Winning on Climate: Case Studies of Cities Centering Economic Inclusion

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Another year of devastating wildfires, extreme weather events, and record-breaking heat make it clear that the climate crisis has arrived. Despite the urgency of the crisis, political gridlock has led to another year passing without meaningful federal action to address climate change. At the same time, a full-on assault against voting rights, racial justice efforts, and civil liberties is underway, and wealth continues to be further concentrated among a handful of individuals. Rather than existing as unrelated societal challenges, the climate crisis and chronic inequity are inextricably intertwined. Systemic oppression, exclusionary policies, and racist planning processes result in communities of color and poorer communities bearing disproportionate environmental burdens. The communities that contribute the least to the climate crisis are the most vulnerable to its impacts. Any solution meant to ameliorate environmental and climate burdens must address racial and economic inequity to succeed.

For too long, climate advocacy ignored racial and economic concerns in favor of focusing only on scientific goals, such as degrees Celsius or parts per million concentrations of greenhouse gas in the atmosphere. To be clear, these elements are important, but the climate crisis is as much a political challenge as a technical one. By ignoring race and economic exclusion, climate advocacy has ignored the reality that people of color and low-income communities will bear the greatest burden of the climate crisis while contributing the least to its cause. Any climate policy that excludes race and class will be inadequate in its ability to fully address the climate crisis for humanity. Centering racial equity and economic inclusion strengthens climate policy by creating more ambitious, comprehensive solutions and building a broad base of public support to help these policies pass.

Building a more just low-carbon future requires deliberate, targeted, and well-resourced policy measures. We are past the point at which deep-seated inequity and a devastating climate crisis can be addressed through a series of tax credits and subsidies. Understanding where racial and economic inequality exists in a city, targeting resources there, and guaranteeing economic inclusion are the types of interventions cities need to make to fully address the climate and inequity crises. When cities meaningfully engage directly impacted communities, they are better able to access the critical knowledge and lived experience of residents, which is essential for equitable and effective climate policy. This kind of engagement can also support community efforts to build political power.

The good news is that we don't have to start from scratch. In the absence of ambitious federal climate policy, cities are stepping up and taking the lead. As the examples below show, centering racial and economic equity results in stronger climate protections. When racial equity and economic inclusion form the foundation of climate policy, investments are targeted in the communities where they are needed, corporations pay their fair share, and emissions are reduced. This white paper begins with a brief discussion of what we mean by equity, recognizing that there is not a one-size-fits-all definition. We discuss principles that can guide the development of equitable policy, then present examples of how some cities have integrated equity into comprehensive climate action. Finally, we present a pathway for how cities can begin to make equity a fundamental part of any climate policy.

What is Equity?

No universally applicable definition of *equity* exists. However, there are several principles that can guide cities in the direction of equity: 1) equitable policy must address the legacy of discrimination, exploitation, and extraction that has led to the current moment, 2) communities that have borne the brunt of these practices must be meaningfully engaged to co-create policies meant to address the harms they have experienced, and 3) economic inclusion and opportunity are fundamental to equity.

For too long, climate advocacy and policy approaches have historically focused only on limited solutions that did not address systemic inequities. This narrow approach ignores the economic, social, and racial disparities that drive the climate crisis and also result in marginalized communities being hit "first and worst" with the impacts of a changing climate. Moving from an extractive economy means moving away from extraction in all its forms – extraction of natural resources, extraction of people through draconian carceral policy, extraction of wealth through predatory practices, and extraction of labor through exploitative labor practices. To truly move to a healthy, sustaining economy, extraction in all forms must end (Movement Generation).

Climate policy work that addresses systemic inequities – such as historic and sustained disinvestment in communities of color – leads to more targeted and effective climate policies and stronger communities. Integrating economic, racial, and social justice is often referred to as "equity" and "equitable" policy. Definitions of equity vary, and we do not claim to present a conclusive view. Rather, the purpose of this section is to provide an understanding of how equity is used in climate policy and to differentiate between business-as-usual climate policy (in which racial, economic, and social considerations are ignored), and *equitable* climate policy.

A fundamental principle of equity is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Vulnerable communities are preyed upon in different ways and by different actors. As Whiteley et al. write, "[E]quity is grounded in the context of time, taking into account the historical sacrifices and past promises as well as hopes and dreams of a better future." As such, every community, region, state, or country will have different equity considerations based on the history and needs of the community. For example, though both suffer from the impacts of the fossil fuel economy, the equity needs of communities in Richmond, California will differ from the equity needs of communities in Eastern Kentucky.

