

Community Voices on Equity & **Green Stormwater Infrastructure**

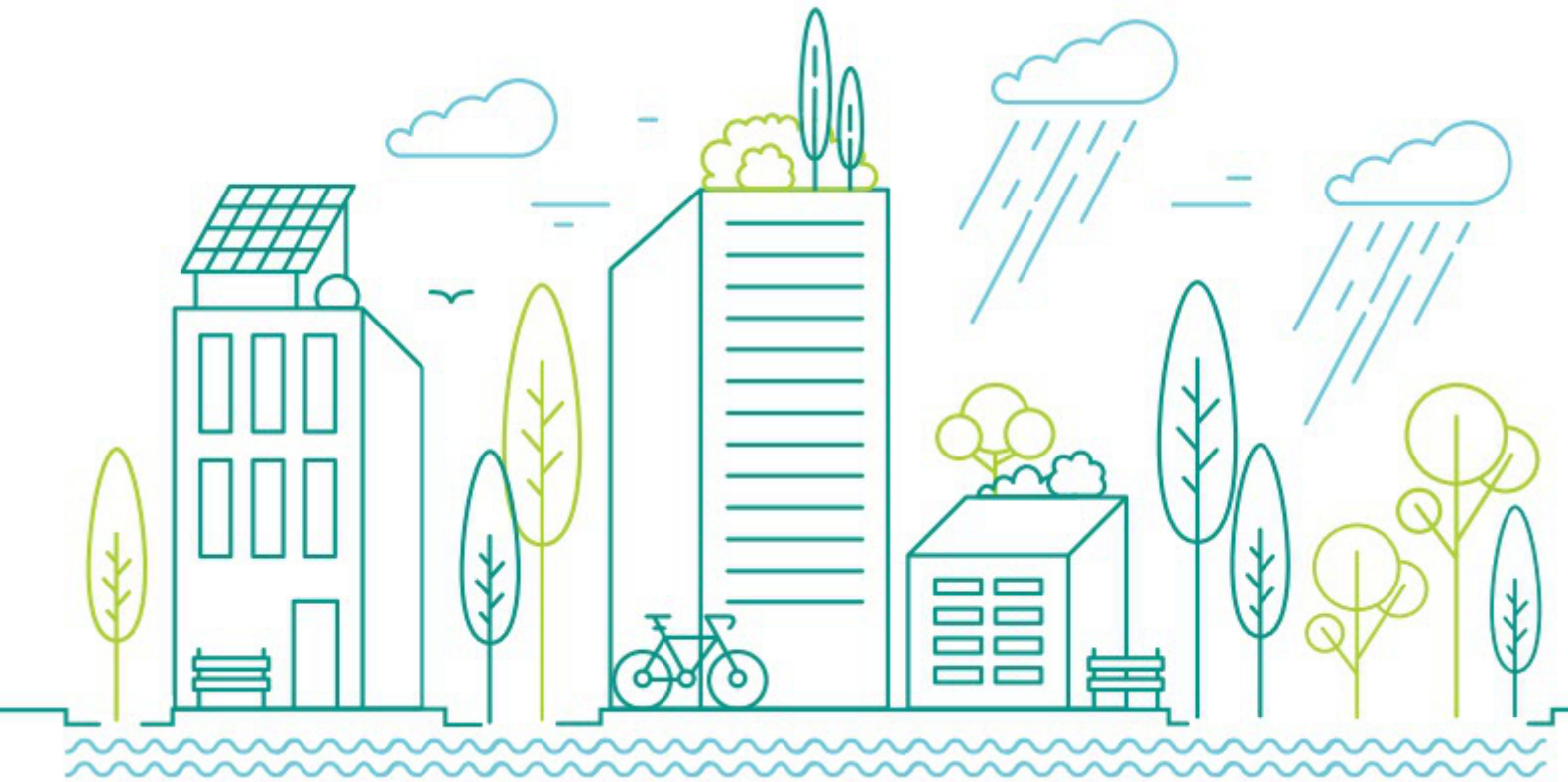


Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Recruitment, Sources, Methodology	4
The Centrality of Community Engagement in the Context of Equity	6
Guidance & Recommendations on Public Sector Approaches to Engaging Communities	8
Four Types of Equity in Relationship to GSI	11
Equity Guidance from Communities for Government Practitioners	12
Conclusion	17

