

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM COMMUNITY LEADERS



Regional vision

A prosperous, equitable, and resilient region
with abundant opportunities for all to
live, work, play, and thrive.

Regional core values

Equity | Leadership | Accountability | Stewardship

Regional goals

Our region is equitable and inclusive

Racial inequities and injustices experienced by historically marginalized communities have been eliminated; and all people feel welcome, included, and empowered.

Our communities are healthy and safe

All our region's residents live healthy and rewarding lives with a sense of dignity and wellbeing.

Our region is dynamic and resilient

Our region meets the opportunities and challenges faced by our communities and economy including issues of choice, access, and affordability.

We lead on addressing climate change

We have mitigated greenhouse gas emissions and have adapted to ensure our communities and systems are resilient to climate impacts.

We protect and restore natural systems

We protect, integrate, and restore natural systems to protect habitat and ensure a high quality of life for the people of our region.



Overview

To ensure that the Met Council heard community advice and incorporated into *Imagine 2050* policy, we focused engagement efforts on groups historically overlooked in regional planning efforts, such as young people, people of color, immigrants and American Indian communities. As part of this effort, Met Council staff convened a workshop series with community leaders in two phases. The first was in 2023, collaborating with five youth organizations in the Young Leaders Collaboration. In 2024, the Council collaborated with four groups focused on multi-generational immigrant and African American communities, the Community Leaders Collaboration. In this report, the two phases are referred to as the Community Leaders Collaboration. The purpose of this report is to summarize findings from Community Leaders Collaboration workshop and research processes around the land use issues communities face in the region.

Community Leaders studied Met Council authorities, selected focus themes, and conducted research on experiences of diverse youth (age 14-24) and adults in the metro region. They presented results to Met Council members and staff. Participants designed research to learn the perspectives of young people or adults in their communities, interviewing more than 200 people in total. This report is organized to connect with existing environmental justice practices and policy and identify the gaps in current practices and policy.

This report contains a comprehensive list of all themes mentioned by Community Leaders related to the report topic. Researchers and planners involved in the project reviewed all materials from the Community Leaders Collaboration workshops and presentations. A lead researcher used reflexive thematic analysis, considering policy area needs. The lead researcher then identified categorizing labels (codes) for ideas expressed by Community Leaders. These codes were then placed into themes (headers and subtopics presented in the report), which were then rigorously reviewed by the lead researcher and additional researchers or planners.

Community leaders participated from these organizations:

- 4H, Scott and Carver County
- Community Resource Center and Shakopee Diversity Alliance, Scott County
- COPAL, regionwide
- Environmental Stewardship Institute, regionwide
- Esperanza United, Dakota County
- Mi Casa, Scott County
- Raices Latinas, Hennepin County
- World Youth Connect, Ramsey County

Defining environmental justice in *Imagine 2050* policy development

The Met Council defines 'environmental justice' environmental justice as the right for all residents to live in a clean, safe environment that contributes to a healthy quality of life.

To that end, the Met Council recognizes that:

- Environmental justice centers, but is not limited to, Black communities, American Indian communities, communities of color, disabled communities, immigrant and refugee, and low-income communities who have and continue to experience a legacy of racism or

other structural or systemic barriers that have resulted in environmental injustices, harms, and risks.

- Through its regional values, the Met Council commits to conducting community-centered engagement, repairing past and ongoing harms, distributing benefits equitably, and preventing future burdens.
- Environmental justice at the Met Council requires necessary adaptations to Met Council services, requirements, policies, practices, processes, and decisions, starting with Imagine 2050, to support a healthy and safe region.

Environmental justice background

Black and American Indian communities organized the Environmental Justice Movement to address environmental racism from both government action and neglect starting in the 1960s. The [17 principles of Environmental Justice](#) adopted at the 1991 People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. guide the holistic Environmental Justice Movement, including the movement's leaders, languages, philosophies, actions, and solutions. Environmental justice work in policy must be rooted in the guiding values of this grassroots movement.

Youth in environmental justice

The majority of participants in the collaboration were young people ages 14-24. Young voices are important to uplift in environmental justice contexts. Youth have long held a critical role in environmental justice; many climate justice movements are youth-led. Climate change and its challenges are a long-term threat with drastic implications for today's youth and future generations. Young people are disproportionately affected by climate change because they will live in a potentially terrifying and dangerous future that climate change is currently shaping.

Youth look to government for proactive policies to combat climate change while also striving to hold government accountable. Youth in Montana declared that the State of Montana's promotion of fossil fuels violated their right to a clean environment. Youth sued the State of Montana, the Montana governor, and the Montana Department of Environmental Quality. A judge ruled in the youths' favor, as Montana's state constitution promises the right to a clean environment.

