

DRAFT Water Forward 2024 Equity and Affordability Roadmap

1. Summary

This goal of this document is to provide context about equity and affordability considerations related to water resource management in Austin and to discuss how these considerations will be included in Water Forward 2024 (WF24), the first update to Austin's 100-year Integrated Water Resource Plan. This memo will provide key definitions, a narrative history, and describe approaches to improve community engagement and evaluate the distribution of benefits and burdens of plan implementation outcomes, especially for people of color and low-income people.

2. Water Forward Overview

Austin Water is committed to providing safe, reliable, high-quality and affordable water services to all water users in our community. The purpose of the Water Forward plan is to develop and implement diverse and environmentally conscious water management strategies to adapt to growth, drought, and climate change and ensure a sustainable, resilient, equitable, and affordable water future for our community for the next 100 years. As part of the 2024 plan update, Austin Water seeks to be intentional in considering equity and affordability impacts in the plan development process and in implementation of plan strategies.

Austin Water recognizes the importance of an equity framework rooted in an understanding of historic discriminatory and exclusionary practices that may have contributed to certain present day inequities in quality of life outcomes for communities of color and low-income communities. Staff have compiled key definitions, historical information, and stakeholder feedback to guide and support the creation of an Equity and Affordability framework for the Water Forward 2024 plan update.

3. Definitions

Equity

The City of Austin Equity Statement is as follows: "Racial equity is the condition when race no longer predicts a person's quality of life outcomes in our community. The City recognizes that race is the primary determinant of social equity and therefore we begin the journey toward social equity with this definition. The City of Austin recognizes historical and structural disparities and a need for alleviation of the wrongs by critically transforming its institutions and creating a culture of equity."

Affordability

Regarding affordability, Austin Water seeks to align with the City of Austin Strategic Direction 2023, which states: "Austinites deserve to experience the necessities of life as

affordable and accessible. Simply put, this means a household can afford rent or mortgage, transportation, childcare expenses, utilities, and taxes.” (City of Austin, 2018)

Marginalized Communities

For the purposes of WF24, marginalized communities are defined primarily as communities of color and low-income communities.

Procedural Equity

Working to develop a decision-making process which is transparent, fair, and equitable.

Distributive Equity

Working to understand the distribution of benefits and burdens of plan implementation outcomes and mitigate potential inequities.

4. Equity and Affordability in WF24

The Water Forward 2024 Plan includes the creation of this Equity and Affordability Roadmap (EARM) and an Equity and Affordability Tool (EAT). The creation of an EARM and EAT for this plan update process was influenced by a similar approach used the Office of Sustainability in developing the City’s Climate Equity Plan. The Office of Sustainability created an equity tool, working with their Climate Ambassadors and other community members, to evaluate strategies that were included in the Climate Equity Plan.

The WF24 EARM provides historical equity context for Austin and outlines how water management strategies will be evaluated using an equity and affordability lens. The EARM lays out a framework to evaluate the distribution of benefits and burdens from plan implementation outcomes and opportunities to mitigate inequities. This framework will be supported by the Equity and Affordability Tool (EAT), that will utilize disaggregated spatial, demographic, and other data to inform responses to the EARM framework questions. The EARM also provides best practices to improve procedural equity in the plan development process. These best practices will be used to inform staff practices and community engagement.

To create a shared equity analysis, Austin Water staff involved in the plan update process attended a three-day equity training facilitated by Joyce James Consulting, LLC. This training examined racial inequities through a Groundwater Analysis and created a space for participants to discuss institutional and structural racism in the historical and current context, as well as implications for the WF24 effort.