Introduction

In early 2022, the Green Infrastructure Leadership Exchange (the Exchange) published [this report](#) highlighting the state of the equity practice in public sector green stormwater infrastructure (GSI). The report was a "pilot" chapter written in preparation for a more complete "State of the Field" report currently under development. The voice and perspective of public sector practitioners in that "pilot" chapter is strong. However, the report needs the voice and perspective of community members, especially those living in low-wealth neighborhoods and historic communities of colors and cultures, which bear a disproportionately larger burden of flooding, infrastructure failure, and other climate change impacts than wealthier, whiter communities.

To address this gap, and to ensure that continued and deepened equitable investments are made in historically under-represented communities as the field of GSI evolves, the Exchange scoped a project in which community voices would be intentionally sought, such that the whole of the story is told, heard, and seen by powers that be. In spring 2022, the Exchange retained Kate O'Brien and Anne Harrison of [Catalyst Collaboratives, LLC](#) to conduct interviews and gather stories from those deeply involved in community-based work—specifically in communities of colors and cultures where public infrastructure investment has been lacking—about how municipal GSI planning and implementation is being experienced on the ground. The data is a body of valuable knowledge, skills, and tools learned and earned through the process of working on both successful and challenged projects.

This report serves as a summary document of the equity-centered observations and recommendations from community members that surfaced through a series of six interviews.

Recruitment, Sources, Methodology

By tapping existing professional and personal relationships, our team recruited and interviewed six people who nurture deep relationships, and are deeply involved, in their respective communities. We prioritized individuals whose grassroots-driven work has (or has had) a strong focus on advancing some type of environmental, urban agriculture, community greening, watershed, and/or green stormwater infrastructure strategies at the neighborhood level. We also sought people of colors and cultures who represent varied engagement experiences and perspectives: those with a history of doing paid work in municipal government; those employed by a CBO that may or may not have partnered with a municipality; and those with lived experience as a resident volunteer engaged in some type of public realm project in their community. The composition of interviewees reflects broad geographic representation across the US, with an emphasis on urban areas with historically large populations of colors and cultures:

- Angela Chalk, New Orleans, LA
- Antoine Carter, Milwaukee, WI
- Denzel Mitchell, Baltimore, MD
- Meishka Mitchell, Camden, NJ
- Robin Schwartz, Seattle, WA
- Vaughn Perry, Washington, DC

In advance of each interview, we asked interviewees to prepare by reviewing and reflecting on this [Project Overview & Interview Guide](#), which includes the set of interview questions used in each conversation. We confirmed that interviewees understood their right to confidentiality, and their right to stop the interview at any point. Interviewees had the opportunity to review all quotes and stories shared in this report, as well as the option to approve or deny its use and attribution. All interviewees were compensated with a modest honorarium in honor of their time spent engaged in this interview and requisite preparations.

Nearly all interviewees noted that multiple perspectives inform how they think about and respond to questions pertaining to GSI planning and implementation in their community: that of a person of color(s) and/or culture(s) living in the United States; that of a resident living in a low-wealth neighborhood and/or a historically Black or Latino/a neighborhood,

and that of an environmental professional driving community-informed strategies in their neighborhood, or ones similar to theirs. Later on in this report, in our discussion of the themes that arose across the interview conversations, readers will see how these distinct perspectives shed important light on issues of equity and inequity as they relate to the state of public sector GSI.

The Centrality of Community Engagement in the Context of Equity

One of the most significant and recurrent themes that emerged across all interviews we conducted was that of community engagement—so much so that we are centering it as the top finding of this report. Given the equity dimensions of this theme, there are some assertions and hard truths about identity, culture, bias, and power that must be named first.