This landmark decision displays that at the state and local government levels, youth are entitled to a safe, healthy environment. [The presiding judge stated](#), "Youth plaintiffs have experienced past and ongoing injuries resulting from the state's failure to consider [greenhouse gas emissions] and climate change, including injuries to their physical and mental health, homes and property; recreational, spiritual and aesthetic interests; tribal and cultural traditions, economic security and happiness."

Indigenous philosophies, which provide a foundation for environmental justice principles, include the '[Seventh Generation](#)' principle. The Seventh Generation principle directs that when planning or making decisions, we must consider not only the people of today, but people seven generations in the future. Environmental justice principles guide us to center youth as a key stakeholder as the region plans for climate change mitigation strategies and continues to embed environmental justice into our work.

Regional environmental justice issues in Community Leaders Collaboration engagement

Environmental justice issues emerged throughout the Community Leaders Collaboration engagement process. While these areas of concern were not explicitly named as “environmental justice,” recognizing these areas of concern as environmental justice issues helps ensure a salient, contextualized connection between an expansive concept such as environmental justice and concrete policies. This analysis was conducted via aggregate analysis of all Community Leaders Collaboration data, including raw and coded data, using the lens of an environmental justice subject matter expert. While many topics were related to environmental justice, participants did not use these exact words. As a result, it was contingent upon the analyst to connect participant-identified topics to environmental justice concepts in the analysis. The environmental justice report combines new ideas and complex formulations and displays environmental justice connections to each of the policy areas and cross-cutting issues.

- Pollution, toxins, and contamination.** Community leaders named vehicle emissions, chemical runoffs, noise pollution, toxic algae blooming, and perfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) as regional concerns. Pollution, toxins, and contamination affect the quality of life in the region for residents, nonhuman living beings, and the natural systems that make up our region. Community Leaders recognized this issue as something that affects the overall health of individuals, communities, and the region.
- Destruction of natural systems.** Destruction of natural systems is an environmental justice issue that stems directly from pollution, as identified by the Community Leaders. Pollution is one aspect of depleting a natural system; the destruction of natural systems refers to the overall decrease in quality of a natural system that may arise from pollution, toxins, contamination, or other factors such as land development. Community Leaders described how the destruction of a natural system, or its quality, is driven by factors including land development and contamination. The destruction of natural systems impacts not only people’s abilities to enjoy the natural systems, such as swimming in lakes or moving through greenspace, but also nonhuman species who live in the region.
- Lack of access and affordability based on geography, socioeconomic class, and identity.** Community Leaders described inequities of access to natural systems such as parks, greenspaces, and freshwater bodies based on geographic location, age, and cultural familiarity with greenspaces.

Table 1: Environmental justice issues identified in Community Leaders Collaboration

Topic	Examples from Community Leaders
Pollutions, toxins, and contamination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “This PFAS stuff is scary, but doesn’t the Twin Cities have the best drinking water in the country? Residents have built-up faith in our drinking water, hopefully we can see that continue.” “Contaminated water lowers quality of health.” “It’s important to keep an eye on [pollution] so we don’t ingest toxins.” “In my neighborhood people aren’t as close, there’s a lot of litter and trash, and there isn’t a lot of respect towards nature.” “Noise pollution is bad here.” “The feminization of duck species is an indicator of pollution.”

Topic	Examples from Community Leaders
Destruction of natural systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “In my neighborhood there has been a lot of development, and some of this development will be at the wetland area, and we are currently lacking wetland in Minnesota.” • “My family and I go to Minnehaha Falls. We see a creek, and we want to swim/find critters in it. I hope these trips can continue without being disturbed by climate change or pollutants.” • “Lake Sylvia used to be really clear, but the water quality has gone way down.” • “I hear people talking about how important fishing is, but people do notice how dirty our lakes are, like Phalen and Como.”
Lack of access and affordability based on geography, socioeconomic class, and identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Help with people going to parks more for younger people and older people.” • “Allow school-age children to discover the beauty of parks and trails.” • “The places that [have hotter temperatures compared to other areas of the region] are places where there are townhomes, and that’s affecting the Somali community because most of them live in those townhomes.” • “I think that parks are places for communities to gather and connect, it’s also interesting because there can be different cultural barriers in terms of accessing parks and feeling sense of belonging in the community. Which can be tied with who engages with park activities too, I have noticed in my previous work that there are certain demographics that think they should come to events more and certain communities that are left out.” • “My friends have cabins in suburban areas. Wealthy people have cabins, and they use water and go out on the lakes when they visit there.”

