

# Seeking Sustainable and Inclusive Communities: A King County Case Study

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April 2010



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## About the Author

### **Sheryl Verlaine Whitney** **Former King County Deputy Executive**

For nearly two decades, Sheryl Whitney was a public servant in King County government where she advanced to the highest management position within the Executive Branch. She served as Deputy County Executive to Ron Sims from 2002 - 2009. As a senior advisor, Sheryl participated in the development of transformative initiatives including equity and social justice, sustainable housing, climate change, rural area services and program performance measurement and accountability. King County has over 13,500 employees and a wide range of business lines including transit, public health, jails, elections, natural resources, permitting and administrative services.

Sheryl has a passion for child welfare and advocacy within the foster care system. She is a former employee of the Casey Family Program and currently serves as a dependency Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). Sheryl has a Masters degree in International Economic Development from American University in Washington, D.C., a Bachelors degree in International Studies from the Jackson School of the University of Washington, and a certificate in Executive Leadership from Seattle University.

## Seeking Sustainable and Inclusive Communities: A King County Case Study

What if all residents of King County had the same opportunities regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, sexual orientation or disability?

What if all residents of King County had the opportunity to receive the same quality education, the same access to basic health care, the same opportunities to work for a living wage, the same access to affordable housing, the same ability to live in safe neighborhoods, and the same opportunity to enjoy the natural environment?

A new, better, and very different King County would emerge.  
We can be the catalyst for this change.

—Former King County Executive Ron Sims

## Overview

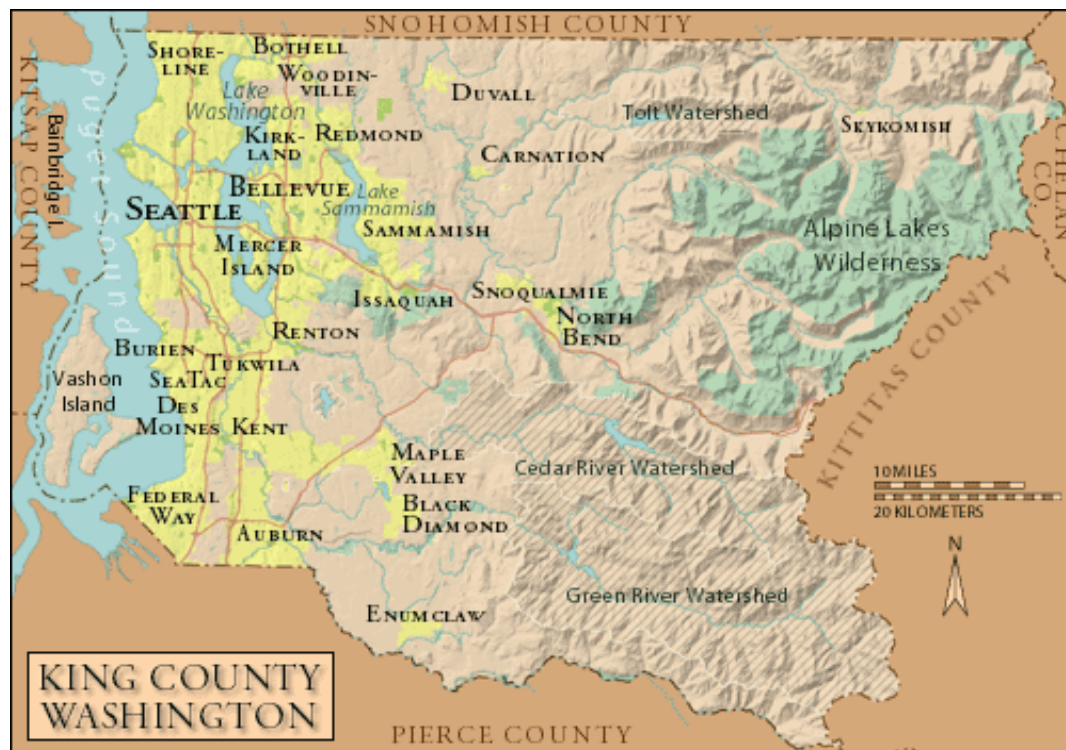
This is a story about a business decision. It will be told through a discussion of lakes, streams, trees, and clean air, as well as children, doctors, schools, and jails. It will sound like a community's passionate desire to reclaim its natural environment and its human capital—but in the end, it is about a region's ability to stay competitive in a rapidly changing world.

In the mid-1990s, the Puget Sound region faced a series of daunting realities: the influx of talent that fed a diversifying and growing local economy also led to rapid land development, which was taking a toll on the environment. While many residents were earning a comfortable living in software development, international trade, e-commerce, and aviation, a growing number of people were falling further behind and adding to the poverty census.

What follows is a discussion of steps King County government took toward easing the strain on the land, water, and air and how this environmental movement became wedded to issues of equity and social justice. What was clear to County elected officials in the mid-1990s was that the region was on an unsustainable path with potentially dire consequences not just for the environment and the health of its residents but for its economic future. Ultimately, this economic imperative helped break through organizational barriers and forged a multidisciplinary approach toward the creation of healthy, equitable, and sustainable communities and neighborhoods in the central Puget Sound region.

### King County: A Case Study

Figure 1. King County, Washington



Source: King County website

King County is the 14th most populous county in the United States. It has over 1.8 million residents with 39 cities and towns—the largest being Seattle, Washington. The County is made up of a diverse landscape of vibrant cities, low-density rural development, healthy farmland, and working forests.

