Insights:
Learning from Equity Leaders
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GENERATING INSIGHTS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEARNING FROM TEN CITIES</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT EQUITY MEANS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaches to Defining Equity</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LESSONS LEARNED</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Themes</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Relationships and Partnerships</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data and Storytelling</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources and Capacity</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and Intention</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNCOVERING EQUITY PRIORITIES</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHALLENGES</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process and Operations</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindset</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk of Gentrification</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIVOTAL MOMENTS</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLOSING</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTINUING PROGRESS</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

*Insights* uplifts peer learning and leadership training by working to advance equity within the field of green infrastructure. As the Green Infrastructure Leadership Exchange continues to advance its mission by creating deep learning spaces among municipal and county leaders, relevant questions arise:

- Where are investments directed?
- Who benefits?
- How can we encourage infrastructure investment in communities in need?

*The Exchange is building a practical playbook for implementing green stormwater infrastructure that any city can adopt. We seek to use this playbook to accelerate implementation of green stormwater infrastructure affordably and equitably throughout North America.*

As tools for implementing and educating about equity have evolved, the Green Infrastructure Leadership Exchange (The Exchange) took on this project to explore multiple approaches to advancing equity. The intention of the project was to better understand what leadership looks like in answering these questions.

This report is intended to be used as a peer learning tool, as well to inform the broader conversation around how to advance equity within green infrastructure. It in no way attempts to represent the full depth, breadth, or complexity of how equity work moves forward within these cities. There is much to be learned, but hopefully this report will facilitate a deeper and more authentic conversation about the aspects of leadership necessary to fundamentally shift the green infrastructure sector.
GENERATING INSIGHTS

In order to better understand the circumstances surrounding the implementation of equity-driven stormwater infrastructure, The Exchange interviewed civic leaders from ten cities in the United States. These conversations were designed to be generative and exploratory, with the perspective that leadership can be practiced in creative ways and unique conditions, and that all staff can be leaders regardless of official titles. Importantly, leadership for equity comes in many forms and provides space for all staff to contribute (not just based on one's title).

Over the course of 60-minute conversations, city leaders shared their insights:

• Their city's journey towards equity and pivotal moments along the way
• What equity means in their context
• Leadership lessons
• Key challenges to advancing equity
• Approaches to determining equity priorities

Interviews were conducted confidentially to encourage candor and broad exploration of leadership lessons, barriers, and pivotal moments along the equity journey. These interviews were undertaken as an effort to deepen the understanding of how municipal leaders are moving equity forward, in addition to their specific tools and outcomes. Our goal with this report is to uplift stories of leadership and learning about embedding equity within green infrastructure.

_Insights_ captures the themes and highlights of these conversations.

These interviews were conducted between March and July 2020 by Bina M Patel, CEO of Saathi Impact Consulting, LLC on behalf of and with input from the Green Infrastructure Leadership Exchange.
Thank you to all those who participated in these conversations. Interviewees universally responded with candor, reflection, and commitment to delivering on the promise of government for all the people.

Also, this project unfolded as the Covid-19 pandemic struck and the racial justice uprisings unfolded in the wake of the George Floyd murder. The conversations about equity, community vulnerability, neighborhood development, and public good became ever more nuanced and pressing.

A special acknowledgement of gratitude to Black, Indigenous, and People of Colors whose truth-telling serves us all for the better.

LEARNING FROM TEN CITIES

Individuals in city, county, and leadership positions from these cities were interviewed:

1. Seattle, WA
2. Baltimore, MD
3. Camden, NJ
4. Buffalo, NY
5. Atlanta, GA
6. Tucson, AZ
7. Grand Rapids, MI
8. Vancouver, BC
9. San Francisco, CA
10. Philadelphia, PA
WHAT EQUITY MEANS

Insight:
It is essential to consider the many ways some people have not benefitted from environmental and green infrastructure investments.

“Environmental justice is a core element of equity. This means we are fair and ethical in how we spread the risks and the benefits of projects. We consider the health of people and the environment.”