Equity Addresses Historic Wrongs

A key distinguishing feature of equity is the understanding that historic legacies of discrimination have left communities of color with devastating environmental, economic, and social consequences that must be addressed. A universalist approach that presents equal opportunity ignores this legacy and its lasting impact. Institutional racism has a cumulative impact – discriminatory housing policy such as redlining impacts educational systems, health outcomes, and labor markets (Bailey et al.). Where a person lives dictates what schools their children can attend, what jobs they have access to, and whether or not they can access healthy foods and quality health care. By deliberately excluding Black people from living in areas where white wealth was accumulating, redlining resulted in decades of discrimination that led to worse health, economic, and educational outcomes for Black populations. These legacies of discrimination must be addressed as part of policy because, as Austin Mayor Steve Adler said, "government helped create a lot of the inequities, it institutionalized them. It's important for…city government to address racial inequity, not just because of the conditions, but also because we helped create it" (Abello).

Historical discrimination manifests in persistent inequity in the present. Historic disinvestment in communities of color has left residents with poor housing stock, which makes them more vulnerable to climate-driven extreme weather events. Those same residents confront a lack of greenery and natural infrastructure to reduce pollution and heat island effects, and an absence of renewable energy projects due to cost and poor underlying infrastructure. Discriminatory zoning led to roads and freeways being built near or through communities of color, furthering exacerbating health inequities and intensifying heatwaves. Environmental racism created sacrifice zones, where communities of color were left with poisoned air, water, and land. These same areas are now also climate sacrifice zones where flooding, hurricanes, and other extreme weather events further threaten residents.

As a result of historic discrimination, opportunity and access must be *equitable,* not equal. This requires moving away from universalist policies formulated to provide the same level of opportunity and support for everyone, to policies that provide different levels of intervention based on recognition of historical legacies of harm.

Equity Requires Meaningful Engagement

Equity is a process as well as an outcome. An exclusionary process that ignores the communities of directly impacted stakeholders will never result in an equitable outcome. Equitable processes involve "consideration of whose interests and what issues are taken into account in transition planning, and who gets to participate and hold power in decision-making forums" (Agyeman & Evans). For too long, policies and decisions were made *for,* and not *by* or *with,* communities. As a result, community needs were not met, and the wealth of knowledge within communities was ignored. By working alongside communities, decision-makers are better able to understand their challenges and needs, and to engage meaningfully with local knowledge and skills, as detailed below. Equitable outcomes are not possible without meaningful engagement from impacted communities and populations. Community members must be empowered to make decisions alongside governments and private interests (Piggot et al.).

Equitable processes require not just community input, but also community decision-making that determines the actual outcomes that communities will see. For example, Portland's Clean Energy Fund is overseen by a grant committee whose members are appointed by the city council. The grant committee members, who decide where funding goes, are specifically chosen from historically marginalized or underserved communities, and possess diverse backgrounds in terms of training, careers, and knowledge.

Equity Requires Economic Inclusion and Opportunity

Investing in a low-carbon future is not only necessary to stop the worst impacts of the climate crisis, but to also address wealth disparities and persistent poverty. Building decarbonization, renewable energy buildout, and low-carbon transit need to be scaled up dramatically for meaningful emissions reductions. The investment infusion will create jobs and economic opportunity. Without ensuring resources are invested according to need, the carbon-free economy will repeat the exploitative and extractive practices of the fossil fuel economy. Equity requires targeting specific and dedicated resources to communities of color and low-income communities – which have been excluded from economic opportunity and growth – in order to create business and wealth-creation opportunities and advance access to low-carbon jobs (Hays et al.).

Many programs assume a universal approach to job creation is sufficient for equitable outcomes. However, this approach ignores the impacts of past discrimination. Renewable energy jobs already pay less and have much lower rates of unionization than fossil fuel jobs. Equity requires intentional economic development that ensures any jobs created are good, high-road jobs that provide family-sustaining wages, benefits, and long-term career paths.

As seen in the examples below, equity requires economic inclusion policies in which efforts are deliberately targeted towards specific populations to ensure everyone can access economic opportunity, increase economic power, and build intergenerational wealth.

Cities Lead by Example: Equity and Climate

Building an equitable future will not happen overnight. The deep-seated inequities and injustices that communities across the country face are the result of deliberate decisions – some present, many past. The consequences and legacy of discrimination are long-lasting. As a result, equity must be a proactive, deliberate effort. The following section highlights examples of how cities have integrated equity into climate policy. By doing so, these cities advanced more ambitious, comprehensive climate actions while building a more equitable future. The examples below show how a disparities study spurred officials to launch ambitious climate equity programs; how cities can make corporations pay their fair share and use those funds for meaningful investments in marginalized communities; and how to deliberately target climate policies towards underserved areas to ensure that renewable energy and energy resilience are not just for those who can afford them.

