project.
- **Built the confidence and clarity** to make key decisions that moved the project forward, drawing on insights and knowledge from peers.
- **Created a brand for their SPRE project:** **Doorways to Dreams** to support their fundraising efforts for the SPRE project.

“I used the information from the accelerator program to move forward some of the items that we had on our list...and felt more confident making decisions about that.... the Accelerator [Program] helped accelerate that decision making process.”

“It was particularly helpful for us to have the reassurance that we didn't miss anything, particularly because this is our first major development project and you don't know what you don't know.”



Source: <https://www.lcclc.org/doorways-to-dreams>

Strong foundations: How a consortium found its rhythm

A consortium of seven organizations

A group of seven organizations in Scarborough, Ontario joined the Accelerator Program in 2023 and developed a governance model to effectively work together for future housing projects.

BEFORE ACCELERATOR

- A consortium of seven organizations joined the Accelerator Program at a very early stage, seeking to develop an equitable governance model to develop housing projects in Scarborough.
- The consortium includes both large and small organizations, some with no prior housing experience (e.g., immigration and settlement organizations).
- Their main challenge was figuring out how all seven organizations could come together with a structured plan—drafting policies, bylaws, and an equitable governance model to guide their collaboration.

AFTER ACCELERATOR

- **Gained access to experts and customized supports** to understand the technical components of the pre-development phase for a SPRE project.
- With support and guidance from their mentor, **the team learned to identify potential roadblocks** in proposed models (e.g., issues around financial guarantees between organizations working together) before investing significant time and resources while strategizing governance models.
- **Partnered with a legal team** to advance their goal of building an equitable governance model that equally represented the needs of all member organizations.
- **Built confidence and assurance in decision-making**, feeling closer to establishing an effective governance framework.

“[Our mentor] really helped us in getting that governance structure going. Before that, it just felt like there were seven organizations working together. But [our mentor] really provided us framework and ideas and to help us decide which direction we could go into.”



Source: Stock image

Growing confidence and capacity through the Accelerator Program

Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto

A member-supported organization representing more than 45,000 people living in more than 160 non-profit housing co-operatives located in Durham, Toronto and York Region.

The experience of one of their staff members demonstrates how the Accelerator Program can help not just organizations, but individual staff, to build important skills and confidence in this sector.

BEFORE ACCELERATOR

- The organization was facing a period of significant change. They had several projects in the pipeline but lacked up-to-date knowledge on current development practices, especially since most of their organization experience was from decades ago.
- Two staff entered the program to build their organizational capacity, learn about current development best practices, and update their skills.

AFTER ACCELERATOR

Staff gained valuable experience through their time with the Accelerator Program, highlighting significant personal and professional growth:

- **Gained confidence in understanding all stages of development**, helping them to articulate what needs to be done and feel comfortable participating in planning meetings with colleagues and partners for multiple SPRE projects.
- **Shared new knowledge internally** spreading information about the stages of development to staff and boards of directors, to help build buy-in.
- **Found value and growth in networking and learning from peers**, noting how experiential learning through the Accelerator sessions really helped them personally stretch and connect with others.
- **Became an enthusiastic advocate for the Program**, encouraging others who are considering similar development paths.

“It’s different when you’re confident that you know what you’re doing...That’s priceless for me, that I have this general understanding of everything. It just gives me more confidence”

“Whenever I meet someone who’s very interested in development, I always recommend this [Accelerator] Program...The stuff you learn from here could maybe take years to figure out on the job!”



Source: Stock image

What “success” means

“I think the most meaningful would be the connections that are facilitated through the program with other organizations and mentors. I would like to see it advance to building confidence and tools, and partnerships to take meaningful next steps.”

– Blue Door, York Region

Cohort 1 participant

“[Success means] having more knowledge and peace of mind for someone like me who's never done this type of development work before.”

– Centre for Immigrant and Community Services, Toronto

Cohort 4 participant

“We're on the pathway to doing this [SPRE project] is the big success to me.

As a charitable organization, we don't have a huge amount of money to be able to make big mistakes. A big part of this [success] is being very measured as you move along and to always be aware of risk, especially financial risk.”

– Christie Refugee Welcome Centre, Toronto

Cohort 1 participant

"I think successful means not making bad decisions at this point for [us]."