From the Cascade Mountains to rare and sensitive lowland wetlands, King County possesses a wide array of habitats. Its 6,000 square kilometers are home to 620 kilometers of marine coastline and more than 18,000 kilometers of rivers and streams. The preservation of this diverse expanse has significant economic importance, but it is also at the core of the Pacific Northwest culture. <sup>1</sup>

*“Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.” Chief Seattle, 1854*

The reverence for the environment that was handed down from the First People of the Puget Sound region lives on in the current residents. Through art, place names, and the salmon fishing industry, symbols of native environmental teachings are present throughout the area’s day-to-day life.

Figure 2: Northwest Native American Images As Seen in Daily Northwest Life



Image: courtesy of Richard Shorty



Source: City of Seattle

Today the demographics of King County are significantly different from Chief Seattle’s era with whites making up 70 percent of the population. Within the ethnic minority population, however, there is tremendous diversity and a richness of cultural traditions that influence the character and attitudes of the region far beyond their numbers. Asian/Pacific Islanders make up 13 percent of the population while Latinos are 7 percent, blacks are 6 percent, people of mixed race are 3 percent, and Native Americans are 1 percent. There are 150 languages spoken within the walls of the region’s schools. The Muckleshoot and Snoqualmie Indian Reservations lie within the county borders and relate to local and state governments as a sovereign nation and a partner on many issues—most significantly those relating to fishing rights and the health of the environment.

<sup>1</sup> ICLEI Local Action for Biodiversity, Durban Commitment Ceremony, Sheryl V. Whitney presenter, Durban, South Africa September 8, 2008

## **A Policy Framework for the Environment**

In 1964, King County developed its first [Comprehensive Plan](#), the focus of which was to guide development in unincorporated areas; however, it did nothing to combat sprawl. The plan was significantly updated in 1985 as regional growth began to take a toll on open spaces, farmland, and forests. This plan identified an urban growth area (UGA), established the Agriculture Production and the Forest Production Districts, and significantly down zoned the rural area. Population growth also drove up the cost of public service provision and dramatically increasing the cost of housing and energy. The desire to maintain the central Sound's natural beauty and avoid the kind of sprawl that had become prevalent in Southern California was also at the heart of the county's planning efforts.

In 1990, the Washington State Legislature passed the [Growth Management Act](#) (GMA) as a way to further protect the character, environment, and quality of life for Washington residents. The GMA requires the state's most populous and fastest growing counties and their cities to prepare comprehensive land use plans that anticipate growth and its impact for a 20-year period.

King County and its cities developed the King County Countywide Planning Policies in 1992 to meet the GMA requirements and to coordinate planning among all of its jurisdictions. These policies establish an urban growth area within the western third of King County, where most growth and development is projected to occur. Policy goals include reducing urban sprawl, protecting rural areas, and more efficiently providing roads, parks, and other services.

These policies and plans have not been immune to controversy. Restrictions on private land development have been the subject of numerous heated public hearings and kitchen table discussions. County land use planners have spent countless hours working with community groups and city elected officials to develop GMA planning guidelines that attempt to balance private rights with the best available environmental science.

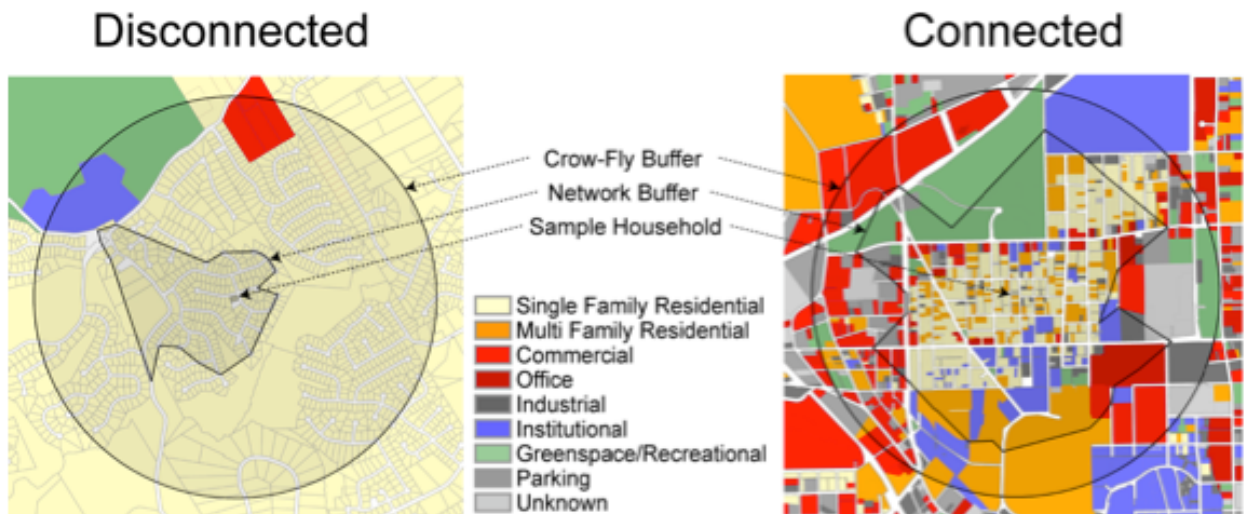
Currently, the County's Comprehensive Plan undergoes updates every four years. Three new framework policies, which were introduced in the 2008 plan, include (1) health, equity, social, and environmental justice; (2) climate change; and (3) performance measurement.