These examples are not meant to be an exhaustive list of all equitable climate policies. Rather, they are meant to highlight how equity can be integrated into climate policy and the role that research, advocacy, and organizing play in advancing these efforts. While these policies and initiatives are relatively new, they are the result of years of advocacy and organizing. Time is needed to see their full impact. What is already clear is that their approach and intended outcomes show a distinct change from only centering emissions reductions while ignoring issues of social and economic injustice.

Boston Builds an Inclusive Green Economic Future

After mounting pressure by residents in Boston, the city conducted an official study that revealed an architecture of disparity in the City. Following the release of the disparity study, the mayor issued an executive order to promote economic development for minority and women-owned businesses. Emerald Cities Collaborative created the Boston Contractor Academy, which provides free contractor training to people of color, women, and disadvantaged contractors.

Data reveals the persistence of inequity and how communities that bear the brunt of its impacts must be at the forefront of guiding the development of efforts for change. Between July 2014 and June 2019, after mounting pressure from the Black Economic Council of Massachusetts and the people of Boston more broadly, the City conducted an official disparity study that focused on women-owned and minority-owned businesses across all industries within Boston. Prior to the 2014 study by BBC Research and Consulting, the City had not conducted an official disparity study for eighteen years.

A disparity study is one way that a city can better understand the equity needs that exist before implementing changes. Disparity studies investigate the demographics of firms benefiting from public investments and analyze what, if any, gaps exist between the availability of minority-owned firms and the number of firms receiving public contracts. Disparity studies are essential for creating the legal basis for policies/programs that expand the participation of historically excluded communities. Based on the results of the completed study in 2021, which showed considerable disparities, outgoing mayor Marty Walsh issued an executive order that set a goal to have 25 percent of discretionary contracting and procurement spending go to minority-owned and woman-owned business enterprises by the fiscal year 2022.

This order coincided with the Emerald Cities Collaborative creating the Boston Contractor Academy (BCA). The BCA promotes sustainability by connecting contractors of color and women to energy efficiency and clean energy projects in the city of Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It aims to help “people of color and women-owned contractors to build their businesses in energy efficiency, renewable energy, and building electrification.” The program offers a free nine-week course that prepares contractors and contracting firms to win bids for energy efficiency and clean energy projects. It is designed to combat the dearth of contractors in the green building sector, by increasing their awareness of new green building policies, codes, and standards (e.g., LEED); and promoting socially responsible contracting and labor standards. The BCA connects contractors to financing opportunities, project opportunities, consultants, and members to grow their businesses through marketing support and exposure to essential business capabilities to win bids on construction projects. According to their website, “The Contractor Academy has a top-notch faculty of construction experts, business skills trainers, and people who control pipelines of projects.” The BCA is free to participants and has already helped individuals secure contracts. One contractor received a $600,000 contract to increase the efficiency of the City’s municipal buildings. The city of Boston also adjusted the “request for qualifications” process to include a supplier diversity plan and a list of past supplier diversity statistics, in order to keep racial equity at the forefront of the procurement process.

To promote accountability during the implementation phase, the BCA has a seventeen-member advisory committee. This committee is made up of individuals representing different sectors around Boston, such as youth groups, technical and vocational programs, the Mayor’s office, local unions, business associations, and construction companies. The varied backgrounds of committee members help ensure that all parties’ interests are met. This increases the probability that Academy participants will obtain work and access to project opportunities once they graduate. Since 2019, nearly 40 contractors have taken the BCA training program.

The BCA contributes to the Boston Climate Action Plan goal of achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 by growing the workforce. In addition to the BCA, Mayor Walsh issued an executive order to promote economic development by increasing the pool of businesses that the City contracts and employs. These programs are essential for expanding business and contracting opportunities for women and people of color in the no-carbon economy. Mayor Walsh’s executive order is supported by a $2 million investment in Boston’s Supplier Diversity program, which aims to “implement new initiatives that expand opportunities for minority- and women-owned businesses.”

In the Boston example, data led to effective, targeted policies. The BCA and the Mayor’s executive order highlight the importance of targeted efforts that promote the involvement of people of color and women-owned contracting firms. Their engagement is necessary if the City is going to achieve its net-zero ambitions. Assistance and capacity-developing support ensures that minority- and women-owned businesses are included in the expanding low-carbon economic future.

The Boston efforts shifted programming and project delivery mechanisms, which increased the participation of minority, disadvantaged, and women-owned contractors on City projects. The BCA exposed contractors to opportunities and the necessary qualifications to successfully bid on projects. Contractors and advocates identified barriers, which could then be addressed. This led to changes in procurement language, to ensure that contracting was inclusive. The pool of contractors expanded, which was necessary for the City to meet its goals, given the amount of work created. The Emerald Cities Collaborative’s advice and programming allowed Boston to increase economic inclusion in its building energy efficiency projects.