– Matthew House Toronto

Cohort 3 participant

Participant descriptions of what success meant to them in their SPRE project and Accelerator experience

“Success to me is anytime something was mentioned in one of the sessions that triggered something in my brain to...follow up and make sure we are looking into that. There was lots of little insights about potential pitfalls, common mistakes that occur for this sort of project. When those pieces of information are being shared, it's helpful to be able to go back to my team and [ask] are we considering this?”

– StepStones for Youth, Toronto

Cohort 4 participant

“Success for us is that we're able to take the next step confidently and start the ideations, start the community consult and get through the three stages and three phases of our approach... We've broken it down with the help of our mentor. Success is for us to be able to see those three phases through.”

– Community Living York South, Southern York Region

Cohort 4 participant

“Even though we don't have a specific project, when I think about success with this program it really comes down to me being comfortable and confident with what I've learned.

Mostly it's about me taking what I pick up and using it in my real projects at my organization. I've learned a lot of things that I'm able to put into practice.”

– Co-op Housing Federation of Toronto

Cohort 3 participant

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

This section summarizes findings from interviews with participants from Cohorts 1 to 4 and mentors by:

- Program Structure – Design
- Program Structure – Mentorship
- Program Impact and Value
- Mentor Experience
- Mentor feedback – Program expansion
- Participant challenges
- Recommendations

“I think that social purpose real estate organizations are increasing their capacity to make good decisions.

You're actually setting us up for success. There's a sustainability element which will slowly emerge - you don't see that impact right away. But you know, you're not having people make bad decisions or partnering with the wrong people.

We're more informed, we're making better decisions, and then we're more successful as a result of it.”

– Hesperus Village, Vaughan

The Accelerator Program's design and delivery format are clear, practical, and accessible, with peer networking opportunities providing additional value to participants.

Comprehensive program structure and design

The program covered all components of SPRE development, including legal, financial, and technical aspects. The program's design and delivery were praised for their clarity and practicality. It is seen as accessible and inclusive, offering value regardless of prior knowledge levels and accommodating different learning styles and schedules.

- Almost all participants appreciated the structured progression through the development phases of a SPRE project, with sessions covering both familiar and new topics in a logical sequence.
- Templates, checklists, and online access to session materials enabled participants to apply learnings directly to their SPRE projects and revisit information as needed.
- Collective participation (e.g., attending as a team from one organization) ensured consistent access to program content and facilitated internal alignment for participants on the direction and expectations for their SPRE project.

"It's not a theory-based program where you just sit in a classroom and you're just taught a bunch of things. It's very practical, customized in a way that they meet you where you're at, where your project's at. The program is created very thoughtfully, keeping different stages of development in mind."

– Cohort 2 participant

Networking and peer learning opportunities

Peer learning opportunities allow organizations to benchmark progress, share experiences, and learn from peer experience.

- Participants appreciated the opportunity of peer-to-peer learning through breakout sessions, pitch nights, and collaborative events. These allowed participants to exchange challenges encountered and lessons learned, fostering a sense of preparedness and support network.
- Networking events helped participants develop presentation skills, gain exposure to industry professional and receive feedback, which enhanced their confidence and clarity about their SPRE project.

"I thought it was well organized. I'm going to be honest. The people are very nice. They're very organized, they're very helpful. Logistically, the program was well run. I really like having access to the sessions afterwards if you had to miss one."

– Cohort 2 participants

Access to industry experts and mentors plays a key role in helping participants turn broad ambitions into concrete, actionable plans.

Mentorship and expert guidance

Access to mentors and industry experts is seen as highly beneficial, providing participants with tailored advice and support throughout the Program:

- Actionable guidance, frameworks, and resources from mentors and experts helped participants clarify project steps, address challenges, and make informed decisions about funding strategies or pursuing partnerships to advance their SPRE projects.
- Many participants highlighted one-on-one support from mentors as especially impactful, with some maintaining on-going relationships with mentors and external experts beyond the program's official end.
- Guest speakers and specialized sessions (e.g., legal, architectural, financial) provided diverse perspectives and deepened participants' understanding of key SPRE topics.

"I would say especially helpful was the mentorship connection. I actually still stay in touch with our mentor to today. He's been very helpful as we navigate new and exciting projects."

– Cohort 1 participant

The following elements contributed to effective and rewarding mentorship experience for both mentors and mentees:

- Mentor-mentee matches were strong, fostering engagement between both parties and effective working relationships. Mentorship was most rewarding and impactful when mentees were at an early stage and open to guidance, enabling mentors to provide valuable direction.
- The diversity of advisors and perspectives (economic, financial, engineering, etc.) provided a well-rounded mentorship experience.
- Flexible mentorship formats, such as focused one-day sessions, enabled timely and targeted problem-solving for organizations.
- Direct access to industry experts, reduced administrative burden and helped organizations make critical decisions to advance their SPRE projects.
- Program staff were described as professional, responsive, and organized, ensuring clear expectations and timely communication.

