



A Racially Equitable & Resilient Recovery

Seattle Planning Commission

August 2020

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In the face of a global pandemic and ensuing economic collapse, both of which disproportionately harm Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), Seattle must plan for a “recovery” that does not simply restore and perpetuate our city’s legacy of systemic racial inequity. The urgency of addressing systemic racism is further driven home by the growing calls to redress the racial animus in our legal system. We must seize this moment to begin to repair current injustices and ensure that all community members have the resources to withstand current and future crises.

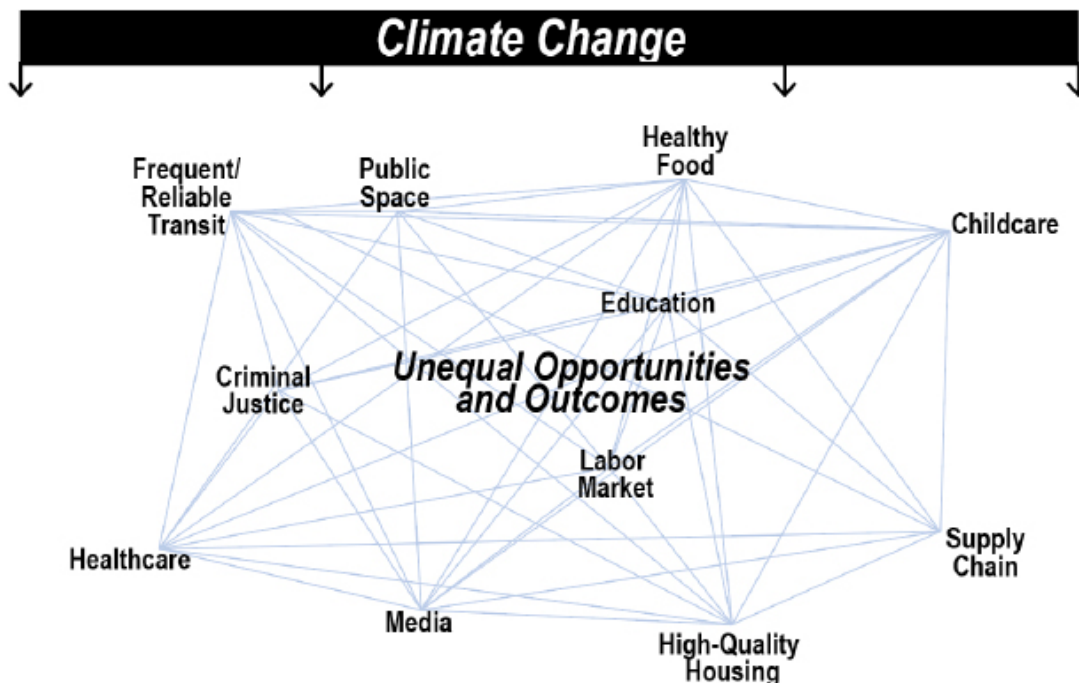
Consistent with the City’s commitment to lead with race, and the growing acknowledgment that racism has long been a public health crisis, the Seattle Planning Commission urges the City to radically shift its practices, programs and policies. By shifting to a new paradigm that prioritizes resources for achieving racial equity, Seattle can become a place where the color of someone’s skin won’t predict their life outcomes, particularly in a time when the impacts of climate change will increase the risk of future shocks and stressors to our environment.

The Seattle Planning Commission is providing recommendations for City planners and leaders in five key areas to reduce the barriers created and enforced through systemic forms of oppression (see graphic on next page). Focusing work in these areas can help transform the complex web of racial oppression that limits the health and resilience of our communities.

Key areas:

- Work in collaboration with BIPOC communities to create a planning process that shares power with communities;
- Advance housing choices and security in response to COVID-19 while expanding homeownership opportunities for BIPOC communities;
- Maintain the critical transit network and ensure City rights-of-way meets safety and open-space needs for BIPOC communities;
- Ensure public spaces work for everyone by centering and implementing BIPOC visions for the public realm;
- Invest equitably in healthy and climate-resilient communities.