## **Studying the Links between the Environment and Public Health**

King County began a significant new chapter in 2001 when it commissioned a study by Frank and Company out of Atlanta, Georgia, to study Land Use, Transportation, Air Quality and Health (LUTAQH, now known as [HealthScape](#)). This study is the first of its kind for a local government. Working in collaboration with the Neighborhood Quality of Life study and the Center for Clean Air Policy, the study establishes a baseline of measures for land use, transportation investment, and travel choices and explores how these factors are associated with air quality, climate change, and health. The major findings of the HealthScape study follow:

1. Whether the goal is to increase transportation efficiency, reduce automobile dependence, or improve regional air quality and health, the study shows that compact development, a wide variety of land uses close to home and work, and a connected street network with pedestrian facilities can help achieve all of these goals.
2. Residents walk more in neighborhoods that provide a wide variety of retail services and where connections to such services are facilitated through a connected street network.
3. Transit and walking are highly synergistic. Transit use was observed to be the highest in locations where walking was the most prevalent. Conversely, the choice to walk is highest where the convenience and efficiency of transit is the greatest.
4. Residents in the most interconnected areas of the county travel 26 percent fewer vehicle miles per day than those that live in the most sprawling areas of the county.

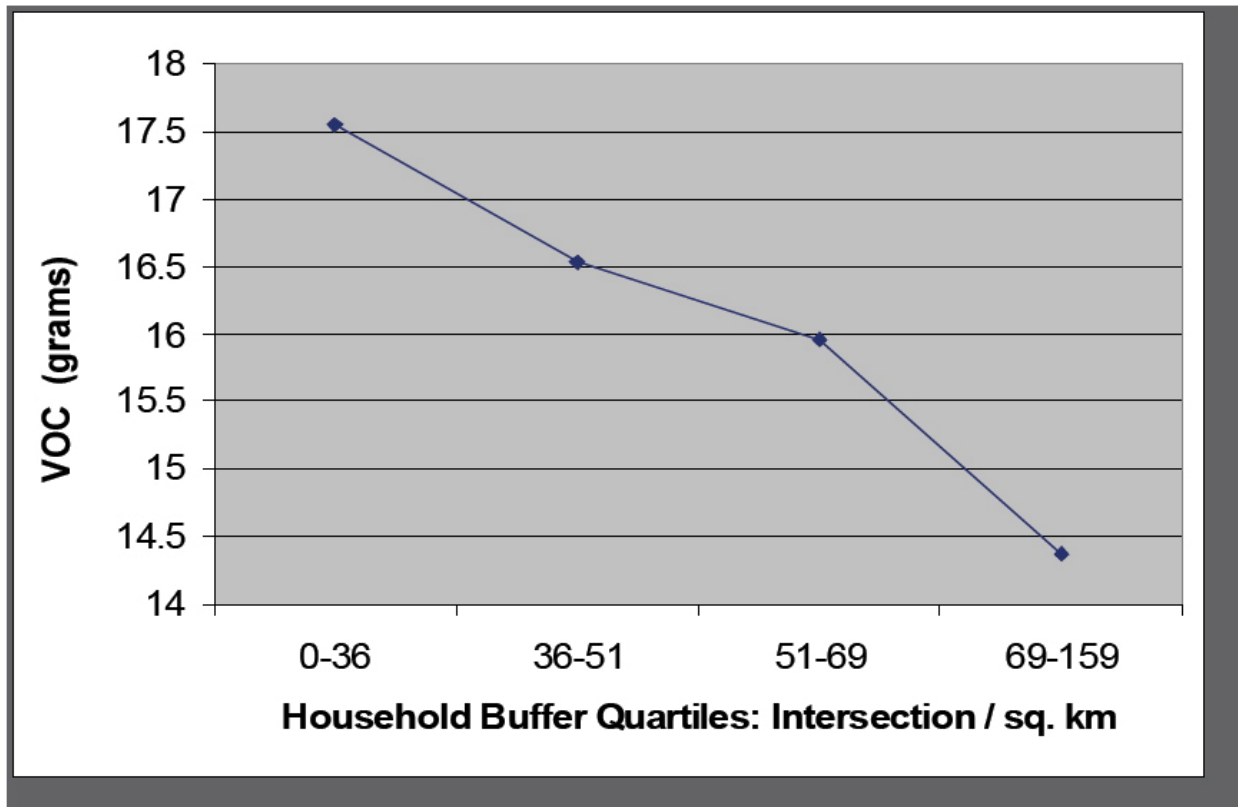
Figure 3. Disconnected, Vehicle Dependent Zone vs. Connected Community Development



*Source:* King County Department of Transportation and Lawrence A. Frank & Co., *LUTAQH Executive Summary*, 4[[Q: If this line is a requirement for reproducing the image, then ignore these edits.]]

5. Increased residential density, street connectivity, and land use mix near home and work are associated with significantly lower per capita vehicle emissions; in particular, fewer nitrogen oxides (NOx) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which react in sunlight and form harmful ozone, and fewer greenhouse gas emissions, which contribute to global warming, are released.

Figure 4. Inverse Relationship Between Connected Community Development and Harmful Emissions



Source: Chart courtesy of King County Department of Transportation and Lawrence A. Frank & Co., *LUTAQH Executive Summary*, 8

- Residents of the most walkable areas of King County were less likely to be overweight or obese and more likely to report being physically active. Preliminary results suggest that residents of the most walkable communities within the county are more likely to meet the 30 minutes per day of moderate activity recommended by the U.S. Surgeon General.<sup>2</sup>

From the results of this study, King County developed a [Transportation Programming Tool](#) and a [Development Impact Assessment](#) to allow transportation and land use planners to anticipate the impacts and benefits of various planning options. Moreover, this study was a catalyst for county agencies to harness the power of interdisciplinary work teams in holistic community problem solving.

