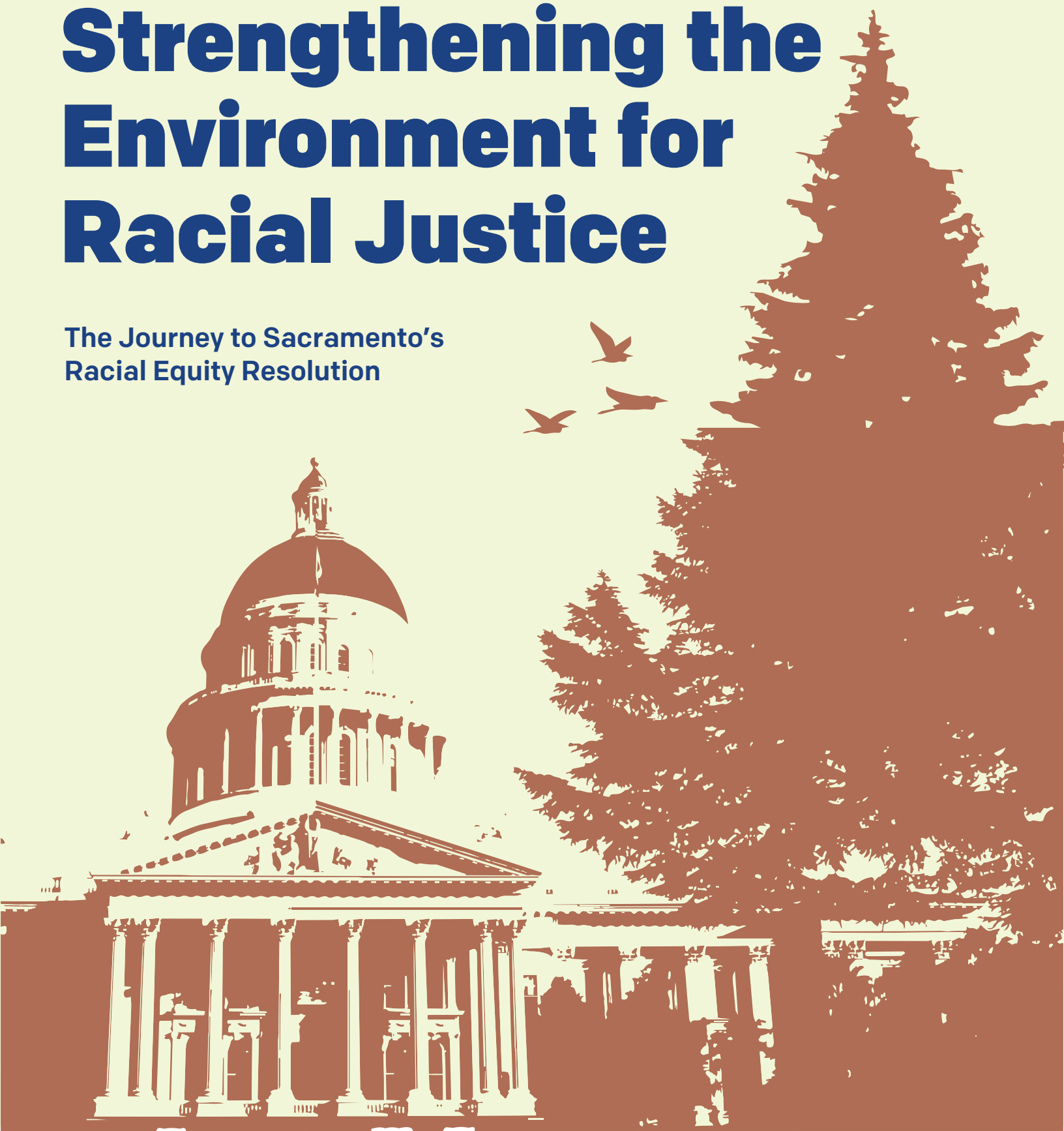
race forward

Strengthening the Environment for Racial Justice

The Journey to Sacramento's Racial Equity Resolution



Race Forward's Place, Policy, and Power (3P) department presents this case study to illuminate the strategies behind the transformation of community demands into legally backed policy infrastructure for racial equity in the City of Sacramento. This initiative was driven by a partnership between a multiracial, intergenerational coalition of community members and city government officials, all sharing a commitment to lead for racial equity.