Austin Water also created a Community Ambassadors Group specifically to provide input on the development of the Equity and Affordability Roadmap framework. Community members from across the City were selected to serve as ambassadors. In advertising this opportunity, staff were explicitly interested in engaging people willing to speak about the challenges, barriers, and opportunities facing historically underrepresented groups — specifically, people of color. A main goal of this Community Ambassador Group (CAG)

was for staff to learn more about the community's values related to equity and affordability in water resources planning. The CAG was convened to:

- Provide recommendations on engaging with communities historically underrepresented in water resources planning efforts to help develop an Equity and Affordability Roadmap and inform the Education and Engagement Plan
- Understand community values related to equity and affordability and find alignment in Water Forward 2024 Plan update
- Understand community concerns about current or possible water supply issues
- Gather ideas from diverse members of our community to draw on the expertise that comes from different lived experiences and identities

CAG members were onboarded through a series of weekly “Water Forward University” sessions that provided background information about the Water Forward plan, the City's water supplies, and how Austin Water manages the City's water resources. The CAG also explored the Pillars of Water Equity as identified by the U.S. Water Alliance.

Ambassadors continued to engage with staff over the course of a year. Along with staff and Council-appointed Water Forward Task Force members, CAG members attended a three session equity grounding series where participants learned about the history of Austin through an equity lens and the inception of the City of Austin Equity Office (presentation provided by Equity Office staff) as well as how other City departments are incorporating equity into their work and strategic planning (presentations provided by the Watershed Protection Department, Austin Energy, and Housing and Planning). The group also discussed strategies for future engagement and themes to organize collective concerns related to equity and affordability.

To conclude their tenure, ambassadors conducted interviews within their communities to further understand values and concerns as they relate to water resources planning and identified Equity and Affordability Themes.

Input from Austin Water (AW) staff, Water Forward Task Force Members, and members of the Community Ambassadors Group (CAG) is being incorporated into Water Forward 2024 deliverables, as shown below in Figure A.

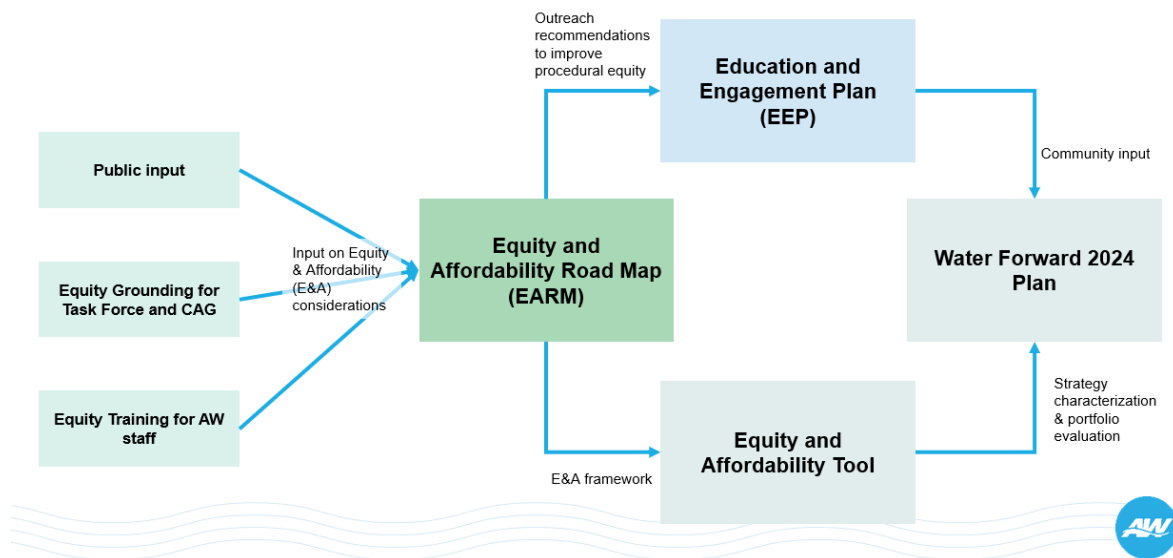


Figure A: Equity and Affordability Framework for WF24

Figure B (shown below) outlines the key steps in developing the deliverables listed above. Austin Water has developed this draft Equity and Affordability Roadmap (EARM) document to inform the development of the WF24. Key findings from the EARM will be incorporated into the Education and Engagement Plan (EEP), which will be used in the ongoing community engagement process. The Equity and Affordability Tool (EAT) will be used to evaluate top performing portfolios of water management strategies.

