NAACP

OVERVIEW

**NAACP Guidelines
for Equitable
Community Involvement:
Community Members**

NAACP's Guidelines for Equitable Community Involvement in Building & Development Projects and Policies is a deep toolkit of explainers, principles, tips and tactics for everyone seeking to bring justice and equity to buildings and development. This is a brief overview of what's in the guide and some of the key takeaways.

INEQUITY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT DRIVES A BROAD IMPERATIVE FOR CHANGE

Communities of color and low-income neighborhoods bear the brunt of the impacts of unhealthy, energy inefficient, and disaster-vulnerable buildings and infrastructure. These communities also have the least access to the institutions and resources that could cultivate sustainable futures.

It's no accident. Inequity in the built environment—buildings, parks, neighborhoods, transit, energy, water—stems from systems long designed for exclusion, with roots in the displacement of Indigenous communities and enslavement of people of African descent. Inequity and racism are visible in the walls and highways that isolate neighborhoods, the discriminatory lending that disinvests in Black and brown communities, and the policies and processes that govern the development process itself.

Inequality and exclusion persist in sustainable building too, where the focus is often narrowed to environmental or technical outcomes—and financial returns to privileged owners—rather than widened to incorporate assessments of community, health and social justice impacts. When sustainability upgrades reach communities of color, they can come with gentrification and displacement—and without authentic sharing of power or community ownership.

This is the context that drives the imperative for action and change—for a broad diversity of people taking leadership and creating the rules, programs and policies in sustainable building. Sustainable building can be a tool for justice, or it can perpetuate injustice.

EARLY INTERVENTION IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS—AND FUNDING FOR COMMUNITIES—ARE CRITICAL

Nearly everything about current development processes favors stakeholders with ample resources, time and privilege—and excludes marginalized groups. Systems and scenarios for development vary widely, are opaque and can involve a range of decision-making bodies. To counter this disempowering lack of transparency, the NAACP Guide provides comprehensive explainer sections on who makes decisions; how private and public sector projects emerge and proceed; and the range of relevant government policies, from city ordinances to state budgets to building and energy codes and regulations.

HERE ARE SOME KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- **Our goal needs to be a process of "community governance of policy and development."** This is where neighbors carry out the whole process of defining a problem to developing and implementing a solution—rather than just being offered a late-stage window into projects or policies conceived without them, and impossible to affect in meaningful ways.

- **To be most successful, residents need an investment from philanthropic partners or local governments** to compensate their work; to fund education and engagement; to pay for needed policy, planning, design or visioning support; and to enable proactive approaches such as sending out Requests for Proposals.

- **When advisory committees are created for projects or policies, community members need to be able to help** define problems; assess needs; imagine, propose and pilot solutions; and organize additional engagement.

- **Pre-design and planning stages are critical points for community members** to influence a particular development project. This is when economic, racial, and environmental justice must be integrated, either through the owner/developer or through well-enforced regulations in place to hold projects accountable to these priorities.

- **Public comment or draft review alone are no guarantee of meaningful community involvement**. They are only a guarantee that voices will be recorded in a file about projects for which foundational decisions have already been made. If projects or policies are already in these later-stage steps, these are moments to demand revised timelines that enable real review, provision of materials in preferred languages, and full implementation of an equity assessment.

- **A Racial Equity Impact Assessment (REIA) is one way to conduct a systematic examination** of how different racial and ethnic groups—with attention to the full spectrum of intersecting marginalized identities—will be affected by a proposal. We need to be advocating for these robust equity analyses.

- **We should assume that the ultimate factor for decision-making in development is profit**, or getting projects done as fast and cheaply as possible. Rather than traditional "cost-benefit analysis"—or analysis with a narrow focus on the environment that can lead to greenwashing or green gentrification—we need to insist that projects be evaluated using a shared definition of sustainability that centers the impact on those on the frontlines of injustice.

ORGANIZING AND BRINGING COMMUNITY VOICES FORWARD: KEYS TO SUCCESS

For everyone seeking to effectively organize to bring community members into any part of policymaking, planning, or development, there are core ingredients to success.

Here are brief highlights from the many detailed in the NAACP Guide:

- **It is important for every single policy and project to be grounded in the experiences of people in the place**, and the place around it. Acknowledge the unceded land of Indigenous communities and ensure Indigenous community participation in decisions. Connect with elders and organizations or businesses that have been in the community for a long time. Be intentional about expanding beyond a racial definition of Black or brown communities to include ethnic and intersectional identities—so that history is not erased.

- **Widen the net of involvement up front so that the same grassroots leaders aren't tapped for everything** and no one bears the burden of speaking on behalf of an entire community. Make it a condition of participation that residents can bring other community members with them. Share out information in community spaces, whether talking to neighbors or through channels like neighborhood newsletters, church bulletins or online groups.

- **Demand and create ways for youth and youth organizations to be involved**, and kept in the loop, as decisions today must represent the needs and desires of those who will be living longest with their repercussions. Consider first creating spaces where youth can speak for themselves without being influenced by adults in the room, then bring everyone together.

- **Urge those seeking community participation to come to community spaces**: places of worship, community centers, schools, local businesses, and neighborhood events. Encourage them to honor people's time and commitment through a shared meal, childcare volunteering, sponsorship, or another offering. Arrange for open, unscheduled social time in addition to the task at hand.

- **Since it's rare that a given meeting day or time will work for everyone, whenever possible offer multiple options for people** to share their perspectives based on their preferences—from forums to small groups to conference calls, surveys or a coffee meeting.

- **Residents are community experts who bring value no one else can**. We can and should ask for compensation or mutual exchange in some form when asked to provide insights, time or labor to improve a project or policy. Are transit support, childcare or any other basics needed to make it to in-person meetings? What is needed to ensure reliable internet access for a virtual meeting? What is needed to ensure access to information in preferred languages?

- **Collaboratively create community norms** and agreements to set expectations for how gatherings can be welcoming and safe, such as these community agreements that guide the NAACP's Centering Equity in the Sustainable Building Sector (CESBS) Initiative. Agreements can address things like accessibility, privacy, conflict, mutual respect, decision-making, and more. They are helpful for building rapport, ensuring everyone is being heard, and starting off with a transparent and democratic process. They can help spark mutual acknowledgement of different perspectives and truths.

MORE RESOURCES

The Spectrum of Community Engagementto Ownership

Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing

Case Study: ReGenesis and equitable neighborhood reinvestment (Spartanburg, South Carolina)

Case Study: Creating a racial justice-centered community land trust (Broome County, New York)

Case Study: Master Plan to rebuild Mosswood Park's recreation center (Oakland, California)