Our Work

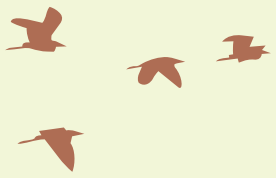
3P works with partners from across the country to change how decisions get made in communities. We help forge the relationships, skills, and infrastructure that strengthens community and government leaders' ability to work together in real partnership — creating governance beyond government and democracy beyond elections. We support leaders and organizations who are accountable to communities of color who have been harmed by systemic racism and are committed to building real governing power in place. It's not about just helping to change policies; it's about changing who's at the table, how decisions are made, and how solutions get implemented with communities, not for them. When we do our work well, people see and feel material change in their lives, communities have more say over what happens where they live, and the broader movement for racial justice feels more connected and clear on what works so victories can spread.

Our Challenge

Too often, the way we make decisions, develop policy, and govern excludes the very people who have the most at stake, producing limited wins that fail to address the systemic root causes of racialized inequality. This leaves communities in a cycle of disappointment and broken civic trust that feeds a narrative of hopelessness and lack of belief that change is possible. However, we know that change is possible and it's happening in big and small ways everyday across our country. Communities are rewriting the rules of governance, moving from transactional relationships to structures that sustain collaborative partnerships rooted in shared accountability and community agency. This is why our work focuses on transforming the practices and culture of governance, across the "whole of government" and civic formations — centering communities of color in building the durable multiracial democracy that can serve us all. We hope this case study helps to illustrate how this happens.

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Executive Summary

In December 2024, the Sacramento City Council unanimously passed a Racial Equity Resolution to operationalize racial equity in the City of Sacramento government. This resolution was co-written between the Racial Equity Alliance (Alliance), a community-powered, intergenerational coalition consisting of community-based organizations and trusted local leaders; the Racial Equity Council, a 12-member body of resident leaders, and a team of key leaders and staff from the City of Sacramento.[1] The journey to this resolution took many years, but it exemplifies a key component of co-governance: creating a strong enabling environment for both community coalitions and government teams through establishing shared power structures for deep collaboration.



An enabling environment for co-governance is a set of conditions and current context that either helps or hinders successful partnerships between community and government to drive racial justice and deepen multiracial democracy.

As you read, consider the following:

1. **What strategies did both the government and community teams use to improve the likelihood of success?**
2. **What elements of the enabling environment seemed most important for a co-governance effort?**
3. **How did the groups build a shared power structure? What worked well and what could be improved?**

[1]Race Forward (2025). "Building an Enabling Environment for Racially Just Co-Governance." https://www.raceforward.org/system/files/2025/05/Building-Enabling-Environment.pdf

Building the Community Enabling Environment

For many decades, community groups in Sacramento had been frustrated by their failed attempts to push local government to reduce racial inequities. The cumulative impact of several high-profile drivers, including the 2018 police killing of Stephon Clark, an unarmed 22-year-old Black man, led to even louder demands for government transformation. The distrust between community groups and the City was significant, and intergenerational civic trauma was front and center for residents of color in the city. As one Alliance member stated, "At the beginning, I didn't consider it a partnership approach as much as it was 'make a deal with the devil' - if government doesn't change, nothing will change on the ground."

The community's goal was to institutionalize racial equity into Sacramento's government structure and to exercise greater influence on the city's budget. Specifically residents wanted influence on how/where resources were allocated to address longstanding racial gaps. According to Alliance member Kim Williams, "The key challenge facing our community's coalition was, 'how do we embed racial equity into how the City works?'" Ultimately, the path to achieving that goal was through a City Council resolution that would serve as a roadmap for implementing change within government and provide essential backup support for getting all City departments to participate. The hope was that this first resolution would lay the groundwork for future actions that would ultimately direct City funds to the neighborhoods and communities that have faced significant disinvestment across generations.

