

PRIORITIZE REPARATIVE PLANNING FOR BOSTON'S FRONTLINE NEIGHBORHOODS

Boston must run with its “Green New Deal” vision to integrate climate action with reparative planning (and become a national leader in the process).

Residents will support the radical changes identified throughout this report only to the extent they can see them improving their neighborhoods and creating economic opportunity, particularly in frontline communities that have a history of environmental pollution, substandard housing, and few transportation options. As noted earlier, apart from the practical imperative our climate future imposes, there is a moral obligation to counteract past economic, environmental, and social harms inflicted upon these communities and create neighborhoods that are accessible, affordable, vibrant, and connected.

This obligation is at the forefront of an emerging planning framework called reparative planning.

Reparative planning acknowledges the role urban planning has played in oppressing Black people and other people of color and seeks to undo past harms.

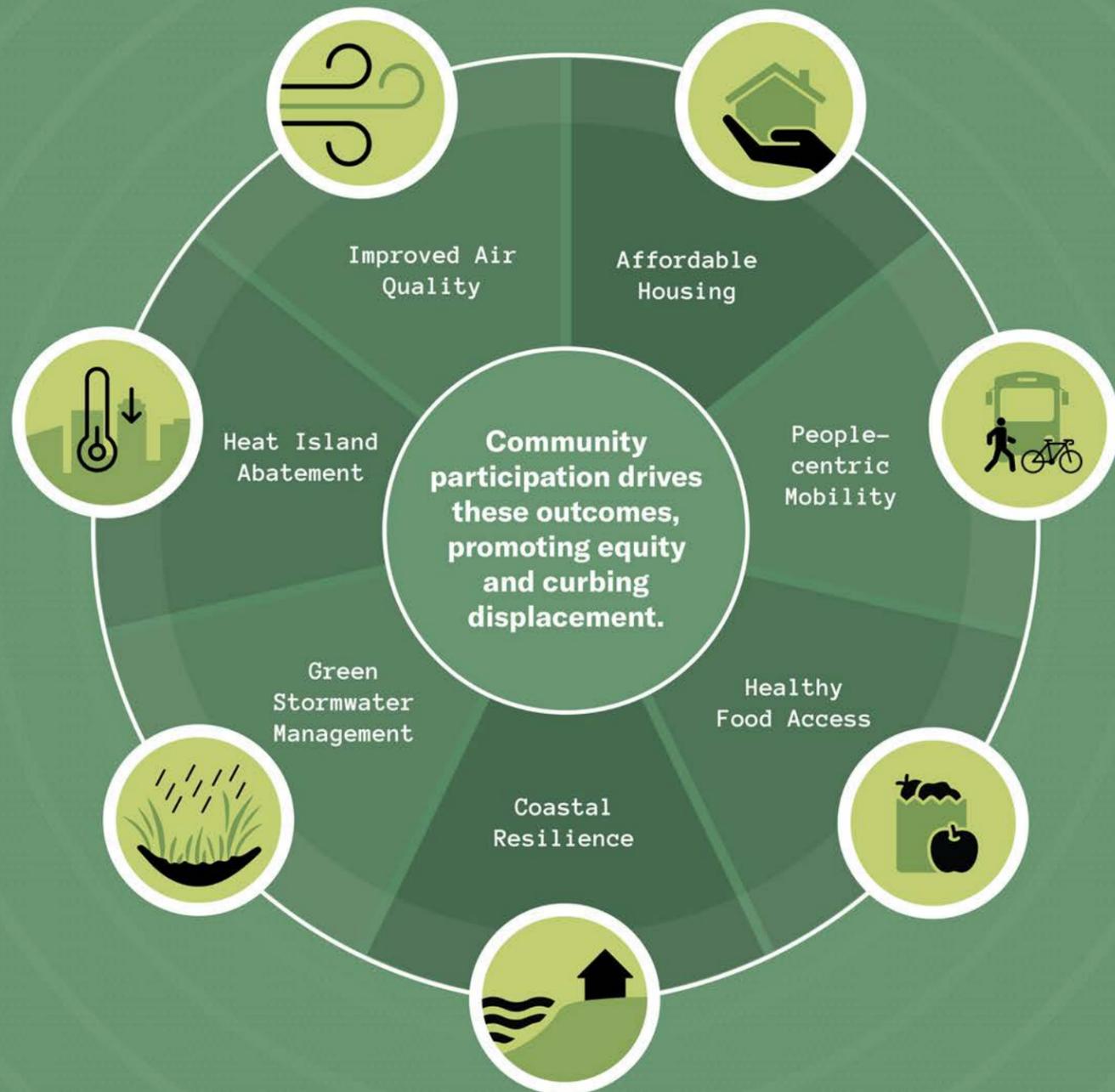
Figure 22. Boston's Frontline Communities