The Accelerator Program is bridging gaps in real estate development capacity among grassroots organizations to advance SPRE projects.

Knowledge and skills development

Organizations with little or no redevelopment experience acquired foundational knowledge, making the development process more accessible and less intimidating.

- Most participants reported accelerated learning, that increased their preparedness for project advancement. As one participant described, the program “condensed years of potential experience into six months”.
- The program enabled SPRE projects to advance through key development phases such as feasibility, design, and securing pre-development funding. Participants also used program materials and templates to inform board discussions, funding applications, and project planning.
- Almost all participants leveraged program insights to make critical decisions, for example: pivoting project concepts, making decisions on building massing, registering new entities, rebranding, or finalizing governance models.

Of the 41 SPRE projects*, **11 SPRE Projects** have secured pre-development funding. Among these, **4 projects** are either ready to advance or have already advanced to the construction phase

**Based on organizations that participated in the post-program evaluation and interview process in August 2025*

Fosters valuable connections

- The program fostered valuable and timely connections among participants, mentors, and industry experts, helping to accelerate their SPRE projects towards the construction phase.
- These connections extended beyond formal sessions, leading to continued collaboration, information sharing, and project momentum. Some participants reconnected at external events or sought advice from the peer network, beyond the formal end of their program.

“I have nothing but good things to say about the program. I thought it brought us much further ahead than we would have been just having a board meeting and figuring stuff out on our own...So I think that's what the Accelerator Program does for you.”

– Cohort 4 participant

“During the session where we got to collaborate, which was great. I love hearing different experiences from everyone. It's amazing how much you can learn from real people. It's different from reading something in the book and magazines. And it's different when you're hearing it from someone.”

– Cohort 3 participant

The Accelerator Program is highly valued by participants, many of whom were at a critical juncture in their SPRE project. Accelerator helped participants make critical project decisions, and they feel more confident to pursue SPRE projects after completion.

Decision-making capacity and risk management

Almost all organizations shared how they critically assessed project viability, managed risks, and made more informed decisions for their SPRE projects using tools and insights gained through the program.

- Participants learned to anticipate common obstacles and set realistic expectations regarding timelines and challenges in SPRE development.
- Financial modeling and pro forma analysis enabled organizations to determine project feasibility and identify when pivots were necessary.
- Participants shared examples of avoiding potential pitfalls and make strategic choices about project scope, partnerships, and resource allocation.

“We were able to foresee that this [framework] is not going to work because [our mentor] was already involved in a program where it had not worked. Things that would have been roadblocks in future, she made us walk through [them all] right now.”

– Cohort 2 participant

“[Accelerator] is building our capacity to make better decisions which in the long term will build more sustainable nonprofit housing.”

– Cohort 1 participant

Organizational capacity and internal alignment

The program contributed to strengthen internal capacity, board engagement, and organizational readiness for SPRE projects.

- About half of the participants engaged boards and staff more effectively, improving buy-in and shared understanding of project risks and requirements.
- One organization used the program to refine its governance model, supporting broader organizational development beyond a single project.

Confidence building

Participants increased their confidence, while organizations gained credibility and strengthened their ability to effectively engage stakeholders and build affordable housing.

- As a result of the program, many participants reported greater confidence in presenting projects, engaging with partners, and making strategic decisions.
- Two participants shared how external recognition of the Accelerator Program by funders and other interest holders enhanced organizational credibility and supported efforts to grow funding and partnerships.
- For some, the program accelerated professional growth, boosting confidence, practical skills, and readiness to take on new leadership roles.

Participants shared challenges that reflect the realities of working on SPRE projects, along with opportunities for program enhancements.

While participants expressed strong overall satisfaction with Accelerator, they also identified challenges. Some of these are related to the Program itself, while others are tied to the complexities of advancing SPRE projects.

