

## Baltimore Sustainability Plan 2017:

### **Why use of an Equity Lens in the present is essential for the sustainability of our future.**

In Baltimore, as in other areas across the country, race and place matter in discussions about sustainability, and therefore must be surfaced and addressed – not ignored. Because of this, the Baltimore Office of Sustainability (BoS) was more intentional in incorporating an “equity lens” in its updating process of the sustainability plan. This lens was used in stakeholder engagement; framing issues; crafting goals, strategies, and indicators; and will be used in evaluations of both strategies and strategy impacts.

The Baltimore Office of Sustainability describes sustainability as “...improving the quality of human life while balancing the need for environmental protection, societal progress, and economic growth.” The BoS further describes a vision of sustainability for Baltimore: “A sustainable Baltimore is one that maintains the balance between meeting the needs of people today without diminishing the ecosystems upon which future generations rely.”

This definition and vision are broad enough to include both the more traditional sustainability issues that focus on environmental stewardship and the realization that definitions of sustainability, and how it is experienced, vary depending on zip code, race, and other factors. This is, in part, due to the City’s, and the country’s, history of institutional and structural race-based barriers and marginalization of investments in neighborhoods because of race and economic standing.

In Baltimore, as in other cities across the nation, health and life expectancy are sustainability issues. Roland Park – a majority-white neighborhood in Baltimore City – has a life expectancy that is 20 years longer than Harlem Park or Sandtown-Winchester, two majority-African American neighborhoods. It may be tempting to frame this disparity in terms of behavioral choices, but as reported in the *Baltimore City Department of Health White Paper: State of Health in Baltimore Summary of Key Issues, Services, and Policies* (March 2017), “...It is impossible to talk about health in Baltimore without addressing the significant disparities that exist because of structural discrimination, racism, poverty, and historical practices of exclusion.”

Transportation is another sustainability issue, and one that has a disproportionately negative impact on African American and other majority non-Black communities of color. In Baltimore, with a population of more-than-half-a-million people, roughly 1/3 do not have access to a car. In 2008, only 15% of Baltimore City’s white residents used public transportation while 40% of African American residents did. African Americans are routinely faced with longer commutes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Black Charities and Strategic Partners, *Dashboard Report: An Overview of Economic Gaps in Black and White (Baltimore, MD: Associated Black Charities, 2008)*.

And, unreliable, disconnected, and/or slow transportation options have very real impacts on opportunities for finding and sustaining employment.

Public funding that has advanced economic investments in majority-white and downtown tourist neighborhoods without touching “blacker” and “browner” west and east Baltimore neighborhoods in close geographic proximity have been seen – as least in some of those communities where disinvestment is an on-going story – as a sustainability issue.

These types of sustainability issues are not new to Baltimore City. But they are reminders that – in a city that has been incorporated for almost 300 years (288), but has only been moving toward racial inclusion (if not racial justice) for 17% of that history (the other 83% of its history was one of “for whites only” legal segregation and exclusion), an equity lens view is long overdue.

If any of this is to matter -- to be implementable and achievable in every Baltimore neighborhood – use of an “equity lens” is essential, not just for those who are in groups who have been historically oppressed, but also for those who are in groups that hold privilege.

“Equity” is often defined as “...the condition that would be achieved if identities assigned to historically oppressed groups no longer acted as the most powerful predictors of how one fares.”<sup>2</sup> “Equity” is not the same as “equality” or “fairness”, both which are based on the assumption that everyone should be treated the same. Historically oppressed groups in Baltimore, and in the United States, have not been treated the same. Policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages have explicitly and implicitly advanced or blocked opportunities for groups based on racial identities (and within those racial identities, based on other factors such as gender, class, ability/disability, sexual orientation, nationality, etc.) and reinforced stereotypes based on negative group outcomes predicated by generations of racialized policies.

Using an “equity lens” acknowledges societal inequities that are long-standing and that have their roots in generations of these unfair structural barriers.

An equity lens – unlike a “universalist” lens, which focuses on sameness -- acknowledges that “...different communities, and hence, the individuals that comprise those communities, are situated differently relative to each other...”<sup>3</sup> It recognizes that “universalists” policies that treat everyone the same continue inequities.

The 2017 Baltimore City Sustainability Plan used an equity process that more intentionally (and building on the process of the previous plan) broadened *the scope of voices* who “live, work, and play” in the city in order to authentically broaden *the scope of meaning of sustainability* – its meaning for ALL residents in the city, as opposed to just some. The plan’s seven core

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<sup>2</sup> Baltimore Racial Justice Action, Definitions. Available from <http://bmoreantiracist.org/resources-2/explanations/>

<sup>3</sup> John a. powell, Connie Cagampang Heller, Fayza Bundalli, “Systems Thinking And Race: Workshop Summary”, June 2011.

themes are Built Environment; Climate and Energy; Economy and Jobs; Education, Arts, and Community; Health and Safety; Natural Systems, and Equity and Empowerment.

However, Equity and Empowerment, while its own category, is part of the criteria for framing issues, goal-setting, strategy development, indicator metrics, and evaluation of the other six core themes.

These seven core themes impact us all. We all benefit from healthy neighborhoods and healthier societies. The more equitable our city, the more secure we all are. The broadening of opportunity advantages us as a city from the Inner Harbor to Mt. Winans to Mt. Washington in more connectivity; more positive health outcomes; more inclusive transportation options; more investments that seed job growth and job opportunities; safer and cleaner streets; and more people to invest – through live, work, and play -- in a city that truly works for all. An equity lens is not one that concentrates only on inequity but concentrates on the expansion of sustained privilege; sustained privilege that benefits us all, regardless of how we are situationally-placed.

The goal of sustainability – using an equity lens -- is to ensure that, in our role as stewards of the health and sustainability-resources of Baltimore, we leave it improved for our children and their children, regardless of race, nationality, zip code, ability, gender, or sexual orientation. Our goal with this plan is to expand opportunity -- to breath clean air; to drink clean water; to have varied modes of transportation; to enjoy green spaces; to have thriving neighborhoods, to be able to walk down the streets of Baltimore in safety from both crime and racial profiling; to access jobs – regardless of whether one belongs to a historically privileged or a historically oppressed group, and regardless of whether one lives, works, or plays in the “white L” or “Black Butterfly” neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Brown, “Two Baltimores: The white L vs the Black Butterfly”, June 28, 2016. Available from <http://www.citypaper.com/bcpnews-two-baltimores-the-white-l-vs-the-black-butterfly-20160628-htmstory.html>