

Root Solutions for Housing and Land Justice

Comprehensive Planning for Racial Equity





SW Corridor Equity Coalition (Portland, Oregon)



INTRODUCTION

Race Forward’s vision of a just housing system is one in which racial hierarchies have been eliminated, housing is a public good, and everyone, regardless of their race, has affordable and dignified homes. This vision is grounded in an understanding of our country’s long history of racist exclusion, expropriation, and exploitation through policy, practice, and its racialized housing system as detailed in our series “[Root Causes of Housing and Land Injustice](#)”.

Local government planning agencies are now reckoning with this history and their role in creating racial inequities while reassessing long-standing planning practices and policies complicit in maintaining them. This brief describes how agencies are approaching racial equity in updates to their communities' local comprehensive plans.

A comprehensive plan is a land use planning document with a long-term vision for the physical development of a jurisdiction and acts as a policy guide for decision-making, especially for zoning and infrastructure funding priorities. Also known as general plans, they are often required by state land use laws to include goals and policies for the built environment such as housing, land use, transportation, and utilities. Their widespread use is fairly recent, but even with a short history they have often resulted in harm to communities of color.

The roots of planning and zoning stem from the need to regulate health and sanitation in cities as populations began to urbanize in the early 20th century. In the post-World War II era, federal legislation such as The Housing Act of 1954 birthed a new era of comprehensive planning as \$1 billion was allocated to jurisdictions to prepare plans. The adoption of comprehensive planning became a primary feature of land use control by the 1960s. However, the plans of the 1960s and 1970s exacerbated racial segregation and disinvestment in communities of color, deepening the economic and social disparities between white households and households of color.

The priorities of planners have evolved over the 20th century. Norman Krumholz is credited with introducing equity planning in the 1970s while he served as Cleveland’s planning director¹. His department inspired a generation of planners to advocate for those who have few if any choices. This was a period when planners expanded their focus from the built environment to also planning for people—addressing issues of poverty, disinvestment, and economic opportunity.

In the 1990s, the planning field shifted its focus to smart growth and climate-conscious planning to emphasize dense growth of the urban core. This elevated issues of racial inequity as communities of color living in neighborhoods that previously experienced chronic disinvestment and devaluation of their land were threatened with gentrification and displacement. However, most smart growth planners were not trained in graduate school or equipped by planning agencies to incorporate considerations of racial equity into their processes or policies.

Recently, a new generation of planners are evaluating land use decisions with a racial equity lens, surfacing the racial disparities that past housing and land use decisions have created. Contemporary racial equity planners have been trained and supported to use inclusive community engagement practices and racial equity analysis to adopt comprehensive plans with a vision and policies for equitable growth for communities' physical and social environments.



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1 See Norman Krumholz book “Making Equity Planning Work: Leadership in the Public Sector”, 1990



NORMALIZING RACIAL EQUITY TERMS IN PLANNING

Key Terms

See additional terms in [GARE's Glossary of Housing and Planning Terms](#)

Racial Equity Planner: Racial equity planners are planning professionals who have the drive, skills, and relationships to lead equitable development planning processes to eliminate racial disparities and improve outcomes for everyone. They are skilled at motivating others, working across differences, and building relationships within and outside of government.

Equitable Development: Quality of life outcomes, such as affordable housing, quality education, living wage employment, healthy environments, and transportation are equitably experienced by the people currently living and working in a neighborhood, as well as for new people moving in. Public and private investments, programs, and policies meet the needs of residents, including communities of color, and reduce racial disparities, taking into account past history and current conditions.

Using a racial equity lens to develop updated comprehensive plans addresses two of Race Forward's ["Root Causes of Housing and Land Injustice"](#):

Government power dynamics with the real estate industry. Governments often have established relationships with predominantly white developers, landowners, and the civic associations that influence how land use and housing policy is developed. Real estate professionals comprise a disproportionate share of seats on local planning commissions and zoning boards, creating a conflict of interest in public policy making. These relationships skew the power imbalance toward the interests of private and well-connected institutions, leaving behind the needs of renters, low-income residents, and smaller housing developers and service providers led by and serving communities of color.