- **Relevance of program content:** Some felt that the program's one-size-fits-all approach sometimes did not meet the needs of those who were either too advanced or too early in their project journey. One participant felt that too much time was spent on networking over learning from experts, while others suggested more purposeful matching of small groups based on project type or stage.
- **Knowledge retention:** Given the long timelines for development projects, a few participants worried about retaining information until it became directly relevant.
- **Mismatched project stages:** Some participants found that variation of project stages from the projects within their cohort made networking less valuable. One participant noted that updates from others could feel repetitive and not relevant, given they were in different phases of the project; and another felt networking could be "hit-and-miss" due to the same reason.
- **Virtual format limitations:** A few participants shared that online meetings and breakout rooms could feel impersonal and hindered meaningful connections; and some of the participants joining from remote locations experienced technical issues when joining workshops.
- **Targeted practical knowledge for external barriers:** One participant suggested including tangible supports to help navigate and mitigate known common external barriers such as land acquisition strategies and financing knowledge. Another participant noted gaps in specific knowledge for housing projects, for example, how to overcome community resistance for example (e.g., NIMBYism "Not In My Backyard" Attitudes).
- **Participant readiness stage:** Some participants believed the program could have been better tailored for organizations at different stages of readiness. For example, organizations in the ideation phase who may have not identified partners or acquired land when they joined the program needed more targeted supports to move their projects forward rather than an overview of the predevelopment process.

Mentors generally find their roles meaningful, deriving satisfaction from contributing to social purpose real estate projects and witnessing participant and organizational growth.

Alignment with mentor expertise

The degree to which mentors feel their skills and experience matched the needs of their mentee varied. This was mostly influenced by mentee’s requirements and the stage of their SPRE project in the pre-development process.

- Mentors feel most effective when their expertise matched specific organizational needs, such as negotiation, arts space, or financial assessment.
- Some noted limitations in addressing highly specialized issues or when mentee needs fell outside their core skill set.
- Mentors recognize that projects may require multiple mentors with different specializations to fully meet diverse needs.
- Compensation for mentor time was appreciated, serving as an effective incentive and support for meaningful participation.

“It's one of the few programs that's offering an honorarium that is commensurate with the level of experience of the people who you're working with. That does make a difference when you're an independent contractor.”

– Mentor

“I know there's been a lot of momentum behind the Somali Community Hub, they are getting other consultants and advisors on board and truly kind of pushing forward towards a reality versus getting stuck in analysis paralysis. By and large, I think people are advancing their visions.”

– Mentor

Mentors highlighted a few challenges and suggestions to improve the experience:

- Wide variation of project sophistication and status limited the ability to provide specialized support; grouping participants by project stage could improve targeted mentorship.
- Lack of follow-up from some mentees could hinder ongoing engagement and impact. Setting clear expectations with mentees could facilitate engagement.
- Mentorship would be more effective if projects were supported by teams of mentors with diverse expertise, rather than relying on a single mentor.
- One mentor expressed that, in some cases, organizations’ needs were more complex than anticipated, requiring effort outside of the scope of project and compensation.

As the Accelerator Program expands nationally, mentors see opportunities to strengthen the program model supporting SPRE development projects

As the team at the Infrastructure Institute looks to expand program offerings nationally, the mentors had a few suggestions to share:

Preserve what's working well

Mentors stressed maintaining the aspects of the program that already work really well:

- Shifting from pitch-style closing events to more flexible panel-based formats has been beneficial and should be maintained.
- Short, focused interactions are valued, as they accommodate professionals' busy schedules while delivering efficient expert assistance.

Enhancing the mentorship model

A few improvements to the mentorship structure could address complex and varied project needs:

- Transitioning from a single-mentor model to diverse mentor teams could better address the multifaceted challenges faced by projects, such as financial, planning, and technical issues.
- Involving architecture and planning students could provide additional wraparound support in a national context.
- Encouraging mentees to proactively reach out to mentors, with clear mentor/mentee expectations and responsibilities, would maximize engagement and learning.

Tailored and specialized support

Mentors suggested adapting the program structure to match participants' project stages and needs would make mentorship more relevant:

- Grouping participants by project sophistication and stage would allow for more specialized and relevant support, moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Achieving a critical mass within each group would make it worthwhile for mentors and experts to provide targeted guidance suited to each stage of development.

“In terms of the program itself, it's absolutely needed. [It is] absolutely essential to get these housing projects going at a grassroots level.”