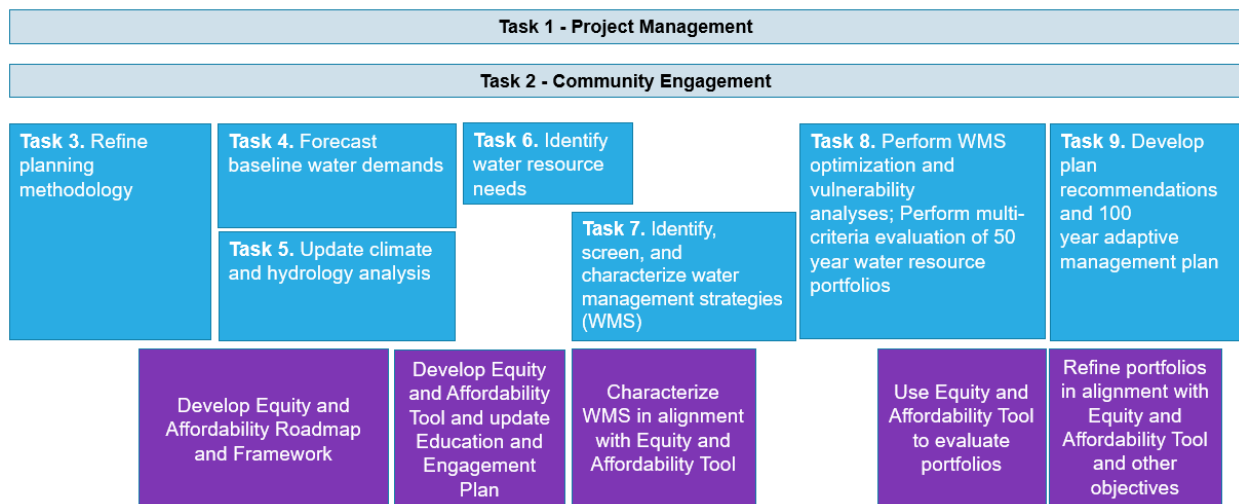


Figure B. Key Steps in Developing Equity and Affordability Deliverables (timeline not to scale)

The greater Austin community was surveyed via the Water Forward 2024 SpeakUp! Austin page on values and guiding principles early in the WF24 plan development process. To continue education and deeper engagement with the community, staff has

launched a public Water Forward University webinar series. Webinar topics to date have included an overview of the Council-approved Water Forward 2018 Plan and how equity and affordability considerations are being incorporated into WF24. Future topics may include a review of the climate and hydrology analysis performed by staff and consultants as well as the development and use of population and employment projections in developing future water demand projections.

Feedback received to date on equity and affordability considerations from a combination of the staff equity trainings, public surveys and interviews, and Community Ambassador work were used to determine the themes for the Equity and Affordability Roadmap (EARM) framework. This feedback has been documented and labeled with the origin of the feedback, the question or prompt, and then sorted to determine themes. This feedback has also been used to inform recommendations related to procedural equity in community engagement in WF24.

Developing the Equity and Affordability Roadmap and Tool was further informed by examining the history of racial segregation and environmental justice issues in Austin. This includes considering the structural and systemic barriers that have contributed to racial inequities in our community

5. Historical context

Austin Water staff has worked to compile and summarize historical information related to race, the environment, governmental policies, and water resources in Austin. This information seeks to place these events in context and understand historic policies and practices that have marginalized people of color and low-income communities. This history includes excerpts, maps, and observations from several sources to understand these impacts spatially and with a cultural context. By acknowledging the original homeland of native peoples and policies that restricted rights and liberties of Black, Mexican, Asian, and indigenous people, we can come to understand how that history has created the structural and institutional inequities that we experience today. This information is in the process of being refined and will be included in the next draft of the Equity and Affordability Roadmap.

6. WF24 Equity and Affordability Framework and Tool

The EARM includes a framework to evaluate the distribution of benefits and burdens from plan implementation outcomes. This framework will be supported by Equity and Affordability Tool (EAT), that will utilize disaggregated spatial, demographic, and other data to inform responses to the EARM framework questions. The Equity and Affordability Tool will also assist Austin Water in identifying mitigation options to address inequitable benefits and burdens.

