

# COMMUNITY-LED PLANNING FOR CARBON NEUTRALITY IN SEATTLE'S RESIDENTIAL SECTOR



**Left:** A team from the Environmental Coalition of South Seattle (ECOSS) and Puget Sound Solar explain the solar panel installation process to a Seattle homeowner. Photo courtesy ECOSS. **Right:** Seattle resident Glenda Rader and her daughter Alma open their energy-efficient refrigerator. Photo by Marcela Gara, Resource Media.

## SEATTLE IS CALLED THE EMERALD CITY FOR GOOD REASON.

Surrounded by beautiful mountain ranges and the flowing waters of the Salish Sea and Puget Sound, the city is a true gem to the 750,000 people who live here and care deeply about our future. Many Seattleites are taking steps to protect the places we love and make our homes more energy and water smart, but not all have equal ability to make these changes or equal access to the environmental and clean energy programs available. Furthermore, communities most impacted by air and water pollution and rising energy and housing costs are often the ones with the least access or say in such programs.

As the City of Seattle works to transition to carbon neutrality, opportunity exists to help reverse these economic and environmental inequities by [sharing power with and centering local communities](#) in the planning, design, and delivery of environmental and clean energy programs. This set of recommendations offers the City a roadmap to help

achieve the goal of community-led planning for carbon neutrality in the residential sector.

## ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL INEQUITIES IN SEATTLE

Seattle is one of the most economically divided cities in the country. While the upper bracket of income earners makes hundreds of thousands of dollars annually, many Seattleites earn just enough to get by, and about [12 percent are living in poverty](#). Poverty disproportionately impacts communities of color, Indigenous people, LGBTQ+ communities, single-parent households, people with disabilities, elders, refugees, immigrants, and other marginalized populations, making it increasingly difficult for them to keep up with rising energy costs and rents and take advantage of energy and environmental programs. Such households are often unable to pay for, nor are in control of, making energy- and water-saving improvements to their homes or putting solar on the roof. Worse yet, some are being forced out of their

neighborhoods as new development—including environmental efforts like [transit-oriented development](#)—drives up housing costs, further exacerbating displacement and gentrification. Since 2010, Seattle [rent has increased 70 percent on average](#), resulting in the displacement of communities and an increase in homelessness, [mostly among communities of color](#). In the 1960s and ‘70s, Black communities represented 73 percent of Seattle’s Central District population. Currently, Black people represent [less than 18 percent](#) of the neighborhood.

A number of historical policies contributed to this displacement and gentrification. In King County, for example, over [500 deeds covering 20,000 properties](#) had racially restrictive language that excluded non-white residents from the neighborhood. People of color were limited to Seattle’s Central Area because essentially every other neighborhood was designated for white residents only. In the 1930s, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) was created with the goal of providing or backing loans so that Americans could purchase a home. However, the FHA warned that real estate values would be undermined with the presence of one or two non-white families and adopted a national appraisal system where race was as much a factor in real estate assessments as the condition of properties. These guidelines were adopted by the private industry and prevented many non-white Americans from securing home loans with as favorable terms as whites were afforded.<sup>1</sup> Segregationist policies such as these

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“Thirteen of the 14 heaviest industrial polluters are located within a half-mile of places where historically oppressed communities live in the Seattle area.”

served to concentrate poverty and people of color in certain neighborhoods and have contributed to the wealth and income gap that characterizes Seattle today.<sup>2</sup>

Today, Seattleites, especially communities of color, call the International District, Beacon Hill, Rainier Valley, Rainier Beach, South Park, or Delridge home. And communities of color are growing in areas like Lake City, Lynnwood, and south of Seattle such as Kent and Federal Way, where El Centro De La Raza opened a new location in January to respond to demographic shifts and community needs. Most of these areas are near highways and heavy industry and are subject to the greatest impacts of environmental degradation. For example, [13 of the 14 heaviest industrial polluters](#) are located within a half-mile of places where historically oppressed communities live in the Seattle area.