For many working in the public sector, especially those working in communities that have endured decades of neglect, deferred maintenance, and lacking investment, community engagement in the public realm is regarded as a process to endure. In many places, the power and potential of community engagement has been, at best, misunderstood, and at worst, rendered an exclusionary, missed opportunity for addressing problems and co-creating solutions together in government-resident partnerships.

Given the way history, systems, and narrative in American society are shaped by dominant culture, those who hold positional power, privilege, and agency—whether in their job title, leadership role, and/or social identities—may find the following assertions difficult, disruptive, and even uncomfortable to read. However, for those whose voices, perspectives, and lived experiences have historically been marginalized, devalued, and even excluded from shaping public narratives, institutions, and systems, these are lived realities, hard truths that must be questioned, challenged, and changed if equity and justice are to ever be fully realized in historically oppressed and marginalized communities.

Equity, power, and community engagement go hand in hand. In the context of neighborhood infrastructure investments, community engagement is not an optional activity, nor a “nice to have” a la carté menu item. Done with intention and in relationship, community engagement can be a tool that unlocks many GSI co-benefits that serve to strengthen the longevity of GSI investments and the

surrounding community. These include, for instance: resident involvement in stewardship; spreading the word about the importance of keeping litter out of rain gardens; beautification; using GSI maintenance needs as a means for workforce development, a pathway to a living wage, careers, and wealth-building out of poverty.

The depth to which community members are engaged by public sector representatives, in the face of any neighborhood change, is the primary determinant of equity outcomes—that is, whether, how, and to what extent that neighborhood change is shaped and unfolds in ways that equitably distribute benefits and burdens across different populations.

To invest in creating conditions that enable community members’ substantive involvement in identifying and shaping equitable solutions and strategies to community-identified needs and opportunities, **is to center and uplift the power and agency of the people and their relationships in that community.**

Guidance & Recommendations on Public Sector Approaches to Engaging Communities

Indeed, the lives, livelihoods, well-being, and resilience of families of colors and cultures depend on deep, holistic, and relational community engagement to ensure equitable investments and outcomes unfold in their communities. But don't just take it from us, the authors of this report. Take it instead from the residents we interviewed, who live and work in communities that are statistically and historically most vulnerable to the impacts of disinvestment, flooding, infrastructure failure, and climate change.

What does- or should- equitable community engagement look, feel, and sound like to the interviewees involved in this project? Here are some powerful sentiments they shared:

- *It's about doing work with, not doing work for.* – Antoine
- *First, I'd tell any local government to go out and seek community members' sense of the problems, opportunities, and needs in their neighborhood. Then, I'd suggest they ask for community members' perspective on what the solutions are. They should then process that information, create some visuals, some Venn diagrams, and go back to the community to share 'this is what we heard, here's what we see as overlapping in terms of the problems and solutions; did we get it right?'. Finally, I'd tell them they need to actually act on the strategies and solutions the community suggests.* – Vaughn
- *Residents need to be treated and regarded as experts. They know and see what is happening in their community, and they can show you where the issues are.* – Meishka
- *When residents take matters into their own hands- for us, that means installing GSI solutions where we know they are needed- the city government shouldn't view that as 'residents shaming them for failing to deliver' on what they 'should' be doing for*

the people. We need to be reframing both the shared ownership of our challenges, and the co-creation of our solutions. – Angela

On the flip side, interviewees also shared perspectives that robustly illustrate the difference between what community engagement is, and what it isn't:

- *I shouldn't have to be in one specific place, or in a certain professional position, to gain access to information about the flooding patterns in my neighborhood, or investments being made to solve a problem, or a new development that's coming up in my community. And yet, the only way I've been able to learn about what's happening in my neighborhood relative to conservation landscapes is that my job has enabled me to be in certain rooms where those conversations are happening, where that information is being exchanged. – Vaughn*
- *A 'one size fits all' approach to engagement is not authentic. Without relationships, you can't understand the history, the patterns, or the nuances of a community. Each community needs a customized strategy for sharing and receiving information, ideas, and solutions. – Antoine*
- *Don't wait for the engineer's report to tell you where the worst flooding is happening. Talk to the residents on the ground first. The engineering professionals' analysis should validate resident-sourced data about where the flooding hotspots are on the map, rather than the other way around. – Meishka*
- *The public doesn't trust the utility, and it's understandable why. When it rains, and the flooding starts, all residents see is that the pumps at the pumping station weren't turned on. What they don't know is the back story, and the utility holds a responsibility for being transparent with residents about why the system doesn't function the way it should. This is a 300 year old city. The stormwater system is antiquated; the parts that comprise the pumping station infrastructure have outlived the company that manufactured them. Replacement parts must be made by hand! Did you know there are utility workers who literally use plaster of paris to create replacement parts? And, the workforce that has long held the knowledge about how the system functions, about the maintenance needed for all those parts, are aging or already retired and passed on." – Angela*