The success of this co-governed resolution hinged on the community coalition and the City government's ability to collaborate and the very intentional strategies they used while working together.

"These community groups are deeply aligned through shared values and vision for their city, but until recently they lacked the container to organize their collective power and sustain their work together."

—

Jesse Villalobos
Race Forward

As the COVID-19 pandemic and the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked national demands for racial justice, the Sacramento City Council agreed to move forward on a racial equity initiative in partnership with this community coalition, with the support of Race Forward's Place-Based Strategies program. This birthed the Sacramento Centered On Racial Equity (SCORE) workplan, which laid out a series of community-driven, government-endorsed goals.[2] This included passing a City Council Racial Equity Resolution and establishing a Racial Equity Council of residents which amplified voices from neighborhoods most impacted across the city. Community groups put substantial research and design work into the development of this plan that the government ultimately supported. In terms of process, it was also the start of building stronger shared governance structures that bridged the relationship and power between community and government. Some questions that arose out of this were:

As the implementation of SCORE began, some key questions around the community governance process arose:

1. **How would a new 12-member community-appointed Racial Equity Council integrate strategy with the existing community group, the Alliance?**
2. **How would equity exist in this process especially since the time and labor of the Council would be recognized and resourced in ways the Alliance's work was not?**
3. **How would they make decisions, maintain strong solidarity, and keep work moving when other priorities arose?**
4. **How are other communities approaching these issues?**
5. **What models exist where residents share governing power with local government toward mutual goals?**

The answers to those questions evolved. While initially the Council and Alliance were separate entities with separate responsibilities, they eventually merged into one body. This merged group includes not just the traditional, better-resourced local nonprofits,[4] but also newer groups and younger organizers, as well as grassroots, membership-based, and mom-and-pop neighborhood nonprofits. The group collectively built a set of agreements and norms where they agreed to trust one another's decisions, so if one person couldn't make a meeting, they would not hold up the collective progress of the group. The decision-making structure honored voices while not delaying progress.

[2] City of Sacramento. "SCORE Initiative Work Scope and Timeline." https://www.cityofsacramento.gov/HR/Office-Diversity-Equity/sacramento-centered-on-race-equity-score-initiative/score-initiative-work-scope-timeline

[3] Compensating community members for their work is a best practice in racial equity when deeply engaging community members for their expertise and experience.

[4] Ibid.

"As someone on the inside of city government, it probably feels and looks like a lot more progress than can be seen or felt from the outside."

—

Kelly Rivas

Mayor Steinberg's Chief of Staff

Racial Equity Advisor



Building the Government Enabling Environment

Parallel to the community coalition strengthening its environment, the City government was also strengthening its equity muscle, both through policy and through key elections. Then-mayor Darrell Steinberg's Chief of Staff and Racial Equity Advisor, Kelly Rivas, had been working to assemble a dedicated team to begin internal government racial equity work from the earliest days of his 2016 election. Directly after entering office, the City Council directed the City Manager to develop, recruit, and hire the City's first Diversity and Equity Manager—Aimée Zenzele Barnes in 2018. They led the City of Sacramento in becoming a member of the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) and launched Sacramento's internal equity reforms.

Barnes' key strategies included trainings, lunch and learns, building equity frameworks, identifying early-adopter leaders and departments, capacity-building, and providing the baseline of normalizing racial equity as a core government function. This groundwork strengthened the ability of government to share space with community in ways that did not cause harm. From a power perspective, it's important to understand that while Barnes' office at underneath the City Manager, the effort was heavily driven by the Mayor and, soon, City Council. In the 2020 election, a community-backed, community organizer won a council seat - Mai Vang. Vang's background in strengthening health and education outcomes for South Sacramento children made her a fierce leader for racial equity and a strong ally of the Mayor and other equity advocates on City Council.