### The Final Overlay: Equity and Social Justice

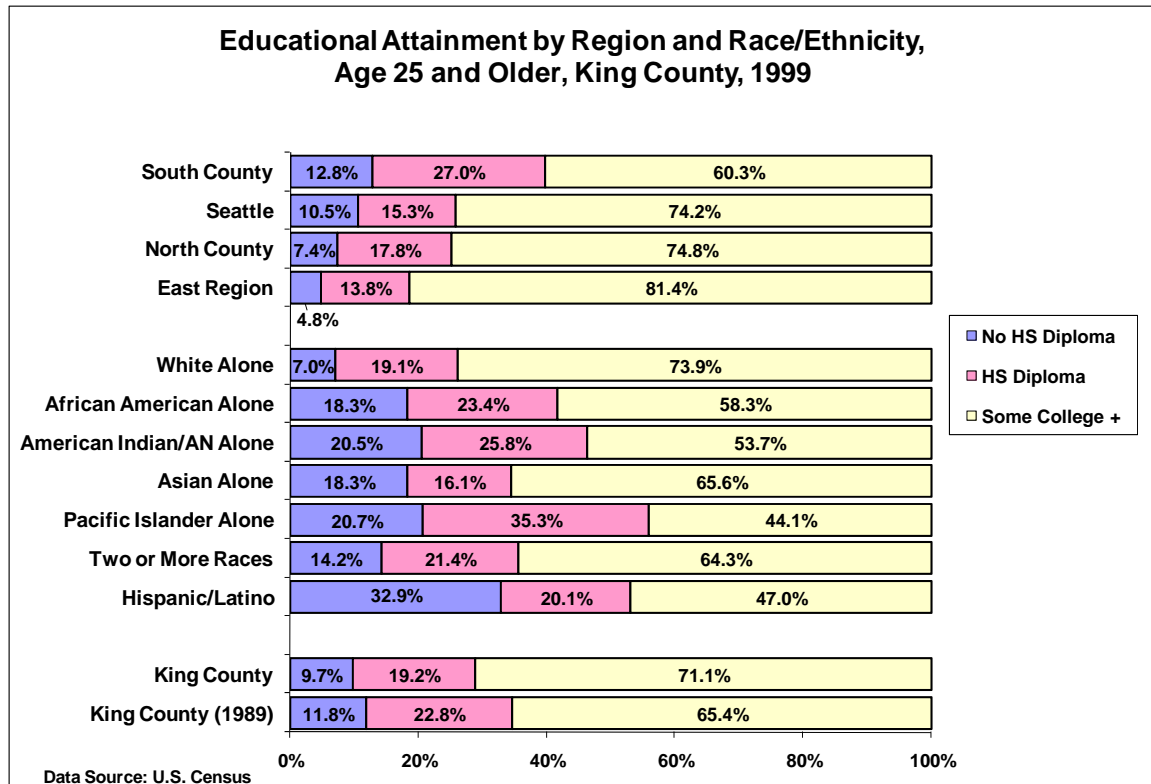
As King County government is beginning to fully embrace the power of cross-disciplinary work teams, former King County Executive Ron Sims met with members of his senior staff to discuss the contents of a new report developed by the Dellums Commission and published by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. In [A Way Out: Creating Partners for Our Nation's Prosperity by Expanding Life Paths of Young Men of Color](#), the Dellums Commission found that 25 years of “get tough” policies have failed young men of color and that dramatic change was needed. According to the report, deindustrialization, de-unionization, a decline in jobs and wages for the working class, ineffective

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Frank & Co., Inc., et al. *A Study of Land Use, Transportation, Air Quality and Health in King County, WA*, Final Report 2005.



drug laws, educational inequities, and discriminatory housing policies have led to higher than average divorce rates, higher dropout rates, declining college enrollment and rising incarceration rates.<sup>3</sup> About the same time, King County was asked to join [Place Matters](#) as one of 16 teams from 21 counties. A nationwide initiative of the Health Policy Institute within the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Place Matters is designed to improve the health of participating communities by addressing social conditions that lead to poor health.

Figure 5. Educational Attainment by Region and Race/Ethnicity, Age 25 and Older, King County, 1999



Source: Seattle-King County Department of Public Health, *Health of King County Report 2006*, 2-5

In a February 2008, [Seattle Times op-ed](#), Sims made a compelling case for adding equity and social justice as a central focus for county government. “At this moment, here in communities as forward-thinking as Seattle and King County, the color of your skin or your home address are good predictors of whether you will have a low-birth-weight baby, die from diabetes, or your children will graduate from high school or end up in jail.” Other indicators noted in the op-ed include the following:

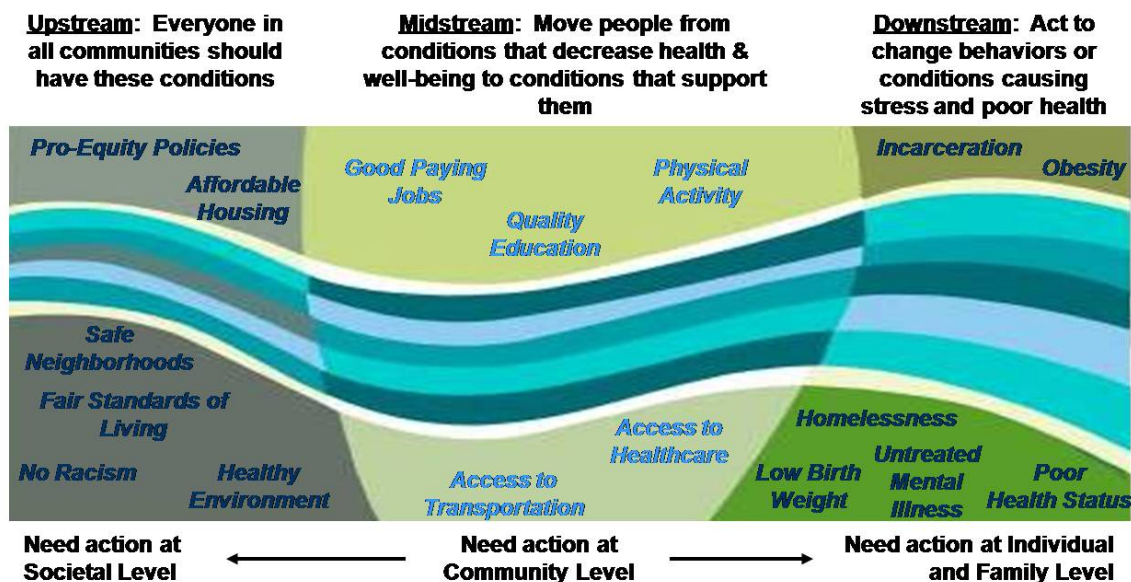
- A child in South King County is more than twice as likely to drop out of high school as one in East King County;
- A worker making between \$15,000 and \$25,000 a year is 10 times less likely to have health insurance than one making more than \$50,000 per year;

<sup>3</sup> *A Way Out: Creating Partners for Our Nation's Prosperity by Expanding Life Paths of Young Men of Color*, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, November 2006.

- A youth of color is six times more likely than a white youth to spend time in a state or county correctional facility;
- A Southeast Seattle resident is four times more likely to die from diabetes than a resident of Mercer Island;
- A Native American baby is four times more likely to die before her first birthday than a white baby. <sup>4</sup>

Calling on the collective resources of county government, Sims announced the launch of the [Initiative on Equity and Social Justice](#). One goal of this initiative is to begin investing as far “upstream” as possible to avoid more costly “downstream” impacts. The follow chart is one tool for communicating this goal within county government and to community partners.

Figure 6. The Equity Stream

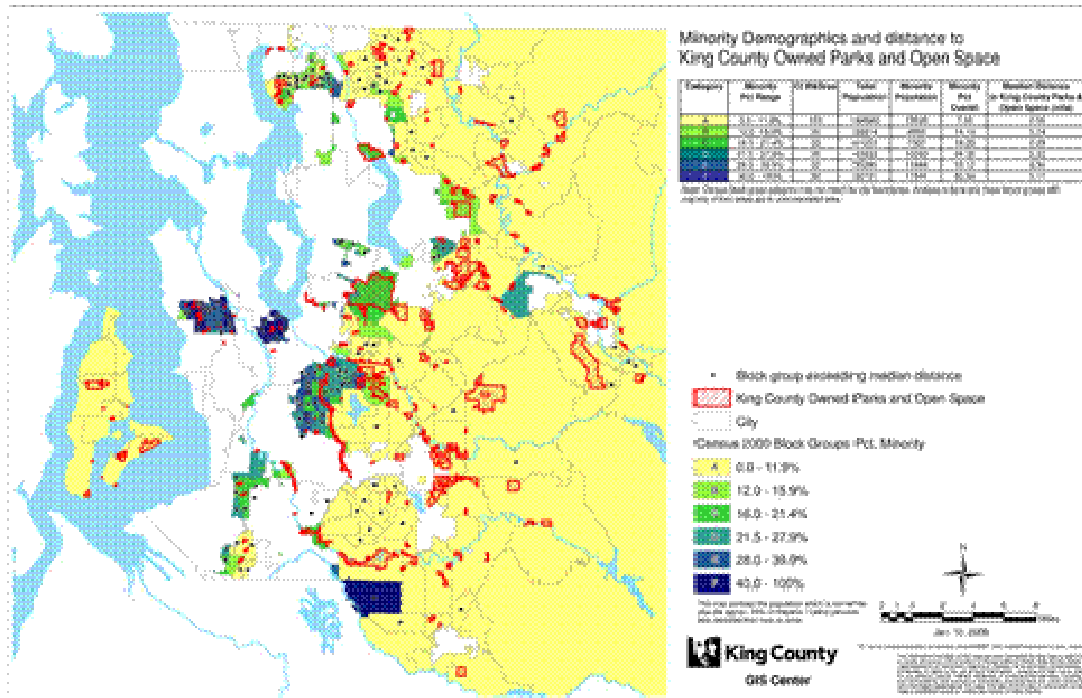


Source: King County Equity and Social Justice Initiative 2008 Report, 9

Another goal of the initiative is to intentionally use an “equity lens” in making decisions about policies, budgets, and programs. An example of this approach can be seen in figure 7 and table 1. County departments began to systematically overlay various data sets to better understand the impacts of policy and operational decisions on poverty and communities of color.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald C. Sims, “Equity and Social Justice”, Special to *The Seattle Times*, February 10, 2008

