

CREATING EQUITABLE, HEALTHY, AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES:

*Strategies for Advancing Smart Growth, Environmental Justice,
and Equitable Development*



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Executive Summary

Communities across the country are integrating smart growth, environmental justice, and equitable development approaches to design and build healthy, sustainable, and inclusive neighborhoods. Overburdened communities are using smart growth strategies to address longstanding environmental and health challenges and create new opportunities where they live. Regional and local planners are engaging low-income, minority, and tribal residents in decision-making and producing more enduring development that is better for people and the environment. Community groups, government agencies, and private and nonprofit partners are cleaning up and investing in existing neighborhoods, providing affordable housing and transportation options, and improving access to critical services and amenities.

This informational publication aims to build on past successes and offer other low-income, minority, tribal, and overburdened communities approaches to shape development that responds to their needs and reflects their values. It identifies strategies that bring together smart growth, environmental justice, and equitable development principles and that community-based organizations, local and regional decision-makers, developers, and others can use to build healthy, sustainable, and inclusive communities. These are places that provide clean air, water, and land; affordable and healthy homes; safe, reliable, and economical transportation options; and convenient access to jobs, schools, parks, shopping, and other daily necessities.

The strategies are grouped under seven common elements, or shared goals and principles that connect environmental justice, smart growth, and equitable development. The fundamental overlap between these concepts is around how to plan and build neighborhoods to address environmental, health, and economic disparities and provide opportunities for low-income,

“A clean, green, healthy community is a better place to buy a home and raise a family; it’s more competitive in the race to attract new businesses; and it has the foundations it needs for prosperity.”

—Lisa P. Jackson
EPA Administrator

minority, tribal, and overburdened residents; therefore, all the approaches described relate to land use and community design. This document provides a brief introduction to each strategy, with a description of what it is, how it supports equitable and environmentally sustainable development, and examples of how it has been used. Local governments and community-based organizations can choose the approaches that best suit their needs and goals. Each of the seven common elements is illustrated by an in-depth case study highlighting a community’s experiences with these strategies.

The seven common elements, along with the strategies that fit under each one, are summarized on the following pages.

Strategies Linking Smart Growth, Environmental Justice, and Equitable Development

Common Element #1: Facilitate Meaningful Community Engagement in Planning and Land Use Decisions

Meaningful community participation in land use planning and decision-making can produce development that meets the needs of a diverse group of residents, build broad support for projects, and lead to more effective public processes. Planners and community-based organizations can use interactive, customizable

strategies to engage low-income, minority, tribal, and overburdened residents who face barriers to participation, are not traditionally involved in public processes, or are particularly affected by development proposals.

- **Conducting multilingual outreach** as part of planning and development decision-making is increasingly important with the growing number of U.S. residents whose primary language is not English. This approach results in policies and projects that better meet the needs of community members and have stronger public support.
- **Conducting community assessments** helps residents gather, analyze, and report information about current conditions and needs related to priority issues in their neighborhoods, such as street safety for pedestrians. These hands-on exercises can be facilitated by community-based organizations or local and regional planners.
- **Holding community planning and visioning workshops** helps groups of residents and organizations define a shared vision and goals for a site, neighborhood, city, town, or

Minimizing Displacement

Chapter 3 begins with a special section on tools, policies, and programs that can help to minimize displacement, an important issue that cuts across the seven common elements. Without advance planning and strong community engagement, revitalization efforts in low-income and overburdened neighborhoods have the potential to displace long-time residents due to rising rents and other costs of living. However, a wide range of tools and strategies can be used to involve community members in planning and visioning, provide affordable homes and transportation choices, support local businesses, and minimize displacement in other ways.

region, laying a foundation for subsequent land use policy and regulatory changes and investments.

Common Element #2: Promote Public Health and a Clean and Safe Environment

Designing and developing neighborhoods and buildings to protect air, water, land, and public health—particularly the health of overburdened populations—can reduce exposure to harmful contamination; prevent future pollution; and promote physical activity, reduced incidence of chronic disease, and other positive health outcomes among residents. This section provides land use planning and zoning-related approaches to address the potential environmental and health concerns from chemical plants, refineries, landfills, power plants, industrial livestock operations, and other facilities that are disproportionately located near low-income, minority, and tribal communities. It also discusses ways of cleaning up and reusing the contaminated sites left behind by those facilities, and methods for integrating healthy and sustainable elements into buildings and streets.