– Mentor

Participant recommendations to strengthen the Accelerator Program

Participants overwhelmingly describe their experience in the Accelerator Program as highly positive, transformative, and valuable. They also shared the following recommendations to help strengthen the program as it moves forward:

- 1. Segment cohorts by project phase:** Some organizations are in early ideation, while others are closer to pre-construction or construction. Consider offering separate streams or tailored supports for organizations at different phases to maximize relevance and impact.
- 2. Clarify program eligibility during recruitment:** A recurring challenge is that organizations without secured land or partnership agreements find much of the program theoretical rather than practical. Ensure participants understand the accelerator best serves organizations in the middle stage of development, far along to be ready to act but not so far advanced that the program is redundant.
- 3. Enhanced hands-on practical application:** While knowledge transfer is strong, some participants felt that without real-time application (e.g., negotiating agreements), learning in theory risks being forgotten before it can be used practically given the long timelines for such projects. Embed more hands-on, project-specific work such as facilitated negotiations or community engagement exercises.
- 4. Expand networking and mentorship opportunities:** The mentorship component was highly valued, particularly when mentors brought relevant contacts and sector expertise. Continue to invest in high-quality mentors and consider expanding opportunities for peer-to-peer networking within cohorts.
- 5. Address land acquisition barriers creatively:** Difficulty acquiring land is a major barrier for many SPRE projects. Explore ways to support collective approaches to land acquisition (e.g., community fundraising models) or facilitate connections with government agencies regarding surplus properties.
- 6. Maintain access to program resources beyond completion:** Participants appreciated being able to revisit materials after completion; continue providing access to session recordings, templates, and resource lists so alumni can reference them as their projects progress. One participant specifically asked to include insights shared by program staff before and after guest-speaker sessions into the session recordings.

Appendix

This section includes:

Appendix A: Summary of post-program evaluation surveys

Appendix B: Participants interview guide

Appendix C: Mentors interview guide

Appendix A: Summary of post-program evaluation surveys

The Accelerator program team has been delivering Groundwork programming since 2022. The program team has been evaluating the program along the way to understand the overall impact of the program. In preparation for the interviews Cathexis members reviewed survey responses completed by cohort participants. Below are few highlights from the summaries of findings provided by program team.

Survey participation

- 9 Responses from each cohort, except Cohort 4 with 12 responses from 9 organizations.
- Direct metric-to-metric comparison of findings across cohorts is not possible. Cohort 4 used a different survey structure, which makes direct quantitative comparisons with Cohorts 1–3 more complex. The table below provides an overview of milestones achieved by participants during the program.

Milestones achieved	Cohort 1 (N=9)	Cohort 2 (N=9)	Cohort 3 (N=9)	Cohort 4 (N=12)
# of orgs who:				
developed a Pro Forma	5	5	3	Avg. rating: 3.8/5
developed a massing study	6	6	Not specified	Avg. rating: 4/5
completed a feasibility study	4	6	4	Avg. rating: 3.5/5

Networking & Partnerships

All cohorts reported making valuable new contacts such as CMHC, United Way, municipal councils, and sector experts.

Capacity Building

Increased board confidence and internal team capacity was reported across all cohorts.

Testimonials & Feedback

Participant testimonials show strong appreciation for mentorship, curriculum, and support from program staff. Other emerging themes are improved board engagement and strategic clarity.

Areas for Improvement

- Clearer mentor matching and engagement guidance.
- More curated networking at showcase events.
- Targeted strategic planning and feasibility support for organizations in early stages of development.
- Better clarity on wraparound services (e.g., massing studies).

Appendix B: Participants Interview guide (1/2 pages)

Introduction

Thank you for participating in this interview, which is part of the evaluation of the Accelerator program of the Infrastructure Institute's Groundwork initiative.

Infrastructure Institute is working with [Cathexis Consulting](#), an Ontario-based company, to conduct this evaluation in 2025. The evaluation includes interviews with program participants, partners and mentors.

About the interviews

- Approximately 15 -20 participants, partners, and mentors will be interviewed as part of this evaluation.
- The interviews will take place with an evaluator from Cathexis and will last approximately 30 minutes.
- The interview will focus on your experiences– including what success looks like for you, and the challenges and supports that shaped your journey in the program and beyond.

Your privacy and how the interviews will be used

We want you to feel comfortable speaking candidly about your experience with the Accelerator program. Please know that:

- Participating is completely voluntary. Choosing to participate (or not) will not affect your relationship with the Accelerator program. You can choose to withdraw at any time.
- With your permission, the interviewer will record the conversation. Recordings will be used only for notetaking purposes and will be destroyed at the end of the project. Our notes will not be shared with the Accelerator program team.
- Your personal information will be respected and handled in accordance with our [privacy policy](#).
- Cathexis will prepare a summary of the interviews in a report for the Infrastructure Institute. This report will be shared publicly.