As Barnes built up the government system's racial equity muscle, Rivas and Vang dedicated consistent leadership to racial equity at the City and helped push through red tape as needed. The City Council and the Mayor agreed to establish the first-ever Racial Equity Committee, a City Council committee dedicated to collaborating with community to drive racially equitable outcomes in Sacramento. By 2021, the Racial Equity Committee approved the allocation of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars, and by 2022, it established a $500,000 midyear budget request from the Mayor to support racial equity work across City government.

While these environments were strengthened through focused strategies addressing community and City needs, communication and collaboration between the community and government teams continued, deepening as each team demonstrated increased courage, capacity, and sustained commitment to the work.



"We knew community needed to drive [this racial equity partnership], be centered in it, and have their own power and command of it, in partnership with the city."

—

Aimée Zenzele Barnes

City of Sacramento Diversity and Equity Manager

"We really shared the power to define what the work is."

—

Kao Ye

Racial Equity Council Member

Building co-governance practices and shared power structures

As each side "worked out" its equity muscles, it became clear that co-governance was the right approach for creating Sacramento's racial equity resolution for two reasons. First, the government lacked legitimacy on its own and needed the community to lead. Second, the community needed to better understand the inner workings of government systems and processes in order to structure their resolution for full and effective integration of racial equity into City government. Both teams were essential to any success, so it was imperative that they collaborate and benefit from one another's increasing strength. As Councilmember Vang said, "The work needs to outlive elected officials, so it needs to be in collaboration."

Collectively, the Alliance and City created numerous structures for shared decision-making and shared power to pass the resolution:

SCORE Initiative - This framework incorporated the idea of building a formal structure for racial equity advisors to the government and the need for a resolution committing the city to long-term change. Racial Equity Alliance members and City staff drafted the content over eight months, and the City Council approved it in December 2024.

Creation of the Racial Equity Committee - This structure, as a subcommittee of the City Council, served as a platform for racial equity work to be elevated and shared transparently with the public. This body also provides an accountability structure to ensure the City commitments in the resolution actually happen.

Co-creation of agendas for Racial Equity Committee - Unlike most city council/subcommittee structures in the US, this one involves Alliance members as well as City staff in determining the agenda for each meeting. This co-ownership of a government entity's literal agenda is a key example of how community members' roles shifted from agitators or advisors to integral co-governing partners with staff and elected Council members.

Trio meetings - These standing meetings included Alliance designees and representatives from City Council, Race Forward, the Mayor's Office, and the City Manager's Office to move the work and address challenges. These meetings exist to this day, and as Rivas shared, "We should have started them earlier."

Racial Equity Resolution - While government staff supported and shared earlier drafts of ideas for the resolution, ultimately, to affirm community voice and priorities, the Alliance and Council co-wrote the resolution and had as much ownership over the text as government staff. As one Alliance member shared, "This process helped the community groups learn how City staff think/work, so strategically it puts us in a position where we know how to move in this space."

Outside of the shared power structures, there are a few other components of this effort to highlight. In reflection, all participants identified the importance of Race Forward's role in serving as a sustained "backbone" organizer, project manager, and strategic thought partner to both the City and Alliance. All interviewees reported they felt that the effort would have fallen apart without this consistent organizing anchor.

Perhaps most importantly, City staff and community members built independent relationships with each other through this process: Attending community events, celebrating personal and collective wins together, grabbing coffee, and informal check-ins and calls to one another when challenges arose. All of these small actions help build trust, respect, and deeper empathy for one another.

These relationship-building strategies and co-governance structures proved essential when an issue arose with the Racial Equity Resolution passage. After the Racial Equity Committee unanimously approved the resolution, the City Manager unilaterally changed the text, which diminished community voice and priorities while eliminating measures to promote City accountability. This action - changing the text of a City Council Committee-approved resolution - was unprecedented and caused an immediate rift.

Community leaders immediately sounded the alarm and voiced their concerns through direct verbal and written communications with Council members and City staff, demanding that the community-endorsed, Council-approved version of the legislation be presented to Council for the final vote. Fortunately, utilizing the co-governance structure, government staff and leaders were simultaneously working inside the City to correct course, while maintaining strong communication with community (i.e., inside-outside tactics). The Alliance utilized their base of community groups to mobilize residents to voice their concerns. Ultimately, the City Manager offered a public apology to the Alliance at the City Council meeting and withdrew his amended version. This ensured that the original, community-endorsed resolution was reinstated before the final vote.