Figure 7. Ethnic Minority Communities and Their Proximity to Parks & Open Space



Source: King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks

Table 1. Unincorporated Racial Demographics and Proximity to King County Parks

**Unincorporated racial demographics (by Block Group) and proximity to King County Parks**

Category	Minority Pct Range	Ct BlkGrps	Total Population	Minority Population	Minority Pct Overall	Median Distance to King County Parks & Open Space (mile)
A	0.0 - 11.9%	153	164580	12020	7.30	0.00
B	12.0 - 15.9%	26	32814	4665	14.19	0.24
C	16.0 - 21.4%	33	41253	7607	18.20	0.29
D	21.5 - 27.9%	36	42633	10393	24.38	0.32
E	28.0 - 39.9%	32	35280	11888	33.12	0.30
F	40.0 - 100%	32	32731	17541	53.59	0.17

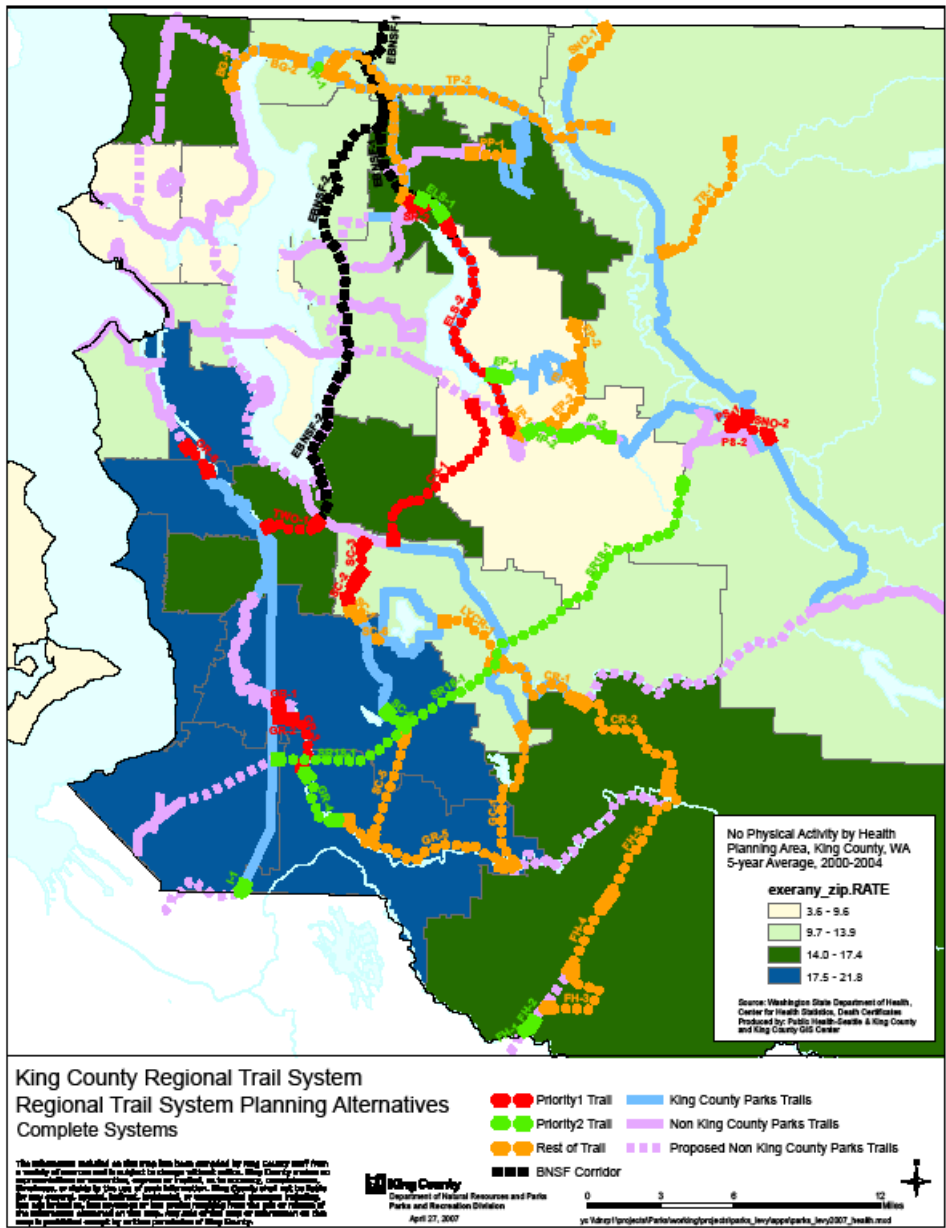
**Countywide Racial Demographics (by Block Group) and Proximity to All Parks in King County**

Category	Minority Pct Range	Ct BlkGrps	Total Population	Minority Population	Minority Pct Overall	Median Distance to Parks / Open Space (mile)
A	0.0 - 11.9%	474	465204	39334	8.46	0.00
B	12.0 - 15.9%	225	245375	34164	13.92	0.00
C	16.0 - 21.4%	226	250239	46096	18.42	0.13
D	21.5 - 27.9%	212	241993	59912	24.34	0.15
E	28.0 - 39.9%	229	281031	93695	33.34	0.00
F	40.0 - 100%	214	253192	149326	58.98	0.14

Source: King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks

Data overlays allowed county officials to ask different questions about public investments and whether community amenities, such as parks and trails, are distributed equitably and effectively across the region. With the HealthScape study under their belt, county officials were keenly aware of how recreational spaces and trail connectivity contribute to overall community health. The result of the data overlay shown in figure 8 led Parks Division officials to set aside funds to further develop the South County trail system.