This story lifts up the economic potential of climate action. When climate action is backed by financing, projects are created. These projects increase labor market demand for workers and businesses capable of doing the work. Qualified businesses and workers from marginalized communities represent labor market supply to meet this demand. The problem is that workers and minority, disadvantaged, and women-owned firms face systemic barriers to accessing these opportunities. This requires an intentional approach that connects workers and businesses to projects. Intentional approaches include:

- highlighting the problem through disparity studies,
- setting targets for greater inclusion as Mayor Walsh did through his executive order,
- examining project delivery systems that may exclude firms that are undercapitalized or unable to meet bonding and insurance requirements, and
- developing programs to cultivate the supply of workers and businesses to meet the demand, as was the case with BCA.

In light of the urgency of climate change and the trend of workforce shortages in the construction industry, addressing systemic barriers is critical.

Portland's Clean Energy Fund Makes Equitable Climate Investments

The Portland Clean Energy Fund, a ballot measure organized by frontline communities, created a climate fund through a tax on large retailers. The fund centers the advancement of racial and social justice, and is an example of making corporations contribute to the betterment of the entire community.

In November 2018, voters approved the Portland Clean Energy Fund (PCEF) through local ballot measure #26-201. The PCEF provides dedicated funding for climate actions and initiatives that advance racial and social justice. The fund is led by four guiding principles: justice, accountability, community power, and multi-benefit climate action. The aim of the fund is to build citywide resilience and economic opportunity in the face of climate change, racial injustice, and economic insecurity. The PCEF targets two priority populations as beneficiaries: (1) those who have historically had less access to benefits of green investments and are more vulnerable to climate-related impacts, such as people of color and those with low income, and (2) those who have not had equitable access to clean energy workforce and contractor opportunities such as women, people of color, people with disabilities, and those who are chronically underemployed.

An important financing mechanism for climate action is ensuring that corporations pay their fair share to the community and ease the burden off taxpayers. The PCEF is generated by a 1 percent surcharge on large retailers in Portland, known as a "gross receipts tax." Large retailers are defined as those with annual tax-year revenue from retail sales of $1 billion or more in the U.S. and $500,000 or more in the city of Portland. The result of this surcharge is the generation of $44-61 million annually for qualified projects in Portland.

The PCEF was created by the PCEF Steering Committee, which is composed of several Portland community groups. The committee worked on the initiative for over a year, then shared the finalized concept with neighborhood associations, affordable housing providers, small businesses, and labor unions. The committee worked on coalition-building for an additional two years before launching the official campaign. Once the campaign was launched, the PCEF Steering Committee collected over 30,000 signatures to get the initiative on the November 2018 ballot. The committee provided training for residents in English and Spanish, taught people how to collect signatures in support of the PCEF, and even facilitated phone-banking sessions. The feedback from the community was overwhelmingly positive.

Large international and multinational corporations opposed the PCEF, due to the added tax burden they would incur, and created a local political action committee to oppose the effort. They attempted to demonstrate public support against the initiative by using false testimonials by two small business owners. However, once this deception was exposed, both small business owners signed up in support of the PCEF.

Over 200 community organizations and 16 neighborhood associations supported the ballot measure. Throughout the development of the original campaign, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)-led organizations were given the final say in large decisions. A nine-member grant committee reviews proposals for the PCEF and is responsible for selecting grant recipients for clean energy projects that will benefit communities of color and low-income households. The committee includes members from a broad spectrum of fields, including a professor, contractor, electrician, affordable housing organization director, community organizer, and a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. The PCEF posts all of its internal governing documents and recordings of committee meetings online, with the intention of making the decision-making process accessible and transparent to the community.

Forty to sixty percent of the PCEF's funding areas are dedicated to clean energy programs, and an additional 10 to 15 percent is dedicated to green infrastructure and regenerative agriculture. So far, the City has approved $8.6 million in grants across 45 projects and among 38 nonprofit organizations. Several of the projects approved so far are focused on making Portland's stock of old buildings more energy efficient. For example, a $668,000 grant for The Portland Community Reinvestment Initiatives Inc. – a Black-led organization that owns over 800 units in North and Northeast Portland – supports efforts to reduce greenhouse gases across its portfolio of low-income housing, most of which was built in the early 1900s. Another approved grant is going to AfroVillage, an organization that provides transitional housing for people experiencing homelessness, with a focus on people of color.

Despite strong and organized opposition from the corporate sector, the Portland example shows how community-based organizing and advocacy can overcome a well-resourced opposition. By making corporations pay their share and investing the resources transparently into underserved communities, Portland is building a more inclusive economic future.