Equity and Affordability Framework

Staff have identified four primary equity and affordability themes based on compiled feedback from the Community Ambassadors Group, the Water Forward Task Force, AW staff, and the public. The four themes are described below.

- **Water Supply Reliability:** Water Forward aims to ensure a sustainable, resilient, equitable, and affordable water future for our community for the next 100 years. Water supply reliability is a key component of meeting this core goal and community access to water and infrastructure resilience are important aspects of this core theme.
 - Access to water
 - Infrastructure resilience
- **Public Health:** Austin Water meets or exceeds all federal and state regulations relating to water quality and service delivery. Austin Water will continue to meet or exceed regulatory requirements during implementation of plan strategies, with consideration of water quality and environmental impacts.
 - Regulatory requirements
 - Water quality
 - Environment
- **Accountability:** In developing and implementing Water Forward, Austin Water seeks to engage with the community in meaningful and accessible ways. Proposed strategies for Water Forward 2024 need to consider accessibility of strategies and include the community during important implementation steps.
 - Transparency
 - Accessibility
 - Community outreach and education
- **Affordability and Economic Impacts:** Austinites are increasingly concerned about the cost of living in the city. Development of the plan should consider cost and affordability. Strategies should consider workforce development opportunities for students and tradespeople to create deeper connections with our local communities.
 - Rate impacts
 - Growth and development
 - Workforce development

Equity and Affordability Tool

A series of questions have been developed related to each of the Equity and Affordability framework themes. Staff will use these questions to evaluate top performing portfolios of strategies and how implementation of plan strategies provide benefits and/or place inequitable burdens on marginalized communities (i.e. primarily people of color and low-income communities). Responses to these questions will be informed by disaggregated spatial, demographic, and other data. Data used for this evaluation may fall into the following categories: socioeconomic, race and ethnicity, heat/ urban heat island/tree

cover, floodplain/drainage, proximity to reclaimed lines, industry proximity, infrastructure age, historical racial districts, Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) data, or other data.

Theme #1	Questions
Water Supply Reliability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to water • Infrastructure resilience 	1.1 Given that marginalized communities can be the most impacted by emergency situations, how does the strategy impact/benefit Austin Water’s access to water supply, especially during drought or other emergency situations?
	1.2 How does the strategy benefit Austin Water’s water, reclaimed water, and/or wastewater infrastructure resilience?
	1.3 Does this strategy create an inequitable maintenance burden for Austin Water customers who are a part of marginalized communities?
	1.4 Does this strategy include energy resilience components?
	1.5 Can this strategy be tailored to help improve water, reclaimed water, and/or wastewater service to marginalized communities?

Theme #2	Questions
Public Health <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulatory requirements • Water quality • Environment 	2.1 Does the proposed strategy help equitably restore or protect ecosystem health (air, land, water, soil)?
	2.2 Does the proposed strategy include policy and/or regulatory requirements that pose barriers to marginalized communities accessing the benefits of the strategy?
	2.3 Does the strategy include regulatory requirements that place inequitable burdens on marginalized communities?
	2.4 Does the strategy impact and/or benefit source water, receiving water, and/or drinking water quality?

Theme #3	Questions
Accountability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency • Accessibility • Community outreach and education 	3.1 How will AW track and publicly report strategy implementation outcomes related to equity and affordability?
	3.2 How will AW create a system for the community to provide feedback during implementation if inequitable outcomes are identified? What processes could be created to potentially adapt water management strategies during implementation or develop new mitigation strategies to address these concerns?

	3.3 What approaches could AW use to make access to these strategies available?
	3.4 Does the strategy require behavioral change from the public? Does this behavior change impact marginalized communities more than others?
	3.5 How does this strategy increase equitable access to information and education opportunities to increase community knowledge about water?

Theme #4	Questions
Affordability and Economic Impacts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rate impacts • Growth and development • Workforce development 	4.1 Are there rate/financial impacts and/or benefits of this strategy? What are the opportunities to mitigate the rate/financial impacts for marginalized communities?
	4.2 How does this strategy economically impact or benefit vulnerable communities? Are there existing assistance programs that can be used to address the impacts?
	4.3 How can this strategy best leverage growth and development to maximize the sustainability and resiliency of our water resources for all?
	4.4 How does the strategy enhance workforce development opportunities for vulnerable communities?