- Collaborative planning and zoning strategies can help **reduce exposure to facilities with potential environmental concerns**, mitigating the impacts of existing facilities on surrounding communities and siting and designing proposed facilities to avoid risks.
- Likewise, local and regional planning agencies, community-based organizations, and industry representatives can work together to design freight facilities and surrounding neighborhoods in ways that **reduce exposure to goods movement activities** and support health, environmental, and economic goals.
- **Clean and reuse contaminated properties**—specifically, brownfields and Superfund sites—in ways that support the community's vision for its future. This can be critical to revitalize neighborhoods and increase access to needed amenities in established communities.

- Strategies that **promote green building** can reduce exposure to toxics and pollutants that have been linked to cancer, asthma, and other health problems. These strategies can also reduce energy and water costs, which are often a significant burden for low-income families.
- Local governments and community-based organizations can **build green streets** by carrying out relatively simple and low-cost projects, such as installing rain gardens; or by enacting comprehensive policy changes, such as updating street design standards.

Common Element #3: Strengthen Existing Communities

Many established communities—city downtowns, older suburban neighborhoods, and rural villages—are rich in culture, heritage, and social capital but lack economic opportunities for residents. Investing in these existing communities rather than in new developments on the outer fringes of metropolitan areas can improve quality of life for low-income and overburdened populations by bringing the new jobs, services, and amenities they need. This approach can also help address the health and safety risks presented by contaminated properties, abandoned buildings, and poorly designed streets, and can increase the tax base to support other local needs.

- Approaches that encourage **fixing existing infrastructure first** prioritize the repair and maintenance of existing roads, bridges, buildings, and water and wastewater facilities over the building of new infrastructure in undeveloped places.
- **Reusing vacant and abandoned properties** as community amenities such as housing, commercial space, gardens, or temporary green spaces can remove blight and safety concerns, increase residents' access to needed services and opportunities, and spur additional investment in neighborhoods.
- **Redeveloping commercial corridors** by creating compact, mixed-use land use patterns and making streets safer for

pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users can improve opportunities for businesses and access for residents along these important thoroughfares.

Common Element #4: Provide Housing Choices

Offering an array of housing options by preserving and building affordable housing allows residents at all income levels to live near jobs, services, and public transit; helps to minimize displacement; and reduces transportation costs and air pollution from long commutes.

- **Preserving affordable housing** using tools like deed restrictions, housing trust funds, rehabilitation assistance, and Low-Income Housing Tax Credits can maintain housing choices and access to opportunities for low- and moderate-income families in revitalizing areas and catalyze investment in struggling neighborhoods.
- **Creating new affordable housing** through approaches such as inclusionary zoning, updated land use regulations, and Low-Income Housing Tax Credits is another way to expand housing choices for low- and moderate-income households, including in affluent communities that lack housing options for low-income earners, young people, and seniors.

Common Element #5: Provide Transportation Options

For many low-income, minority, tribal, and overburdened communities, public transit and safe routes for walking and bicycling are critical links to regional employment and educational opportunities that help residents improve their lives. Providing equitable and affordable transportation options improves mobility and access to jobs, services, and other daily necessities for all residents, including those who do not own cars.

- **Providing access to public transportation** through inclusive schedule and route planning and thoughtful transit stop and street design connects people to regional jobs and services.

- **Implementing equitable transit-oriented development** provides affordable housing near transit, which can significantly lower the housing and transportation costs that claim a large share of the incomes of many low-income households.
- Local and regional agencies and community-based organizations can work together to **design safe streets for all users** by incorporating sidewalks, bike lanes, median islands, pedestrian signals, bus lanes, and other facilities for pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and public transit users of all ages and abilities into new and existing streets.

Common Element #6: Improve Access to Opportunities and Daily Necessities

All residents, regardless of race, ethnicity, or economic status, should have access to the basic ingredients for healthy, productive lives, including employment and educational opportunities; services such as health clinics and child care; and amenities such as grocery stores, safe streets, and parks and recreational facilities.

- Approaches to **promote diverse, community-centered schools** preserve or build schools that are near the families they serve. Community-centered schools allow students to walk or bicycle to school, which promotes physical activity; and provide important community anchors and gathering places.
- Programs that **create safe routes to school** improve children's health by providing education, enforcement, and infrastructure upgrades that make it possible for them to walk or bicycle to school.
- Planners and community-based organizations can **provide access to healthy food** by removing barriers in land use regulations, offering incentives and financing to retailers, connecting retailers with financing, and assisting with challenging issues such as assembling land for development.

- **Providing access to parks and green space** at all scales provides critical health, social, and environmental benefits for low-income and overburdened communities.