Complex systems of oppression



Adapted from: "Racism and White Privilege Curriculum Design" by Lee Bell, Barbara J. Love, Rosemarie A. Roberts in Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice. Edited by Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin

Achieving racial equity means transformational change

In the years since naming racial equity as one of the City's core values, Seattle has conducted several analyses that identify where to target resources to maximize impact and support communities with the highest need. These analyses are a strong platform from which to promote racial equity while responding to COVID-19, and the continued and future impacts of the climate crisis. There are many existing resources and [frameworks](#) for racially equitable planning efforts that Seattle has yet to adopt and implement. Historically an innovator in racial equity work, Seattle has the opportunity to fulfill its promise as a leader in this arena.

It is important to recognize the projects, programs, and policies that can address the issues previously, and continuously raised by BIPOC communities. Community-based groups such as Puget Sound Sage, Got Green, Black Lives Matter of Seattle-King County, the Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition and others have clearly articulated many of their communities' needs and challenges. The Planning Commission recommends that elected officials begin by consulting with those community resources.

The City has several existing programs and boards that can assist in the racially equitable actions recommended in this paper. These programs include the [Equity and Environment Initiative](#), [Outside Citywide](#), the [Equitable Development Initiative](#), and the assigned work of the recently established [Green New Deal Oversight Board](#). With racial equity and environmental justice as a core tenet of those programs, they will be valuable vehicles for developing and implementing a recovery plan in partnership with BIPOC communities.

The following recommendations are based on the experience and expertise of Planning Commissioners. We advocate pursuing these recommendations with the leadership and collaboration of BIPOC communities, ensuring co-development of the policy details, metrics for evaluation, and implementation process.

Work in collaboration with BIPOC communities to create a planning process that shares power with communities

Much of the City's planning work for the past decade has been a reactive response to intense growth in population and employment. The economic recession caused by COVID-19 may slow that growth, providing time to engage with BIPOC communities to plan for a far more equitable future.

Indigenize the planning process

As part of a paradigm shift, the Planning Commission encourages the City to adopt more practices based on indigenous principles that create self-determination for BIPOC communities, emphasizing holistic wellbeing and authentic relationships. Seattle's planning process should reflect the traditions and practices of local tribes, co-creating methods of placekeeping. Placekeeping and place-serving practices are those that ensure that policies, plans, and investments will serve and create value for those already living there, even while others are welcomed and investments are made. Placekeeping celebrates a community's cultures and histories while preventing displacement. As an example, the [Indigenous Design Collaborative](#) at Arizona State University, has developed an [Indigenous Placekeeping Framework](#) to assist with indigenizing campus planning in partnership with local tribes. We recommend the City take inspiration from this and similar efforts to update the Racial Equity Toolkit in support of meaningfully including indigenous practices in project and policy development.

Nothing about us, without us, is for us

There are many strategies the City can use to increase the participation of community members in decision-making. One would be participatory budgeting, which has been used at a variety of scales in

many other cities, including New York, which has [participatory budgeting](#) for a portion of its physical infrastructure investments. Seattle has already piloted participatory budgeting with small community grants over the past several years. In a larger scale effort, the Black Lives Matter organizers in Los Angeles convened a coalition of community groups to develop a [People's Budget](#) that represents their priorities. Similarly, in Seattle, community groups including [Black Lives Matter of Seattle-King County](#), Decriminalize Seattle, and King County Equity Now have issued calls and developed proposals for a [participatory budget process](#) for Seattle's 2021 budget. Their work and that of others can be shaped into a budget process that reflects Seattle's long-stated anti-racist intentions.

Invest in long-term engagement with BIPOC communities and follow through on visions and plans

Too often, community members invest time and energy in planning efforts to create visions that never see sufficient resources to fulfill them. There should be an expectation that some key, visible actions take place following the investment of community's time. This can help develop trust between the City and community members who might hesitate to invest in processes that they may worry will result in little or no action.