Denver Voters Advance Equity through the Climate Protection Fund

The Denver Climate Protection Fund is a revised version of a previous energy tax that failed to pass due to its lack of focus on centering racial equity. Members of 26 different community groups created a new, more transformative fund, with efforts focused on those most harmed by climate change.

Centering racial and economic equity in climate policy makes climate policy stronger, as evidenced in Denver, Colorado. In November 2020, Denver voters approved the Denver Climate Protection Fund (CPF) through Ballot Initiative 2A. The CPF was borne from a previous failed attempt by grassroots environmental group Resilient Denver to put an energy tax on Denver's 2019 ballot. While well-intentioned, opposition from the utility sector and a lack of multilateral support caused the group to abandon its effort. In response to this initiative, Mayor Michael B. Hancock created a Climate Action Task Force, composed of 26 members representing different industries and constituents such as community groups, church groups, environmental organizations, youth councils, fossil fuel stakeholders, and others. The task force engaged the community through two rounds of community meetings with hundreds of Denver locals, and by creating a website that was launched to make it easy for Denver residents to provide public input. The task force presented its recommendations to the city council, which in turn created Ballot Initiative 2A by November 2020. In Colorado, tax initiatives must be voted on by the public; Ballot Initiative 2A was approved by a clear majority vote of 65 percent.

The CPF reduces greenhouse gas emissions, supports climate adaptation, creates new jobs, and improves the quality of life for Denver residents through the allocation of funds to community projects with corresponding goals. The CPF generates funds through a 0.25 percent increase in local sales and use tax, and is estimated to generate $35-$40 million annually. The CPF maximizes funding for under-resourced communities and the communities most vulnerable to climate change. Half of all of the CPF funds are required to directly benefit these communities. Target communities are determined in part through Denver's Climate Equity Scoring System, which ranks communities on a scale of 0-100 to determine their level of climate equity, based on census data collected around climate change and air pollution.

The CPF designated six categories as acceptable uses of funding: (1) job creation (2) increased investments in renewable energy (3) environmental and climate justice programs (4) adaptation and resiliency programs (5) affordable transportation programs, and (6) energy efficiency upgrades. These categories promote equity through social, economic, and environmental impacts.

While the CPF has not issued any funding yet, in November 2021 the Office of Climate Action, Sustainability, and Resiliency developed a 5-year plan for implementing tax mechanisms and distributing CPF funds. It has been submitted to the Mayor, City Council, and Sustainability Advisory Council.

The Denver example shows that centering equity will garner greater support from the public for climate initiatives. After the first attempt at an energy tax failed, a more ambitious, more inclusive process was launched that included a broad diversity of stakeholders. The resulting initiative clearly requires directing benefits to marginalized communities through environmental and climate justice programs, job creation, and other funding uses. An equitable policy approach engages the interests of more people and, as a result, can build a broader base of support.

Washington, DC Promotes Equity Through Solar for All

The District of Columbia's Solar for All Program provides solar energy to qualified low-income households at no cost, by partnering with organizations across the City to equip 100,000 households with solar panels. Solar for All also partners with other DC organizations to offer solar installation courses and build pathways to solar industry jobs.

The upfront investment required for solar panels often excludes households that cannot afford it, leaving the benefits of clean energy only for those wealthy enough to afford it. Washington, DC shows how targeted policy can reverse that trend and provide renewable energy– and its many economic and environmental benefits – to all residents. In 2016, voters passed The Renewable Portfolio Standard Expansion Amendment Act. That Act created the Renewable Energy Development Fund, which funds solar energy projects in DC, including Solar for All. The Solar for All program set a goal to equip 100,000 low- to moderate-income households with solar energy. The City's Department of Energy and the Environment (DOEE) partners with organizations across the district to install solar panels with the additional aim to cut the electricity bills of Solar for All participants by 50 percent. Residents who qualify for the program, but are unable to have rooftop solar installed, can opt to join the community solar program which gives residents the same benefits, by using solar power generated elsewhere to power those homes.

The Renewable Portfolio Standard Expansion Amendment Act that created Solar for All also sets a goal to raise the renewable portfolio standard for tier-one renewable sources (solar power, wind power, low impact hydro power, and geothermal energy) to 50 percent by 2032 and the solar requirement to 5 percent by 2032.

In order to ensure that marginalized communities receive the monetary benefits of this program, Solar for All is limited to Washington, DC residents with household income below 80 percent of the area median income (AMI) threshold. Furthermore, to hold the program accountable, since December 2017, DOEE has published on its website and submitted to the Council an annual report on the expenditure of the funds allocated to the program, the amount of progress toward achieving the established benchmarks, and the number of solar PV systems installed pursuant to the previous fiscal year. This kind of goal setting and transparency is important to help guarantee that cities have meaningful follow-through with the projects outlined in many climate plans.

