



## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Mayor and Council Members

**FROM:** Jorge L. Morales, P.E., CFM, Director  
Watershed Protection Department *JL Morales*

**THROUGH:** Rey Arellano, Assistant City Manager *Rey Arellano*

**DATE:** December 1, 2022

**SUBJECT:** **Staff Response to Resolution 20220609 - Incorporating Equity into the Rain to River Strategic Plan**

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City Council Resolution [20220609-061](#) directs the City Manager to address equitable protection of the environment throughout the City of Austin as part of the Watershed Protection Strategic Plan, with emphasis on the protection of Blackland Prairie. Regulations related to cut and fill and creek protection were directed to be among the considerations.

The Watershed Protection Strategic Plan is the guiding blueprint for the Watershed Protection Department—setting goals and objectives and establishing how to prioritize problems and make decisions. It provides a framework for evaluating future programs, projects, and regulations as well as measuring the success of the Watershed Protection Department (WPD) portfolio. The document also helps explain WPD work and priorities to staff, policymakers, and the Austin community.

WPD is working on a comprehensive update to its Strategic Plan—known as [Rain to River](#). Rain to River will center on the needs of groups most vulnerable to watershed impacts and who have historically been excluded from City planning processes. Austin has changed a lot in the 20 years since the original plan was developed, and staff must tackle current challenges like climate change, population growth, and racial inequities. The update process will strive to advance racial equity in all department operations, ensuring that the department's work results in equitable outcomes for all Austinites. WPD recognizes the value in having community members inform the plan through their lived experiences, values, and priorities. Developing an equitable plan requires all members of the community to have the opportunity to provide input including historically underrepresented populations in a manner that is not just sought, but that it is amplified and intentionally incorporated into the decision-making process. To help achieve these goals, the department is building on the best practices and lessons learned from the Climate Equity Plan, which was created with the intentional focus of engaging racially and economically diverse residents about the challenges, barriers, and opportunities facing historically excluded groups.

Past Watershed Protection Department strategic planning efforts have not prioritized engaging people of color, low-income communities, and other groups more likely to experience negative quality of life outcomes in Austin. As a result, these groups have also been denied a full opportunity to participate in past planning and decision-making processes. For Rain to River, the department is dedicating extra time and resources toward engaging groups whose voices have been left out of past planning processes.

Engagement strategies to reach these communities include:

- Hiring paid community ambassadors to gather stories and perspectives from racially and economically diverse communities;
- Awarding \$5,000 mini-grants to six organizations that can help further goals for community engagement and representation;
- Working with MEASURE—a local black-owned nonprofit—to conduct five compensated focus groups designed by and centered on historically-excluded communities;
- Reaching out to over 120 different priority stakeholder organizations and community leaders to make new connections and build relationships; and
- Making it easy and enjoyable to provide input by meeting people where they are, such as at community meetings and events.

The intent is to gather input from the full diversity of Austin’s residents, which will lead to a stronger plan that reflects the values and priorities of all Austinites while advancing racial equity.

While Rain to River is under development, the department is actively expanding its internal equity initiative to advance equity-related goals within existing operations. In March 2022, the department hired its first Equity and Inclusion Program Manager. Having a dedicated full-time position will serve to focus and provide capacity to these efforts—however, sustainable and meaningful equity work requires engagement of all staff. To support broad department participation, the Program Manager works with an intradepartmental team to implement and refine recommendations developed as part of the [Equity Action Plan](#) in partnership with the City of Austin’s Equity Office. This work includes staff training and development, assessment of department policies and procedures, and modifying operations to work towards measurable, equitable outcomes. This initiative is not only fundamental to achieving the existing equity goals established in the Austin Strategic Direction 2023 Plan and other citywide initiatives; it also lays the foundation for readily implementing community-driven recommendations identified in the Rain to River Strategic Planning process.

A large component of this work includes implementation of an Equity Assessment Tool, developed by the City of Austin’s Equity Office and community based on the tool created by the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE). This tool provides a framework for evaluating policies, programs, and procedures to consider whether the subject advances racial equity or perpetuates racial inequities. As part of internal equity efforts, WPD is dedicated to evaluating its environmental regulations – including the policies in the Land Development Code and associated criteria manuals – using the Equity Assessment Tool. This will be a comprehensive effort to be conducted based on the priorities identified in the Rain to River process. This evaluation will also reflect the findings of the [Green Infrastructure Strengths and Gaps Assessment](#) as well as the results of a recent [WPD study](#) focused on stream corridors in the Blackland Prairie ecosystem to better understand the unique environmental sensitivities of these corridors as well as the specific challenges we need to address to protect and enhance them. In the Equity Response, Summary, and Recommendations for the 2022 Environmental Code Amendments, staff committed to develop “a full equity assessment of all environmental code to be conducted in 2023 with recommendations for potential code changes presented to Council by Fall of 2023.”

For questions about Rain to River, please contact Erin Wood, Principal Planner, Watershed Protection Department at [erin.wood@austintexas.gov](mailto:erin.wood@austintexas.gov) or 512-974-2809.

cc:     Spencer Cronk, City Manager  
          Katie Coyne, Environmental Officer, Assistant Director  
          Kye Tavernier, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Program Manager