According to the [Duwamish Valley Cumulative Health Impacts Analysis](#) conducted in 2013:

*“Beacon Hill/Georgetown/South Park (zip code 98108) had the highest ranking for air pollution and for exposure to confirmed and suspected contaminated sites. This area also had one of the highest rankings in the city for unhealthy environmental effects, i.e., lack of access to a healthy built environment. Cumulatively, these poor environmental scores combined with high ranks for social vulnerabilities (socioeconomic factors and sensitive populations) and a medium ranking for public health effects resulted in the highest cumulative impact score of Seattle zip codes in the study.”<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> <http://newsreel.org/transcripts/race3.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/OPCD/OngoingInitiatives/EquitableDevelopmentInitiative/CapstoneReport2019.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://justhealthaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Duwamish-Valley-Cumulative-Health-Impacts-Analysis-Seattle-WA.pdf>

## THE IMPERATIVE FOR EQUITABLE ENERGY PLANNING

Much of our current energy policy and planning has exacerbated a growing wealth gap by targeting benefits toward rewarding individuals for lower-carbon lifestyles.<sup>4</sup> For example, the Federal Investment Tax Credit for Renewable Energy, worth up to 30 percent of the cost of installation, is tailored to people who own property, have homes with roofs in good structural condition, access to capital, good credit, and a tax liability (i.e., those in a higher tax bracket with a higher income). By the same principles, 83 percent of the solar capacity under Washington State's Renewable Energy Incentive Programs totaling \$142 million has been installed on individual homes, directing approximately \$350 million in electricity value and \$150 million in tax benefits to a narrow swath of Washington's residents.<sup>5</sup> Rapidly increasing property values, without commensurate cost of living increases, create more burden on families through increasing rents and property taxes, further extending the wealth gap.

Additionally, most energy programs, such as solar grants for affordable housing and weatherization and efficiency and energy assistance programs—while laudable and important for their targeted support of low-income households and service organizations—do not interrupt the unfair distribution of wealth and power. Programs may be inaccessible due to displacement, bureaucracy, or income guidelines, putting people further at risk for displacement, losing their homes, and living without energy efficient technologies. Here, it is important to distinguish between access and inclusion, and [racial equity](#). Racial equity is the systematic fair treatment of people of all races that results in equitable opportunities and outcomes for everyone.

For environmental and clean energy programs to be truly equitable, the City must center the leadership and decision-making of communities of color and other historically oppressed communities and entities in the planning, design, and delivery of its programs and services. In addition, the City must prioritize the reduction of energy burdens, improve the homes and health of communities, shift funding and resources to community-driven equitable approaches, utilize anti-displacement strategies due to gentrification, work with other institutions outside of its boundaries to support those

already displaced and who travel daily into Seattle to work or for other purposes, and commit to the long-term creation of truly equitable policies at all levels. Solutions should take into account the legacy of environmental and social justice issues and seek ways to creatively shift dynamics.

## THE SEATTLE WORKING GROUP: A HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN APPROACH TO EQUITABLE ENERGY PLANNING

As a participating city of the Zero Cities Project (ZCP) and with a goal to chart an equity-centered approach and pathway to zero-net-carbon buildings, Seattle established a funded community partnership to co-create a local strategy with the support of the national ZCP team.<sup>6</sup> In the summer of 2018, a working group was recruited from among the City's Environmental Justice Committee (EJC), community advocates, residents, and representatives from community-based organizations (CBOs) to participate in a facilitated series of strategy-building conversations. The Seattle Working Group, guided by a local facilitator and support from the City's

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org/our-work/our-programs/energy-democracy/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.energy.wsu.edu/RenewableEnergySystemIncentiveProgram.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> Corrine Van-Hook Turner, Movement Strategy Center; Leah Obias and Nalani Yoko, Race Forward; Debbie Slobe and Marla Wilson, Resource Media





**Seattle Working Group (left to right):** Emily Chan, Yolanda Matthews, Cesar Garcia, Mikhaila Gonzales, Hester Serebrin, Pah-Tu Pitt, Corrine Van Hook-Turner, Christine Bunch and Alma Villegas.