Even prior to social distancing, planners had limited success engaging communities using conventional approaches that often come with an agenda originating outside the community, and requiring participants to take time from work or family. The Planning Commission encourages City leadership to make the investments necessary to establish an ongoing, cumulative engagement process that builds relationships and trust over time. This can allow community members and City planners to identify the issues most vital to the community and remove barriers to participation. A significant portion of City planners' work time should include: attending community-organized events and coalition meetings; volunteering with community-based organizations; and working closely with community liaisons.

Adapt language and practice to shift the balance of power toward communities

In their work to eliminate racial oppression, City representatives and elected officials must be trained in alternatives to white-centered terminology and alienating jargon. City staff should be able to communicate with state-of-the-art practices for achieving racial justice. All individuals in positions of influence and power must be explicit about addressing racial equity and justice, rather than step around the issue of race with terms such as "social equity."

In engaging with BIPOC communities, City officials must explicitly acknowledge the power imbalances that exist between community, government, business and real estate interests, and wealthier, white constituencies. Conducting a power analysis can address dynamics of unequal power between those engaging in planning. This requires acknowledging individual identities, as well as the power and authority given to participants through their employment or financial position. Talking with community members to co-develop a power analysis increases transparency and supports development of engagement strategies and decision-making processes that work towards balancing power, and equitable decision making.

Advance housing choices and security in response to COVID-19 while expanding homeownership opportunities for BIPOC communities

The housing segregation achieved by the use of government policies such as redlining and other discriminatory practices produced long-lasting racial inequities in housing and home ownership. They have prevented BIPOC families from building wealth that could have otherwise been transferred from one generation to the next. The limits to advancing economically through homeownership have contributed to cascading racial disparities in education, employment opportunities, and health.

Seattle's Growth Strategy of the last 25 years has had the effect of perpetuating this situation. It has made many of the areas that were traditionally accessible to BIPOC communities the targets for new development and land speculation, driving up housing costs and displacing BIPOC residents. Meanwhile, the commitment to preserving large swaths of the city for stand-alone houses created an artificial scarcity of available land to build housing and effectively barred lower-income families from ready access to the city's amenities, such as parks.

Increase housing choices, especially for essential workers and others who are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19

BIPOC workers disproportionately make up the essential workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has played a role in the greater mortality and transmission rates for BIPOC communities. This also intersects with racial inequities in housing, where BIPOC are at greater risk of displacement, and more likely to live in areas with higher levels of air pollution. One illustration of the disparities in place prior to COVID-19 is that the residents of South Park, a neighborhood with a proportion of BIPOC residents higher than the City's average, have an average lifespan that is [10 years shorter](#) than the average residents of Laurelhurst, which is predominantly white.

These long-standing racial inequities are worsened by the pandemic response. The impacts of physical distancing vary widely depending on what type of housing one has and the proximity of that housing to parks and open spaces. Most of the city's rental housing is in multistory buildings that require sharing elevators and long hallways with other residents and visitors. Those buildings are typically located on arterial streets with little or no access to open space. Narrow sidewalks and busy vehicle traffic can make those streets unsafe for physical distancing, and the concentrated vehicle emissions contribute to pulmonary and cardiovascular health impacts. The result is a city of "haves" and "have nots" in which those with access to private yards also have the best access to parks and other publicly funded amenities while an ever-growing percentage of the city's population has adequate access to neither.

All scales of government that participated in racist housing and land use practices are responsible for restitution of these harms, and for changing institutional practices for managing residential land and housing development. As the City works to expand housing opportunities, reforming our zoning, and

preventing displacement must be a core objective. Keeping communities together supports strong relationships and mutual aid networks that increase Seattle's resilience to the impacts of the climate crisis, and any future pandemics.

While zoning and development regulations will not fix this overnight, we must begin to address the shortage of suitable housing for low- to middle-income people by removing apartment bans and allowing a much greater variety of housing types in more areas of the city.