This example demonstrates some of the challenges of working with a complex government entity, united in aspirations for a racially equitable city, yet representative of a spectrum of ideas about how, when, and with what resources racial equity is achieved. Community power, government accountability, and resilient relationships helped the City and community move forward together.

"The way things get done is through relationships."

—

Robynne Rose
Alliance Member

Building co-governance practices and shared power structures



Sacramento's City Council ultimately passed the original resolution drafted in collaboration with community, committing the City to long-term operationalization of racial equity work. The resolution establishes a legal backing for the City's internal racial equity work, and the goal is for the City and Alliance to co-create an implementation plan with recommendations for City Council as a next step. While most material outcomes have yet to be felt by residents, part of the resolution requires consistent community-government partnership and public readouts of progress at the Racial Equity Committee and in community spaces.

Resolution implementation continues to this day, as do many of the co-governance structures listed above. The City of Sacramento also recently hired a new City Manager, which brings renewed hopes and expectations from all for strong racial equity leadership from the City's lead executive.[5] Though trust between the City and coalition was damaged, the power-sharing structures built as part of this process are being used to repair trust and continue forward momentum toward tangible improvements for Sacramentans.

[5]Sacramento City Express. "Sacramento City Council appoints Maraskeshia Smith as New City Manager." https://sacramentocityexpress.com/2025/09/30/sacramento-city-council-appoints-maraskeshia-smith-as-new-city-manager/

Lessons for the Field

Building a strong enabling environment takes time but is essential for success.

In racial equity work, where government and community have such minimal trust, building up the requisite capacity to engage on a human level takes a lot of time and investment. Particularly when community coalitions are newly formed, they often lack the power, resources, staffing, and the apparatus of government that the City can utilize to deploy resources and drive their work. One Race Forward staff shared, "The Mayor and City Council continually pushed the coalition to move faster. But without proper time to strategize, build trust and align, what was created would not have been as powerful." The strength of both the Sacramento City government and the Racial Equity Alliance/Council, however, bears out the importance of this groundwork. Sufficient leadership and people power to keep the work going have been key to the ongoing progress.

Prioritize relationships with an inside/outside strategy, and keep a generosity of spirit.

Two quotes from participants exemplify this lesson. Alliance member Kim Williams: "This work doesn't happen if you don't have advocates on the government side - then it becomes just advocates pushing against government. You need people on the inside ready for change." Diversity and Equity Manager Aimée Barnes agrees: "It is vital to really understand the community, and to think about it from an abundance mindset, not a deficit one - recognize they will see the work differently from you, and that's okay - keep your growth mindset front and center."

Understand how power flows in your jurisdiction; if you have a weak mayor system, City Council and the bureaucracy are key.

Often, community members see a single elected official as the champion who can solve all problems, but the reality is that it takes far more than one elected to drive change, especially since unelected government staff will be charged with implementation. Ensuring that you have key government leaders at the table from all corners, from the beginning, makes it more likely that your co-governance effort will succeed, even when it faces challenges. The Racial Equity Committee is a structural way to ensure the work continues even as Mayors and City Council members cycle out.

The roles of an anchor, a neutral facilitator, and project manager are critical to impact and sustainability.