Figure 8. The King County Regional Trail System



Source: King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks

At the direction of Executive Sims, each department was asked to make annual commitments to the Equity and Social Justice Initiative, thereby attacking community inequities from many different disciplines. Examples from 2008 include the following:

- Rewriting the zoning code to allow greater flexibility for developers and encourage more vibrant, mixed-use neighborhoods in return for providing public benefit, such as mixed-income housing, walkability, and sustainability.
- Offering court-involved youth the chance to learn about and train for high-wage and high-demand “green jobs.”
- Encouraging underrepresented groups to participate in neighborhood revitalization projects.
- Engaging lower income and non-English speaking community groups to assist in the revision of bus routes due to the opening of a light rail line in their neighborhoods.
- Increasing equitable access to the county’s innovative Health Incentive benefits program.
- The development of an enhanced translation policy and system—creating consistent, high-quality materials in 20 languages.

County planners also developed an Equity Impact Review Tool to serve as a lens through which managers could examine their operations and new initiatives. Each executive branch department is beginning to use this tool to better understand the impact of proposed new policies, programs, or budget decisions on low-income residents and communities of color and to look for opportunities to improve services.

To inculcate use of the equity tool and to encourage expanded use of social justice principles, King County designed a formal, mandatory Equity and Social Justice Initiative (ESJI) training program. The goals of the training are to enable staff to

- Learn the ESJI’s vision, mission, and guiding principles;
- Explore the underlying concepts of equity and social justice and how these apply to their work;
- Understand the priority being placed on the initiative within the government; and
- Understand how equity and social justice principles apply to county policies, delivery of services, and community engagement.

In its first phase, the ESJI training is geared toward 1,014 department directors, managers, and frontline supervisors. The ultimate vision for the training program is to see that all 13,500 employees receive training in Equity, putting it on par with such long-standing trainings as anti-sexual harassment and public sector ethics.

Inherent in the Equity initiative is the intention to elevate the role of diverse communities to one of full partner in designing and implementing strategies to promote neighborhood vitality and resiliency. The vision is that the county can achieve an equitable and effective array of services and service delivery methodologies, through review of current and past appropriation decisions, increasingly

sophisticated data analysis, a robust internal and external communication system, and community partnerships.

### **Putting It All Together I: The Greenbridge Project**

In the summer of 2002, King County Executive Ron Sims requested that staff prepare an ordinance for pilot housing projects to determine whether innovative permit processing, site development, and building construction techniques based on low-impact development and construction practices result in environmental benefits and affordable housing. It was hoped this approach would also lead to administrative and development cost savings for project applicants and King County.<sup>5</sup> [Greenbridge](#) was one of these pilot projects. In addition to building new infrastructure, the goals were to make this affordable housing project more pedestrian oriented, increase density, and include low-impact drainage and mixed-use buildings. The project includes parks of all sizes, trails, narrower streets, and energy efficient housing.

Greenbridge was developed on the site of the 569 unit Park Lake Homes public housing project, which in the 1940s had been temporary housing for Boeing Company defense workers. The King County Housing Authority received Hope VI funding to implement this new housing vision with King County itself putting \$10 million into the effort.

Figure 9. The Greenbridge Community



Source: King County Housing Authority

Greenbridge reflects not only a new vision for community development in King County but the new spirit of multidisciplinary collaboration. Permitting officials, the Housing Authority, transportation engineers, park planners, the school district, and the Health and Human Services departments all worked in partnership with the community to design this new neighborhood. Hundreds of community meetings staffed with translators helped the public agencies to understand what would allow this multicultural neighborhood to succeed. The amenities at Greenbridge now include

- Renovated community center
- Library
- Head Start program

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<sup>5</sup> Ngozi Oleru, "Greenbridge: Health Equity, Environmental Justice, and the Built Environment," Presentation at the 2008 New Partners in Smart Growth Conference, page 6.

- Police storefront
- Career development center
- YMCA
- Neighborhood retail
- Health department office
- Public space
- New elementary school
- Comprehensive trail system
- Wider sidewalks
- Public art
- Public transit.

Greenbridge will be completed in multiple phases. The ultimate number of units will be somewhere between 850 and 1,000. Of these, 480 will be rental units, with 300 of those being rent subsidized by public housing or project-based Section 8 funding. The remaining rentals will be affordable under tax credit regulation at 60 percent of median and below. The balance of the units, up to 520, is slated for home ownership with a goal of 75 units affordable to 80 percent of area median income. The Greenbridge staff are looking for additional capital subsidies that will reduce the cost of the homeownership units. They are also working to establish a down-payment assistance program for first-time home buyers.<sup>6</sup>

The Greenbridge project has received over 15 awards for green design and community revitalization, including the 2008 Community-Informed Design Award from the American Institute of Architects and the Office of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

### **Putting It All Together II: The SW 98th Street Corridor**

Because of the success of the Greenbridge project and the analysis provided by the HealthScape study, King County was awarded 2009 federal stimulus dollars to develop the [SW 98th Street Project](#). This investment will allow the creation of a safe, walkable corridor that will connect Greenbridge to the businesses and services in the nearby White Center business district. This small project embodies the essence of King County's interdisciplinary approach to equity and sustainability. This corridor will connect the residents of Greenbridge to the shops in White Center and to frequent bus service on 98th Street to downtown Seattle and elsewhere in the county. This corridor will encourage walking and biking instead of driving and provide a physical connection that will lead to a broader sense of community.