Address evictions and displacement caused by COVID-19

The massive economic impact of COVID-19 threatens to exacerbate what was already a [racially inequitable eviction system](#) in Seattle. This increased threat requires a holistic approach that includes local efforts by the City of Seattle, as well as efforts to advocate at the state and federal level for rent relief and supports for renters and landlords. The Mayor's emergency order to put a moratorium on evictions is an essential action and should be extended while possible supports are explored for landlords to pay their mortgages. At the same time, increased coordination between the Office of Housing's investments, the rental inspection program, and direct service providers should be a focus in the near-term recovery efforts of the City.

Land ownership models that build household and community wealth

The Planning Commission recommends expanding the City's efforts to strategically acquire property for housing and to promote land trusts, shared equity or limited equity cooperatives, and other community ownership models. This should be in support of building BIPOC community wealth when land values are increased through changes to development standards and zoning regulations to allow the development of more housing types and [community owned spaces](#). Many land trusts and limited equity cooperatives were established in the 1970s, [creating many](#) successful, long-term [case studies](#) to guide Seattle's efforts to promote these affordable forms of ownership, including some focused primarily on [transit oriented development](#). These financing models keep the benefits of new, lower-cost housing within the community, reducing displacement risk. Many of these community ownership models are most feasible when applied to the smaller-scale, multifamily housing types that are currently restricted in most areas of the city.

Leveraging economic opportunities of work-from-home arrangements

With guidance from the communities most in need of economic development, the City should look to establish more neighborhood commercial areas to create opportunities for local retail, cafes, restaurants, small-scale office, co-working spaces and spaces for childcare. Council Member Strauss's efforts to remove code barriers for childcare facilities is a good start in this effort. Allowing more economic opportunities throughout the city could create jobs while providing goods and services to the many residents who will likely continue to work from home even after it is safe to return to offices. Increasing access to neighborhood commercial areas reduces the need for car trips, allowing convenient access to goods and services, while also helping to reduce carbon emissions. As more people shift to working from home, the spatial relationship between living and working within one's home

must also shift. This calls for allowing more live-work, co-working and maker spaces that combine living and working in more intentional ways. This will also support entrepreneurs and foster the growth of small businesses in neighborhoods citywide.



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Maintain the critical transit network and ensure City rights-of-way meet safety and mobility needs for BIPOC communities

Over the last decade the City has made great progress in accommodating significant population growth while reducing reliance on the automobile. A reversal of this trend would harm Seattle in myriad ways and further compound racial inequities. Seattle's transportation system can instead support climate and air quality goals by increasing transit mobility and options for active modes of transportation. These alternatives can support transit-dependent residents making essential trips, and workers using transit to commute to essential jobs.

Maintaining and expanding transit alongside multimodal connections

Transit systems have been severely impacted by the drops in ridership and revenue during the COVID-19 crisis. With limits on transit-vehicle capacity likely to remain in place as the pandemic wears on, transit agencies are preparing for long-term service reductions to compensate for revenue losses during the burgeoning economic slowdown. The challenges posed by COVID-19 come in addition to uncertainty in funding caused by the passage and subsequent legal battles of Initiative-976. Under the circumstances, previous visions for much-expanded service are unlikely to be realized in the near term. However, we cannot allow the City to backslide in its progress toward reducing private vehicle use and lowering climate-harming emissions. The combination of both these threats to transit should be a primary

concern. If long-term congestion increases are to be avoided the City must take action to support transit investments and non-car options.

The City's first transportation priority should be preserving and expanding the potential transit network to support essential workers that rely on transit, as well as to prepare for a robust rebound when pandemic fears ease. As buses and busways are the workhorse of our regional system and play the largest role in getting people to work and daily needs throughout Seattle, resources must be focused there first. Doing so would be consistent with the recently released report, [Powering the Transition](#), by Puget Sound Sage, whose survey of BIPOC communities showed support to "Expand public transit, reduce fares, and electrify public transit infrastructure," over personal vehicle use.