Common Element #7: Preserve and Build on the Features That Make a Community Distinctive

Authentic community planning and revitalization are anchored in the physical and cultural assets that make a place unique. As decision-makers and community stakeholders implement the policies and strategies described in this report, they should build on the distinctive characteristics of their neighborhoods. Preserving and strengthening the features that make a place special maintains what existing residents value about their homes, attracts new residents and visitors, and spurs economic development that is grounded in community identity.

- Community planning and historic preservation strategies can help to **preserve existing cultural features**.
- Tools such as design guidelines and neighborhood conservation districts can **create new development that strengthens local culture** by capturing the specific physical characteristics of development that determine the overall character of a neighborhood and applying them to new projects.

This publication demonstrates that smart growth, environmental justice, and equitable development approaches can be an effective combination for responding to the challenges overburdened communities face, promoting development that is authentic and enduring, and laying the foundation for economic resilience. Taken together or in part, the strategies outlined here can help low-income, minority, tribal, and overburdened communities shape development to respond to their needs and reflect their values. These strategies can also help local and regional planners and policy-makers make land use decisions that are equitable, healthy, and sustainable for all residents.

of Executive Order 12898, seeks to empower communities to improve their health and environments and establish partnerships between government agencies and other stakeholder groups.⁹ EPA and the White House Council on Environmental Quality have also reconvened the Federal Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice. As part of this effort, 17 federal agencies and White House offices are working with community stakeholders to develop and implement environmental justice strategies, strengthen community access to federal resources, and integrate environmental justice into programs, policies, and activities across the federal government.¹⁰

Smart growth

Smart growth describes a range of strategies for planning and building cities, suburbs, and small towns in ways that protect the environment and public health, support economic development, and strengthen communities. In 1996, the Smart Growth Network, a group of more than 30 national organizations representing a range of interests including land conservation; affordable housing; real estate; community development;

transportation; and local, state, and federal government, created 10 smart growth principles based on the experiences of communities around the country. The principles are:¹¹

- **Mix land uses.** Mixing housing, shops, offices, schools, and other compatible land uses in the same neighborhood makes it easy for residents to walk, bicycle, take public transportation, drive shorter distances, and reach different destinations conveniently and affordably.
- **Take advantage of compact building design.** Compact building design preserves open space and uses land and resources more efficiently. It creates neighborhoods that can easily be served by public transit, puts destinations close enough for people to walk between, and protects water quality by reducing the amount of paved surfaces and polluted runoff.
- **Create a range of housing opportunities and choices.** Providing an array of quality housing options in new developments and existing neighborhoods allows people of all income levels, household sizes, and stages of life to live near jobs, public transit, and services.
- **Create walkable neighborhoods.** Creating safe and inviting pedestrian spaces, mixing land uses, and building compactly make walking a viable transportation option, which can reduce transportation costs, encourage physical activity, and help to reduce obesity, diabetes, and other diseases.
- **Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place.** Development should represent the values and the unique history, culture, economy, and geography of a community. Preserving and building on community assets are key to long-term quality of life and economic vitality.

9 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. *Plan EJ 2014*. 2011. www.epa.gov/compliance/ej/resources/policy/plan-ej-2014/plan-ej-2011-09.pdf.

10 In 2011, the 17 federal agencies and White House offices participating in the Federal Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Environmental Justice and Executive Order 12898. This MOU serves as a formal agreement to recommit to environmental justice through a collaborative and comprehensive effort. The agencies agreed to continue to identify and address environmental justice considerations in their programs, policies, and activities; provide environmental justice strategies and implementation progress reports; adopt an MOU charter; and identify areas of focus. To inform their work and engage communities, the agencies held listening sessions and stakeholder dialogues around the country, as well as a White House Forum on Environmental Justice which brought together administration officials, community leaders, and officials from state, local and tribal governments to discuss issues that are important to communities overburdened with pollution. The Federal Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice has created a compendium of agency strategies, policies, guidance documents, and plans for implementing Executive Order 12898; the Environmental Justice Federal Interagency Directory with information about agency roles, organizational charts, and key contacts; and the Community-Based Federal Environmental Justice Guide, describing federal funding and technical assistance programs that can assist communities in reducing toxic exposures. These resources are available from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency at "Federal Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice," www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/interagency.