What Is a Frontline Community?

Frontline communities are those that have been exposed to more economic and environmental harm than other communities that have more power and wealth. They are often composed of racially and culturally distinct groups and diverse people of color who have limited financial and elective power. Frontline communities were hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, and experience the most immediate and worst impacts of climate change. According to the NAACP, they are directly affected and have fewer resources and protections to adapt, pass legislation, and implement policies to their benefit.¹⁴⁶

Figure 23. Elements of Reparative Planning



Reparative planning defines success by outcomes, not intentions.¹⁴⁵ Authentic participation is essential to achieving reparative outcomes.⁶⁴

Linking reparative planning to climate action creates the imperative that communities that have experienced the “first and worst” of climate change impacts—frontline communities—should be the first to receive the benefits of climate action.

We see this linkage between reparative planning and climate action in the “green justice zones” several cities are establishing in frontline communities. They ameliorate past environmental harms such as high levels of pollution, neglected infrastructure, or substandard housing while increasing resilience and creating economic opportunity in the green economy. Central concerns in creating a green justice zone are that the planning for it is co-created with residents and that throughout planning and implementation measures to prevent gentrification and displacement are in place. We adapt a model used by Minneapolis for its green zones to illustrate what we call neighborhood-based reparative planning (figure 23). Its ultimate goal is climate justice.

These efforts can inform Boston as Mayor Wu’s green new deal vision is realized in planning. But Boston’s checkered history of developer-led planning suggests it won’t be easy.

Historically, the practice of planning in Boston has deferred to developers in the private sector (see next page). The need to expand the tax base means that City Hall is in a constant balancing act between wanting to ask more of developers and asking for so much that it scares them away. The profits made from private development, however, suggest that the City has much more leverage than it has been willing to use.

Many of Boston’s developers are from other places and do not share a reparative vision for the city. They will build to the specifications the City requires for reducing emissions and building resilience. And through the BPDA neighborhood planning process, they will negotiate concessions that community residents seek. They are unlikely partners in reparative planning, however, unless the City puts more pressure on them to do so.

Contrast that with Chicago developer A.J. Patton, the founder and CEO of 548 Development, a full-service development and construction company with a mission of creating more sustainable and equitable communities of color. All the housing Patton builds is energy efficient to keep utility bills low for tenants. Patton uses minority-owned contractors to the extent possible on his projects. He helps these small businesses network by introducing them to bankers, elected officials, and others who can help their businesses grow. Boston needs a strategy for developing a cadre of community-minded developers to link social, economic, and environmental goals.

The Failure of Developer-Led Planning



Boston's Seaport District. (Source: Rhododendrites/Wikimedia Commons)

Boston has a large percentage of nonprofit-owned real estate that generates limited tax revenues. And there is no city income tax or other taxes as the basis of its revenue structure. Thus, developer-led planning is what got us the Seaport. In the late 1990s the area of the Seaport was almost nothing but parking lots—a 600-acre clean slate on which a vibrant and sustainable neighborhood could have been developed. Indeed, Boston developed a comprehensive plan for the area in 1999, The Seaport Public Realm Plan, with the intention of defining a vision that could be used as leverage when negotiating with developers. Since then, several more plans have been released addressing different foci and sub-neighborhoods.