Municipal planning and zoning policies that reinforce segregation. Housing and land use policies were used explicitly to segregate wealthy, white populations from non-white populations. This sequestration of wealth and opportunity benefitted white communities at the expense of communities of color. "Race-neutral" or exclusionary zoning standards gradually replaced race-explicit policies by limiting the availability of density/affordable housing in particular neighborhoods. After passage of the Fair Housing Act, local governments continued to obstruct the construction of low-income housing and/or locate it in segregated high-poverty communities of color. Decades of disinvestment in racially segregated high-poverty communities made property values plummet and—often with the help of government redevelopment dollars—fueled speculative real estate endeavors, making neighborhoods ripe for displacement. Governments are now addressing how clustering affordable housing development over the last several decades has perpetuated racial segregation and a lack of access to opportunity for low-income and communities of color.



Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments



OPERATIONALIZING A RACIAL EQUITY LENS IN COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

Racial equity is operationalized in both the planning processes and in the substantive policies and implementation structures of the resulting plans. Planners are using the following established and emerging best practices to change both. Resources for operationalizing each practice are provided.

Shared Racial Equity Principles

Planners are now bringing racial equity to the forefront of comprehensive plans by working early with communities of color to establish a set of racial equity values and principles. These principles guide both the planning process and an overarching policy framework. This has led to familiar domains of the built environment such as land use, housing, transportation, and capital budgeting being revisited with an equity lens. It has also brought a broader people-focused view of growth management to include addressing new issues in comprehensive plans: health equity, environmental justice, development without displacement, fair housing, and equitable zoning reform.

One emerging promising practice is for councils of governments or metropolitan planning organizations to convene multiple jurisdictions to center racial equity in their plans. These convenings establish an understanding of equitable development, inform the creation of a shared set of racial equity principles, and provide opportunities for education and technical assistance in local planning. Regional committees, increased staff capacity in local government offices of racial equity, and support to embed racial equity in comprehensive planning provides policy alignment amongst jurisdictions in a region.

Resources: GARE Housing, Land, and Development Toolbox chapter [“Racial Equity in Housing and Planning Policy”](#) and GARE’s [“Equitable Development as a Tool to Advance Racial Equity”](#)

EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES

Source: Government Alliance on Race and Equity and Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments

Process principles for planning and policy development

Acknowledge history and repair past harms

Document the historical harm caused to communities of color by the actions of government through planning, housing and development to identify the connections between those actions and today's racially disparate outcomes.

Practice inclusive and meaningful community engagement

Require local community participation and leadership in decision-making to reflect a diversity of voices. Use power mapping with an equity lens to design equitable decision making structures that account for differences in power amongst stakeholders. Include targeted strategies to engage and compensate historically marginalized communities, and voices representing future residents. Build cultural competence into planning processes and design planning processes and materials to be clear, accessible, and engaging for culturally diverse stakeholders.

Commit to implementation with internal capacity and community transparency

Implement equitable development policies with sufficient dedicated budget, organizational structures, and staff trained in equitable planning practices to sustain and grow jurisdictions' capacity to follow through on their adopted policies. Develop public-facing accountability tools designed with community engagement and tie them to meaningful budget and policy processes to measure jurisdictions' performance and monitor regional racial disparities.

Policy outcomes principles

Advance economic opportunity and mobility

Promote generational wealth building, local economic development, and entrepreneur opportunities including local minority businesses participating in publicly supported capital projects and real estate development. Work with the private sector to avoid and mitigate displacement of businesses during construction of new projects, enhance community-serving establishments with capital and capacity building supports, and increase career pathways for quality living wage jobs for people in all neighborhoods.

Prevent displacement

Develop government regulations, policies, and programs to mitigate economic pressures and allow anyone who wants to continue living in a community to do so as it grows, especially for residents vulnerable to displacement pressures due to systemic racism and economic insecurity. Prevent displacement of small businesses that serve communities experiencing displacement pressure, including preventing predatory speculation of property in communities at risk of displacement.

Expand affordable housing options and preserve existing affordability

Create and preserve healthy, safe, and long-term affordable housing for all family sizes, abilities, ages, and incomes to create integrated, inclusive communities in all neighborhoods. This should be accomplished through a mix of publicly supported strategies scaled to meet the actual housing need of the region's population growth and communities who have experienced housing discrimination.

Support and strengthen diverse community values

Respect the local culture, character, and diverse values of a community by uplifting existing cultural resources as valuable assets of a community.

Promote people-centered multi-modal mobility and connectivity

Prioritize effective, safe, dignified, healthy, and affordable multi-modal transportation choices for all residents. Support transit-dependent communities and provide equitable access to core services and amenities, including employment, education, health and social services.