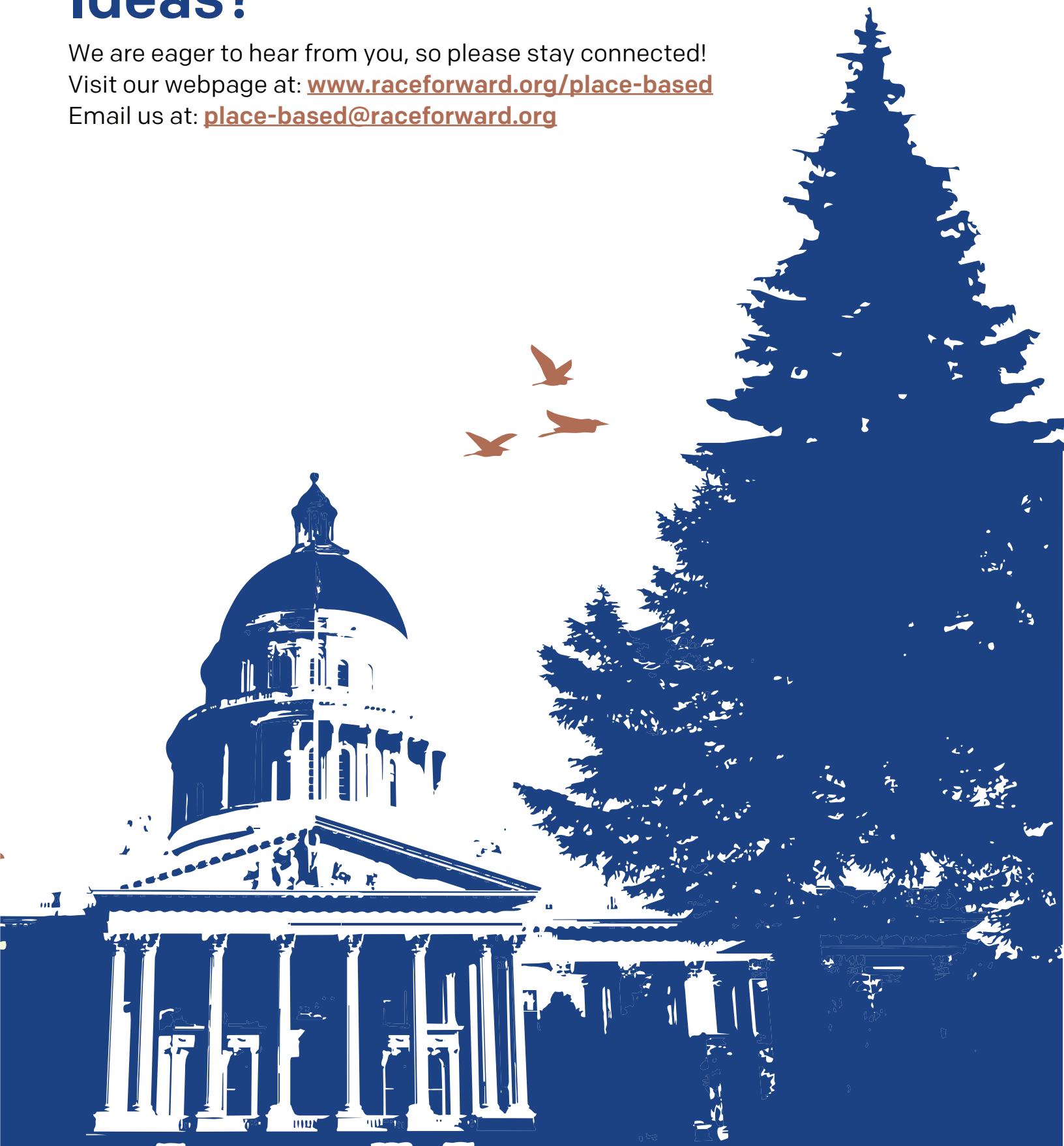
These co-governance bodies can be funded through philanthropy, government, or some combination of the two, but it is vital that one "side" of the co-governance isn't overly burdened with managing all the project logistics. More importantly, having a neutral party invested in the shared vision and success of both community and government as a consistent participant can help all parties move forward together.

Sacramento's success provides a clear example of the importance of analyzing and strengthening the environment for co-governance as well as the importance of building shared power structures to accomplish the work. Despite some setbacks, Sacramento is now in a much stronger place to drive racial equity transformation than it was ten years ago. That progress is due to the dedication and tireless commitment of dozens of City government staff and community leaders committed to making multiracial democracy a reality.



Connections?
Questions?
Ideas?

We are eager to hear from you, so please stay connected!
Visit our webpage at: www.raceforward.org/place-based
Email us at: place-based@raceforward.org



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