City leaders shared a variety of approaches to defining equity, including specific ways to understand the many ways residents may experience marginalization. While working definitions of equity may vary, there are essential characteristics of equity present across cities. Specifically, within the field of green infrastructure, equity...

• Serves and benefits individuals from the most marginalized groups.
• Manifests in both the process and the outcome (i.e., the means and the outcomes must be aligned).
• Is visible through data, which reveals inequities around investment, funding, and needs.
• Must occupy intersections among not only race but geography, housing, education, poverty, disability, language, and other descriptors.

“Maintaining a lens on how equity shows up in green infrastructure is essential to delivering the promise we make to residents. We have to ensure that all customers have access to our services in the same way, and that factors like race, income, or language do not get in the way of them working with us.”
Approaches to Defining Equity

Over the course of the interviews, leaders identified five key areas in which equity is defined and applied in their area: geographic, racial, income, process, and relationships. Within each area, key questions emerged which inform how inequities are isolated and addressed.

- **Geographic**
  Are there historic or current inequities in green infrastructure investments across our region/service area?
  Do we see patterns around how neighborhoods or zip codes determine whose basements flood or if parks are available and accessible?
  Are there geographic areas in our region that have historically been under- or disinvested and that continue to bear the burden of poor or no green infrastructure?

- **Racial**
  Do we see historical and current trends across who benefits or suffers from infrastructure distribution based on racial demographics of communities?
  Are there continuing policies or practices that continue to perpetuate racial marginalization or limited access to our investments?

- **Income**
  Do low-income communities get fewer green infrastructure investments and benefits?
  Are our services equitably affordable?

- **Process**
  Do all communities have access to us as city, county and utility leaders?
  Do all communities receive information in understandable ways (materials provided in their first language, for example)?
  Do residents who have been historically marginalized have opportunities to participate in deliberation, decision-making, and knowledge sharing?

- **Relationships**
  Do we have relationships with community leaders across different parts of the city?
  Have we built trust with communities that have historically been marginalized?
  Are we considered trustworthy?

Nearly all interviewees stressed the danger of approaching equity issues from a reductionist standpoint. Rather than merely considering matters of race, leaders in this field need to consider intersections among factors including geography, housing, education, poverty, disability, and language, among others, when planning and implementing green infrastructure.
LESSONS LEARNED

Insight:
It is a journey, and every step counts.

“We have to move past the buzzword of equity and focus on changing the way things are thought about and the way we do things. This is about being intentional in every step of our processes – together.”

A variety of lessons can be learned from the lived experiences of interviewees. These conversations allowed us to uncover many dynamic and “between-the-lines” lessons about how to bring equity into day-to-day work. Several of the lessons here are interconnected and present multiple avenues for taking action. In general, any leadership working towards equity in this field would do well to follow each of these lessons in their implementation.

Summary of Themes

- Build community relationships and partnerships
- Foster collaboration within and outside your organization
- Use visuals and stories to represent data effectively
- Invest institutional resources in long-term initiatives
- Strive for language that puts transparency and community needs first

Community Relationships and Partnerships

An overwhelmingly shared theme emerging from the interviews was that relationships with community members matter. Communities who have historically been marginalized from green infrastructure efforts or relationships with government leaders are key participants in green infrastructure, and as such, they need to feel that their perspective matters in any infrastructure projects. This is important not only because they are the ones being affected by such projects, but also because they provide capital for the projects. Such partnerships also bring benefits to the equity mission: involving community members increases buy-in and support for green infrastructure.
One fundamental component of building strong community relationships is trust. Community members need to feel that they can trust leadership before any meaningful relationship can be built. This may necessitate explicit acknowledgement of current or historic tensions between government and the community. While trust can be built organically through increased transparency and outreach programs, it is also important for the relationships to be two-way; the older model of simply informing communities about programs or projects is not sufficiently interactive to constitute a partnership. Interviewees recommended introducing participatory planning, contributing to important community events, and giving support (financial or otherwise) to other groups and individuals within a community.