From the Municipal Harbor Plan in 2001 to the Fort Point District 100 Acres Master Plan in 2008 to the South Boston Waterfront Sustainable Transportation Plan (2015) to Coastal Resilience Solutions for South Boston (2018). All these plans have been largely ignored. Instead, as in the rest of Boston, planning occurs at a parcel level, not at a district level. While some broad requirements are applied to developers, most resilience or community benefit decisions are made at the negotiation table. The result: the Seaport, criticized by many as sterile, a traffic nightmare, and vulnerable to sea-level rise. It was dubbed by the *Boston Globe* as “A Brand New Boston—Even Whiter Than the Old.”

Planning in Boston needs a better process for community engagement. Although planners have tried, residents of Boston's frontline communities (East Boston, Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan) are not satisfied that their input is acted upon and sometimes feel it is even deliberately ignored.

Changing that requires creating official stakeholder institution/community/public official working groups to guide neighborhood environmental improvement and development. Enabling communities to define and organize themselves, linked to capacity-building training for the newly formed coalitions, could lay the groundwork for neighborhood-based reparative planning (The Reparative Planning supplemental chapter reveals that there is a precedent for this in Boston).

Finally, Boston's nonprofit anchor institutions—mainly universities and hospitals—are tax exempt and do not pay their fair share in payments-in-lieu-of-taxes. They should be pressured to invest in their surrounding communities to create a greener future.¹⁴⁷ The Green Ribbon Commission has encouraged members in these sectors to reduce emissions and build more resilience but has not done enough to add advocacy for climate justice in communities to their missions.

Reparative Planning Strategies

- ▶ Build healthy and climate resilient frontline communities
- ▶ Address root causes of inequities faced by residents of frontline communities
- ▶ Build education and training pathways for residents
- ▶ Cultivate and build community leadership across issues to advance reparative planning
- ▶ Commit to building authentic participation in planning processes

Source: Derived from Williams, the Greenlining Institute, Fitzgerald.

CHALLENGES

We identify several challenges for implementing these ideas that need to be resolved:

1

Limited City Influence on Developers: Inertia.

Developers need to be more responsive to city and community needs. As we see from the Seaport example, the BPDA hesitates to make big demands on developers (e.g., mandatory inclusionary housing onsite rather than paying into pool; investment in transit infrastructure; public green space) for fear of scaring them off and losing the associated tax base. Many of Boston's developers are from out of town and don't have a vested interest in community improvement beyond their project.

2

Need for Governance Structure on Development: Competing Interests.

What communities want is sometimes quite different from what developers plan. Communities have some political clout to vote against plans they don't like but often lack the planning and financial resources to implement the plans they would prefer. Instead, through the BPDA approval process, they provide input on developer proposals and negotiate for amenities that offer immediate and tangible results, such as funding a small park or a cash gift to a youth group. The process is reactive—residents are not part of the planning and design process, but only respond to the plans and designs presented to them.

3

Need to Diversify Boston's Development and Construction Field: Knowledge Gap.

Boston has few Black, Latino or Asian developers, construction companies, or workers in real estate development who can operate at the scale of current development projects nor is there a pipeline within the vocational, community college, and university system for creating more of these development professionals. Development entities, environmental organizations, professional associations, schools at all levels, unions, policy makers, and communities must work together to create these environmental justice workforce development pipelines, as was the case in the early stages of planning for the Big Dig project.



Anchor Institutions Minimally Engaged in Reparative Justice: Inertia.

As the City begins comprehensively implementing elements of the green new deal and the reparative planning it suggests, all stakeholders need to support the agenda. The city's anchor institutions—colleges and universities, cultural institutions, and hospitals—all have a key role to play in neighborhood-based reparative planning. Each has programs that invest in communities, but connecting them to each other and to reparative planning principles is needed to leverage greater impact.

Progress Assessment

In August, at the direction of Mayor Wu, the City took a step in increasing accountability to community needs.

{ A new planning process requires that developers lay out their plans for being more inclusive in their neighborhood impact plans, and that they specify their diversity, equity, and inclusion plans.

To date, clear metrics of success and timetables and sanctions that hold invested parties accountable for achieving measurable results have not been put in place. Doing so should be a priority. Without metrics and sanctions, there is little motivation for change.

