

# Case Study:

## Equitable Community Engagement for Climate Action

### Acknowledgements

Research, writing, and project management for this case study were led by Clare Auld-Brokish, Program Associate at the US Water Alliance. The Alliance thanks David Ponder, Sarah Robinson, Emily Simonson, Alex King, Kyla Peterson, and Anna Yates for their support and contributions. This case study's success can be attributed to the US Water Alliance's partnership with the Water Utility Climate Alliance (WUCA) and with the utilities whose best practices are featured in this work.

The US Water Alliance is especially grateful to Wayne Miles, Ariel Bushel, and Nicole Goddard of Raleigh Stormwater; Ann Grodnik-Nagle and Leslie Webster of Seattle Public Utilities; and Marisa Flores-Gonzalez of Austin Water for lending their time to share project insights and provide review support.

Gratitude goes to the WUCA Equity Subcommittee for providing guidance on development, including the subgroup that provided review support:

- **Stephanie Chiorean**, Philadelphia Water Department
- **Alan Cohn**, New York City Department of Environmental Protection
- **Jessica Evans**, American Metropolitan Water Association
- **Marisa Flores-Gonzalez**, Austin Water
- **Ann Grodnik-Nagle**, Seattle Public Utilities
- **Kavita Heyn**, Portland Water Bureau
- **Allison Lau**, Philadelphia Water Department
- **Joshua Randall**, Central Arizona Project
- **Amy Motzny**, New York City Department of Environmental Protection

### Introduction: Equitable Community Engagement for Climate Action

An issue as unpredictable and far-reaching as climate change demands a shift away from business-as-usual toward new kinds of collaborative, community-wide solutions. These solutions prioritize the input of those who have historically been excluded from the decision-making process, most often low-income communities and Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color who experience climate impacts “first and worst.”<sup>1</sup> These residents and community-based organizations are often viewed as important but passive stakeholders. However, their proximity to the climate impacts occurring in their neighborhoods and deep connections to place and community make them especially powerful allies for actions against the climate crisis, the effects from which are often unpredictable and felt locally. Equitable community engagement is a compelling avenue for water utilities to build trust and foster resilience within their communities while preparing for and alleviating the worst impacts of climate change.

Equitable community engagement extends beyond traditional educational efforts to inform residents of utility programs or projects and strives to create proactive, relationship-based community empowerment in climate action planning and climate readiness. It acknowledges that climate impacts are experienced differently by each community due to ongoing structural inequities and that communities are more resilient to climate stressors when they face them together. A key principle of equitable community engagement through One Water is valuing all ways of knowing including lived experience, local knowledge, and academic and technical expertise. Equitable engagement moves at the speed of trust, empowers community members to participate as

authentic partners in the utility prioritization, planning, and project implementation decisions that affect them, and supports them in facing present and future climate impacts.

This case study includes examples from leading utilities across the country working to embed equitable community engagement into climate action. Insights included in these examples were derived from conversations with utility staff and utility publications. The Additional Resources section at the end of this case study includes opportunities for further reading on this topic as well as existing standards and frameworks for designing and carrying out equitable community engagement.

Building trust and embedding equity in utility processes through community engagement is an ongoing effort that is tested and refined in each project. Please use the utility insights found below as resources to begin conversations with the understanding that equity, trust, and community partnerships take time.

## Examples of Equitable Community Engagement for Climate Action

### Stormwater Management Advisory Commission: Raleigh Stormwater

#### Community empowerment in watershed resilience

#### Description

The Raleigh [Stormwater Management Advisory Commission \(SMAC\)](#) is a 10-member group of community advocates and residents appointed by the Raleigh City Council to guide stormwater decisions and develop and implement projects in accordance with the City's [2030 Comprehensive Plan](#), including a "no new development" restriction for commercial and residential properties in the city's updated floodplain. The group was formed in 2004 when Raleigh created its stormwater utility and began collecting impervious surface-based utility fees and is now one of almost 40 community advisory councils and boards overseen by the City of Raleigh. SMAC members meet once a month and serve two-year terms (with a maximum limit of three consecutive terms). New appointees are chosen with the goal of providing diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and lived experiences, reflecting an emphasis on equity in all of SMAC's considerations.

Almost 20 years since it began, SMAC has imbued Raleigh Stormwater with an ethos of equity in community partnership that is evident in projects like the [Walnut Creek Watershed Learning Network](#) (WCWLN), which began in 2021 and takes inspiration from the Atlanta Watershed Learning Network. Walnut Creek Watershed makes up the southern third of Raleigh and encompasses many disproportionately climate-impacted neighborhoods in the city.