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<sup>6</sup> Cheryl Markam, Program Manager, King County Housing and Community Development Program, e-mail, January 5, 2010.

## Performance Measurement, Indicator Development, and the Use of Data

A major component of King County's success story has been the collection and ongoing development of performance indicators. This data work has come in many forms and forums—each providing important tools to aid policy and budget development as well as allowing the public to understand more readily the work of the county.

[King County Performance Scorecard](#) and [AIMs High report](#)—As part of the county's efforts to provide transparency and accountability, strategic planning staff produce a four-page performance scorecard and an in-depth performance measurement web site, AIMs High: Annual Indicators and Measures. The web site is designed to show the state of the county and King County government's performance.

[KingStat](#)—KingStat is the county executive's performance management program. Its purpose is to facilitate ongoing review of department performance and encourage dialogue about performance results between the executive and the departments.

[King County Benchmark Program](#)—Established in 1995 as required by the Growth Management Act, the King County Benchmark Program measures the progress of the King County Countywide Planning Policies. The program reports annually on 45 indicators within five policy areas: land use, economic development, transportation, affordable housing, and the environment.

[Annual Growth Report](#)—The Annual Growth Report is the county's report on growth and development trends in King County, its cities, and planning areas. The report has two primary purposes: (1) present a standard set of data on growth in King County to answer questions about where, when, and how much growth is occurring in King County and (2) provide a foundation for evaluating King County land use and development policies.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the above county-based and driven reports, planning staff are involved in two national and international benchmarking initiatives: [STAR Community Index](#) and the [Global City Indicators Facility](#).

The role of data development and monitoring in environmental work is familiar and largely intuitive to those interested in public policy. Monitoring air quality, water pollutant levels, and land erosion help to tell the story of a region's overall sustainability. Governments, nonprofits, and the public are accustomed to acting and reacting as a result of scientific environmental data. The importance of data analysis in the promotion of equity and social justice is an evolving science but an important one. In the King County example, social and health data traditionally collected and maintained by the Health Department are providing a useful foundation upon which to launch interdisciplinary approaches to community problems.

The county's use of social and health data, such as income, poverty, educational attainment, access to affordable housing, obesity, asthma hospitalization, birth weight, teen pregnancy, and crime rates (among others) has helped to delineate the most fragile communities in objective, nonemotional terms. The identification of these communities then allows other disciplines, such as bus and light rail services, land use planning, parks, trails, garbage disposal, and sewage treatment to ask

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<sup>7</sup> King County Performance Management Section, Office of Strategic Planning and Performance Management <http://www.kingcounty.gov/exec/strategy/PerformMgmt.aspx>, King County web site.



questions regarding how their services are encouraging community development or creating additional neighborhood burdens in areas that can least afford it.

Finally, sharing the same social and health data sets across the government and across disciplines has helped create a common vision of community need. And the ability to track this data over time helps county staff understand where their efforts are effective and when programs and services need revision. It also helps to identify critical partnerships outside county government. For example, the county has partnered with the state, suburban cities, universities, private nonprofits, the religious community, and civic-minded businesses on a [10-year plan to end homelessness](#) in the region.

### **Past Challenges and Moving into the Future**

While King County government has taken small but important steps toward fostering healthy, equitable, and sustainable communities, it has not been easy. As an early adopter of these approaches, the county has struggled with creating and spreading the message throughout a large organization, developing relevant data pictures, identifying its top equity priorities, and building transparent systems of accountability that allow for creativity and innovation. These struggles, however, should be expected when tackling such complex issues as climate change, poverty, race, and privilege. Moreover, they support the crucial value of becoming a learning organization—one that is willing to learn from its successes and mistakes through open communication at all levels.

From a regional perspective, there have been disagreements between county government and suburban cities regarding density levels for and location of affordable housing units. Most cities agree that housing costs in the region run the risk of severely limiting options for moderate and low-income families. Yet, some cities are concerned about significant concentrations of low-income housing in their backyards. Planning for several transit-oriented development projects has struggled or collapsed altogether over the county's proposed percentage requirements for affordable housing units.

Like most in jurisdictions, the future for King County is complicated by the current economic crisis. Its capacity to manage severe budget cuts and maintain momentum in changing organizational culture and practices will be tested. County officials will need to resist the tendency to stay within traditional comfort zones when facing financial hardship. Instead, it will be even more critical to engage communities and build partnerships across the region to drive toward a sustainable future.

### **Conclusion**

For more than 20 years, King County has set about an intentional path to reclaim the land, water, and air from the effects of climate change and the stress of rapid population growth. More recently, an important reality has emerged: environmental sustainability is intimately linked to the health and well-being of each and every neighborhood. Caring for the environment and the community's most fragile residents is much more than a general act of humanitarianism. For the Pacific Northwest, environmental stewardship helps to ensure a region that will continue to support businesses and attract cutting-edge industries that fuel the local economy and provide livable wage jobs. Investing in schools, parks, and affordable housing creates more opportunity—and opportunity allows a productive and creative workforce to keep those industries competitive.

King County's formal embrace of equity and social justice principles have furthered the region's overall sustainability. The early successes have largely been a product of interdisciplinary teams that have abandoned their traditional silos. These new teams have used data and indicators that provide a common understanding of the region's strengths and weaknesses. County leaders hope that as the principles of equity are more understood and each community has an opportunity to provide its own imprint on the vision, there will be stronger support for and commitment to creating opportunity in every corner of the county. Projects like Greenbridge and the SW 98th Street Corridor provide important testimony for what is possible in a more equitable and environmentally sound community.

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