The Solar for All program creates a cleaner energy future while saving money for DC residents. Homes participating in the program see their electricity bill cut in half. In buildings where individuals pay a fixed rate for building amenities, the money that would be going to electricity goes instead to community benefits determined by the tenants, such as improved daycare, financial literacy training, or measures to increase safety. As part of the community investment aspect of this program, when it is needed, home repairs are included in solar installations to make sure residents can continue to live in their homes and benefit from the program. Taking the monetary benefits of a solar program and investing it into the community at large illustrates how climate programs can advance equitable outcomes in tandem.

The Solar for All program collaborates with local solar companies to bring money and jobs into the community rather than outsourcing for labor. In partnership with a program called Solar Works DC, the City offers community members solar installation courses and pathways to jobs in the solar industry. The program operates 12-week cohorts in the fall and spring, which are open to DC residents ages 18 and over. Participants in the 12-week sessions complete GRID Alternative's Installation Basics Training program and earn industry-relevant skill certificates by demonstrating competency in solar installations. This elevates the economic impact of the program, which saves people money on their utility bills while also helping people create, find, and keep good jobs.

In 2019, Solar For All provided the benefits of solar energy to approximately 8,600 households and installed nearly 7 megawatts (MW) of solar. Altogether, this additional 7 MW of solar will provide roughly 2,750 households with credits on their electric bills. These credits total approximately $500 annually per household.

The Solar for All program reduces household energy bills and reduces dependence on fossil fuel use by centering sustainability and equity. Deliberately targeting the program to households with income below 80 percent of the area median income brings solar energy to those who would not otherwise be able to purchase it. Moreover, providing home upgrades when needed makes housing healthier, which is a critical need for many families. Protections against displacement help low-income residents stay in their homes and enjoy the benefits of a clean energy future. The program shows how collaborating with solar companies helps to create sustainable jobs within the community, increasing economic security.

Minneapolis Focuses Climate Action in Green Zones

The city of Minneapolis created two Green Zones in areas of the city that have historically endured the most environmental harm. The Green Zones aim to become the primary focus areas for future climate projects within Minneapolis. Two Green Zone task forces direct funds and hold the city accountable in its ongoing plan implementation.

Comprehensive efforts are needed to reverse the disproportionate environmental and climate burdens placed on communities of color and low-income communities. Minnesota's Green Zones effort seeks to address environmental and climate injustices holistically. The Green Zones Initiative came from the Minneapolis Climate Action Plan Environmental Justice Working Group, which was supported through a $10,000 grant from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. The Minneapolis Green Zones Initiative aims to end environmental harm, reduce the current environmental burden, and invest in the Green Zone communities. A Minneapolis City Council Resolution passed on April 28, 2017 created the Green Zones designation, focusing environmental and climate justice efforts in the two communities most affected by climate change.

Minneapolis has two Green Zones: The Northside and Southside Green Zone. Both zones have a council that is responsible for holding the City accountable for the implementation of the climate action plan, informing the public of the status of Green Zone plans, developing fundraising strategies, securing resources, and providing guidance and assistance to the Mayor and City Council. The Northside Green Zone Council and Southside Green Zone Council, or "task forces" are made up of interested community members who live within the Green Zones, community members who are also members of the Environmental Justice Coordinating Council, and representatives from several city departments. The City uses grant funding to support the task force meetings with stipends, refreshments, and translation. By including and elevating community voices, the Green Zone task forces can ensure that they are centering the issues that most concern Green Zone residents.

The Green Zones have numerous initiatives and projects underway for environmentally conscious economic development that achieves the following goals: 1) green job creation, 2) improved air quality, 3) improved housing quality and affordability, 4) decreased soil and water contamination, 5) area greening through increased vegetation and use of clean energy, and 6) increased access to healthy food.

The city of Minneapolis has implemented a program that increases Green Cost Sharing by 10 percent for projects happening within Green Zones. The Southside Green Zone Council recently designed and executed an environmental justice fund, giving $68,000 to 13 of 25 Green Zone projects that applied.

The Green Zones program recognizes that equity requires a holistic, multi-prong approach. Creating high-road jobs and investing in economic development supports intergenerational wealth-building and brings economic power to impacted communities. Improving housing, increasing access to healthy food, and greening areas can bring better health outcomes and decrease disparities. Reducing pollution and addressing contaminated water and soil can begin to reverse decades of environmental racism.

Transformative Climate Communities Boosts Equity in Oakland

The city of Oakland, in collaboration with neighborhood groups, applied for and received state funding from Transformative Climate Communities. The funds support community-driven climate solutions with minimum equitable investment standards focused in historically marginalized communities. The Oakland example shows how states and cities can work together, with the state providing resources that would not be possible with city efforts alone.