Develop healthy and safe communities

Design built environments that enhance health opportunities for communities currently experiencing racial disparities in health through public amenities (schools, parks, open spaces, transportation, complete streets, health care, and other services), access to affordable healthy food, physical exercise, improved air quality, and safe and inviting environments.

Promote and regulate for environmental justice

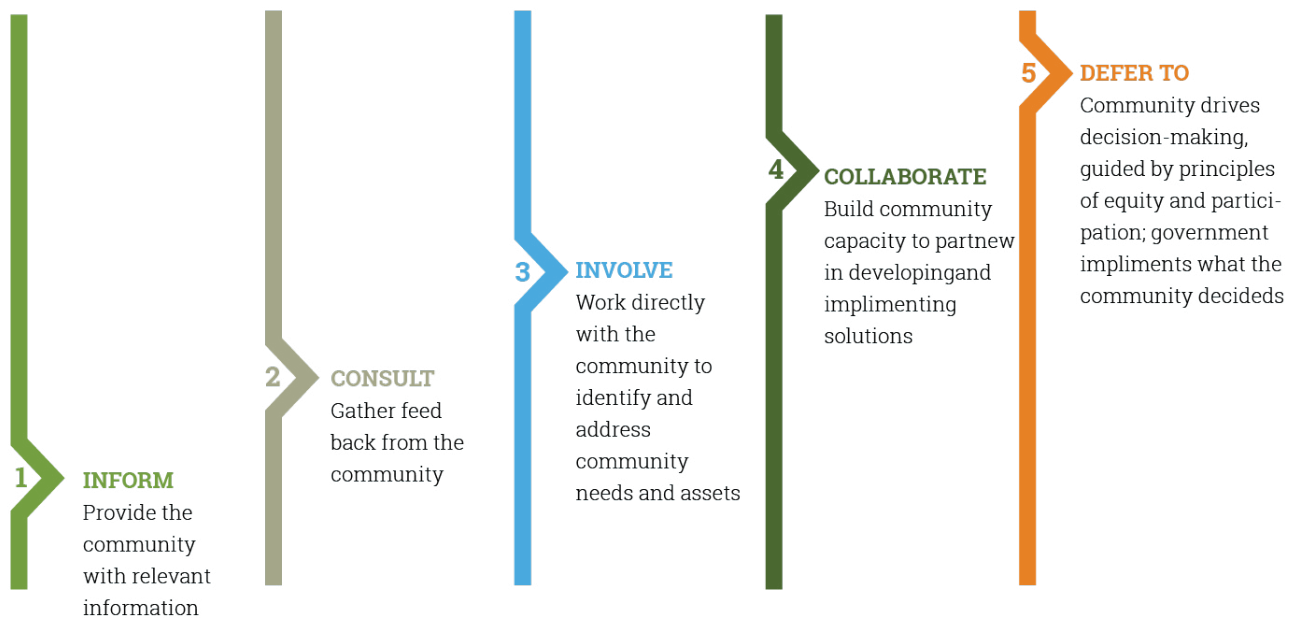
Work across silos within government and across other sectors to eliminate disproportionate and harmful environmental burdens on any community. Enact regulations and secure resources to mitigate and reverse the effects of environmental hazards past and present that have disproportionately harmed communities of color.

Inclusive Community Engagement

The Kirwan Institute describes community engagement as “more than a collection of meetings, techniques, and tools. It takes place in an environment made up of diverse people, practices, conditions, and values.” At its core, community engagement is our democracy at work and should serve to redistribute power so that local governments are effective at being of, for, and by the people. Racial equity planners are using new tools to fold engagement into their decision-making, expand whom they listen to, and increase the participation and power of those who have been excluded, marginalized, and harmed.

One powerful tool to help define the purpose of engagement and role of community is Rosa Gonzalez and Facilitating Power’s “Spectrum of Community Engagement to Empowerment.” The graphic below illustrates the spectrum’s categorization of the different stances that the government can take toward a community. The full tool names the messages different stances can send to the community and their impact. It provides inspiration and activities staff can use to align a process and resources with the needs of impacted communities. It also describes the costs, benefits, and activities of engagement at different phases of a policy or plan development process.

Spectrum of Community Engagement



Based on the public participation spectrum created by the international Association for Public Participation and on graphics featured in *Spectrum of Engagement to Ownership* by Rose González of Facilitating Power.