Environmental justice recommendations from Community Leaders

- **Environmental education** – Community Leaders identified a strong need for environmental justice education for themselves and their communities on pollution clean-up and reduction, native habitat restoration, and climate change mitigation strategies. Education around the environment, pollution, climate change, and other environmental justice issues helps a community understand why the issues occur, and what can be done within a community to alleviate, reduce, or repair them. Community Leaders emphasized the importance of beginning such education with younger generations.
- **American Indian cultures within the cultural landscape** – Environmental justice requires government organizations to think critically about and begin to repair relationships with American Indian communities. Community Leaders identified the need to preserve and respect American Indian perspectives, lands, and cultures.

- **Centering in community** – Centering communities overburdened by climate change is critical in the environmental justice movement and its subsequent actions, policies, and practices. Such overburdened communities include, but are not limited to, Black, American Indian, and communities of color, disabled, low-income, and aging and youth communities. Community Leaders recognized the importance of meaningfully involving community not only in thoughtful policy creation, but also via grassroots actions and stewardship.
- **Bold, urgent policy and governance on climate change** – Community Leaders desire proactive policy and governance that directly combats climate change and its harmful symptoms. Community members expect government policies and practices to mitigate climate change creatively, intentionally, and justly. Policies need community engagement directly on climate and community subject matter experts on the topic. Community Leaders want policies to combat climate resiliency, greenhouse gas emission reduction and clean energy investments, and encouraged policymakers to consider resource management and efficiency.
- **Public and ecosystem health** – Community Leaders emphasized the importance of preserving and protecting land from further development and restoring natural habitats, as natural systems are important for habitat restoration and ecological stabilization. Restoration efforts are necessary for thriving natural systems within the region for all human and nonhuman inhabitants.

Table 2: Environmental justice perspectives and recommendations identified in the Community Leaders Collaboration

Topic	Community Perspectives and Recommendations
Environmental education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I would like to learn more about climate change and how much it’s going to progress. What makes climate change worse, how can we help, what should be made known to people. Preserving ecosystems is also a priority.” • “I want to learn more about what pollution is doing.” • “I would like to learn about climate change, and the actions we can take to change it.” • “I wish there were more information on how to take care of our planet and global warming.”
American Indian cultures within the cultural landscape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Preserving land is sacred to Native American culture. As original inhabitants, it’s important that we respect that.” • “People value open land because it’s sentimental, cultural. Native Americans value land.” • “Indigenous tribes view water as a very important thing. Wild rice is a very big topic right now. Wild rice is also an indicator species, it’s very sensitive to change and important culturally.” • “I think there should be a big effort to educate people on Indigenous land. Not only that, but there was people and their culture as well and how we can protect them better.”

Topic	Community Perspectives and Recommendations
Centering community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It’s important to ask for solutions from the person who’s experiencing it... By doing interviews with other people, we got to hear about experiences we hadn’t known about, it helped us make recommendations.” • “Community engagement ties into transparency.” • “It’s important that in the plan the Met Council should consider marginalized groups. And mention that they say that ‘hey this considered this marginalized group.’ This would not be possible without the interviews. The interviews were such a vital part of this process.” • “People of color will still be a minority in 2050. Some people don’t feel smart enough to be ambitious in their neighborhood. Hopes resources are more available and communicated better to all communities. Would like to see more representation in the different available communities.” • “A community garden would allow people to exchange and try food and ingredients from different countries and cultures.”
Bold, urgent policy and governance on climate change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “There is a desire for more policy for clean energy.” • “Regional planners should consider immigrants. They don’t have generational wealth.” • “We should look at how to reduce greenhouse gases and discover new ways to use clean energy and cut back on energy wastage.” • “Solar energy apartments to better save nonrenewable resources.” • “Build practical low-carbon-footprint housing if expansion is needed.” • “Prevent urban sprawl by repurposing old buildings.”
Public and ecosystem health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Preserving land will help animals not go extinct: If we do develop all open land, we are taking away natural resources for animals which can speed up their extinction rate.” • “People preserve land because it’s the basis of our planet, and we need to preserve that nature.” • “Making sure natural water, lakes, ponds, and rivers are safe and clean for recreation.” • “I go to school next to Como lake. That’s not the cleanest lake. I know there’s been efforts to remove pollutants, but I think there should be improvements in the future.” • “We need to clean polluted recreational water.” • “Protect the outdoors spaces we have and work on preserving more.”

Environmental justice in regional policy

Elements of environmental justice exist in each policy area and cross-cutting issue. Community Leaders stated environmental justice-related values, visions, and goals that connect directly with Met Council priorities for *Imagine 2050*. In the following table, Community Leaders’ recommendations are cross-tabulated to demonstrate how these environmental justice perspectives connect cross-cutting issues to regional policy areas.