In 2017, the city of Oakland, California joined a coalition of twelve neighborhood organizations as the lead applicant for funding from the Transformative Climate Communities (TCC), a state-sponsored program to fund community-driven climate solutions. The TCC Implementation grant is paired with an additional $34.2 million in outside funding to make a catalytic climate investment in Oakland's neighborhoods most impacted by poverty and pollution.

Oakland received TCC funding in two separate rounds. In 2018, they received a $170,000 planning grant to develop a collaborative governance system of local government, community-based organizations, and a technical assistance provider. In 2020, they received a $28.2 million grant from the state to implement the community-driven plan over five years.

Oakland's Transformative Climate Communities project showcases Greenlining Institute's Equitable Community Investment Standards, which set the following minimum standards for projects in disinvested communities:

- **Build community capacity**. TCC requires a collaborative governance structure between local government, a community-based anchor, residents, and/or other stakeholders to help ensure that projects are derived from resident-identified needs. In Oakland, the collaborative governance model helps build leadership and power among community members, has improved relationships with the city government, and provides funding for technical assistance to facilitate capacity-building beyond the scope of the project.

- **Be community-driven at every stage.** Oakland's TCC project is fully community-led. The initial community goals were set by a twelve-organization coalition. Community members will continue to be in leadership roles throughout the duration of the project through 2025.

- **Emphasize anti-racist solutions**. The Oakland TCC funding targets a historically Black neighborhood that has seen notable demographic shifts in recent years. Now predominantly Latinx, the neighborhood is experiencing rising housing prices and a significant loss of Black households from 2000-2015. One outcome of the City's partnership with the neighborhood coalition has been an improved relationship between local government and community-based organizations – a relationship that has historically been tense.

- **Prioritize comprehensive approaches**. Since priorities are chosen by the community, the Oakland TCC project intersects with many different issue areas. By the end of the grant period, East Oakland will have new investments in urban forestry, urban greenways, affordable housing, transportation, a bike-share program, new mobility options, and improved food access, as well as workforce development programming and small business development.

- **Target benefits to communities**. While the City was the lead applicant for the state TCC funding, the project was co-designed with community members and all new investments will be built within a five square mile area. The neighborhood is among the top 5%-20% of environmentally burdened neighborhoods in California, and the benefits of the project will go directly to the residents.

- **Establish paths towards wealth-building**. Oakland's plan will build and restore wealth in historically redlined neighborhoods through a small business incubator, workforce development programming, and a community benefits agreement.

The Oakland example shows how a collaborative governance structure can result in deep climate action that directly benefits communities of concern. It also shows how states and cities can work together, with the state providing resources that would not be possible with city efforts alone. The tailoring of the program is then done at the city level, to ensure that specific community needs are met. The Transformative Climate Communities is a state-administered program that Oakland tailored to meet the specific challenges and concerns of its residents.

Where We Go From Here

Cities must understand equity as both an outcome and a pathway. Neither can stand alone, as equitable outcomes require equitable processes, but equitable processes alone do not inherently produce outcomes that address racialized disparities.

To intentionally design outcomes that actually address equity and improve quality of life for marginalized communities, local governments must:

- Prepare internally to understand their region's equity challenges by researching and gathering data on the issues that impacted communities have raised.
- Engage and collaborate with impacted communities, harnessing their expertise and lived experience, and clearly and transparently integrating those learnings into co-created policies and practices.
- Create community-informed goals that balance equity and climate.
- Institutionalize equitable processes within governance structures so that systems support equity goals in an ongoing way.

Moving more meaningfully towards equitable policy can seem daunting and overwhelming for cities, as it requires working and thinking in ways that are unfamiliar. However, examples exist of cities that have effectively centered equity in their climate policy approach. The examples below are not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather an illustration of different approaches cities use.

Data Gathering and Visualization

Data can highlight which communities have been historically marginalized and negatively impacted, and potentially shed light on which challenges are most pressing. Once the equity challenges are understood, they can be integrated into policy agendas, to lie alongside climate goals.

The tools used to understand social and climate inequities in different regions can vary. For example, Boston, MA hired consultants to conduct baseline studies as the first step in their efforts to create plans to address disparities. Asheville, NC generated salient data on the most climate-impacted communities using a Climate Justice Index – a virtual mapping tool that cross-analyzes percentages of BIPOC, heat vulnerability, energy burden, CDC social vulnerability, and climate resiliency threats. The index highlights the ways in which redlining has harmed communities. Providence, RI utilized existing data-gathering and displaying tools such as EJSCREEN to analyze frontline communities.