More planners are collaborating with communities of color to conduct participatory needs assessments, co-host community engagement events to co-create solutions, and funding or assisting community organizations to conduct outreach and education. These types of practices are building community capacity and leadership which lead to longer-term partnerships in local planning decisions. Inclusive engagement is also increasing support for pro-growth policies and enhancing

the effectiveness of the policy implementation. This is because the people directly impacted by inequitable growth are bringing their expertise to the problems to design better solutions which are then reflected in the priorities of the adopted plans.

Resource: City of Oakland's ["Inclusive Public Engagement Guide"](#) and Rosa Gonzalez & Facilitating Power's ["Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership"](#).

Racial Equity Analysis

Municipalities are updating plan language and policies using a structured racial equity analysis of existing plans and community conditions. These analyses examine the historic harm of plans on communities of color and project the potential benefits and burdens of proposed new plans. They include racially disaggregated data to surface disparities relevant to growth and direct community engagement with communities experiencing the impact of those disparities.

The first completed racial equity analysis of a comprehensive plan was conducted in [2015 by the City of Seattle](#) using a racial equity toolkit designed by the City's Race and Social Justice Initiative. City planners engaged a coalition of organizations from formerly redlined neighborhoods to make Racial Equity the central principle of the 2035 Comprehensive Plan, which guided the analysis and development of the plan's equitable growth policy framework. This analysis measured displacement risk and the disparities in the distribution of amenities due to racial segregation and disinvestment. The analysis led to the adoption of dozens of new equity policies in all chapters and creation of a first-in-the-nation funding program for anti-displacement real estate projects led by communities of color.

Resource: [ESRI GIS Racial Equity Hub](#) and [GARE's Racial Equity Toolkit](#)



Arlington County's Engagement Brigade conducting stakeholder mapping exercises

Build on the Success of Proven Models

The field of planning is now rich with examples of adopted land use plans, analyzing the benefits and burdens of growth and integrating considerations of racial equity into their zoning maps and policy. The American Planning Association and GARE have cataloged many of these in their [resource libraries](#) and [repositories](#) so racial equity planners and community advocates can help decision makers see the benefit of centering racial equity in planning.

The City of Minneapolis and City of Portland comprehensive plans were two of the first to include equity policy frameworks with an emphasis on eliminating exclusionary single-family zoning. Minneapolis and Portland were the first to reform their zoning code to allow property owners to build three and six homes, respectively, where before only one existed.

The [City of Minneapolis 2040 Comprehensive Plan](#) has an explicit goal to eliminate racial disparities and an overarching theme for growth to undo the barriers created by a history of public policies that have contributed to significant racial disparities in housing, wealth, health, safety, and economic opportunity. The plan features 14 goals and nearly 100 policies with action steps outlining ways to achieve the plan's goals. Highlights of implementation include city-wide zoning reform, adoption of a Transportation Racial Equity Framework, and a Climate Equity Action Plan.

The [City of Portland's Comprehensive Plan](#) includes equity as a guiding principle and incorporates equity goals and policies into all plan elements. The Housing chapter alone has 54 policies related to affordable housing programs and regulations. The Plan adopted equitable growth policies championed by a community coalition and laid the foundation for strengthening anti-displacement efforts, developing housing preference policies, and new adherences to fair housing policy.

Resource: [APA Equity Planning Case Studies](#) and [GARE's Repository of Race-informed Housing Policy and Plans](#)



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CENTERING RACIAL EQUITY IN COMPREHENSIVE PLAN POLICIES AND PROCESSES

The following case studies provide insights into the internal processes and capacity needed to implement robust equity planning.

The Washington DC Metro Area, known as the DMV, contains the District of Columbia (DC) at its core and is surrounded by neighboring counties in portions of Maryland and Virginia. The DMV area falls under the political jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Government (MWCOC) who—along with 24 member jurisdictions—have crafted a dynamic process to bring local equity practitioners together to embed racial equity in the region’s land use planning and development.

Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments

Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOC) has led the regional effort to build racial equity capacity. The adoption of MWCOC’s [Equitable Development Principles](#) (Principles) in 2024 provides jurisdictions a guidepost to align their local comprehensive plan updates. The Principles were developed alongside ongoing regional and local efforts to build racial equity competency within land use and planning.

After the success of partnering with GARE to host a 2018 Equity Learning cohort, MWCOC’s Chief Equity Officer’s Committee (CEOC) organized an Equitable Development Mini-Series with training content focused on equitable development, community engagement, and budgets. Nearly 80 housing and planning staff along with members of the CEOC participated in the November 2023 equitable development workshop, which also served as an opportunity to vet the Principles and kick off the mini-series.