Moving beyond "Stay Healthy Streets," with BIPOC input

City leadership and employees at the Department of Transportation (SDOT) are to be commended for the action taken to open up Stay Healthy Streets in several areas of the city, where vehicle through-traffic is diverted and street space is made available for people. These are primarily on pre-existing neighborhood greenways, in large part because those corridors had previously been vetted with communities as less car-dominated streets. As a result, the first phase of Stay Healthy streets has done little to provide outdoor space for people or businesses in our densest areas with minimal open space or along our busiest roadways. As BIPOC are more likely to be renters than to own stand-alone houses, this has a racially inequitable result.

The City must engage communities in a discussion of whether and how to reallocate the right-of-way to allow space for social distancing and safe walking, bicycling and other personal mobility devices, while addressing the notion of safety in all senses and for all people. The near-term urgency is to ensure that all neighborhoods – not just wealthier areas of stand-alone houses – have the street space that can meet many needs, not just the movement and storage of cars.

Flexible use of the public right-of-way

The pandemic and the need for greater physical distance among people on the streets and in businesses such as restaurants and cafes require the City to be innovative in the allocation of public space and street right-of-way. Several U.S. cities – including several of Seattle's near neighbors – are granting access to public spaces for restaurants to provide outdoor seating. While enacted as temporary measures, these moves could lead the way toward more permanent changes as community members begin to see the possibilities to use street rights-of-way as a place for people and not only cars. As with any innovative approach, it is essential that City representatives conduct programs, policies, and practices in ways that support BIPOC communities, particularly the Black community.

Ensure public spaces work for everyone by centering and implementing BIPOC visions for the public realm

The recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations have served to amplify the need to ensure that spaces are genuinely safe and welcoming for BIPOC communities, particularly our Black community. This problem is heightened when public spaces become one of the only resources for staying active while maintaining safe physical distances during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a first priority, the City needs to ensure that spaces deter hate crimes, racial profiling, or other forms of violence. This requires that they be planned and designed in partnership with BIPOC communities to ensure that everyone has the amenities and resources they need to feel that public spaces serve their needs. These spaces are essential elements to providing opportunities for residents to relax, recreate, and live in a healthy environment that supports positive public health outcomes.

Seek out a diversity of practices to shape the public realm

Many of the modern best practices shared among planners originate from European and western cultures. For example, Copenhagen and similar European cities are commonly referenced for their excellent examples of promoting people-first planning approaches and creating alternatives to driving cars. However, the practices that fit within European communities should not be assumed to be the practices best suited to support cultural activities and norms of the racially and ethnically diverse population of Seattle. Defaulting to the use of Euro-centric practices limits the conversation of design, in what novelist Chimamanda Adichie refers to in her [TED talk](#) as the danger of a single story, where hearing only one voice can lead to critical misunderstandings. City staff should seek the use of design and planning approaches that may have not yet been institutionalized into current governance models and explore a diversity of alternatives.

Interrogate ‘traditional’ safety principles for public space through a racial equity lens

Many planning and design practices that have superficially been ‘objective’ and ‘race-neutral’ have had racially discriminatory impacts. It is vital to think critically about safety standards designed primarily for the comfort of the dominant white society. For example, the CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design), widely adopted since its emergence in the 1960s, has contributed to the over-policing of BIPOC communities. City staff working in design and activation of the public realm should work with BIPOC communities to adapt public space planning standards to produce safe, healthy, and walkable communities for all.

Innovative public health and hygiene tactics

The need for public access to restrooms and washing stations has been amplified by the pandemic, especially for those experiencing homelessness. Seattle has responded by contracting with vendors to

provide temporary restrooms and hand washing stations. However, the number of these installations remains limited and at great cost to the city.

This has sparked grass-roots movements in Seattle and around the country to provide community-financed, DIY hand-washing facilities. An example of this in Seattle is the Clean Hands Collective, which has been providing three different installations in response to community need and site conditions. City policies and practices should support such bottom-up community responses, particularly where they can play a role in supporting racial equity and resilience.