Of course, when forming relationships with the community, it is critical to consider who is in the room when decisions are being made. If there is a representation gap between the leadership and the community, seek to remedy this problem as part of community relationship building. Importantly, representation means diversity and lived experience of issues. Interviewees often pointed to the asymmetrical knowledge between “insiders” and community members, but through a strong and communicative relationship, a more nuanced understanding of what is happening on the ground leads to better solutions, including learning about how community-based relationships are built and maintained, language used by community members, and even how community members define benefits. Equity leaders learned how communities talk about the challenges and about the need to connect with neighborhood-based leaders, interconnections among issues related to green infrastructure, housing, and open space, and community priorities.

Finally, while long-lasting relationships in the community are a real asset, it is important to continually be looking for new relationships and partnerships. Identify leaders in the community beyond the one or two “go-to leaders”, and keep in mind that community leadership may change over time.

"Building relationships across areas and the opportunities to do deep learning and training outside of my day-to-day work showed me how my privilege obscured some truths of what was happening in our community, and how environmental justice, racial justice and green infrastructure are tied together. Those moments of deep learning and spending time in these conversations have been transformative for me."
Collaboration

Interviewees identified a variety of collaborative avenues by which equity is more effectively introduced. By including individuals from a variety of disciplines, backgrounds, or locations, leadership can create a deeper knowledge base from which to draw during planning and implementation. Amplifying horizontal and vertical collaboration within your own institution can provide opportunities to build shared wins, expanded knowledge, and innovative solutions. In addition, this expands the network of equity leaders internally, creating a more sustained and embedded practice of advancing equity.

Naturally, inviting collaboration within any equity project will first necessitate building the infrastructure for such collaboration. How will this collaboration happen, and how will information and decisions be shared? Who will staff the collaboration? This is also an area in which community partnerships can be built—community leaders and experts will likely have useful information or perspective, or will know someone in the community who does. More to the point, community members will have a more intimate knowledge of how concepts like climate vulnerability affect people where they live.

Data and Storytelling

Data is critical in understanding where and how green infrastructure is being implemented inequitably. However, some interviewees pointed to the limited value data can have when it is not organized in a way that is clear to colleagues and community members. Two ways of representing data that can be much more powerful than numbers on spreadsheets are visuals and personalized community stories. Consider how information is being shared and try to increase its impact through visual or narrative means. Interviewees shared how shifting from “reporting data” to showing maps and telling broader stories using data and story boards shifted the conversation and understanding of green infrastructure and equity.

Resources and Capacity

It is crucial to properly manage an organization’s available resources, including funding, time, effort, education, and person-power. Interviewees stressed the need to invest in equity as a continuous ongoing piece of work, prioritizing ongoing learning and action – rather than one-time training.

This supports the importance of building solid community partnerships (and keeping those partnerships maintained as individuals come and go), as effective relationships with the community can continue advancing equity work over the long term.
To that end, leaders should try to uncover any way in which resources can be invested in community support—childcare, food, transportation, multilingual materials, etc. Working with community-based partners, foundations, and non-profits has been an effective tool support activities that are often outside of the reach of governmental agencies.

One frequently overlooked resource your organization can contribute is workforce development. Hiring practices within your organization can contribute to changing the civic workforce to reflect the community in which it works. This builds capacity from the inside out and benefits community members in the form of positive, meaningful employment that also boosts investment in community infrastructure projects.

Finally, to gain perspective about equity, new green infrastructure solutions, and community engagement strategies, interviewees pointed to the immense benefits of place-based learning and peer learning. Site visit, cross-city virtual learning sessions, community leader panels and other forms of broadening your learning circles are especially important to understanding the many pathways of advancing equity.

**Language and Intention**

Nearly every interviewee had words of caution about the scale and difficulty of equity work. Equity issues can be extremely difficult to discuss, even for individuals with good intentions. The best thing an organization can do is to be as transparent as possible with its motivations and actions. Do not promise things that cannot be delivered (in terms of community engagement activities, project benefits, etc), and practice self-reflection throughout the process (including personal inquiry about your own biases, decision-making norms, and what kinds of “expertise” is most important). Create spaces for shared learning, for staff to grapple with data about investment disparities, power dynamics, and equity goals, and bring in experts to help facilitate the equity learning journey.