Image courtesy of Raleigh Stormwater



In collaboration with Partners for Environmental Justice, the WCWLN offers a six-week education program focusing on empowering community members to understand flooding and water quality risks in the Walnut Creek watershed and how these risks are impacted by development, climate change, and other factors. During the program, community members are also taught about mitigation strategies and how they can use their voice to engage their neighbors in watershed issues and participate in citywide governing processes themselves. Topics include green stormwater infrastructure, civic policy and engagement, and environmental justice with a focus on Raleigh's largest historically underserved communities: Rochester Heights and Biltmore Hills. Community members are paid for their participation in the program and have gone on to participate in city planning processes including community discussions of development planned for the Southeast Raleigh Area.

The WCWLN is in its third cohort and has already earned Walnut Creek increased regional and national support through the designation as the country's 21st [Urban Water Federal Partnership Watershed](#). In October 2023, the City of Raleigh received a grant from the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's \(NOAA\) Environmental Literacy Program](#) to increase the number of Watershed Learning Network cohorts offered to six and broaden their scope to include three "Heat Island Learning Teams" focused on heat island effects and preparedness in heat-vulnerable neighborhoods.

## Insights

- **Long-term community voices enhance decision-making and planning processes.** Recommendations made by a community are considered more objective and credible. Community members that engage with utilities and city councils regularly over long periods of time can learn more about detailed government processes, make more informed recommendations, and become active partners in this collaboration.
- **Community education with the goal of empowerment in local decision-making has an outsized positive impact on resident engagement and climate resilience.** Residents that are knowledgeable about local climate impacts and the importance of their voice to citywide climate readiness are more likely to participate in local government processes and share this information with their neighbors and communities.

## Learn More

For more information about Raleigh Stormwater and this project, please contact Wayne Miles, Raleigh Stormwater at [Wayne.Miles@RaleighNC.gov](mailto:Wayne.Miles@RaleighNC.gov).

Images courtesy of Raleigh Stormwater





# Shape Our Water: Seattle Public Utilities

## Collaboration with the community on strategic resilience plan visioning

### Description

[Shape Our Water](#) is a 50-year plan focused on resilience and equity for Seattle Public Utilities' (SPU) drainage and wastewater services. The ongoing development of this plan included a two-year "visioning stage" that focused on understanding the community's vision and goals for a resilient and equitable Seattle. The goals of this stage were to utilize engagement strategies that help address systemic inequity and create opportunities for collaboration and long-term partnerships between SPU and traditionally underrepresented communities.

Throughout the visioning stage, which was completed in 2021, SPU centered listening and worked to incorporate and elevate voices from historically underrepresented groups like youth, artists, grassroots organizers, and representatives from community groups. SPU collaborated with a design team of leaders from Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color who helped design and facilitate a variety of community engagement events and multimedia projects, synthesize the community's insights, and develop the plan's goals, documented in the [Shape Our Water Community Vision](#).

Image courtesy of Natalie Dupille





Image courtesy of Natalie Dupille

Community engagement events included a three-part fireside series that featured Tribal, local, and national perspectives on equity and resilience, an intergenerational focus group, and a digital convening for water resilience that brought together 49 local public, private, and nonprofit professionals. Collectively, the engagement events attracted 398 participants. Additional outreach included ten community water stories from youth leaders that were featured in local publications, the creation of a drainage and wastewater infrastructure map, and self-guided walking tours. SPU aimed to allocate 10 percent of this stage's services budget to community co-creators.

SPU will kick off a series of workshops in 2024 focused on brainstorming solutions for the Shape Our Water plan and is currently piloting several projects that will incorporate the Shape Our Water vision and goals into near-term project and program design. These include RainCity partnerships, Area-based Green Infrastructure in Urban Villages, and a long-term control plan update for reducing combined sewer overflows.

## Insights

- **Maximize audio/visual communication to portray often invisible water infrastructure.** The use of images and illustrations to represent what infrastructure does or could be like captured the imagination of community members and helped emphasize the importance of the project. Using a variety of multimedia forms (audio, video, and images) and partnering with local media outlets to publish the community stories helped the utility reach a larger audience.
- **Lead with honesty, transparency, and proactive trust-building.** Having honest conversations about challenges and barriers and being transparent about how the utility is working through them helped to build trust with community leaders. Building trust takes time and requires openness to new ideas and ways of working, but it will lead to more positive outcomes.
- **Build lasting community partnerships as an anchor institution.** It is important to compensate community partners for their time, expertise, and effort, but anchor institutions should also look for opportunities to invest in long-term growth and capacity building. Communication of the long-term benefits of these utility-community partnerships encourages future collaboration.

## Learn More

For more information about SPU and this project, please visit [www.ShapeOurWater.org](http://www.ShapeOurWater.org).

# Water Forward Plan: Austin Water

## Community as key stakeholder in resilience plan update

### Description

Water Forward is Austin Water's 100-year integrated water resource plan to develop and implement diverse and environmentally conscious water management strategies to adapt to growth, drought, and climate change and ensure a sustainable, resilient, equitable, and affordable water future for the Austin community for the next century. The plan was first approved by the Austin City Council in November 2018 and is currently undergoing its first five-year update. The continuous revision of the plan to meet emerging climate and community needs is consistent with the utility's goal of adaptive management. Central to this update process was the Community Ambassadors Group (CAG), which complemented the Council-appointed Water Forward Task Force and public workshops and provided frameworks and recommendations for embedding equitable community engagement into the Water Forward plan update.