Photo Source: Seattle Clean Hands Collective



Invest equitably in healthy and climate-resilient communities

As strategies to prevent climate change are evolved, the connections between climate resilience and racial justice are increasingly being recognized. The connection can be seen in examples such as the colonial systems of governance in place that endorse the extraction of resources, to the detriment of local communities and especially indigenous peoples. Because the dominant ideology that justifies harms to people and the environment have the same origin, neither climate change nor racial injustice can be solved independently. Locally, climate change impacts such as heat island effect and poor air quality from wildfire smoke are already disproportionately harming BIPOC communities.

Fund climate change education and public health data collection

Seattle & King County Public Health has already developed a strong [Blueprint For Addressing Climate Change and Public Health](#), which can support the efforts of City planners to address racial health disparities. This work has been inadequately funded and should be a priority as the City works to promote public health in the response to COVID-19. Another part of the work to address climate change and racial justice should include increasing public education about the impacts of climate change on human health, which can boost support for climate action. Additionally, increasing the collection and use of public health data supports the City in responding to public health impacts of climate change, as well as other health impacts of the built environment.

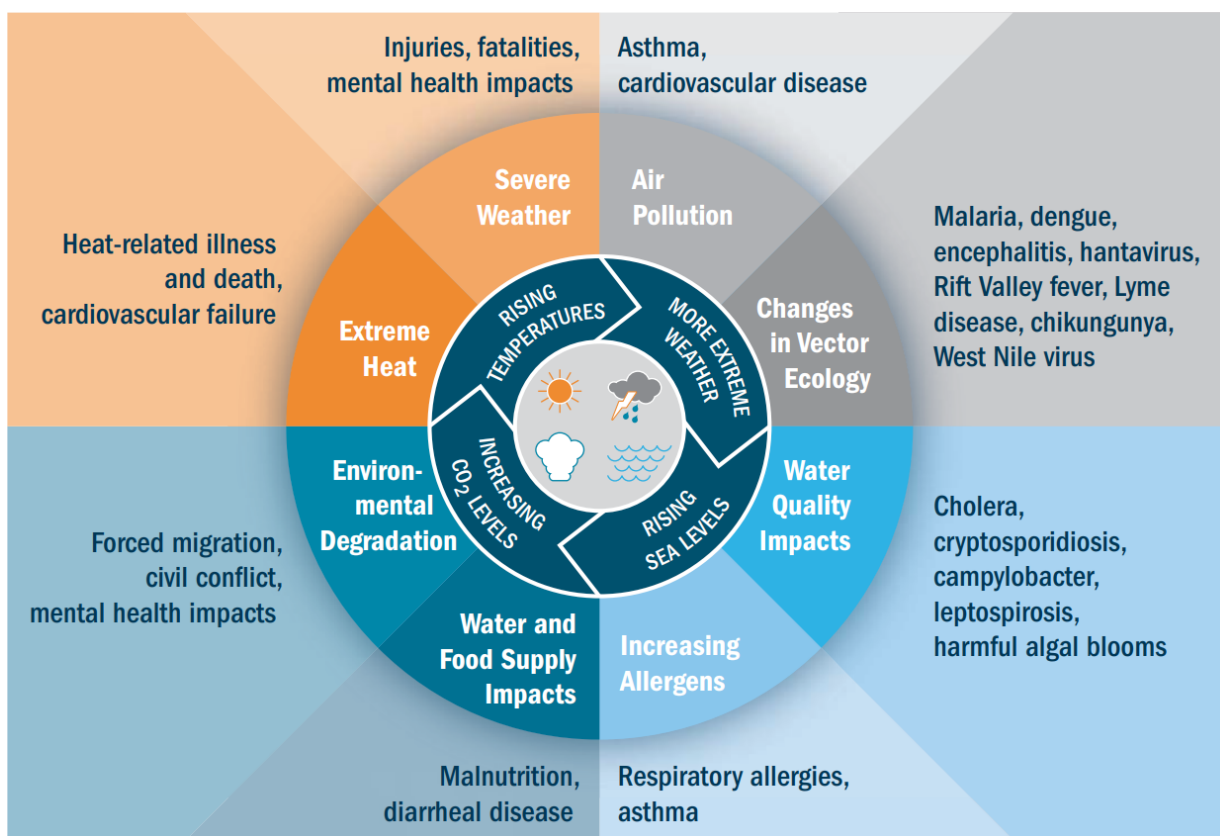
Healthy and climate-resilient buildings

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the physical and mental health benefits of open space and