Office of Sustainability and Environment (OSE), convened monthly meetings from January 2019 to October 2019 in Seattle to examine an energy planning process that would improve support for low-income individuals, historically oppressed people, and communities of color. Using prompts from Human-Centered Design methodology, the facilitator led a series of conversations to distill recommendations from the personal and professional experiences of working group members. Conversations were structured around topics of policy, programs, and accountability. The result was a compilation of ideas and recommendations (short-term and long-term) on equitable energy planning.

## SEATTLE WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. SUPPORT AND FOLLOW COMMUNITY-SPECIFIC LEADERSHIP

Geographic communities (e.g. the Central District) are distinct from demographic communities (e.g. LGBTQ+), although these can overlap. Understanding and working with these nuances is important for an energy planning process that is inclusive, accessible, community-driven, and neighborhood-scale.

- Fund and support community members who can convene and facilitate energy planning activities
- Tailor programs and services to each neighborhood and community

- Support and invest in neighborhood leaders and green career pathways for people who reside in and/or possesses demonstrated connections to each neighborhood
- Develop and strengthen relationships that extend beyond more well-known and well-resourced environmental organizations
- Amplify community-originated social media and narratives and establish a city-resourced social media campaign that elevates each neighborhood or community
- Support organizers and groups with intersectional strategies and a strong grassroots presence

### 2. EVALUATE AND EXPAND THE DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOODS' COMMUNITY LIAISON PROGRAM

Expand the Department of Neighborhoods' Community Liaison Program to ensure liaisons have capacity to support resident leaders and organizers.

- Improve training that includes the functions and procedures of various departments and programs
- Provide adequate resources and time commensurate to the complexity of community involvement
- Look for opportunities to improve recruitment strategies to identify Community Liaisons who reside in and/or have deep ties to each neighborhood
- Establish a neighborhood referral system (e.g. include a liaison contact in the landlord/tenant packet)
- Community Liaisons, interpreters and translators each serve distinct and challenging roles that should be

- separated without reducing overall staff capacity
- Establish a process of consistent and proactive check-ins between Community Liaisons and community leaders, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) led organizations and neighborhood associations

### 3. INVEST IN AN INCLUSIVE PROCESS

By investing in local residents and community-based organizations representative of Seattle's most vulnerable populations, the City can ensure programs truly meet local needs, reach more people, and deliver equitable results.

- Directly fund community-based organizations and loosely formed neighborhood groups to implement projects. Some examples might include:
  - > Set a standard percentage of project budgets that is allocated directly to CBOs and neighborhood-led or grassroots groups to design and implement projects in each neighborhood (i.e. leading briefings at community-based meetings and holding responsibility of program planning)
  - > Develop a standardized funding model that is designed by communities and that includes cost of living adjustments
  - > Replace/reorganize city roles and responsibilities with scope of work contracts that directly fund CBOs and community groups



*South Seattle homeowner Marissa Mei Esteban installs an energy efficient light bulb in her kitchen. Photo by Marcela Gara, Resource Media.*

- > Adjust funding criteria to favor projects designed or widely supported by community members of color or people living on limited income
- Support upstream organizing work, even if it does not immediately generate quantifiable deliverables
- Invest in robust staffing at all levels of the City that is dedicated to supporting neighborhood-based projects, including diverse representation within staff
- Provide community organizations and members proper accommodations and support for participation (e.g. paid trainings, stipends, meals, translation, childcare, etc.)
- Invest in capacity-building for under-resourced community partners
- Leverage input gathered from the community by various City departments to eliminate community fatigue
- Establish a process that reports back to community how the various City departments are applying community input on an ongoing and consistent basis

**Key recommendation:**  
Directly fund community-based organizations and loosely formed neighborhood groups to implement projects.