"I THINK THESE EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS HAVE BEEN THE MOST POPULAR AMONG JURISDICTION STAFF BECAUSE LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT HAVE MAJOR POLICY IMPLICATIONS ACROSS SO MANY DEPARTMENTS."

- Monica Nunez, MWCOG's Government Relations Manager

This momentum led to a MWCOG Board of Directors resolution adopting the Principles in early 2024. The Principles have served a unifying role in policy alignment for comprehensive planning in the DMV region. The MWCOG will provide continued support in the form of technical assistance and training to support implementation in the region.

Arlington County, VA

Arlington County is in the process of updating its General Land Use Plan with a racial equity lens. The planning process builds on a strong foundation of racial equity work across the whole of government and is being led by a long-time racial equity practitioner in the County who was promoted to be the Director of the Office of Community Planning, Housing & Development (CPHD). CPHD's Director, Samia Byrd, is a former county Principal Planner who went on to be a Deputy County Manager and Chief Race and Equity Officer. She participated in MWCOG's Equity Learning cohort with GARE, helped draft the Equitable Development Principles, and designed the Equitable Development mini-series.

Arlington County's racial equity initiative was strengthened in 2019 when the County's Public Health Division published a health equity plan "Destination 2027," which used a health and racial equity lens. This opened the door to the adoption of the [County Board Equity Resolution](#) and the development of a Chief Equity Officer position to oversee county-wide racial equity work. A "Leading with Race" training series was launched for all county staff, and mandatory training modules are now accessible online for new staff and the public.

The County went on to produce several resources and reports advancing its commitment to equity, [Advancing Racial Equity in Government](#), [Realizing Arlington's Commitment to Equity \(RACE\)](#), and a [Race and Ethnicity Data Dashboard](#).

These resources were important touchstones for the County as they passed a Zoning Ordinance Amendment, [Expanded Housing Options](#), allowing missing middle-type housing development. Prior to this legislation, only single-detached homes were permitted in 79% of the County's residential land area, which disproportionately served higher-income households. The history and current-day impacts of exclusionary zoning were highlighted in the County's "Expanded Housing Options Racial and Socioeconomic Equity Analysis," providing a model for racial equity analytical methods applied to a

land use decision. This analysis was critical to these historic land use changes and neutralizing the opposition from high-income neighborhoods that have seen little or no housing development in decades. This win also set the stage for racial equity to be a central focus of the General Land Use Plan update.

CPHD's work exemplifies this new generation of equity planning.

"IT IS PAST TIME HOUSING AND PLANNING PRACTITIONERS IN GOVERNMENT ASSUME THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF RACIAL EQUITY PRACTITIONERS. FOR GENERATIONS WE RACIALIZED HOUSING INVESTMENTS AND LAND USE REGULATIONS TO SEGREGATE, DISINVEST, AND DISPLACE COMMUNITIES OF COLOR. NOW WE COME TOGETHER TO DEVELOP RACIAL EQUITY POLICIES, PLANS, AND PRACTICES CENTERING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN SYSTEMATICALLY MARGINALIZED BY OUR UNJUST HOUSING AND LAND USE SYSTEM."

- Samia Byrd, Arlington County Director of the Office of Community Planning, Housing & Development

When Arlington County adopted the regional Equitable Development Principles in spring of 2024, CPHD expanded their community engagement guide to include equitable engagement strategies. The new engagement strategy of "full inclusion" challenges the status quo, locally known as the "Arlington Way," which relies on a network of civic associations that drive and control land use decision-making, often in opposition to new housing. In order to advance the type and scale of housing development needed to meet the need, Arlington is focusing its resources to engage populations most in need. Efforts include pop-up events in racially diverse neighborhoods, attending local community meetings, and new online tools. Expanded translation of materials and interactive community planning methods are increasing meaningful feedback.

City of Washington, DC

In 2025, the City of Washington, D.C. embarked on a new comprehensive planning process to entirely rewrite its 2006 Comprehensive Plan (Plan). The DC Office of Planning's Comprehensive Plan team participated in the MWCOG's Equitable Development series to help prepare them for the work ahead. Their rewrite process is supported by the City's investments in organizational infrastructure to advance

racial equity across the whole of government and a 2021 amendment to the Plan which centered equity for the first time.