The Community Ambassadors Group (CAG) lasted one year, included nine community representatives, and helped develop Austin Water's Equity and Affordability Road Map and Equity and Affordability Tool, both of which will inform how the Water Forward Plan will impact and engage Communities of Color and low-income residents. Having community-led frameworks and place-based definitions of equity help Austin Water and the Austin community evaluate equity together. Early in the update process, Austin Water began to recruit community members for this paid opportunity using materials translated into six languages, embedded outreach in community hubs through various multimedia, and targeted outreach in communities that are historically underrepresented and especially vulnerable to climate-driven water stressors. Members of the CAG participated in trainings to develop a shared equity lens and understanding of historic/ongoing local institutional and structural racism and utilized a variety of tools to encourage input from their communities. These included a survey to gauge community understanding of key issues like water systems, water equity, and climate vulnerability and a series of virtual community learning sessions, entitled Water Forward University, to share information about the plan update process.

### Insights

- **Iteratively incorporate community input into engagement strategies.** Incorporate community input about engagement strategies into these same strategies to practice procedural equity and proactively and continuously break down barriers to equitable engagement.
- **Use creative recruitment strategies to capture a variety of voices.** Encourage utility staff to think creatively about their advertising and recruitment methods. Understanding common accessibility barriers (internet usage, language, time of day) helps to promote equity in the engagement process and participation by historically underrepresented communities.
- **Use a relational approach to develop partnerships with key community members.** In addition to ongoing community engagement and education, invest in a handful of meaningful relationships with community members and leaders of community organizations instead of aiming for broad participation. These relationships will lead to a deeper understanding of community needs, long-term trust, and meaningful partnerships.

### Learn More

For more information about Austin Water and this project, please contact Marisa Flores Gonzalez, Austin Water at [marisa.flores@austintexas.gov](mailto:marisa.flores@austintexas.gov).



## Additional Resources

### Water Equity and Community Engagement Frameworks

- **American Water Works Association's [A Water Utility Manager's Guide to Community Stewardship](#) (2019).** This report introduces the idea of community stewardship and its benefits to water utilities across a variety of utility organizational fields. Case studies throughout provide examples of utilities embedding social equity in their programs.
- **US Environmental Protection Agency's [Water Utilities as Anchor Institutions: Impacting the equity, social, and economic fabric of communities and regions](#) (2021).** This document introduces a framework for anchor institutions in the water utility context.
- **The Pennsylvania State University College of Agricultural Sciences' [Community Engagement Toolbox](#).** This compendium gives definitions and useful guidance for building, managing, and evaluating a community engagement plan.
- **The US Water Alliance's [An Equitable Water Future: A National Briefing Paper](#) (2017).** This report introduces the US Water Alliance's water equity framework. Central to the framework is pillar three: foster community resilience in the face of a changing climate. Please reference the US Water Alliance's [Water Equity Task Force: Insights for the Water Sector](#) (2021) for a summary of insights gained during the two-year pilot of the water equity framework in seven US cities.
- **The US Water Alliance's [Advancing Racial Equity Across the Water Sector: A Toolkit for Utilities](#) (2022).** This toolkit provides a framework for water utilities to assess and improve their internal and external racial equity practices and outcomes.
- **Green Infrastructure Leadership Exchange and Greenprint Partners' [Equity Guide for Green Stormwater Infrastructure Practitioners](#) (2022).** This framework and roadmap are for stormwater managers aiming to incorporate equity through community engagement—specifically in community-informed work plans.

## Additional Community Engagement Examples and Leading Practices

- **The Kresge Foundation's [Building a Community of Practice at the Intersection of Water, Climate Resilience, and Equity](#) (2020).** This report contains insights and opportunities compiled from an assessment of The Kresge Foundation's Climate Resilient and Equitable Water Systems (CREWS) initiative.
- **River Network and Urban Waters Learning Network's [Learning Series: Building Water Equity and Climate Resilient Communities for ALL](#).** This six-part learning series highlights strategies to guide community-based organizations in helping their communities anticipate, prepare for, and respond to climate risks. The series ran from July 2023 to January 2024.
- **The US Water Alliance's [Water Rising: Equitable Approaches to Urban Flooding](#) (2020).** This report contains insights from the Alliance's Urban Flooding Bootcamp and case studies from bootcamp participants across five priority actions for equitable resilience in the urban flooding context.

## Notes

- 1 Wing, Lehman, Bates et al, "Inequitable Patterns of US Flood Risk in the Anthropocene," *Nature Climate Change* 12 (2022): 156-162, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-021-01265-6>.

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