Similar to EJSCREEN is the Greenlink Equity Map, which gives cities access to intuitively organized and mapped information; it shows up to thirty indicators related to equity, such as housing, health, and energy burdens. In alignment with the goals of transparent decision-making and community involvement, these data collection tools produce concise mapping and visualization to make data accessible to anyone who is interested. An important component of data collection is to collaborate with impacted communities on the creation of the resulting narrative or "meaning-making" of the data. In this way, community members can inform cities on the accuracy of the data and reflect on the realities of their lived experiences.

Meaningfully Engaging Communities

Meaningfully engaging communities is essential to any equity effort; it requires communities to be empowered to co-create the policies that will directly impact them and an accountability system that ensures policies are implemented properly. While the process will look different for every city, cities should consider investing in capacity-building so communities are equipped for meaningful engagement while not being overburdened. Commissions like the one put together in Denver and detailed below in Austin – that bring together community members and different stakeholders to determine the scope of policy – can also result in meaningful community engagement.

The city of Austin, Texas shows how to solicit meaningful community input by engaging broadly across the city and integrating racial equity into city training. The City's climate equity plan was created with input from nearly 200 community members, with an intentional focus on engaging racially and economically diverse residents. In creating this plan, Austin city staff, 120 community members, and 12 ambassadors engaged in a series of equity and anti-racism training sessions in order to develop a shared set of values and common language (Sierra Club). Meaningful community engagement, coupled with racial equity training for the city staff, were important steps in creating an equitable process and laying the groundwork for shared commitment to equitable outcomes.

In order to pursue climate action in Anchorage, Alaska, the City actively worked to create an ongoing dialogue with community members. They worked with a steering committee composed of hundreds of technical advisors, scientists, students, professors, and community members. The City also formed an advisory committee of community organizations in order to review drafts of the plan and ensure the themes of equity and economic prosperity were integrated throughout the plan. The community was directly engaged through a series of events, conversations, presentations, and workshops – all of which were promoted via public websites, social media, newsletters, and listservs.

Transparent Governance Processes

Equity requires fair, open, and transfparent decision-making processes in which the individuals and groups most affected by decisions have an opportunity to participate. Transparent processes can take different forms, depending on the structure of the local government. In Portland, the PCEF posts all governing documents online and posts committee meetings on YouTube, making the decision-making process accessible and transparent to the community. The use of task forces in Minneapolis and Denver are also examples of collaborative governance. Oakland's TCC requires a collaborative governance structure between local communities and city government that ensures programs and policies center residents' needs.

Building Wealth and Decreasing Cost Burdens

Building equity means addressing the widening gap between the people who have financial wealth and those who have been systematically excluded from wealth building. Boston and Washington, DC are two cities that have included wealth-building methods within their climate-related plans. The Boston Contractor Academy focused on wealth-building by increasing access to sustainable jobs for women contractors and contractors of color. In the District of Columbia, the Solar for All program aimed to eliminate the cost burden of powering homes for low-income households by supplying free solar panels or solar energy.

Wealth-building also requires creation of high-road, family-sustaining, and union jobs to ensure workers are paid a livable wage, especially given the proliferation of low-wage jobs economy-wide. High-road job creation requires adequate planning processes to create demand for workers, rather than focusing only on training and retraining programs. For example, demand-side job creation through ambitious emissions reductions mandates can ensure there are high-road jobs to employ displaced fossil fuel workers and workers historically excluded from the fossil fuel economy. Oakland's TCC program advances economic inclusion through workforce development programming and small business incubators as paths to wealth-building.

Conclusion

Equity requires deep, often uncomfortable work. It is an opening for imagining and creating a better, more just future. It requires thinking differently. Continuing climate policies and programs that use a general “colorblind” approach, or tacking on equity language without any engagement with the principles discussed here, can increase harm and delay much-needed action on climate and racial disparities.

A robust body of environmental justice research shows that making the most vulnerable communities healthier makes everyone healthier. Similarly, advancing climate policies that center the most vulnerable communities results in stronger overall climate policy. Understanding the historic burdens communities bear, meaningfully engaging directly impacted stakeholders, and ensuring economic inclusion enables decision-makers to craft climate policy that maximizes emissions reductions and targets resources and investment where they are most needed.

Equity is transformative and, as such, equitable policy must be transformative. The way Portland’s climate policy taxes big box stores to create revenue for investment in marginalized communities makes polluters pay, thereby transforming the way people think about how to raise revenue. Boston’s deliberate investment in contractors of color and women contractors transforms the demographics of the workforce engaged in climate work. And, Washington, DC’s deliberate targeting of low-income communities for solar panels transforms who has access to the benefits of a clean energy economy.

While much work remains to be done, cities can, and are, leading the way on equitable climate policy.

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