### 4. INVOLVE DISPERSED, DISPLACED, AND IMPACTED COMMUNITIES

Seattle City Light brands itself the “Nation’s Greenest Utility” and is able to offer some of the lowest electric rates in the country for its use of clean hydroelectricity.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, tribes and other river-dependent communities continue to pay a high price for our low cost of electricity. Federal and state policies have enabled investor-owned and consumer-owned utilities to redirect or drain entire waterways and inundate tribal lands, traditional and usual fishing sites, and sites of cultural and economic significance with little or no support for impacted communities. The ecological consequences are compounded by climate change, market fluctuations, and aging infrastructure.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.seattle.gov/light/greenest/cleanhydro.asp>



## JUST TRANSITION PRINCIPLES

The Just Transition movement asserts that the impacts of climate change are inextricably linked to poverty from a local to a global scale. Authentic solutions will respond to environmental challenges by simultaneously addressing economic stagnation, racism, and a lack of people of color in the historically white-led mainstream environmental movement. The movement advocates for the community-led solutions needed to ensure workers' jobs and livelihoods as economies shift in response to our climate and economic crises.<sup>8</sup>

There must be an acknowledgement of those who have already been displaced as well as those living outside of Seattle and are currently impacted by Seattle's utilization of artificially low cost of power and fracked gas.

- Hydroelectricity provides clean energy at a low cost to customers but at a high cost to tribes and other fish-dependent and river-dependent communities. Address low fish runs and land loss with reparations and coordination with tribes and impacted communities, including seeking other opportunities to interact differently moving forward
- More equitable planning yields opportunity for Seattle to take into account its green footprint within and outside Seattle and discontinue further displacement and harm as the economy transitions
- Involve residents who have been displaced from their neighborhoods by reaching out to service centers in areas such as Burien, Des Moines, Tukwila, SeaTac, Kent, and Federal Way and acknowledge the connectedness of our region as a strength
- Identify community job training, job creation opportunities, career pathways, and business opportunities for members of historically oppressed populations and those historically displaced, including increased representation from communities identified by the Vulnerability Index, with goals identified by the community for an inclusive economy
- Apply Just Transition Principles (see box at right) and support workers and businesses at risk from shifting to a carbon-free economy (for example, pipefitters who install and service fracked gas lines)

## 5. LINK THE CLIMATE ACTION PLAN (CAP), EQUITY AND ENVIRONMENT AGENDA (EEA), DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOODS AND RACE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE

While the City of Seattle has an Equity and Environment Agenda (EEA) Climate Action Plan (CAP) and Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI), the three do not always work together. The CAP originated internally, did not go through the process of consulting the Environmental Justice Committee (EJC) and uses status-quo Western science that is not representative of all impacted communities—perpetuating the standard practice of looking at nature as separate from communities—and sets zero equity targets for community engagement and shared ownership. Planning documents need to incorporate intersectional identities, such as acknowledging Indigenous, refugee, and immigrant communities that are sometimes assumed to be represented although may not be. Additionally, community-driven energy planning would require interdepartmental coordination with the Department of Neighborhoods.

- The roll-out of the CAP demonstrates that the City inconsistently applied the community engagement components of their RSJI tool to ensure the community is present every step of the way
- The Seattle Working Group recommends a reassessment not only of the tool's effectiveness but of the way City staff apply and evaluate the tool to all of its projects. Also, we recommend improving the RSJI toolkit to encompass intersectional identities and impacts beyond the geographic location of projects

**Key recommendation:  
Identify community job  
training, job creation  
opportunities, career  
pathways, and business  
opportunities for  
members of historically  
oppressed populations.**

<sup>8</sup> [https://gotgreenseattle.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/OurPeopleOurPlanetOurPower\\_GotGreen\\_Sage\\_Final1.pdf](https://gotgreenseattle.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/OurPeopleOurPlanetOurPower_GotGreen_Sage_Final1.pdf)



*Seattle homeowner Sian Wu and her sons enjoy a Sunday afternoon reading beside their energy efficient double-paned windows. Photo by Marcela Gara, Resource Media.*

- Implement CAP at the neighborhood and community levels. The City must invest additional resources by providing consistent training on the application of the tool and ensure the tool is integrated during the design phase of all projects
- Apply the City's Racial Equity Toolkit to the CAP and all other plans that impact communities directly and evaluate the process and results to determine whether or not outcomes are better for impacted communities
- Prioritize and invest in the most impacted communities with special attention on low-income renters and homeowners and others at risk of displacement by using the 2035 Comprehensive Plan Equity Analysis Vulnerability Index and other resources such as the City of Seattle Displacement Risk Index
- Ensure that targets are set for leadership by underrepresented people and businesses and historic demographics as outlined in the City of Seattle's Racial Equity Toolkit, seeking ways to reach people that are not frequently engaged
- Hire equity-specific staff (i.e. equity managers for each department) who are trained to apply an RSJ lens to all interactions and transactions