Table 3: Cross tabulation of policy areas and regional cross-cutting issues

	Climate change	Economic	Equity	Healthy communities	Natural systems
Housing	"[I] disliked that parks are being taken down for apartments." *	"When people are struggling to pay their housing, that means they have to cut on other essentials like food, electricity bills, or their kids schooling."	"Money does affect where you live, especially in Minnesota. For example, we see the different clusters of minorities in Minneapolis and St. Paul."	"A safe community would be having more resources for those in need."	"We want to encourage density for habitat preservation and affordability."
Land use	"Density is best for the environment. Efficient, use less building materials."	"With housing pricing going up and family incomes staying the same, it is hard for people to afford."	"There should be a big effort to educate people on Indigenous land... their culture as well and how we can protect them better."	"I think that the land we have is really beautiful, I think that we should preserve it for future generations to see."	"I think our city is lacking a lot of biodiversity, there's so much development and such little trees... some of this development will be at the wetland area, and we are currently lacking wetland in Minnesota."

	Climate change	Economic	Equity	Healthy communities	Natural systems
Parks	“I am interested in pursuing conservation, and it’s because of the work that’s been done in those parks.”	“I notice that a lot of the time there isn’t enough funding for certain parks.”	“Parks are places for communities to gather and connect... there can be different cultural barriers in terms of accessing parks and feeling sense of belonging in the community.”	“Parks allow me to better enjoy nature with the people I love, it allows me to enjoy the fresh air and keep us healthy physically and mentally.”	“I love to swim... and every year the water seems to get darker and dirtier. I would like to learn how that happens and what can be done.”
Transportation	“Eliminating excessive greenhouse gases by cars [is important].”	“Public needs to be accessible and educated on, electric vehicles need to be affordable.”	“Having more accessible public transportation would allow for more pollution dispersal...”	“More energy efficient, public transportation is better for the environment overall.”	“If there’s public transportation like buses it makes it much easier to get to parks...”
Water resources	“Protect lakes and ponds from pollution. Maybe even protection from erosion and noise pollution... Educate people about lakes and environments around them.”	“Waterways are important in Minnesotan economics. Fishing industry is huge.”	“Having more access to clean and healthy water for all is important.”	“The PFAS stuff is scary, but doesn’t the Twin Cities have the best drinking water in the country? Residents have built-up faith in our drinking water, hopefully we can see that continue.”	“Amphibians are indicator species. They’re not doing well. I went out to Manomin park in Fridley... I hear a lot of amphibians when I’m driving, but when I go to Manomin there’s nothing.”

**Parks and open spaces are ideal places for native habitat restoration, as several regional park implementing agencies have demonstrated. Parks contain open greenspaces with trees and pervious surfaces, which provide natural cooling systems and flood mitigation. Maintaining and restoring regional parks and mitigating greenfield development is critical for climate change resiliency.*

Commitments for implementing environmental justice in policy

Establishing and acting on environmental justice commitments are an effective way to implement environmental justice into policy processes and outcomes.

Based on priorities and needs identified by Community Leaders, potential environmental justice commitments could look like:

- Improving mental and physical health outcomes through our planning and project work for historically and presently overburdened communities, which include low-income communities, Black, American Indian, and communities of color, disabled, aging, and immigrant and refugee communities.
- Upholding and advancing the fundamental human and nonhuman right to clean, healthy, and adequate air, water, land, transportation, and housing.
- Elevating the voices of overburdened communities by strengthening resources and respecting the abilities that overburdened communities have to survive, adapt, and thrive.
- Deliberately and respectfully honoring culturally relevant history to maintain cultural heritage from the past and present for the benefit of all generations, paying particular attention to self-told narratives from Black communities, American Indian communities, and communities of color.
- Promoting climate strategies that enhance the ability of overburdened communities to adapt to the impacts of climate change.
- Advancing strategies that ensure holistic land stewardship and respecting the inherent value of the natural world as well as the land's role in nourishing the human community.
- Supporting access to jobs, housing, transportation, funding, education, healthy foods, and a clean environment for overburdened communities.

Further resources

Community Leaders and young leaders presented their recommendations to the Met Council. [Young Leaders' Presentation at May 17, 2023 Committee of the Whole Meeting](#) and [Community Leaders' Presentations in March 2024 Committee of the Whole Meeting](#) can be viewed online. The presentations describing environmental justice-related policy recommendations are:

2023 Young Leaders Collaboration

- [4H presentation](#) (15:30)
- [Raices Latinas presentation](#) (27:10)
- [Environmental Stewardship Council](#) (48:31)
- [Esperanza United presentation](#) (1:07:20)
- [World Youth Connect presentation](#) (1:23:00)

2024 Community Leaders Collaboration

- [Community Resource Center & Shakopee Diversity Alliance presentation](#) (31:48)
- [COPAL presentation](#) (53:01)

Please note that not all recommendations are attributed to specific organizations. If geographic distribution or identity is important to the application of this report, please contact us.

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