The new requirements for developers to create more inclusive neighborhood impact plans is laudable. But not much has changed in how Boston empowers residents to participate in determining the needs of their communities. It is essential to have an officially recognized structure for engaging with community members. For example, residents should be on formal advisory groups and be paid for their participation in neighborhood-based reparative planning.

Reparative climate justice planning is very much aligned with Mayor Wu's Green New Deal (Table 1), and we have seen the beginning of its implementation in such actions as: prioritizing the needs of East Boston in coastal resilience; committing \$2 billion into improving school facilities, and investing approximately \$380 million into affordable housing and home ownership. The transformative reorganization of the priorities of the BPDA along with the hiring of a Green New Deal Director are additional steps that signal that Boston is moving away from the market-driven, developer-led planning that got us the Seaport.

The green technology and related careers pipeline starts with high schools. More education and training programs that prepare residents of frontline communities for the range of occupations and professions comprising real estate development and green technology need to be developed and linked to the city's community colleges, universities, and employers. Students need mentoring so they can create new businesses in these and related areas. Boston also needs a strategy to promote more minority-owned businesses and bring them to the attention of developer procurement managers.

Few anchor institutions are investing substantially in frontline community initiatives to improve environmental conditions, create career-ladder employment opportunities, or promote community health. Such initiatives would enhance neighborhood-based reparative planning. The Green Ribbon Commission has been an effective mechanism for encouraging these institutions and the real estate sector to reduce their individual carbon footprints. It now needs to focus its members on climate justice, and motivate all anchor institutions—colleges and universities, hospitals, and cultural institutions, as well as real estate developers—to integrate community outreach and reparative justice into their missions.



Training and early exposure to opportunities in climate-conscious development and construction professions should be ramped up.

Charlestown students on STEM field trip. (Source Kellyanne Mahoney/Autodesk)

PRIORITY ACTIONS

Hold developers accountable

Overview

The Mayor and the City's Chief Planner need to set timelines for the analysis and assessment of developer plans for incorporating environmental justice remedial measures into development plans. If data on current and pipeline developments were to be collected, assessed, and analyzed over the coming 18 months for their measurable positive outcomes, then new guidelines and recommendations could be prepared for implementation by mid-2024, with fairly negotiated and implementable sanctions incorporated into the guidelines as development mandates.

Responsible Party

- ▶ Mayor's Office
- ▶ Boston Planning & Development Agency

Progress Indicators

A timeline is established for analyzing developer plans.

Guidelines for developers are established.

Develop structures and processes for community engagement

Overview

Create a structure for engaging with community members (formal advisory groups, ad hoc relationships, community partnerships on specific issues, etc.).

Bring community stakeholders into the process in early stages so that they are co-creators of the engagement strategy.

Define and be transparent about how community input will influence organizational actions on climate change.

Collaborate with community partners to raise mutual awareness about climate change and actions that organizations and community members can take.

Responsible Parties

- ▶ Mayor's Office
- ▶ Boston Planning & Development Agency
- ▶ Community & environmental justice organizations

Progress Indicators

Formal advisory groups are created.

The City issues a statement on how community input will be used in defining and implementing climate action.

Motivate key institutions to promote climate justice initiatives in their communities

Overview

Request/require that Green Ribbon Commission member organizations place a client or community advocate member on their Boards or establish advisory groups on environmental justice (with paid members) to help develop specific strategies to address how the stakeholder institutions can best focus their resources on achieving measurable results in this area.

Responsible Party

- ▶ Green Ribbon Commission

Progress Indicators

Members are appointed and strategies developed within one year.

Create linked secondary and higher ed programs to prepare young adults for green technology careers

Overview

Assess employment needs related to implementing Boston's climate and resilience plans. Conduct an inventory of existing programs, paying particular attention to availability of opportunities for residents of frontline communities. Create a planning committee with representation from each of the responsible parties for program planning.

Responsible Parties

- ▶ Boston Public Schools
- ▶ Regional community colleges
- ▶ Boston Planning & Development Agency
- ▶ Green Ribbon Commission

Progress Indicators

Programs and initiatives are identified with input from frontline communities.