## 6. IMPROVE PROGRAM DELIVERY

While the City of Seattle has developed a number of programs and policies to help residents shift to clean energy and make energy-saving improvements to their homes and businesses, eligibility criteria, paperwork, and bureaucratic silos create barriers to access. We recommend the City work in partnership

with communities and across departments to effectively reach and serve Seattle's most historically oppressed populations, whether or not they still reside in city limits.

### Improvements to existing programs would include:

- Ensure program information is easy to understand, accessible, and translated for non-native English speakers.
- Incorporate energy program applications into community services and tenant/landlord packets
- Incorporate equity targets into building codes and LEED and ENERGY STAR certifications
- Collaborate with other institutions providing energy efficiency programs, such as Puget Sound Energy
- Address overlaps and gaps in programs delivered by the City and other community groups

### New programs would include:

- Establish renewable energy and community solar co-op projects that help reduce energy burdens for low-income renters and homeowners and those at risk for displacement, which could include businesses, CBOs, clinics, etc.
- A one-stop shop (online portal) for energy program eligibility and applications that are developed and designed by a diverse representation of community members and include a strategy to reach those who do not have internet access
- Explore existing community solar co-op models to inform the development of local programs



## 7. IMPROVE ACCOUNTABILITY

Existing organizational structures such as the Environmental Justice Committee (EJC) were created as models of engagement that would bridge the gap between community members and advocates and City representatives. Experiences from past members of the EJC have identified the need for the City to reassess the committee's process and ensure the balance of power lies with the community representatives. The current process often involves City staff setting agendas, representatives of established environmental organizations taking over conversations, and the voices of resident representatives often being overlooked or overshadowed. In addition, community representatives are appointed by the City, thereby limiting members from being able to touch on certain topics and have an open and honest dialogue. The current structure of the EJC does not have enough separation between the City and those representing the community.

### **We recommend the City review and restructure existing accountability bodies as necessary:**

- Seek balance in the representation of nonprofit staff with resident community leaders and business owners
- Compensate community members for bringing their real-life experiences
- Add flexibility to accommodate alternatives to in-person meetings
- Convene at rotating locations and times that accommodate all members residing in different parts of the city, with diverse work and family schedules
- Fund opportunities for community members to convene independently of the City

**Key recommendation:  
Seek balance in the  
representation of  
nonprofit staff with  
resident community  
leaders & business owners**



*Seattle resident Nikki Mazzei shows off her energy saving Conserv refrigerator.  
Photo by Marcela Gara, Resource Media.*

- Develop a set of principles or guidelines for the accountability body to:
  - > Hold the City accountable to community
  - > Hold the accountability body accountable to community
  - > Empower community members to lead and eliminate reliance on city staff
- Invest sufficient resources to value community members' time and work-related commitments, and provide adequate staffing for flexibility and support
- Establish or support existing community advisory groups that hold elected officials and City staff accountable

## 8. BUILD TRUST

When City staff are inconsistent in how and when they engage the community—sometimes delaying community involvement until the final hour—this damages public trust. For example, hosting a public forum on the plans for a new development without clarity on the public's influence can be disappointing and can damage accountability by setting unclear expectations.

- Stop the practice of the City asking for input from communities without transparency and a consistent process for reporting back
- Shared power must include a commitment from the City to reallocate a percentage of all budgets for projects impacting local neighborhoods to the residents residing in them and those with strong ties to each neighborhood



## CONCLUSION

Over the course of a year and a half (2019 – 2020), the Seattle Working Group co-developed a strategy that would be responsive to what they already knew—through the lived experiences of Seattle’s most impacted communities and their own—was an inconsistent, inaccessible, and inequitable City planning process that (historically and presently) does not allow for policies and programs to benefit everyone. Furthermore, the strategy addresses the ongoing need to fully explore what it would take to ensure communities at the neighborhood level are informing and can shape climate policy. What the Working Group came up with, through the support of their City partners, was a series of recommendations rooted in a pivotal shift to transform traditional City planning processes toward ones that center a community-driven approach. The Working Group modeled this collaborative approach within their own planning process with the support of a skilled facilitator in this area to navigate existing power dynamics. They identified that key culture shifts are needed that call for:

- Elimination of community fatigue and distrust by stopping the practice of the City asking for input from communities without transparency and a consistent process for reporting back;
- Shared power that must include a commitment from the City to reallocate a percentage of all budgets for projects impacting local neighborhoods to the people residing in them; and
- Changing institutionalized behaviors that undermine and undervalue communities and the genuine investment in community-driven processes.
- As the roll-out of the CAP demonstrates, the City has inconsistently applied the community engagement components of their RSJI tool to ensure the community is present every step of the way. The Working Group recommends a reassessment not only of the tool’s effectiveness but of the way City staff apply the tool to all of its projects. The City must invest additional resources by providing consistent training on the application of the tool and ensure the tool is integrated during the design phase of all projects and not at the end when it will merely act as “checking the box.”

## CALL TO ACTION

***The Seattle Working Group is calling on the Environmental Justice Committee (EJC) to review these recommendations and work with the Office of Sustainability and Environment (OSE) to design a short-term and long-term plan of action to implement community-led planning for carbon neutrality. The EJC is asked to provide a progress update on their plan by the end of 2020.***

**For more information and to continue the dialogue, contact:**

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The Seattle Working Group is supported in part by the Zero Cities Project, a three-year effort to assist cities and their most impacted communities to co-develop and implement equitable roadmaps and policy strategies to achieve a zero-carbon building sector by 2050. Through a community collaboration process centering on equity and analysis that draws on city data, the project generates planning models, common roadmaps, and a suite of tools that are supporting a broad network of cities. Seattle is among several cities engaging in a community-led process through a convened working group of experts centering local priorities. The Zero Cities Project team integrates expertise from the Urban Sustainability Directors Network/Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance, Architecture 2030, New Buildings Institute, Race Forward, Movement Strategy Center, and Resource Media.



In 2015, the City of Seattle and its Office of Sustainability and Environment embarked on a yearlong process in partnership with leaders across Seattle to develop a strategy to address environmental disparities for communities that are impacted most by environmental injustice. This process jointly led by the City and the Community Partners Steering Committee informed the creation of the [Equity & Environment Agenda](#) to guide the City's Equity and Environment Initiative. The Agenda provides goals and strategies which serve as a roadmap for sectors to better work together to advance environmental equity in Seattle.

The [Environmental Justice Committee](#) was launched in 2017 to ensure those most affected by environmental inequities have ownership in decision-making, environmental program/policy design and Equity & Environment Agenda implementation while enhancing partnerships with City departments and better connecting community-based solutions into government.

The Environmental Justice Committee or EJC, was established as a mayoral advisory board comprised of community leaders who are deeply connected to communities of color, Indigenous and Native peoples, immigrants, refugees, people with low income, English language learners and/or organizations who work closely with these communities or environmental justice issues. Committee members are selected through an application and interview process. In 2019, changes were implemented to the application and interview process through a collaborative design process between the EJC and the City's Equity & Environment Initiative staff. The application review team now includes the Committee's leadership team, EJC alumni, and Equity & Environment Initiative staff. In January 2020, the committee welcomed seven new members and the Committee is working to establish their own governance structures and committee culture. They have developed their first work plan outlining their goals and priorities for 2020-2021 that are rooted in community priorities to advance the goals within the Equity and Environment Agenda. Committee members elect their leadership team which sets the meeting agendas, with support of staff, and provides direction for the Committee as it moves forward their priorities in the spirit of advancing environmental justice for their communities.

The Committee is also responsible for the oversight of the Environmental Justice Fund. This grant program, established in 2017, has distributed over \$500,000 to community-led projects that improve environmental conditions, respond to impacts of climate change and get us closer to achieving environmental justice.

In 2020, the Director of the Office of Sustainability and Environment created a Climate Justice Director position to deepen the City's commitment to climate action and further advance climate and environmental solutions rooted in racial equity and social justice.