In 2021, the City created two new offices of racial equity: the Mayor's Office of Racial Equity—tasked with building capacity within agencies—and the Council Office of Racial Equity, which evaluates legislation for equity impacts. A [Racial Equity Impact Assessment \(REIA\) Tool](#) will help the Council evaluate equity impacts of the Plan rewrite. The REIA will:

- Identify and consider past and current systemic racial inequities,
- Identify who benefits or is burdened from a decision,
- Disaggregate data by race and analyze data considering different impacts and outcomes by race, and
- Evaluate programs, activities, or decisions to identify measures, such as policies, plans, or requirements, that reduce systemic racial inequities, eliminate race as a predictor of results, and promote equitable development outcomes.

Coinciding with the formation of these equity offices, the DC Office of Planning amended its Comprehensive Plan by first creating an [Equity Crosswalk](#) to look across all Plan elements to identify and strengthen policies that advance equity. Affordable housing was a major focus of the Plan amendment. A 2019 [Housing Equity Report](#) laid the groundwork for strengthening existing housing policies, programs, and renters' rights. The Plan established area-specific goals for affordable housing, a first step in addressing residential segregation and unlocking opportunities for residents of all races and ethnicities to live in neighborhoods rich in civic amenities and economic opportunities. These goals made the case for allocating general fund resources to the District's Housing Production Trust Fund, which receives at least \$100 million annually—more than any city per capita in the country.

In 2024, the Mayor's Office of Racial Equity released a Districtwide Racial Equity Action Plan to jumpstart implementation across departments. The D.C. Office of Planning (OP) then released its Racial Equity Action Plan for 2024-2026, which lays out an approach to embedding racial equity in the Comprehensive Plan Rewrite before the process officially begins. OP will:

- Submit a proposal to the City Council for how racial equity will be embedded in the public engagement process and plan content, and
- Develop a racial equity policy framework.



Arlington County planners leading community planning exercises at the Farlington Farmers Market

ADVICE FROM RACIAL EQUITY PRACTITIONERS FOR GETTING STARTED

The Washington DC Metro region experience provides valuable insights for other jurisdictions applying a racial equity lens to their comprehensive planning.

Lead with Racial Equity Values and Principles

Racial equity planners spoke of the importance of starting with a principles-driven approach to planning that takes into account both the process and outcomes of policy development. Equitable development principles serve as a values framework for incorporating racial equity in land use planning policy as well as planning practices.

"THE REGION'S EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLE FOR PRACTICING INCLUSIVE AND MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT BROUGHT IN THE NEW VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES NEEDED TO SHIFT PUBLIC POLICY. IT ENSURED THAT THE COMMUNITIES MOST-IMPACTED BY A LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING OPTIONS WERE ABLE TO MEANINGFULLY PARTICIPATE IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT."

- Samia Byrd, Arlington County's Planning, Housing & Development Director

Leverage the Power of Regional Government

Regional governments can play a pivotal role in comprehensive planning by convening key stakeholders, leading policy priorities, and providing ongoing technical support and training to their member jurisdictions.

MWCOG's committees such as the Planning Directors Committee, Housing Directors Committee, and Chief Equity Officers Committees provide the regional infrastructure for land use planning using an equity lens across jurisdictions.

One of the greatest benefits of participating in the DMV Equitable Development Mini-series was the ability for cross-jurisdictional collaboration.

"IT IS FANTASTIC TO HAVE A DEDICATED SPACE TO TALK ABOUT WHAT RACIALLY EQUITABLE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT LOOKS LIKE WITH PEERS."

- Ryan Hand, City of Washington DC Associate Director for Citywide Planning

Hand believes that the new regional Principles can help to normalize discussions about systemic racism and serve a unifying role in regional policy alignment.

Be Explicit and Prepared for Backlash

The new generation of racial equity planners must be bold as they navigate this new era of broad social change and change within the field of planning. It is important to be explicit upfront about the need for equitable development and prepare for the inevitable backlash.

Preparedness involves developing robust and thorough equity analysis to establish a justification for why a comprehensive plan is the right policy vehicle to achieve racial equity goals. In-house legal counsel can be helpful in determining which historical and existing conditions data will increase the likelihood of legally defending race-informed policies.

Preparedness also means identifying and assessing the power of those who may oppose and those who can support equitable growth. Power mapping is a useful tool to show which groups have high amounts of influence and vested interests in the status quo. It will also show which communities are most impacted but have less influence. These results can help equity practitioners prioritize resources and attention for the latter, as well as prepare for resistance from the former.



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APPRECIATIONS

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