Now that we've lifted up the centrality of honest, relational, and transparent community engagement in the context of equity and GSI in the public sector, we'll pause to prompt your reflection on these recommendations.

- What from this guidance feels actionable to you and your team?
- What feels as though it may require more reflection, discussion, and/or learning?
- Where might you find learning content?
- Where might you find peer support as you internalize this rich from-the-ground guidance, and determine your course of action from here?

A universal truth about doing equity work is that there is no finish line, and the work is never actually done. As you shift into that mode of thinking, we'll move to the next section, where we'll begin to explore other important themes, recommendations, and guidance for public sector leaders that surfaced in the interviews. We'll start by outlining the different types of equity encountered with GSI investments.

Four Types of Equity in Relationship to GSI

In 2020, the Green Infrastructure Leadership Exchange developed an *Equity Statement of Purpose* in which four types of equity, which those making GSI investments can and should seek to address, are described:

Spatial Equity describes where communities are and/or have been underinvested or disinvested, and where communities are experiencing multiple forms of systemic vulnerability and environmental injustice related to housing, poverty, access to transportation, food, pollution, and/or environmental burdens.

Identity Equity describes the multitude of ways individuals hold racial, gender, ability, age, economic status, and other social identities. For green infrastructure in particular, this asks practitioners to consider the trends around access to green infrastructure and green infrastructure investment for communities, given the identities they hold. It explicitly asks whether communities who are traditionally given marginalized identities (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, People with Disabilities, Age, LGBTQIA2+, etc.) are included and provided access to projects directly affecting their communities, and whether communities who suffer vulnerabilities due to multiple forms of systemic marginalization are centered and included.

Process Equity describes the degree of access various communities have to public decision-making. It asks who has access to government leaders; who is consistently engaged or not; and what different kinds of barriers are present for communities that limit engagement, such as access to information, engagement platforms, language accessibility, time and child care.

Power Equity describes who has influence and control over resources and considers whether the profiles of these influencers align (or do not align) with who is most marginalized from the benefits. It asks whether power over resources, problem-definition, and solution-making is shared. It also invites us to ask who is being considered the “expert” and whether that group can be expanded to be more inclusive.

Equity Guidance from Communities for Government Practitioners

In preparing this report, our team used these four types of equity as an organizing framework for the themes that emerged in the qualitative data we gathered from the interviewees. Below we will explore these equity dimensions as they relate to the stories, perspectives, and lived experiences of the interviewees featured in this report.

Spatial Equity

1. Approach community engagement and GSI investments with intersectional, holistic, and historical lenses.

- *Green infrastructure solutions may be a lower priority for community members by necessity if they are also contending with things like violence in their community, homelessness, failing schools, family members in the criminal justice system, or safety walking to the corner store. – Vaughn*
- *No one in my community knows who to call when flooding is happening. Is it the city government? County government? Which department? Stormwater knows no boundaries as it flows, and neither should our solutions. – Robin*
- *In our community, which faces a whole lot of challenges, flooding still comes up as the highest priority for community members in areas with the most serious flooding because it affects daily life so profoundly. – Meishka*
- *Government, know this: people in Black and Brown communities care about the issues of climate and resilience. We just can't be at the table because we working people are working– us not showing up at meetings doesn't mean we don't care. We care, because we have to! We are the first and worst impacted by the effects of climate change and flooding, and we are consistently the last*

to recover. – Angela

- *GSI is a 'nice to have' that is by and large inaccessible to people living in [low-income, historically Black] communities like mine. – Denzel*
- *Green infrastructure is needed most in underserved and under resourced neighborhoods. Those are the low-lying places that the water remembers as lagoons and marshes. The water always knows. The water always comes back. – Antoine*

2. As government invests in GSI, it should also invest in growing the local workforce necessary to maintain and sustain it, emphasizing involvement of historically marginalized populations.