7. Procedural Equity Best Practices

Community engagement best practices from the Water Forward 2018 plan development process that will be used for the 2024 plan update include:

- Collecting demographic information from participants that provide feedback and attend meetings
- Ensuring geographic representation from neighborhoods across the city
- Identifying key decision points and ensuring opportunities for community input
- Maintaining targeted stakeholder lists

Throughout the 2024 plan update process, Austin Water staff will use a variety of community engagement approaches to:

- Inform and educate the community about the Water Forward plan
- Seek input from the community at key touchpoints in the plan update process
- Identify community values and reflect them in the plan update
- Identify and foster internal and external stakeholder relationships

For WF24, AW will build on outreach strategies used for the 2018 plan development process that included:

- Attending community events and meetings to provide information and presentations, such as tabling at a public event or attending neighborhood association meetings
- Hosting in person and virtual Water Forward events and meetings, such as community workshops or targeted stakeholder meetings
- Providing in person and virtual presentations to industry and professional groups
- Providing staff support for regular Council-appointed Water Forward Task Force Meetings
- Gathering stakeholder feedback through online and paper surveys
- Sharing information via the Austin Water website, social media, news releases and eNewsletters
- Documenting how public input is being used and at what key milestones during the plan update

Additional best practices related to how staff engage with community members as part of the Water Forward 2024 plan update process are listed below.

- Incorporate lessons learned from past and ongoing engagement and partnerships to continually refine our education and outreach approach
- Regularly review and update Water Forward stakeholder lists
- Share information and gather community feedback via the Water Forward 2024 Speak Up Austin page
- Build relationships with community organizations, especially those that serve marginalized communities, that have not been involved in the past on water resource planning topics and build networks to deepen networks and engagement with marginalized communities
- Identify additional community engagement strategies to increase community water knowledge, especially for marginalized communities
- Translate materials into multiple languages and provide language interpretation at Water Forward events and include information for people to request additional language access needs (translations for additional languages, sign language support, etc.)
- Work to provide multiple ways to access information and meetings, considering how information and public meetings may be accessed by people with different abilities and preferences (audio, visual, paper handouts, web content, etc.)
- Work to make public meetings more accessible to marginalized communities with different abilities, preferences, family, and transportation needs (child-friendly environment, advertise public transportation options, etc.)

Preliminary best practices that have been identified to incorporate into future strategy implementation phases (after the 2024 plan update is completed) are listed below.

- Accountability

- Create an online dashboard providing data and updates about strategy implementation progress including equity and affordability considerations
- Share implementation progress for strategies in a visually appealing way
- Create systems for community feedback and input during strategy implementation
- Communication
 - Share relevant and accessible information about AW programs and incentives
 - Continue to work to provide multiple ways to access information, considering how information may be accessed by people with different abilities and preferences (audio, visual, paper handouts, web content, etc.)
- Collaboration
 - Collaborate with internal City of Austin departments and workgroups
 - Maintain relationships with community organizations, especially those that serve marginalized communities

Future WF24 Community Engagement Phases

Upcoming phases of the WF24 plan development process will include opportunities for community engagement on key tasks. During Spring and Summer 2023, AW will be sharing information on progress to date in developing an updated Climate and Hydrology Analysis, population and water demand projections, and preliminary estimates of future water needs. Staff will also be gathering community input on water management strategies (WMS). This will include feedback on strategies included in the Water Forward 2018 plan and the additional strategies to be considered in this update.

In 2024, AW will be sharing information about characterized water management strategies, the results of the WMS Assessment and Vulnerability Evaluation. Staff will be seeking feedback on strategies of portfolios. In a later phase in 2024, staff will be sharing information about the results of the 50-year portfolio evaluation and development of a 100-year adaptive management plan and will be seeking feedback on proposed WF24 plan recommendations. Future engagement phases will seek to utilize best practices that have been identified in this Equity and Affordability Roadmap and reflected in the updated Education and Engagement Plan.