In a broader sense, the language used in equity work matters greatly. One interviewee reported running into problems by being overly cautious with their language—in their fear of misrepresenting anyone, they failed to clearly articulate their mission and values around equity. *Saying* and *doing* are both critically important aspects to equity.
UNCOVERING EQUITY PRIORITIES

Utilities used do a lot of “informing.” Now our work is doing more participatory planning, deep community engagement, and having conversations with community members about preferences and tradeoffs.

Central to advancing equity are the methods by which city, county, and utility leaders come to understand community priorities. As one city leader mentioned, equity is both the process and the outcome. Community determination about priorities, needs, and solutions is an essential part of advancing equitable green infrastructure projects.

For most leaders interviewed for Insights, developing a more rigorous methodology of community input and community-led project planning is a priority, but it is also a long road. The challenges of complex projects with multiple participants, embedded power structures, access to information, relationship building, and tight resources require deep equity capacity and strong leadership. By deep capacity, we can observe that equity leaders and organizations demonstrate explicit, public, and consistent deliberation about equity impacts in day-to-day decision making, that equity knowledge and practice is widespread across the organization, and that the organizational norms are such that equity is as normal to discuss and investigate as are budget questions.

Several leaders pointed out the need to advance this work beyond data collection and consider the procedural and process intersectional aspects of equity. One question that can guide this particular priority: How are processes designed to engage and interact with people most affected and provide space to for decision-making by those people? This and other relevant questions need to be answered before any meaningful equity work can take place.

This task can be accomplished through observation of historical and technical data, and most of all through community outreach (including education about how community members can engage in participatory decision-making processes). Community outreach for the goal of assessing priorities can be accomplished in several ways, including forums or open houses, surveys, and partnerships with consultants or community organizations.
CHALLENGES

You can get worn down or so used to hearing something - so going out to get a new perspective and learn from others, gives me an appreciation for what we are doing here.

Interviewees pointed to several barriers to advancing equity, including:

• Time
• Funding
• Communication
• Process and Operations
• Mindset
• Risk of gentrification

Challenge 1: Time

Although time is necessary for building community relationships or making lasting change, it is also a luxury that many organizations cannot afford due to tight or conflicting schedules. All too often, issues of equity are the first to be abandoned by an organization when a deadline is approaching or busy individuals cannot find the time to collaborate. Time should be given extra consideration when it comes to community members who are willing to work with your organization; many such community liaisons have several important projects on their plate at once, and their time needs to be appreciated and respected as much as possible.

Challenge 2: Funding

Apart from the general personnel costs associated with advancing equity work, there are many additional funding issues that interviewees were generally unaware of when they began their projects. For example, expertise from community members or other equity workers cannot be expected to be given for free, and the new data necessary to accurately plan and implement any equity program can be expensive to come by. Finally, projects that address community priorities sometimes fall outside approved funding lines for governmental or private organizations, and these projects must find alternate sources of funding.
Challenge 3: Communication

Not all staff or departments within an organization will have the same understanding of equity issues, and more importantly, there may also be a gap between the organization and the community at large. Miscommunication about intentions or needs can throw a project into disarray at a critical moment, particularly when there is a lack of in-house expertise about equity at a project’s outset. Creating spaces for ongoing learning, reflection, and open communication is essential to sustaining equity work. This can mean redesigning agendas to include more time for critical thinking about equity learning and application, specific ongoing retreats, building a community of learning group, and consistently offering more time for staff to bring forward their individual learning into collective spaces.

Challenge 4: Process and Operations

Even if an organization invests heavily in an equity initiative, the effect of such a program can be limited without implementation across all departments. In particular, one interviewee mentioned that it is extremely difficult to introduce an equity lens into project procurement. Another interviewee cited the lack of a strong workforce development agency, while others pointed to internal silos and power asymmetries among different internal experts. In general, if an equity team lacks allies across operational departments, any work they do will be hamstrung when actually put into practice. This again points to the need of building strong relationships internally, as well as infrastructure to support cross-functional and interdisciplinary learning.