the need for people in all types of housing to have access to it. As noted above, most of Seattle’s multifamily housing is in dense areas with limited access to open space. The City should revise codes to require and/or incentivize balconies, roof decks, courtyards and other private and shared outdoor spaces. If designed with landscape features, these spaces can reduce heat island effects, improve air quality, provide stormwater storage, and sequester carbon. This will help prepare the city for future public health crises and mitigate climate change impacts. Further steps in the interest of meeting the City’s carbon reduction goals for 2030 should include incentives to motivate the decommissioning of fossil fuels in existing buildings.

Such code revisions and incentives to improve open space in the built environment also have the potential to drive displacement of residents and businesses, often referred to as [environmental gentrification](#). Mitigating these impacts through robust anti-displacement strategies requires working closely with the communities being impacted by development investments to identify accompanying actions that can build community ownership and resilience.

IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON HUMAN HEALTH (SOURCE: KING COUNTY)



Racially equitable green jobs

The economic recession caused by COVID-19 will likely impact BIPOC communities inequitably because of the disproportionate number of BIPOC working in service jobs, and other forms of employment that

can't be performed from home. As part of the City's efforts to bounce forward from this recession, pathways to green jobs for BIPOC communities should be a high priority for the City. These pathways can include internships, apprenticeships, local hire requirements, mentorships, and other pathways identified in the City Council's Resolution endorsing community principles for green jobs ([Resolution 31712](#)). The frontline communities, those effected "first and worst" by climate change impacts, are disproportionately BIPOC communities. Focusing green job opportunities in those communities not only supports racial equity outcomes, it allows the City to access the experience and knowledge of those best positioned to generate and implement solutions to the problems in their communities.

Climate ready infrastructure

Sea level rise, heat waves, flooding from heavy rains, and poor air quality have already begun impacting communities in Seattle, and will likely increase in severity as the global temperature continues to rise. These impacts will challenge existing infrastructure, and require investments guided by community leadership. Some key infrastructure types for responding to climate change impacts and persistent racial inequities include green spaces, street trees, transit stations, and green stormwater infrastructure (GSI). The City should consider pairing GSI with sidewalk investments in areas of the city that are being impacted by flooding and sea level rise and have yet to receive sidewalk investments. By prioritizing investments for climate resilience projects, especially with the use of BIPOC community led planning processes, and local hire construction policies, communities most impacted by climate change can have a strong role in leading climate resilience efforts.

Conclusion

The pandemic and ensuing economic crisis, in conjunction with the Movement For Black Lives, create an urgency to plan and act that does not allow for an endless "Seattle process". As we have noted, that process traditionally engages and caters to white, wealthy property owners and suppresses BIPOC communities. It would be a travesty if planning for a "recovery" merely restored the unjust status quo after hearing most from the same voices that have historically driven planning decisions. Recent efforts by the City to engage all communities equitably should be continued, adequately resourced and strengthened.

In this paper we have sought to bring together some of our own observations as well as those of people around the country and world who are recognizing that the blows to the existing order offer an opportunity to rethink how we've traditionally engaged communities and on whose behalf. We encourage City planners and leaders to begin now to work collaboratively with individuals and organizations with deep roots in BIPOC communities to center their identified priorities as we build new relationships and structures to create a healthier, more resilient and just Seattle – for everyone.

Who serves on the Planning Commission?

The Seattle Planning Commission is an independent advisory body appointed by the Mayor, City Council, and the Commission itself. The members of the Commission are volunteers who bring a wide array of expertise and a diversity of perspectives to these roles.

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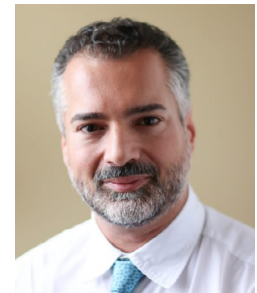
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