- *As we install these GSI solutions, we need a knowledgeable workforce to monitor and maintain this infrastructure, and residents in our community are being overlooked for such jobs. Just because it's nature-based doesn't mean it doesn't need to be maintained and monitored. Take permeable pavers– people like to have them installed, but there are only three vendors in the metro area that can do that work. Mulch and trees are another example. There are limited numbers of nurseries on the north side of the lake, and only a few provide native plants. There's this whole sector that's needed to fulfill the demand for plants that are part of these interventions. This is a groundbreaking new field, a major opportunity, jobs that will provide mid-career salaries in early career positions. We've seen that residents can ultimately fulfill GSI maintenance jobs with long-term, well-paying jobs and careers, especially for those with past involvement in the criminal justice system. – Angela*

Power Equity

1. Re-frame residents' knowledge as expertise. Work to center, bolster, and lift up their power and expertise everywhere.

- *We need shared language, a common understanding, among municipalities and residents. Stormwater management is not only the utility's responsibility. The people bear a responsibility, too. You can't just throw trash on the ground without it causing a problem, because when it gets into the storm drains, they get backed up and don't function properly. It will take all of us connecting the dots to understand, maintain, and make the system work effectively. – Angela*

- *Job training and recruitment in the GSI field should be for both entry level and leadership positions, and it should involve residents. Decision makers should reflect and understand the community they serve. There's a disconnect between who is in management in municipalities and who comprises the communities they serve. Oftentimes, white middle class males from outside the community served [of color] are the primary workers, and the ones in leadership positions. Efforts to improve access to those jobs don't seem to reach into the neighborhoods most affected, nor connect with known employment pipelines. – Meishka*

2. Embrace the maxim that 'knowledge is power'. Make sustained investments in building community knowledge about GSI by offering educational opportunities, using accessible language, and doing maintenance planning with residents.

- *To improve government-resident relationships, the best places to start are with the children. Stormwater management should be taught and discussed, so it's a regular part of life, so kids come up understanding that there is a better way to build. Signage would help increase awareness and educate people about a site's function, why it's designed the way it is, what taking care of it looks like. That way, residents could become part of the maintenance, part of the solution. – Denzel*
- *We have been working to engage a young workforce in multiple green infrastructure projects in the neighborhood. Our Youth Corp works on stewardship and maintenance of rain gardens and other projects. It takes training to know how to do that particular kind of maintenance- when one unused industrial site on the port was set to be paved over, the neighborhood came together to ask for a better intervention and were able to advocate for a tidal area with added native plants and trees. The wishes of the community were fulfilled, but we need to invest in education so our growing workforce can identify and care for those native plants. We also need long-term funding for maintenance and stewardship to care for these spaces once they're built, too. – Robin*

Process Equity



- 1. Nurture relationships, and work to connect with folks in ways that suit them, rather than ways that suit you.**

- *Community engagement involves person to person outreach, being present in the community. We're talking about sending mailers in the four main languages spoken in the neighborhood [other than English]. It's tabling at community events, the weekly market, or holding office hours in the neighborhood, at the library or coffee shop, and making sure these are accessible, multi-language events. It's not asking me to send an email to my contacts. – Robin*
- *We need to get out of the office and get into the community to talk with people. I do a lot of walking and talking. People stop me on the street. The young folks use social media. The elders use phone trees. We use email sometimes, but really we use a variety of communications techniques that depend on the cultural and social norms of each given generation. I send young people out to connect with the elders: 'Go knock on the 3rd window down the block, let her know what's going on'. That's the type of network we've had to create, because people connect and communicate in different ways. Not everyone has access to technology. Not everyone has a cell phone, or if they do, they can only use it at certain times. This is what I need the government to understand about folks in our communities. We aren't all at the same level. There's no equity in this. – Angela*

2. Develop partnerships with local CBOs. Budget for, and pay for, CBO staff to engage community members about GSI with your team.