Challenge 5: Mindset

Unfortunately, many equity projects in green infrastructure organizations end up falling apart due to conflicting mindsets and/or time constraints within the organization. Some individuals may believe that equity falls outside the job of a utility or government agency, or will believe the way they have always done their work does not need to be changed. Others will likely be unaware of equity issues that affect individuals within their city, even within their neighborhood. Whether fueled by resistance to change or lack of awareness, these mindsets can sabotage the efficacy of an equity program.

Challenge 6: Risk of Gentrification

Finally, Insights interviewees identified that gentrification is a central concern and ever present and complex challenge. In this way, improved infrastructure can fail to serve its intended community and actually reinforce problems of segregation and wealth disparity. Community partnerships and clear communication of intentions and process are critical for making sure green infrastructure does not make further problems for a community. This is also requiring agencies consider that sometimes, green infrastructure benefits may not be community benefits. Listening to community, being present or engaged with other groups around housing, transportation, and community development can help green infrastructure agencies develop a more responsive approach that may help mitigate gentrification concerns. Importantly, interviewees notes, while green infrastructure and utility agencies cannot solve gentrification, this issue requires active engagement and leadership from the green infrastructure sector.
Looking back at their journeys towards equity, interviewees pointed to pivotal moments that may not show up as a headline announcement or an unveiling of new tool or report. However, whether they realized it at the time or not, these moments proved critical to their progress.

"Sitting in equity task force meeting, I saw the head of engineering and water, our CFO, and so many other colleagues from across many departments - and wow, it hit me. We finally have the senior leadership to our table with community people who have never gotten their ideas up to senior management. I saw how important it was to have this official process to allow us to do this - we signed up for and created an opportunity for this interaction. And I saw deep engagement."

"We spent years building relationships internally and externally. And then a few things fell in place: our senior leadership [was] to more explicit about equity; we took time to acknowledge where we are in the journey, and to ask how we can give equity the value it needs to influence our actions?"

"Support from a funder to engage in this work has been so pivotal to us. It allowed us to engage in place-based learning, peer learning, building our in-house equity expertise, and supporting community engagement."

"Hearing about equity from different spaces and taking time to be in learning spaces together with colleagues beyond the equity team. Normally we don't get this time to be in a learning space."

"We had a research fellow who was personally interested in equity. We made sure to include him in our equity meetings and conversations. He helped us articulate the key questions we need to ask ourselves about what an equity approach can mean: “Who is benefiting from this, and who is burdened by this policy?” “What are the barriers from the city structure to form partnerships [and] engage?” and “Are we talking to the right people including folks when making decisions and policy?”"
CLOSING

"It comes full circle, keep at it – doing this work makes more of a difference than you’ll ever know. You may never see the people you’ve helped, but you’ve helped. Be consistent in your purpose and tenacity.

Intentionally do as much good as possible. Opportunities will come your way, and then be opportunistic - and be ready to take the opportunity. Look for partners, and don't feel you have to reinvent the wheel on your own.

The effort required to build one’s own leadership to advance equity work is no small feat. The larger task for building allies, relationships, trust, and shared purpose is formidable. What became clear in the course of these interviews was even when uncertainty or budget constraints or resistance to change appeared, these leaders demonstrated the unabated commitment to keep going."
CONTINUING PROGRESS

Although the interviewees were able to identify several areas in which they had found success in working towards equity in green infrastructure, they acknowledged that their work was far from over (and in fact that equity work is never over). Looking forward, the interviewees identified some essential areas to continue advancing equity, in line with the lessons, priorities, and challenges identified in their experiences:

• Being more explicit about racial equity and systemic racism within the history of public works and investments.
• Increasing cross-departmental and interdisciplinary collaboration and leadership on equity.
• Boosting community-led decision-making and fully operationalized early and ongoing community engagement as a regular component of their work.
• Striving to make their language clearer and more explicit.
• Invest in a process of accountability to ensure their organization’s actions match up with their intentions.

Another important part of the Exchange’s equity work includes development of an Equity “Point of View” document. This document provides space for the Exchange to develop a clear narrative about what equity means, why it is important to green infrastructure efforts, and key areas of commitment to action. The POV document is a “living” document, meaning the Exchange may use the POV to capture its ongoing journey and evolution of equity work.