11 Smart Growth Network. Why Smart Growth? smartgrowth.org/why.php. Accessed 2010.

- **Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas.** Farmland, pastures, forests, and other natural and working lands support land-based economic activities that are critical for healthy regional and national economies. The vegetation in natural areas also helps to protect the environment and public health by filtering pollutants from the air and drinking water.
- **Strengthen and direct development towards existing communities.** Investing in existing communities helps to address environmental and health hazards like contaminated properties, brings new jobs and services for residents, and saves localities money by using the infrastructure already in place.
- **Provide a variety of transportation choices.** A balanced transportation system that incorporates many means of travel—including buses, rail, walking, biking, and private cars—provides more affordable options for getting around, reduces air pollution and associated health impacts, and increases mobility for citizens who do not drive.
- **Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective.** By making development processes clear and by working with the private sector, municipalities can make smart growth economically viable and attractive to private investors and developers.
- **Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions.** Development can create great places to live, work, and play if it responds to a community's sense of how and where it wants to grow. Smart growth strategies involve residents, businesses, and all other stakeholders early and often to define and implement the community's vision and goals.

Equitable development strategies help low-income, minority, tribal, and overburdened communities participate in and benefit from decisions that shape their neighborhoods and regions.

These principles form the foundation for strategies that cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural areas can use to create efficient development that is environmentally and economically sustainable and provides more opportunities for all residents. Each community can adapt smart growth strategies and techniques to meet its needs. Smart growth development will look different in different places depending on each community's context and priorities.

Equitable development

There is no formal definition or set of principles to describe equitable development, but the term generally refers to a range of approaches for creating healthy, vibrant, and sustainable communities where residents of all incomes, races, and ethnicities have access to the opportunities, services, and amenities they need to thrive. Equitable development strategies help low-income, minority, tribal, and overburdened communities participate in and benefit from decisions that shape their neighborhoods and regions.¹²

The concept of equitable development draws on both environmental justice and smart growth. It emphasizes that all residents should be protected from environmental hazards and enjoy access to environmental, health, economic, and social necessities such as clean air and water, adequate infrastructure, job opportunities, and involvement in decision-making. To achieve this, equitable development approaches usually integrate people-focused strategies—efforts that support community residents—with place-focused

¹² PolicyLink. Equitable Development Toolkit. www.policylink.org/site/c.lklXLBmNJrE/b.5136575/k.39A1/Equitable_Development_Toolkit.htm. Accessed 2010.

strategies—efforts that stabilize and improve the neighborhood environment.¹³ Place-focused investments in housing, transportation, infrastructure, and pollution cleanup can reduce health and economic disparities, bring new opportunities, and improve quality of life. People-focused programs that assist with job training and placement, business development, education, health and wellness, and financial management can build the skills and wealth of residents and equip them to take part in revitalization and remain in their neighborhoods. Meaningful community participation and leadership are crucial components of equitable development.

In addition, equitable development typically calls for a regional perspective in order to reduce health and economic inequalities among localities and improve outcomes for low-income communities while building healthy metropolitan regions. Equitable development aims to ensure that everyone—regardless of where they live—can benefit from economic growth in the region, with affordable housing in safe and attractive neighborhoods, living-wage jobs, high-performing schools, public transit, and other essential services and amenities evenly available.¹⁴

Equitable development efforts not only aim to revitalize disadvantaged neighborhoods, but also to ensure that low-income residents have access to housing and job opportunities in more affluent communities, increasing the diversity and economic prosperity of the region as a whole.

“Healthy communities are not only environmentally healthy, they are also socially and economically strong. They offer employment and educational opportunities, safe and affordable homes, access to recreation, health care, and other needs of daily life, all close enough together that people can choose to safely walk, bike, or take transit instead of driving.”

—Lisa P. Jackson
EPA Administrator

Overlap between smart growth, environmental justice, and equitable development

This publication highlights strategies and approaches that link smart growth, environmental justice, and equitable development. In Chapter 3, these strategies and approaches are grouped under seven common themes that unite the three concepts. The fundamental overlap between smart growth, environmental justice, and equitable development is how to plan and build neighborhoods to address environmental, health, and economic disparities and provide benefits and opportunities for low-income, minority, tribal, and overburdened residents, so all the strategies described relate generally to land use and community design.

¹³ PolicyLink. Equitable Development Toolkit. www.policylink.org/site/c.lklXLbMNJrE/b.5136575/k.39A1/Equitable_Development_Toolkit.htm. Accessed 2010.

¹⁴ Glover Blackwell, Angela and Fox, Radhika K. *Regional Equity and Smart Growth: Opportunities for Advancing Social and Economic Justice in America*. Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities. 2004. www.fundersnetwork.org/files/learn/Regional_Equity_and_Smart_Growth_2nd_Ed.pdf.