- We'd like to feature stories about organization's journeys and successes with the program. With your consent, we would like to use your organization's name in the reporting. We will only do this in cases where we are sharing stories about your SPRE project and outcomes. Any other feedback provided (e.g., about the program experience) will be summarised with others and will not be attributed to your project.

More information

If you have any questions or concerns about this process, please do not hesitate to contact:

- Jacquelyn Quirk, Senior Consultant,
Jacquelyn@cathexisconsulting.ca
- Raisa Masud, Accelerator Program lead,
Raisa.Masud@mail.utoronto.ca

Consent

Do you have any questions?

Can we record this interview?

May we use your organization's name in our reporting?

Interview questions- Participants

1. Briefly, what drew you to the Accelerator program? And where was your organization at in your journey at that time?
 - a. *Probe: Did you take part in the Organizational Readiness program?*
2. Can you walk me through your experience in the program?
 - a. What stood out to you as especially helpful? *Probe: Any specific supports from the program (mentors, networking, the other workshops or learning, pitch night/poster showcase)?*

Appendix B: Participants Interview guide (2/2 pages)

- b. What can you tell me about anything you didn't find particularly helpful or relevant? Anything that could have been done differently in the program delivery or supports provided?
- 3. Since completing the program, what changes – if any - have you or your organization made in moving your social real estate project forward?
[Note: Before interview, interviewer to review participant database to have general understanding of why Infrastructure Institute sees this as a success, with special attention to projects where success is not 'traditional', i.e., not moving ahead with project.]
- 4. When you think about “success” with this program, what does it mean to you now?
 - a. *Probes: Success can be thought of broadly – and could be big or small things. It could be knowledge you gained, decisions you've made, potential disasters you've avoided, roadblocks you've overcome etc.*
- 5. If you were talking to someone considering this program, or considering funding this program, what would you want them to know?
- 6. If applicable: We'd like to feature stories in the report to help bring the Accelerator program to life. Can you share photos that showcase your SPRE project for us to include in our report? There is a possibility that the report will be shared publicly.
- 7. Is there anything else you wanted to share with us today that we didn't get a chance to cover?

Thank you so much for your time today. The Infrastructure Institute plans to send a summary of these interviews out in the fall.

Appendix C: Mentors Interview guide

Introduction

Thank you for participating in this interview, which is part of the evaluation of the Accelerator program of the Infrastructure Institute's Groundwork initiative.

Infrastructure Institute is working with [Cathexis Consulting](#), an Ontario-based company, to conduct this evaluation in 2025. The evaluation includes interviews with program participants, partners and mentors.

About the interviews

- Approximately 15 -20 participants, partners, and mentors will be interviewed as part of this evaluation.
- The interviews will take place with an evaluator from Cathexis and will last approximately 30 minutes.
- The interview will focus on your experiences– including what success looks like for you, and the challenges and supports that shaped your journey in the program and beyond.

Your privacy and how the interviews will be used

We want you to feel comfortable speaking candidly about your experience with the Accelerator program. Please know that:

- Participating is completely voluntary. Choosing to participate (or not) will not affect your relationship with the Accelerator program. You can choose to withdraw at any time.
- With your permission, the interviewer will record the conversation. Recordings will be used only for notetaking purposes and will be destroyed at the end of the project. Our notes will not be shared with the Accelerator program team.
- Your personal information will be respected and handled in accordance with our [privacy policy](#).
- Cathexis will prepare a summary of the interviews in a report for the Infrastructure Institute. This report will be shared publicly.

More information

If you have any questions or concerns about this process, please do not hesitate to contact:

- Jacquelyn Quirk, Senior Consultant, Jacquelyn@cathexisconsulting.ca
- Raisa Masud, Accelerator Program lead, Raisa.Masud@mail.utoronto.ca

Consent

Do you have any questions?

Can we record this interview?

Interview questions- Participants

1. Why did you decide to get involved with this program? What was your role, and what did that look like in practice?
2. What stood out to you about the participant experience in this program?
3. Based on what you've seen or heard, how much can you tell us about the project progress of the organizations you've worked with, beyond the scope of the program?
4. When you think about "success" with this program, what does it mean to you now?
5. If you were speaking with someone who is thinking about participating in, or funding, this program, what would you tell them?
6. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience supporting the program, or about how it could grow or improve in the future?