- *Make sure you get quality data. Paying for data collection that is resident-driven is the best way to get it. Pay the staff at youth-serving organizations, community-serving institutions, churches. It's through those deeper relationships you'll learn about when people are working, what the best time and location is to schedule a community meeting, what languages are spoken so you can get the right interpreters, and a sense of the history of what's gone down before in the neighborhood. How can you learn from past project failures to deepen community members' involvement this time around? – Antoine*
- *Working with local groups will help you get small wins on the ground. Start right away, build trust by listening to their concerns, and responding by completing a project, no matter how small. Those early wins (i.e., neighborhood beautification projects, education activities like building rain gardens) will build community members' investment and their trust, and that will help the community hang in, because you know the larger, more ambitious projects will take more time. – Meishka*

3. Make sure your communications are transparent, honest, consistent, accessible, and attuned to cultural differences and influences.

- *My neighbors are frustrated. I'm frustrated. They have regular flooding in their basements from combined sewer overflows, and there's nowhere to turn to report issues or share what is happening. These issues are confusing and complex. My neighbors are rarely engaged by the local government or the utility. Many are renters and unsure how to navigate and advocate, compared to the white people in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods, and as a result their concerns seem to be deprioritized. I see the City responding to other neighborhoods with higher quality amenities and more engaged representatives. – Robin*
- *Our municipal government... I believe they make a concerted effort to do engagement and outreach, I just don't think it's enough. They do it because it's the right thing to do, but it's more outreach than engagement. To me, outreach is going into the community to announce 'this is what we're doing' versus engagement, which is 'we are seeking your feedback and involvement, and we will be integrating your ideas into our solutions'. – Vaughn*

Identity Equity

1. When you invest in GSI projects, invest in the people that live nearby, too. With intentional efforts to educate, and resources to support it, community members can become strong GSI stewards.

- *Community engagement takes time and energy when done well, but the results are worth the energy because you're maximizing the huge amount invested. Projects that involve residents from design through implementation are more customized to the needs of that particular neighborhood, and therefore are better maintained over time, even by residents. It's harder to be a steward of a space I had no part in designing. Why spend all that money for a short-term, less effective product? – Antoine*
- *We can work in partnership with residents to create holistic solutions to the many-intersecting challenges that communities like ours face. When residents are involved in identifying the problems and the solutions, we can develop strategies that can address many of the concerns we have, in addition to flooding. – Vaughn*

Conclusion

In the midst of rapidly changing climates and social conditions, an emerging and evolving field of GSI, and heightening awareness amongst those in positions of privilege and power about the existence and systemic perpetuation of grave inequities across different diversity dimensions and social identities, these community members' stories, guidance, and wisdom are powerful reminders of just how far we still have to go in disrupting the status quo and pushing toward equity, justice, and collective liberation.

As referenced earlier, a universal truth about doing equity work is that there is no finish line, and the work is never actually done. The same is true for this report: though our team heard and gathered dozens of stories pointing out cautionary tales, lessons learned, and hard truths, the recommendations and guidance conveyed here should be received with gratitude, humility and discernment. The stories, experiences, and perspectives of these individuals are truths for them, but that does not mean they are universal to all people living in low-wealth or historically marginalized communities. Rather, these voices reflect a representative sample and snapshot of sentiments shared during a moment in time, and yet infused with first-hand perspective from enduring historical and present-day patterns of inequity.

With this report of guidance and recommendations comes an implicit call to action: *Public sector leaders, are you listening? It's time to be brave and bold, and accept that some discomfort and resistance may come up as you work to do things differently. Familiar, well-worn paths lead to the same old places, while breaking new trails can sometimes make a person feel like they are losing their way. So, how will you and your team examine and change the patterns and the ways that things have always been done? How will you take action steps toward realizing equity today? Tomorrow? In the months and years ahead?*